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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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CHAPTER 2. RE-INVENTING AND IMPLEMENTING MODIFICATIONS OF RHYTHM AND TEMPO WITH THE PROJECT ORCHESTRA

These are my principles, and if you don't like them.... well, I have others!¹⁶¹

(Attributed to) Groucho Marx (1890-1977).

2.1 MY ROLE AS CONDUCTOR

Throughout this dissertation, I have used the term “re-inventing” to describe my way of working with modifications of rhythm and tempo. I consider the process of re-invention as being crucial to understanding the nature of the lost tools of expression that are described in the first chapter of this dissertation. I used a selection of historical sources to sketch the history of modifications of rhythm and tempo and their application in orchestral performance in the nineteenth century. I focused in particular on the style of Brahms performance developed by Fritz Steinbach with the Meiningen Orchestra. In doing so, I assembled a concept of tempo and modifications thereof from various historical sources that relate closely to what I have shown might have been Brahms's own ideas regarding this subject and what he might have expected from musicians performing his music. I also described the tools for modification that Steinbach and others reportedly applied. Musicians like Blume, Klauwell, and Brahms himself stressed that working with tools of expression required a certain “feeling” or emotional understanding. To me, my attempts to implement these tools are not the most important part of my work. Instead, the essence of this research project relates to establishing an emotional connection with these expressive tools.

¹⁶¹ Groucho Marx Quotes. BrainyQuote.com, BrainyMedia Inc, 2022. https://www.brainyquote.com/quotes/groucho_marx_122547. (Last accessed September 2022).

Blume wrote that by 1933, the year of the centenary of Brahms's birth, the way people experienced reality (*Bewusstseinshaltung*) had changed so profoundly since the days of Brahms and Steinbach that it would be impossible to describe in words the change and its effect on the way music was performed. Today, almost one hundred years after Blume wrote his text, this change has become exponentially greater and researchers, musicians and audiences are further removed from the *Bewusstseinshaltung* of Brahms and Steinbach than they can even begin to understand. That is why one needs to think of the process of making emotional sense of the lost tools of expression as being a process of re-invention. Without an emotional understanding of them, implementing these rules and working with these tools is pointless. Of course, for a musician it would be equally pointless just to experience one's emotional response to the "affects" in the music. As a performer, one needs to use these emotions, which are sometimes understood as being directed inwards, to create an outward effect by shaping the performance on the basis of one's connectedness to the emotions. Quantz writes about this in his *Versuch*:

The performer of a piece must try to place himself within the main and secondary passions that he is supposed to express. And because in most pieces one passion always alternates with others, the performer must also know how to judge every thought, the kind of passion that he contains within himself, and always shape his performance to correspond with it.¹⁶²

Carl Philipp Emanuel Bach, in his *Versuch*, also writes about the need for the performer to connect to the affects in the music:

Since a musician can only move if he is moved himself, he must necessarily be able to inhabit all the affects that he wants his listeners to experience; he

¹⁶² Quantz, J. J. *Versuch einer Anweisung die Flöte traversiere zu spielen; mit verschiedenen, zur Beförderung des guten Geschmacks in der praktischen Musik dienlichen Anmerkungen begleitet, und mit Exempeln erläutert*. Berlin: Johann Friedrich Voß, 1752, Hauptstück XI, paragraph 15, p. 107. *Der Ausführende eines Stückes muss sich selbst in die Haupt- und Nebenleidenschaften, die er ausdrücken soll, zu versetzen suchen. Und weil in dem meisten Stücken immer eine Leidenschaft mit andern abwechselt, so muss auch der Ausführer jeden Gedanken zu beurteilen wissen, was für eine Leidenschaft er in sich enthalte, und seinen Vortrag immer derselben gleichförmig machen.*

offers them his sentiments as the best way of allowing them to experience them with him.¹⁶³

Lest we put the emotions of the performer front and centre of every performance, I want to stress that both these writers (Quantz and Bach) detail the importance of recognising the affects embedded in the music by the composer. Like other writers, such as Mattheson, they point to specific compositional tools, such as the use of tempo and intervals, to demonstrate the way in which they connect to specific emotions. Like these authors, I think that only by making a very serious effort to identify the affects that the composer intended to embed in his music, can we hope to reveal the full expressive potential of the composition in question.

