Re-inventing the nineteenth-century tools of unprescribed modifications of rhythm and tempo in performances of Brahms's symphonies and concertos

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INTRODUCTION

As a teenager who was learning to play the violin in my native city of Groningen, I drove my teachers at the local music school to despair by refusing to apply a continuous vibrato and be accompanied by a grand piano. Not only did I feel that the vibrato did not improve the sound I managed to produce on my instrument, but the piano also, frankly, scared me. To my ear, the sounds coming out of this shiny black monster were of an abstract perfection – something I was unable to relate to with my efforts to produce an expressive sound on my violin.

A few years later, in the preparatory programme at the Conservatory in Groningen, I confessed to my teachers that I wanted to become a baroque violinist and a conductor. To this day, I am grateful for the advice that my chamber music teacher, Wim ten Have (principal violist in the Orchestra of the Eighteenth Century at the time) gave me: learn to play the violin as best you can, and if your path leads you to baroque violin playing or even conducting, pursue it; if not, don't. I think what he was telling me implicitly was that there is no substitute for a broad musical training when it comes to developing ideas about what you want to hear, or how you want music to be played. Ten Have believed that one's choice of instrument and the role one can play in performance should be secondary considerations, not primary goals. In other words, it all begins with what one wants to hear. In my case, I have always wanted to hear a different Brahms. Above all, I thought that his music often sounded much too heavy. I do not want to pretend that I had a sharp vision of my ideal Brahms early on. The truth is that my answers to the "different, but how?" question have changed radically over time, most of all because of my research during these past four years.

In 1983, I decided to use the prize money I had won in the National Violin Competition Oscar Back to study with violinist Josef Suk (1929-2011) in Vienna and Prague. At a time when most other young violinists from the Netherlands were looking for opportunities elsewhere, particularly in New York, I wanted to learn how to play Brahms like Suk. I was, and still am, fascinated by Suk's beautiful singing style of playing in his recording of the

Violin Sonatas (Decca-466393-2) with pianist Julius Katchen (1926-1969). That was my first conscious effort to find a different Brahms, less dominated by a display of instrumental virtuosity and more vocal in nature. Though my playing at the time included none of the ingredients I later found to be particularly important, such as extensive use of portamento and limited use of vibrato, I did find what I was looking for: a singing way of playing Brahms.

My second attempt to work out a different way of playing Brahms came much later and it related to his orchestral music. With my period instrument orchestra called the Nieuwe Philharmonie Utrecht (NPhU), I performed a series of three programmes in the 2011-2012 season, in which I combined Brahms's *Tragic Overture, Three Hungarian Dances, First Piano Concerto,* and *First Symphony* with unknown works by nineteenth-century Dutch composers, such as Johannes Verhulst (1816-1891), Richard Hol (1825-1904), and Johan Wagenaar (1862-1941). I based my approach on the belief that Brahms would benefit from a more transparent orchestral sound, produced by using period instruments. I wanted to take the ideas regarding the Historically Informed Performance Practice (HIPP) of Beethoven symphonies that I had learned to work with as a guest player in the Orchestra of the Eighteenth Century, as concertmaster of Anima Eterna, Bruges, and as a conductor with the NPhU and other orchestras one step further and apply them to Brahms. I found the document *Brahms in der Meininger Tradition* – in which conductor Walter Blume (1883-1933) described in detail how Fritz Steinbach (1855-1916) performed Brahms's symphonies and *Haydn Variations* – to be a great help. Yet many questions still remained.[1]

"Taking the HIPP ideas regarding Beethoven one step further" meant little more than using a bit more vibrato and portamento than I would do in Beethoven. But where and why? My approach to these and other important issues such as tempo modification had no proper foundation, except in my personal aesthetic preferences. My Brahms with the NPhU at the time sounded significantly different from others, as the recordings prove, but I

[1] Blume, W. *Brahms in der Meininger Tradition, seine Sinfonien und Haydn-Variationen in der Bezeichnung von Fritz Steinbach*. Suhrkamp, Stuttgart, 1933.

felt as if I was skating on very thin ice. My dissatisfaction with the foundations of this approach and its results when it came to Brahms made me wonder, in fact, whether the way the orchestral music of Beethoven (and others) was performed in HIPP might be equally flawed. I deliberately avoid using the word "illegitimate" to describe the foundations of various approaches to Beethoven, Brahms, and others. I believe that performers do not need to legitimise their way of performing music; for instance, a performance of Beethoven's *Fifth Symphony* on an accordion at half the speed of the composer's metronome markings can be perfectly legitimate. It is only when performers claim that their way of playing is based on historical evidence that the question whether they can legitimately make that claim becomes relevant. In my efforts to find a way to perform Brahms's orchestral music that was based on my accumulated experience with HIPP of baroque and classical music, I began to feel increasingly dissatisfied with the fact that I was failing to incorporate so much of what I had read about nineteenth-century performance practices in my approach to this repertoire.

