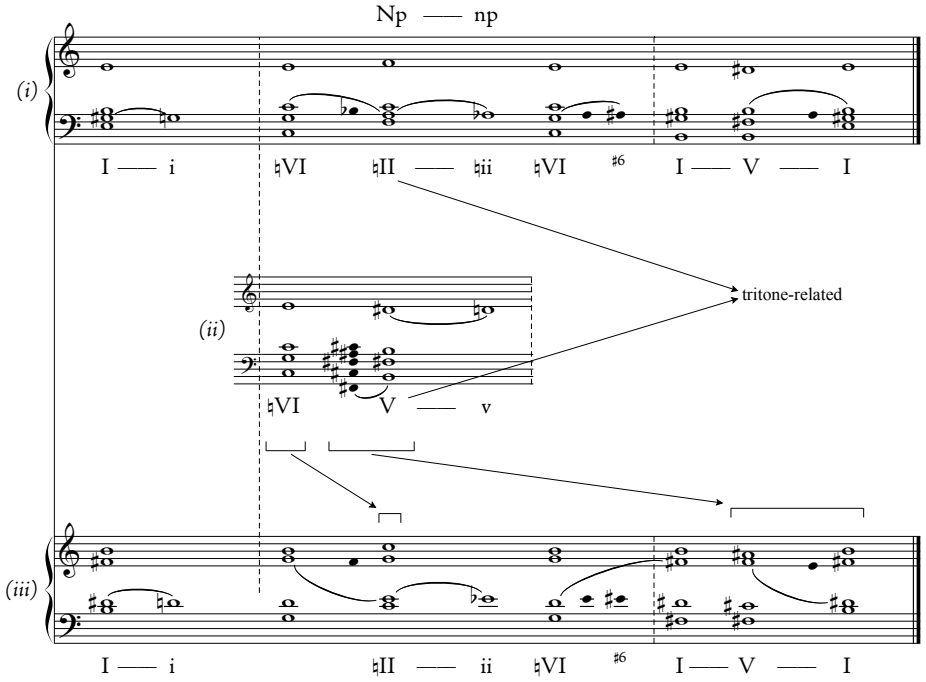
II

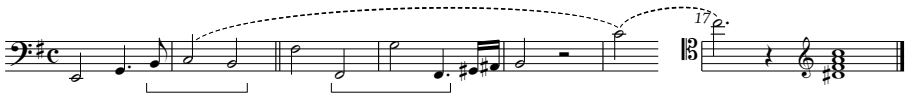
Both Tovey and Webster remark upon the expressive extremes of the first movement of Brahms's E minor sonata Op. 38. Tovey contrasts the 'indignant "second subject"' with the 'quiet major end' of the exposition, which is 'expanded into a pathetic coda in which the movement expires in peace'; comparably, Webster refers to the 'agitated' and 'ethereal' aspects of the music. If this recalls Schubert, then so too does Webster's observation that the exposition 'could even be considered [to contain] a triple second group if the independent transitional theme in C were counted'. And Tovey probably had in mind the expansive lyricism of the generally low-lying cello part in saying that 'the development is very broad, and is remarkable in form for using very large unbroken passages of exposition, instead of following the orthodox habit of breaking the material up'. Schoenberg,[20] on the other hand, drew attention to the concentrated motivic working of the two principal themes, thereby indicating some of the triumphs of transformation that inform the piece as a whole.



Example 3. The 'Neapolitan complex' in an ideal representation derived from Franz Schubert.