Musicians today have no choice but to connect with those affects as citizens of the twenty-first century, which means that they link them to emotions that are part of today's way of experiencing reality. Though the musical affects which composers and theorists of the past have named¹⁶⁴ are of a general human nature and can be easily recognised, one cannot say with any degree of certainty whether using these affects to shape one's performance today leads musicians, including those who study history, in a similar direction as it did the people of Brahms's day, or Blume's. In fact, Blume's account claims that this was no longer the case even at the start of last century. Placing the process of emotionally connecting to the lost tools of expression at the centre of my project has had consequences for my role as a conductor. A large part of my responsibility as a conductor obviously lies in leading rehearsals, conducting performances and recording sessions. In the years leading up to my project and throughout the course of it, I have learned to redefine my role and extend it beyond these duties. The following are some examples of my new-found role. I will focus on my artistic responsibilities, leaving aside the practical ones.

¹⁶³Bach, C. Ph. E. *Versuch*, p. 85. *Indem ein Musikus nicht anders rühren kan, er sey dann selbst gerührt; so muss er notwendig sich in alle Affecten setzen können, welche er bey seinen Zuhörern erregen will; er giebt ihnen seine Empfindungen zu verstehen und bewegt sie solchergestalt am besten zur Mit-Empfindung.*

¹⁶⁴ For example, the French philosopher René Descartes, who names 6 basic affects: admiration, love, hatred, desire, joy and sorrow in *Les passions de l'âme* (Henry Le Gras, Paris, 1649) p. 94.

CREATING A SHARED ARTISTIC FOUNDATION WITH THE ORCHESTRA BEFORE THE START OF THE REHEARSALS.

I have always believed that if musicians make music based on an approach that they feel is their own, they sound more convincing than when they follow the instructions of even the most artistically outstanding conductor. The Orchestra of the Eighteenth Century, for example, shared an approach to a specific and limited repertoire with their founder and chief conductor Frans Brüggen (1934-2014). The musicians had the opportunity to develop this approach through fruitful and intensive cooperation between conductor and orchestra over the course of many years. Seeing and hearing what could be achieved through such a close cooperation was a source of inspiration to me as a student and young musician.

My conviction that a shared artistic approach would be crucial for my project made me realise that I needed to share my insights and the preliminary results of my research with the musicians playing in the orchestra. I realised early on that it would not be enough to do this during the project weeks, because there would not be enough time during the rehearsals. Therefore, I shared essays and “dear fellow musicians” letters with my orchestra members in the first two years.¹⁶⁵ In 2021, I launched a website, making it easier to share materials with the musicians. I used these contemporary technical tools to build a starting point for developing a shared artistic purpose with the orchestra members. I am fully aware that my efforts are dwarfed by notable examples of the past (some of which I have quoted in Chapter I of this dissertation) and indeed of the more recent past, but I nonetheless find inspiration in those examples.

I am convinced that in their work with the Meiningen Orchestra, conductors Bülow and Steinbach also worked on the basis of a musical approach they developed and shared with the musicians. Weingartner describes Bülow’s work with the musicians of the Meiningen Orchestra:

¹⁶⁵ Leertouwer “Historically Inspired Modernism,” (published June 2021) <https://brahms.johannesleertouwer.nl/wp-content/uploads/Historically-Inspired-Modernism.pdf>.

By dint of diligent, indefatigable practice he [Bülow] had so infused into the orchestra his own conception of the works as to get a perfection of *ensemble* at that time unknown.¹⁶⁶

Bülow is said to have thought of the orchestra as a piano on which he could play the orchestral repertoire. In that image, the players would be no more than keys and it would matter little if they shared the conductor's approach to the music. However, Weingartner's description of Bülow's rehearsal process as that of an infusion of ideas and Bülow's own account of these rehearsals suggest that the process involved much more participation and commitment from the musicians than the piano image would suggest. In any case, it is more than likely that the infusion of ideas over a period of many months of close collaboration between conductor and orchestra, made up in part of excellent musicians with impressive track records as performing artists outside the orchestra, would result in a sense of shared purpose. Weingartner's description is reminiscent, for instance, of the review of Beethoven's performance described in Chapter 1.1, in which the writer for the *Wiener allgemeine musikalische Zeitung* described how "the ideal of Beethoven's creation was as it were expressed through and by them."¹⁶⁷ Here one finds the idea that the musicians forming an orchestra do not just carry out instructions (in this case from the highest authority, the composer), but they also convey the musical narrative, which is expressed *by and through* them. A prerequisite for this level of engagement, for the musicians to work effectively, in my opinion, is a shared idea about what the music expresses and how it is to be performed. That is why I have striven to share as much as I could of my understanding of the historical sources and my idea of the musical narrative with the musicians of the orchestra.