I have documented my third attempt to develop an approach to Brahms in this dissertation and in the recordings, films, and articles on my website (brahms.johannesleertouwer.nl). In the spring of 2018, Okke Westdorp, at the time associate director and head of classical music at the Conservatory of Amsterdam (CvA), now its director, suggested that my ongoing search for a different Brahms should take the form of a PhD research project. The Amsterdam University of the Arts (AHK) offers a programme to support teachers who want to engage in such research with the purpose of continuously improving the quality of teaching at the schools that fall under its responsibility, of which the CvA is one. Having taught there for over thirty years, I had seen colleagues take this path before me. Some of them had been allowed to reduce their teaching obligations to spend a substantial amount of time on their research. After completing their research projects, some colleagues had expressed the view that it was not always easy to find a connection between their research findings and their teaching. I proposed to incorporate my research into the curriculum of the CvA, so that the return on investment by the AHK in my project should come not after

completion of the PhD project but rather while it was ongoing. To make this possible, I put together a special project orchestra in which professors, graduates, and students of the CvA played side by side. In each third week of September, for the duration of the project (2019-2022), this orchestra functioned as a laboratory in which I could try out, further develop, and share the findings of my research.

The relevance of my research project is primarily rooted in audible evidence of possibilities for implementing lost tools of nineteenth-century orchestral performance practices. I am convinced that applying the findings of the research should not come after the phase of researching the historical evidence. Instead, it should be an integral part of the research itself. One needs to work with lost techniques and tools and investigate them in practice to better understand their nature and expressive potential. In fact, I would go as far as to say that the experience of hearing what effect nineteenth-century expressive tools can have in an orchestra is a *sine qua non* when it comes to understanding what these tools are.

During my research, I re-examined the historical evidence relating to the nature of nineteenth-century orchestral performance practices and the ways in which performers had moved away from those practices throughout the twentieth century. This re-examination led me to see the HIPP, as it emerged in the second half of the twentieth century, as belonging, at least largely, to the modernistic rejection of nineteenth-century practices, which started at the end of the nineteenth century and progressed quickly in the first half of the twentieth century. It became clear to me that a fundamental change was needed to find an approach to Brahms, that took account of the historical evidence. If I wanted to be able to claim that my approach was historically informed, I would not only need to steer away from the Mainstream orchestral Performance Practice (MPP) but also from the HIPP. In no other area did this become more obvious to me than in the modification of rhythm and tempo in orchestral performance, which appears to have remained largely unexplored in the majority of HIPP and MPP until recently.[2]

[2] I am referring specifically to orchestral performance. I know a lot of important work has been done and still is being done in the field of solo and chamber music playing.

As a performer and teacher, my personal golden rule regarding tempo had always been "not to change the tempo unless you have to." Throughout my career as a performing musician, tempo modification had always been a last resort. I would only consider changing the tempo if I found myself still dissatisfied after trying all other available means to bring out the full character of a theme or a passage as I understood it, such as modification of sound colour, dynamics, or phrasing.

Modifying rhythm was even more alien to the expressive tools I worked with. In my lessons with Josef Suk, I learnt to exaggerate certain rhythms incidentally. Yet my training prohibited me from exploring the idea that the rhythms on the page might be interpreted more freely in order to bring out the character of themes or passages more fully. Only in fermatas and dotted rhythms did I feel that a certain degree of interpretation of the printed rhythm was inevitable. In conclusion I would say that I had been trained to make sense of the notation as best as I could without addressing the fundamental issue of its inaccuracy. It became clear to me that my training and accumulated experience as a classical musician in the latter decades of the twentieth century, including my experience as a member of a number of ensembles and orchestras specialising in the historically informed performance practice of baroque and classical music, had conditioned me in such a way that pursuing a style of performance based on the available evidence of nineteenth-century practices had become impossible without a profound reassessment of my understanding of the identity of the compositions I wished to perform in relation to even the most faithfully researched printed versions of them. I would not only have to learn to read the score in a different way, which would include interpreting markings such as crescendo and diminuendo and hairpins as relating to modification of rhythm and tempo. I would also need to start understanding the expectations a composer might have had about what the performer might bring to the performance of their own, as an integral part of the composition.

