Stefan Jackiw

Brahms: Sonata No. 1 in G Major, Op. 78, "Regensonate"
Stefan Jackiw is one of America’s foremost violinists, captivating audiences with playing that combines poetry and purity with an impeccable technique. Hailed for playing of “uncommon musical substance” that is “striking for its intelligence and sensitivity” (Boston Globe), Jackiw has appeared as soloist with the Boston, Chicago, Cleveland, New York, Philadelphia, and San Francisco symphony orchestras, among others. He holds a Bachelor of Arts from Harvard University, as well as an Artist Diploma from the New England Conservatory. Jackiw plays a violin made in 1750 in Milan by G.B. Guadagnini, on generous loan from a private collection.
About this course

Based on his song for voice and piano titled “Regenlied,” Brahms’s first sonata for violin captures the experience of a nostalgic older man remembering but never fully recreating the varied memories of many bygone decades. The work calls for moderation; the tempo is “lively but not too much,” the opening theme is “mezza voce,” and the violin sound should be airy and energetic yet veiled. With the masterful pedagogical prose of Stefan Jackiw, you’ll be swept through the meaning of this delicately balanced work and learn how to convey the proper character through sound, attention to technique, and phrasing.

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**First movement: Vivace, ma non troppo**

Brahms wrote this piece in 1878–79, and though it’s his first sonata for the violin, he was already 46 and had a number of successful works behind him. This sonata’s nickname *Regenlied* or *Regensonate* translates to “rain song,” evocative of his earlier work *Regenlied*, Op. 59, No. 3 for voice and piano. In this song, an old man sings with a nostalgia for the joys of his youth; a complete translation of the text is printed below (in bold are the lines that Jackiw specifically pointed out):

*Cascade, rain, cascade down,*
*Wake for me those dreams again,*
*That I dreamed in childhood,*
*When water foamed on the sand!*  
*When oppressive summer heat*  
*Contended idly with cool freshness,*  
*And shiny leaves dripped with dew*  
*And crops turned a darker blue,*  
*How blissful then it was to stand*  
*With naked feet in the flow!*  
*Or to brush against the grass*  
*Or grasp the foam in both hands,*  
*Or to catch the cold drops*  
*On my glowing cheeks,*  
*And to bare my boyish breast*  
*To fresh-awakened scents!*  
*Like the dripping chalices,*  
*My breathing soul stood open,*  
*Like the flowers drunk with fragrance,*  
*Drowned in heaven’s dew.*  
*Each shuddering drop seeped through*  
*And cooled my beating heart,*  
*And creation’s sacred weaving*  
*Penetrated our secret lives.—*  
*Cascade, rain, cascade down,*  
*Wake in me those old songs*  
*That we sang in the doorway*  
*When outside the drops resounded!*  
*I’d love again to listen*  
*To their sweet, moist murmuring,*  
*And softly bedew my soul*  
*With innocent childlike awe.*

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* Brahms photographed in 1872, about six years before writing this sonata

*The first page of Brahms’s manuscript for *Regenlied*, Op. 59, written between 1870–1873*
Tempo and sound

Just like his original song, the mood of this entire sonata is wistful and contemplative. Brahms takes the primary musical material from the Regenlied and uses it in the third movement of his first violin sonata; the piano is given the pattering raindrops, and the violin personifies the old man.

The tempo marking is somewhat unusual; all we see is “lively, but not too much.” Vivace is often interpreted as meaning fast, but isn’t fast by definition. The association of the piece with nostalgia might not be conducive to a wildly kinetic interpretation! At the same time, this isn’t a lament for a remembrance of a tragic life, rather a wistful remembrance of a joyful life.

We can create a sound that remains airy and energetic but veiled. Hear the sound from far away, just as the old man looks back on his life from many decades. “Mezza voce” means “middle voice,” neither full nor hushed. Listen carefully to Jackiw’s sound and study how he obtains it.

Jackiw uses very little vibrato in this passage to help communicate this pale, far-away mood. Use minimal bow pressure, as if you’re painting with watercolors. The natural resonance of the violin will carry the sound.
Phrasing: mm. 9-18

The texture becomes more active at the end of m. 9. Listen to how flexibly Jackiw is interpreting the time here and how the violin and piano exchange activity.

Some examples of phrasing this passage include taking a bit of time in measure 12 at the diminuendo. He emphasizes the D♭ in m. 13 with more density and bow pressure than the D♯ in m. 12 (the darkness of minor can be conveyed this way).