I like to think of the process of sharing my developing insights with the musicians through emails, short films, and so on, as a way of helping them, as performing musicians, to create – in the words of Brown – a

¹⁶⁶ Weingartner, p.12

¹⁶⁷ WamZ 1813, No 48, pp. 749-50.

different persona. In some ways this can be seen as essentially a modernistic twenty-first century translation of Bülow's rehearsal process, and an effort to create an environment in which the music can be expressed through and by all the musicians involved in the project. My style of leading the rehearsals, performances, and recordings was designed to achieve this goal of creating a shared artistic foundation for our approach.

ARTISTIC PRIORITIES IN REHEARSALS

My research led me to choose different artistic priorities in the rehearsal process with the orchestra from the ones I was used to. That is why I started this chapter with a quotation attributed to Groucho Marx. In fact, what I seem to have told myself was: "these are my artistic principles, but because I no longer think they help me in performing Brahms in a way that takes into account what the historical evidence tells me, I must make new ones."

It is relatively easy to keep an orchestra playing together (in vertical alignment) if one does not alter the basic tempo. But my understanding of the historical evidence suggested to me that keeping the tempo steady in order to maintain togetherness was not necessarily something that Brahms would have expected from musicians performing his music. My changed approach to togetherness constitutes one example of my new-found (different) principles. In the period leading up to the projects, I shared my intentions regarding modifications with the musicians by giving out annotated scores and parts. For the most part, though, I developed and finalised my modifications in collaboration with the orchestra during the rehearsals and performances, prioritising expressivity and experimentation over togetherness. The immediate reaction to un-togetherness from musicians involved in the project, including myself, who had been trained in the twentieth-century tradition of technical perfection and synchrony, is to create or re-establish vertical alignment as quickly as possible. This reflex drastically reduces the room for experimentation with modifications of both rhythm and tempo. My new role as a conductor now included ensuring that reverting to the priority of perfect ensemble, an essential characteristic of

the modernistic performance practice of the twentieth century, was avoided or postponed as much as possible. Only by doing this, could I make sure that there was room for prolonged experimentation. To some extent, I became an advocate of chaos – the exact opposite of what I would previously have considered my role to be. For me personally, it was very important to be able to claim that my approach was based on my understanding of historical information, as I would have been uncomfortable convincing the musicians to try things that were so far outside their comfort zone based purely on my musical aesthetics and intuition as a twenty-first century musician. I have no way of saying whether the musicians might have followed me if I had not been able to claim that my approach was based on historical research. But I can say with certainty that it was the research that led me to apply the modifications of rhythm and tempo described in this dissertation, not the personal aesthetics I had developed as a performing musician.

Another artistic priority became the joint emotional understanding of the music and the modifications. Although I had always considered this an important part of my responsibility as a conductor, it now gained a new urgency and importance because of my research. A constant and active search for how my understanding of the emotional narrative of the piece could help shape the performance, and then sharing this with the orchestra, became an artistic top priority. To be able to lead this process, I had to embrace the amateur musician in myself, looking for how musical events made me feel first of all, before considering ways to shape and polish a performance in order to convey and evoke those emotions. For example, one can feel the difference between an *accelerando* that is the result of accumulated energy and is in a way self-propelled and an *accelerando* which is more goal-directed, designed to reach a specific place or goal note in the music. In my opinion, sharing the emotional drive behind these types of *accelerandi*, rather than focussing on the technical dimensions of the increase of tempo, improved the chance of reaching a unified expressive result. As for the modifications of rhythm, I increasingly felt the need to address the shaping of repeated notes of the same written length. I used the technique of singing a phrase to the musicians, suggesting the uneven

accentuation of syllables in words temporarily set to the music, and also incorporated very plastic gestures to suggest light and shadow.