In the words of my supervisor Clive Brown, "I would need to develop a new persona as a performing musician."[3]

Even before the start of this project, I knew that I had no ambition whatsoever to write a book about interpreting Brahms, nor did I have any interest in coming up with a new set of rules for the interpretation of Brahms's music.[4] To be clear, I have great respect and admiration for the authors of many books on these subjects, and I feel grateful for their efforts to make so much scholarly knowledge so easily accessible to anyone who might care to read about it. I simply did not feel that this was a field in which I could make a significant contribution. When it came to audible results however, the situation was different; in my opinion, none of the existing recordings reflected what I had read about nineteenth-century performance practices. I felt that modern-day rules about supposedly good musicianship, particularly regarding evenness of sound production and tempo in combination with a general and demonstrable tendency to ignore the historical evidence of nineteenth-century practices, had resulted in increasingly neutral performances of music of the romantic era. These are the results of an approach where the performer refrains from doing things not printed in the score. The path forward for my research became clear for me: I wanted to demonstrate that some of the expressive tools of the nineteenth century could be reinvented and implemented in performances of Brahms's orchestral music today to help expand the range of expressive possibilities.

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[3] Brown, C. "Interview at the start of the project." Interview by author. Filmed in August 2019. https://vimeo.com/357370790/c6e120e223.

[4] Having worked as a violin teacher and a conductor at the Conservatory of Amsterdam and elsewhere for more than three decades, I have accumulated ample experience as a jury member. As such I played the role of what Daniel Leech-Wilkinson, for example in *Challenging Performance*, calls 'a gatekeeper', by judging the performances of students and others based on sets of rules that had been communicated implicitly or explicitly. I really want to make every effort I can to avoid a situation in which the results of my research might be understood as providing further rules for the 'correct' performance of Brahms. I am only interested in expanding the range of expressive possibilities, not limiting it. At the same time, I want to make a case that this expansion can successfully be achieved by the use of expressive tools that were familiar to the composer. Tools that he would have expected performers to use in building their narrative and realising their performance.

Any meaningful new perspective on the ways of performing this repertoire would need to do two things. First of all, it would have to offer a significantly different result than those hitherto produced by both MPP and HIPP. Secondly, it would have to demonstrate that the basis of the approach leading to these results was grounded in my understanding of the historical evidence. The Academy of Creative and Performing Arts at Leiden University prides itself on the fact that a performance can be an important part of the materials presented to obtain a doctorate in the arts. In line with university policy, I wish to present my recordings of the four Brahms *Symphonies* and the four *Concertos* not only as an integral part of my research, but as the very core of it. From that point of view, this written part of my dissertation can be seen as accompanying the recordings, rather than the other way around.

In the first chapter of this dissertation, I explain the historical evidence I have used as a foundation for my approach to modifications of rhythm and tempo in orchestral performance. I demonstrate that a constantly subtly changing tempo was something Brahms would have expected of musicians, including when performing his own orchestral works. Through my research, particularly through the work with the project orchestra, I discarded my old belief that the tempo had to be maintained quite rigidly throughout a piece or a movement and replaced it with the new concept of a tempo susceptible to constant change.

In the second chapter, I describe the process of re-inventing and implementing this new concept into the performance style of the project orchestra and provide examples of modifications in our recordings. In the third chapter, I give a brief overview of other characteristics of the project orchestra and its playing, and I present its recordings in the fourth chapter. The last, fifth chapter contains my conclusions.

I would like to suggest to the reader that, although I am presenting my material in this order, which I believe has a certain logic to it in the context of this text, listening to the audio recordings and watching the films that include examples of modifications may be the best starting point for someone who wants to understand what this project is about. In order to

facilitate access to the films and audio, I have added QR-codes to the links, that will lead the reader to these materials.