Generally speaking, in German Romantic music, hairpins are often also indicators of momentum and phrase direction. A crescendo hairpin not only suggests an increase in volume but a slight push in tempo, while a decrescendo hairpin suggests the opposite. The downbeat of measure 12 is an arrival point, and after the C♯, Jackiw takes a bit of time before starting the next gesture. The piece should feel more dream-like than rigid!
Dramatic friction and resolution

Upon the return of the opening gesture in the pickup to m. 21, the music begins to go in yet another different direction. Measure 25 starts a series of exchanges between the violin and piano. The space between the echoes shrinks in measure 27, where they overlap. The voices aren’t combative, but step on each other’s toes enough to create dramatic friction. Imagine that you’re pushing against one another, and try to reflect with your body language a sort of mini-argument. Add a slight impulse to the beginning of each slurred group, emphasizing your entrance as if you’re trying to outdo the other player’s entrance.

There is not one right way to interpret the fortepiano in m. 29, but Jackiw suggests for it not to start with an edge. After the kinetic violin and piano build-up, it is a satisfying arrival to sink in and relax. Jackiw plays this fortepiano with a cushioned sound. The peak volume is not at the start of the note, but a split second after.

Rise and fall: mm. 30-35

In m. 30, the violin takes over the pendulum gesture, and the piano takes over the opening figure. The opening figure in both the violin and piano parts should go with the idea of a pendulum lifting and falling. The first two upbeats rise while the slur on the downbeat falls. Incorporating this rise and fall into your body language is a good idea for two reasons. First, it communicates to the audience the direction of the phrase and is felt subconsciously by perception alone. Second, it encourages the bow to respond more in line with the intended musical gesture.
Furthermore, measure 30 is a dissonance (if you consider that the melody and bass relationship in the piano is F# to E, a minor seventh) that resolves in the following measure (D in the melody and B in the bass). Like a typical appoggiatura in classical music, emphasize the dissonance and back off on the resolution. This aligns with our previous understanding of the rise and fall.

Brahms adds to these harmonies with two-note slurs in the violin. He marks a dot under each note, not suggesting to make the notes short, but meaning as continuous as possible without being fully connected. Give each note just a slight impulse. From measures 31–33, Brahms alternates between tension and release (a dissonant seventh interval to a consonant sixth). Give more impulse to the first note and less on the second. In mm. 34–35, he gets rid of the slurs and writes a hairpin.

“Con anima” means “with spirit,” not the same as “animato,” which means to move faster. However, a slight tempo increase isn’t unwarranted if you feel like it (though it will be canceled out by the sostenuto two bars later). Jackiw relies on the piano to generate this bubbly, expectant energy.

Practicing this piece at home alone doesn’t necessarily get us to the true meaning of the work. Development of the collaboration between two equals (piano and violin) is necessary. Prior to Brahms’s time, works for keyboard and violin were often titled as piano solos with obligato violin! It’s always helpful to study a work on your own at first, but reading with a pianist is transformative to understanding the piece’s interactivity.
Unpacking phrasing: mm. 46-49

In m. 46, Brahms writes a hairpin up with the word “cresc.” This might seem redundant, but recall that hairpins often refer to the phrasing as well. This suggests Brahms was intending a push and pull with the tempo in addition to an overall crescendo.

Sostenuto in m. 48 slows the tempo slightly. At the same time, we see upward hairpins. How is this possible if hairpins also suggest tempo? Furthermore, is the crescendo in m. 49 an exit from the sostenuto or still occurring within the slow-down? There is no correct answer to these questions. We must use our best judgment to discern what the composer meant. The last three notes of m. 49 compare to the last three notes of m. 187. In the first instance, the piano has a constant hairpin up, while in m. 187, the last of the three notes has a hairpin down. This subtle difference isn’t an accident, so it should inform our approach, but we can’t know for sure how Brahms would have wanted this played. In m. 50, however, we do see a clear crescendo.
Modulation, blend, and shudder

The perfect authentic cadence in measure 60 is satisfying and conclusive. It’s followed quite suddenly by an accented F#, but this accent is not harsh, it’s more of a gasping interruption. The suspense of the single F# hangs in the air until the piano joins, and then we find ourselves in the distant world of F# major. Piano and violin play the same rhythms in m. 61, far less emotionally turbulent than before. To highlight this quiet dignity, use a slower bow and try to blend into the piano’s low register. Use a slow bow, more pressure, and minimal vibrato.