The experience of working with different artistic priorities, sometimes directly opposed to the ones I had applied before the start of my research project, led me to reconsider what musical intuition can amount to in the context of musical interpretation. My experience as a teacher at the CvA over the past decades has shown me that intuition, like musicality, in the context of (higher) musical education is often seen as something that a student or a musician is gifted with (to a greater or a lesser extent) rather than something that can be taught or acquired, or even developed. Through this research project, my perspective on that concept of intuition has changed. I now think that what we call musical intuition in musical education is often the capacity to work intuitively with one's artistic principles. I think it is important to draw a distinction between the underlying principles and the ability to work with them intuitively, i.e., applying them without consciously affirming the process or indeed the underlying principles themselves at every step. Whilst I would not be able to claim any knowledge of the possibilities of developing people's capacity to use their intuition, I think that my experience makes it clear to me that my intuition in itself does not lead me to any specific artistic choices. These choices, however, are determined by underlying artistic principles that can be influenced and altered. Thus, my intuition, which once led me to keep a stable tempo throughout a movement, now leads me to constantly strive for modifications of the tempo, because my idea about tempo has changed. One might call this 'informed intuition' as this term perhaps makes clear that intuition is not necessarily just a matter of (gut) feeling. Without wanting to advocate change for change's sake, I would like to say that if a performer relies on their musical intuition based on the same unquestioned fundamental beliefs or artistic principles, this could easily result in the repetition of ingrained, unconsciously stored knowledge or ideas. It is clear to me that the fundamental ideas or basic artistic principles one uses in performance through musical intuition can be shaped not only by accumulated listening experiences, as well as all kinds of written and verbal input to shape ideas about performance, but also by extra-musical

factors such as for example the performer's temperament or ideas about the function of classical music in society.¹⁶⁸

TECHNICAL CONSIDERATIONS

The ever-growing desire for evenness in musical performance over the twentieth century, described by Philip above, led to a style of conducting that was similarly more even in nature. Particularly when it came to varying the units in the pattern with which a conductor used to show the tempo, the tendency became to choose a traditional pattern and change it as little as possible.¹⁶⁹ Sources such as Blume's text, however, suggest that changing the beat pattern once constituted a natural part of a nineteenth-century conductor's *modus operandi* when wanting to realise modifications of tempo. In fact, Brahms himself reportedly used a rather unusual pattern in the first movement of the *First Piano Concerto*. As Irish composer, organist and pedagogue, Charles Villiers Stanford (1852-1924) recalls:

His conducting of the D minor concerto threw an entirely new light on the whole composition, especially as regards the rhythmical swing of the first movement. Written in the troublesome tempo of 6/4 most conductors take it too quickly by beating two in a bar or too slowly by beating six. Brahms beat it in an uneven four (__u__u) which entirely did away with undue dragging or hurrying and kept the line of movement insistent up to the last note.¹⁷⁰

As this quote suggests, beating in these uneven units was remarkable in Brahms's days and it would be remarkable today in performances of nineteenth-century repertoire as well, even though a much greater variety of beating patterns came into existence in the century that followed as a requirement for conducting newly-composed pieces with complex rhythms and changing time signatures. The historical evidence on varying the pattern

¹⁶⁸ The extent to which old beliefs play a role in the shaping of newfound principals is something I think one can probably only judge at a later stage, in hindsight.

¹⁶⁹ A comprehensive list of traditional patterns can be found in: Rudolf, M. *The Grammar of Conducting A Practical Guide to Baton Technique and Orchestral Interpretation*. Schirmer, New York, 1950.

¹⁷⁰ Stanford, C. V. *Pages from an Unwritten Diary*. Edward Arnold, London, 1914, pp. 201-202.

of beats and using patterns that today would be considered unconventional leads me to look for opportunities to apply these technical tools today.

To create a shared artistic basis for my approach to Brahms's orchestral music, I extended my role in this project beyond the standard role of a conductor in today's performance practice. I shared the findings and preliminary results of my research with the community of orchestral musicians before the start of each project week. This enabled the musicians to make themselves familiar with my developing ideas. My newfound artistic principles also affected my role in rehearsals, performances and recordings, as I found myself working with different priorities. Over the course of the project, the musicians in the orchestra and I developed a more intuitive way of working with these new-found artistic principles. As a conductor I applied a wider variety of beating patterns, including some unconventional ones, to show my intention to strive for a less even way of performing the music. All this is part of an ongoing process of which, in the context of the limited scope of my project, I think I can show only the beginning.