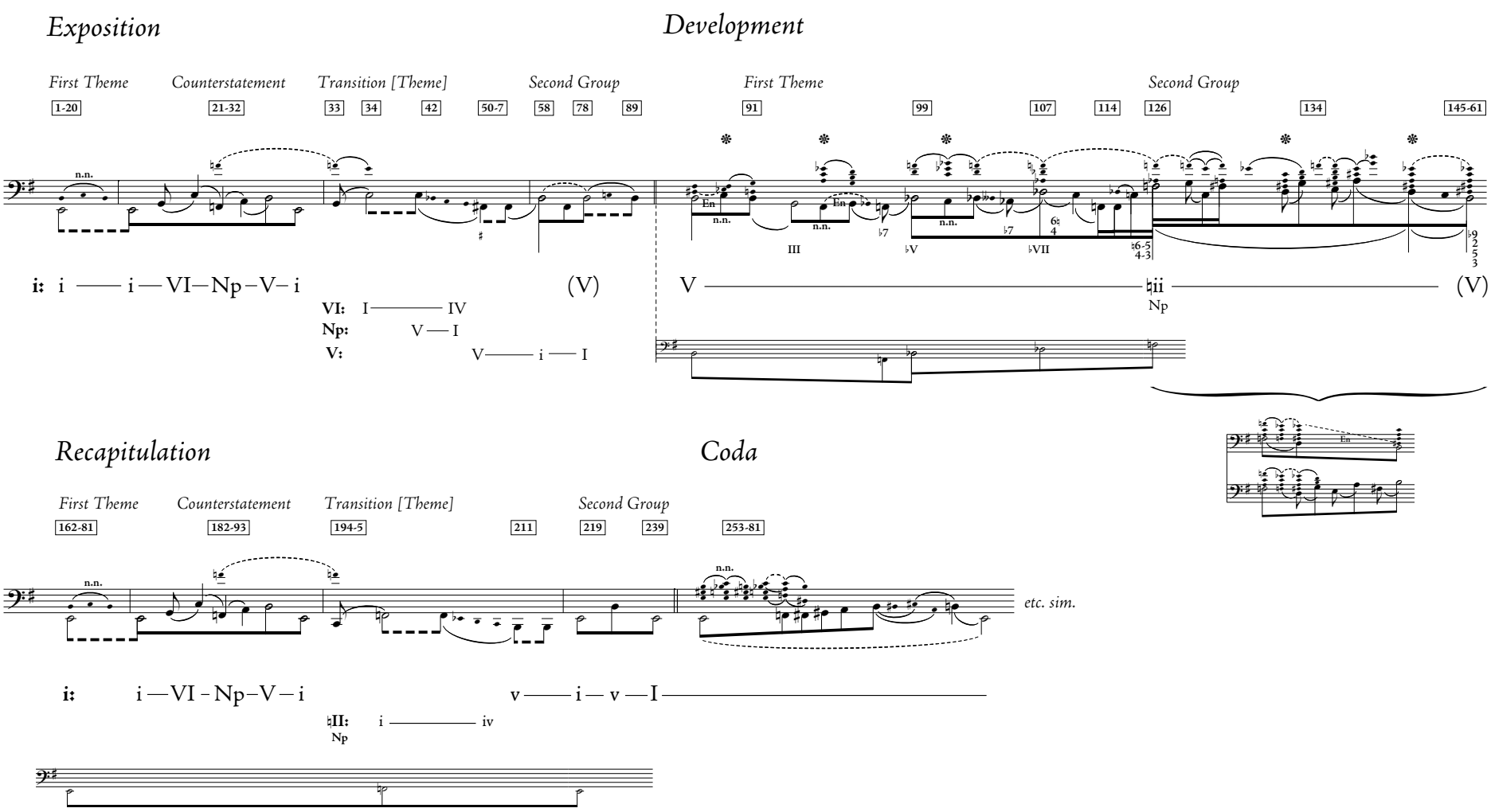
Drama, lyricism, formal anomalies, motivic evolution: all these disparate observations may be brought together under the aegis of the Neapolitan complex. Although the significance of its elements will only become apparent slowly, it is useful to survey them at this point. The three parts of system *i* show: the E major/minor alternation; the ambiguous use of the C major harmony to lead, on the one hand, to F major/minor, and on the other to a return to E major, with the earlier seventh (B♭) reinterpreted as an augmented sixth A♯; the return to E, leading to a full close (it is written here in the major although it could, of course, include minor elements, as did the first part of the system). The expansion of the complex in system *ii* shows how, for example, in sonata movements, the C major harmony may itself act as Neapolitan to the dominant. This dominant B is a tritone away from the original Neapolitan F to which C led in the first system. System *iii*, which takes as its model system *i*, and amplifies system *ii*, shows how the dominant seventh of C may be reinterpreted as a chord of the augmented sixth leading to the B major $\frac{6}{4}$ chord. The complex as a whole, of course, is only an ideal representation: it could be set out in many ways, and no single piece follows its course exactly. But, as we shall see, it may still serve some use as a point of reference.