Brahms writes a somewhat eerie “death rattle” in m. 64. What’s the purpose of this? Reckoning with the passage of time suggests a foreboding about the impending end of life. The tritone relationship atop the sudden octave sounds like a human shudder. Give the beginning an impulse and taper off.
Dance and pizzicato: mm. 70-82

The melody in measure 70 is suddenly very dance-like, with a lilting syncopated piano figure. Brahms marked “gracefully and tenderly” but still distant, light, and airy; this is a memory of a dance from decades ago. It’s only a fleeting recollection, one that turns to dust after only twelve bars.

In m. 82, the development begins with the main theme in the piano and the marking of time in pizzicato violin. Jackiw performed this piece early in his life without giving much practice to the pizzicato. On stage, he ended up missing strings and struggling to obtain a good sound. This pizzicato should remain cushioned, never pointillistic. These particular chords sound exceptional on the cello because of the size of the strings. Pluck from the air, without holding your right thumb anywhere on the violin. Experiment with how close to the bridge you pluck; closer to the fingerboard tends to be more resonant. Jackiw plucks only with his index finger, though some use two fingers or their thumb!

The angle of your pluck should be such that the hand moves away from the face. It’s quite easy to hit the E string accidentally, so Jackiw depresses the string slightly with his left-hand pinky.
Development

Brahms modulates to a cadence in $A^b$ major in m. 99. How does restating melodic material in a new key change it? Depending on the instrument you play, it might change it a lot. On the violin, G major uses a lot more open strings than $A^b$ (only the open low G is even a member of the $A^b$ major scale!) The resulting sound on violin is more covered and dark because of this. Lean into this feeling by aiming for a slower bow and more vibrato.

After the melody gets going, Brahms writes a gradual fall in tempo, explicitly telling us not to give in to the desire to move forward. In fact, we won’t see another tempo indication until “Tempo I” in m. 156, suggesting that this entire passage should be at a slower tempo. How do we create drama without increasing the tempo?

The first way is to capitalize on the friction between the violin and piano. Both instruments have four-note slurs in m. 109, for example, but displaced by two eighth notes. Give a lot of impulse to the beginning of each slur.

Brahms also experiments with simultaneous placement of triplets and duplets in m. 111 and 115, which is all the more reason to lean into the misalignment!

In m. 118, we come to a stormy rendition of the primary theme, this time as loud as we can. Use a fast, narrow vibrato and keep the bow pressure heavy.
At the downbeat of 134 in G minor, we try to find our way home from the storm to the return of the melody in 156. In the two measures before, “poco a poco” instructs us to increase our tempo to Tempo I. We see home in the distance and gradually speed up as we anticipate our arrival. However, our arrival isn’t quite as perfect as we would’ve hoped. The violin plays the same melody on the same note in the home key, while the piano doesn’t arrive on the tonic. It’s a slightly frustrated arrival, not quite the homecoming we’re hoping for. The crescendo and subito piano at the arrival also fall in line with the feeling of the altered return.

Perhaps this is Brahms’s way of showing that, in life, you can never really revert to the way things used to be. Something is inevitably fleeting about our precious memories. Toward the end of the movement, we have a gradual crescendo from 223 to 240. The final forte shouldn’t be aggressive or triumphant but optimistic and life-affirming.
Second movement: Adagio

The Adagio movement picks up from the joy and hopefulness at the end of the first movement, but in E♭ major, the flattened sixth scale degree in G major (the key of movement one). G major is quite bright on the violin because of the presence of open strings, but E♭ major is a bit darker and “burnished” because of the lack of open strings.

The opening statement in the piano is intimate yet grand (two qualities that Brahms was exceptional at conveying in his music). Brahms marked the piano to play “poco forte,” a “quintessential Brahmsian marking.” What does it mean to play a little bit loud? Is it louder than mezzo-forte? It’s likely an indication of an emotional feeling: generous, comfortable, and warm. Mezzo-forte is too medium and unspecific.

The violin enters marked piano with short hairpins, tentative explorations in this new darker color. We search for our opportunity to play this theme, though it doesn’t come until m. 17.

The piano enters with a foreboding march in m. 24 in E♭ minor. This dotted rhythm is generated from the uplifting primary theme in the first movement, converted into something more terrifying and obsessively relentless. Through the analogy of nostalgia, this is a musical manifestation of the inevitability of time’s procession.
Retransition to the Recapitulation

Jumping ahead to measure 67, we end up in a wandering state with an A diminished seventh chord. How will we return back to E♭ major? The G♭ transforms into a G♯, expanding into the brightness of E♭ major. We may choose to let the G♭ die out before letting the warmth flood in with the G♯.

Instead, Jackiw likes to feel that the “G♭ smiles into the G♯.” It’s as if you’re in a pit of despair when suddenly you’re pulled out. Your sound becomes warmer, with more vibrato.