2.2 RE-INVENTING AND IMPLEMENTING MODIFICATIONS WITH THE PROJECT ORCHESTRA

I documented the working process with the project orchestra in four films, which can be found on my website through the links provided below. The process of re-inventing and implementing modifications of rhythm and tempo - the central subject of this dissertation - has arguably been the most important aspect of my work with the orchestra. As such, it gets a considerable amount of attention in the films. These films illustrate how my approach to modification of rhythm and tempo (as well as my approach to other subjects such as vibrato and portamento) developed and how my perspective changed over the course of the four-year trajectory of the project - something predicted early on by Clive Brown, Anna Scott and others. This is one reason why I decided to document the process carefully in this way. The films include interviews with participating musicians, revealing their experiences, and changing perspectives. The interviews with experts in the field of historically-informed performance practice of nineteenth-century orchestral repertoires make up another important part of the films. All the interviews together, but perhaps most noticeably the interviews with the musicians of the orchestra, make it clear that the orchestra has functioned here as a kind of laboratory. Experiments were carried out collectively, but also at the level of each individual musician. The films also touch on topics like the position of the project within the wider fields of orchestral performance practices and higher music education.

I have provided links to the films and QR-codes, which can be scanned, for example with a mobile phone or another device. Both the links and the codes lead directly to the films and audio recordings. I hope that the QR-codes will be particularly useful for readers of the printed version of my thesis.

LINKS TO THE FILMS DESCRIBING EACH OF THE PROJECT WEEKS:

Film 1 (2019)

<https://vimeo.com/381993988/19eae836bd>



QR-code 1

Film 2 (2020)

<https://vimeo.com/498298089/66dc9e2576>



QR-code 2

Film 3 (2021)

<https://vimeo.com/669806758>



QR-code 3

Film 4 (2022)

<https://vimeo.com/765626194>



QR-code 4

2.3 EXAMPLES OF MODIFICATIONS OF RHYTHM AND TEMPO IN THE PROJECT ORCHESTRA RECORDINGS

After careful consideration, I decided to present this chapter (like the previous one) in the form of films. By writing several essays about tempo modification with music examples and by monitoring the feedback I received from musicians and others who read them, I learned that I had to reconsider the format in which I would offer this part of my research. Though my audio examples, embedded in the text through hyperlinks, were appreciated, the fact that one was taken away from the text to a separate website for the audio, interrupted the flow of the reader in a way that made it hard to comprehend fully what I was arguing in the text and what I was trying to demonstrate in the examples. This feedback coincided with my own experience as a reader of other texts with audio examples embedded in a similar way. This is why I decided to look for a different way of presenting the examples of modification in the recordings. I ended up choosing the format of a film in which I talk about the type of modification in question and provide the audio example in a way that allows the viewer to follow the music in the annotated score directly.

Rather than trying to present a full discussion of all modifications, I aimed to give examples of several types of modification in recordings of different pieces played in all four years of the project. As mentioned in the introduction to this dissertation, I consider the recorded performances to lie at the core of my project, and the written part of my work as accompanying them. The videos too can be seen as accompanying my recordings. The films are intended to introduce the listener to the sounding results of the several types of modification that can be found in the recordings. As I wrote in the Introduction, watching these films (and listening to the recordings) is possibly the quickest way for the reader to get a good impression of the nature of the project.

LINKS TO FILMS WITH EXAMPLES OF MODIFICATIONS

Examples of modifications of rhythm and tempo with explanation and motivation.

First Symphony op. 68, C minor

First movement: Un poco sostenuto-Allegro

<https://vimeo.com/742594238>



QR-code 5

Second movement: Andante sostenuto

<https://vimeo.com/742670743>



QR-code 6

Third movement: Un poco Allegretto e grazioso

<https://vimeo.com/742616977>



QR-code 7

Fourth movement: Adagio - Allegro non troppo, ma con brio

<https://vimeo.com/742626108>



QR-code 8

Second Symphony op. 73, D major

First movement: Allegro non troppo

<https://vimeo.com/742661960>



QR-code 9

Second movement: Adagio non troppo

<https://vimeo.com/742660351>



QR-code 10

Third Symphony op. 90, F major

First movement: Allegro con brio

<https://vimeo.com/742662950>



QR-code 11

Second movement: Andante

<https://vimeo.com/742666038>



QR-code 12

Third movement: Poco Allegretto

<https://vimeo.com/742668356>



QR-code 13

Fourth movement: Allegro

<https://vimeo.com/742594861>



QR-code 14

Fourth Symphony op. 98, E minor op. 98

First movement: Allegro non troppo

<https://vimeo.com/764507392>



QR-code 15

Second movement: Andante moderato

<https://vimeo.com/764507688>



QR-code 16

Third movement: Allegro giocoso

<https://vimeo.com/764507960>



QR-code 17

Fourth movement: Allegro energico e passionato

<https://vimeo.com/764508265>



QR-code 18