In the meantime, let us return to Brahms's Sonata Op. 38 and explore the elements of the first theme of the opening movement. These are shown in Example 4: a principal motive B–C–B (cf. Op. 98), duplicated at the fifth in bars 6-7 (although Schoenberg saw this, he never saw the recurrence of F♯–G–F♯ in the turbulent second theme), with its C♮ thrown into especial relief at bar 9, where it opens the second phrase, and at bar 17, where it forms its climax. This climactic C is supported by a 'source' diminished harmony that acquires multiple meanings in what follows.



Example 4. Johannes Brahms, Sonata for Piano and Cello in E minor Op. 38, first theme, showing the handling of B–C–B and F♯–G–F♯.

Now, although the notes C and B have a Phrygian (and Neapolitan) potential, the first theme has embodied no Neapolitan elements *per se*. These, characteristically, are introduced into the traditionally subordinate counterstatement, which, reciprocally, surrenders its conventional quality of tonal instability and becomes broadly stable within E minor. This is shown in Example 5 (this bass graph is, of course, highly selective), which also reveals that, so far only a limited number of elements of the



Example 5. Johannes Brahms, Sonata for Piano and Cello, Op. 38, first movement, showing a bass graph that integrates the Neapolitan complex into the sonata form.

Neapolitan complex have been exposed: E minor, a tonicized C, and a tonicized F major. The dramatic oppositions of F minor and E major have yet to come. Now, we have seen, from Example 3, system *ii*, that, in larger forms the Neapolitan complex has to absorb and accommodate itself to the traditional form-defining opposition of tonic and dominant. In the transition and second group of Example 5, this absorption is shown in three ways. First, as has already been noticed, the second group projects the conflict between agitation and serenity through the transformation from B minor to B major. In the recapitulation, shown in Example 5 in the system beneath the exposition, this conflict is meaningfully duplicated in the tonic, introducing the all-important E major for the first time. Second, the relation of the C major of the transition to the B of the second group mimics, to use Webster's word, a Neapolitan approach. As with the example from Schubert's Octet, what is implicit in the exposition becomes explicit in the recapitulation, where, as the bottom stave of the system reveals, the larger Neapolitan relation of the three tonalities outlines the contour of the principal

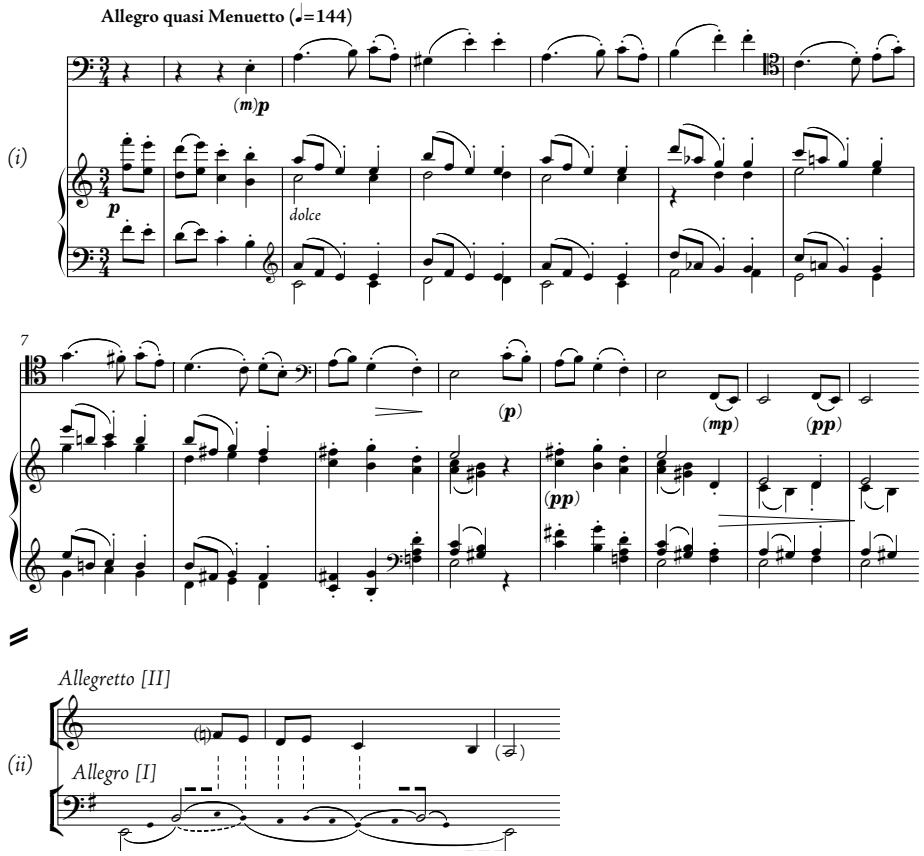
motive. Third, to return to the transition of the exposition, there is a nice example of developing variation that reveals the dual function of the C tonality: on the one hand, as we have already seen, C leads to V–I in B; on the other hand, it is approached and quitted in much the same way as occurred in the counterstatement: initially it is tonicized by the two-bar extension to the counterstatement in bars 32-3, before moving on towards F in bar 42 through a B♭ that is shortly reinterpreted as an A♯ (there are other fascinating enharmonic changes here too).