Double stops

Of course, worrying about two notes at once is more difficult than one. Practice these double stops first out of rhythm, checking both notes individually before together. Another way to practice intonation is to finger both notes but only sound the bottom note. Then repeat with the upper note. If each line sounds in tune this way, you’ll know the intonation will be spot-on when put together!

Double stops are more prone to sounding crushed and choked than a single line. This is because both hands tend to play with too much pressure. Practice soft, despite the forte marking, focusing on the smoothness of the bow. Hit both strings equally with even strokes, and relax the vibrato to soften the sound. Imagine your fingers are pushing down just the minimum amount to stop the string without clamping down. It’s perfectly fine to break the slur Brahms writes from mm. 67–68 after the first three notes.
Recapitulation and onwards

At measure 76, the harmony provided by the piano is the same as in measure 9, but this time the sixteenth-note pattern is replaced with sextuplets. Although the violin plays the same melody, we should reflect the extra activity and complexity that is taking place underneath. The sound should be more full-bodied and with a little more density this time.

Similarly, measure 84 repeats material from measure 18. Whereas earlier in the movement, the violin’s dynamics remained at a low level and gave this melody a somber, prayer-like quality, at this later point, Brahms writes poco forte and again adds further detail to the accompaniment. Not only does this dynamic instruction give more volume, but it also adds warmth to the tone. Measure 87 brings in a stringendo, pushing the tempo until hitting the brakes in measure 89 at the high D. Build towards this point and hold the arrival at the D.

Although the march rhythm returns in measure 91, the harmony is major this time, and the dynamics are pianissimo. The atmosphere has become softer and perhaps signals a gentle acceptance (rather than dread) of time moving forward. Try to maintain this sense of peace and resolution as the movement moves towards the end.
Third movement: Allegro molto moderato

Brahms adapted his song for the third movement of this sonata Regenlied (Rain Song). In the opening, the piano part is largely the same as the song version, with sixteenth notes imitating the patter of raindrops. The violin takes up the voice of the old man (from the original song). This movement is in rondo form, with the opening refrain repeating after each episode. One way to map this movement might be to imagine the refrain as the old man pondering the passage of time from the present perspective, and each intervening refrain as a particular memory of the past. These episodes tend to be lighter in content and mood, often in a major key and with a dance-like element. There are also quotations from earlier in the work as the movement progresses, literally referencing something from the past.

The tempo marking, Allegro molto moderato, is somewhat contradictory: fast but very moderate. Jackiw explains this as allegro giving forward motion to the movement, but moderato meaning to allow room to express the gravitas of time and memory. Avoid making the piece too lively or jumpy and instead, aim for a more contemplative tone. Keep the vibrato subtle and narrow rather than energetic, and use a light bow stroke.
First episode

At measure 29, the piano plays sparse, staccato interjections under the violin’s melody. At 33, the roles swap, with the violin now taking the background part. Both parts are marked leggiero (light), giving a buoyant, dance-like feel. When the violin takes the main melody, make sure it is lilting and give a phrasal separation between each slurred gesture.

![Musical notation for the first episode]

Second episode

The second episode, starting with the pickup to measure 84, begins with a quotation from the previous movement. Drawing from earlier material adds an extra layer of depth to this sonata’s focus on the passage of time and nostalgia. Bring back the feeling of warmth and generosity from the second movement for this episode. Whereas much of this third movement is more distant and wistful, this section can add more weight to the sound. At measure 89, bring back the slight lilt from the previous episode by separating the slurred gestures.

A forte passage begins at measure 106, eventually giving way to a tranquillo (tranquil) section at measure 113. Brahms seems to be winding down from this point and deliberately reducing the momentum. In addition to the poco calando (falling, i.e., getting slower and quieter) at measure 122, the rhythm at the end of measure 123 is written as eighth notes rather than a sixteenth note (as it appears earlier in the movement). This has the effect of a written-out ritardando and decrease of energy, as the note value is elongated.
The coda begins in measure 140 with a key change from G minor to major. This key change is prepared in the preceding few measures. The piano plays a B-natural under the violin’s long G in measure 138, hinting at the change that is approaching. The actual G major chord is played by the piano in measure 139. This whole sonata has been grappling with the notion of the passage of time, and this change from major to minor implies some final acceptance. Although not all issues have been resolved, we are at least at peace with the journey and outcome.

If you have any corrections, comments, or critiques relating to this workbook, please send them to ethan@tonebase.co. We strive to deliver the highest quality enrichment experience. Thank you!