This still leaves the F minor of the Neapolitan complex unaccounted for, and almost inevitably this emerges as the goal from every point of view of the development section. Its arrival, at bar 126, unleashes an awesome rhetorical power, as the canonic second group establishes unequivocally a tonality foreshadowed in the previous twelve bars by the heavy chromatic inflections of the underlying F major (notice the derivation of the semitonal figures from the principal motive, especially D♭–C, which stands a semitone higher from C–B). The very broad scheme of the development raises an issue that will be explored later, namely the tritone relations invoked by moving from the dominant B to the Neapolitan F and back onto the dominant for the re-transition. Brahms, in effect, derives this most anti-functional of relations from a projection on the large-scale of the root-progression implicit in the conventional cadence involving the (linear) Phrygian second, and the (harmonic) Neapolitan sixth: ♮II–V–I. Furthermore, it would not be fanciful to see the bass arpeggiation from bars 99-126, B♭–D♭–F, as itself foreshadowing the turn to F minor (notice how the B♭ is itself a tritone from the tonic E), though to interpret the B♭ as an indirect Neapolitan *à la Tovey* to the dominant B that ends the exposition might well be (see the stave beneath the top line of the graph): for the development begins with a conventional enough move to the intervening relative major, G, albeit a short-lived move.

There are many other aspects of this development that invite further explication: the changing role of the 'source' diminished harmony (marked with an asterisk on each appearance), the pervasive use of the neighbour-note figure from the principal motive, the conflation of two moves in the return from F (bar 134) to B (bar 145) shown again beneath the graph. But for the time being it will be enough to make just two further points about this sonata.

As in Schubert, there is nothing perfunctory about the coda. On the contrary, Example 5 shows how its first moves embody a number of issues. The only element in the Neapolitan complex not included so far is introduced here for the first time. The graph shows two functions for the harmony E–G–B♭–C: the first resolves back by stepwise voice-leading to the E major triad from where it emanated; the second shows itself very locally as the dominant of the F major triad. This move, however, not only encapsulates the harmonic drama of the whole into a single aphorism – purged, one might say, of the torment of F minor – but reveals plainly and impressively the connection of the principal motive, B–C–B, with the harmonic argument of the entire movement.

There are only three movements in the sonata, the second being an Allegretto quasi Menuetto (Example 6). At first sight, its key of A minor may seem remote from the Neapolitan complex. But one need only to listen to the first two pitches, F and E, to acknowledge the pervasiveness of their presence in the following bars, and to hear the reiterated Phrygian cadences, with the F–E now in the bass, to recognize how important it would be for a complete reading of this piece to follow the advice of Schoenberg and Musgrave, and search for a larger unity spanning the entire work.



Example 6. Johannes Brahms, Sonata in E minor for Piano and Cello, Op. 38, showing bars 1-14 of the second movement together with a derivation of its opening from the start of the first movement.