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 5. Evaluation and conclusions

The films covering the four project years include much about the ongoing evaluation of my methods and the developing results of the research. These aspects are discussed further, briefly, in this chapter. In addition to this I will discuss the project in the context of artistic research, today's performance practice and the field of (higher) music education. In the introduction to this dissertation, I stated that I intended to demonstrate how nineteenth-century expressive tools of modification of rhythm and tempo can be reinvented and implemented in present-day performances of Brahms's orchestral music. If this demonstration were to offer a meaningful new perspective on ways of performing this repertoire, it would have to have produced a result that was significantly different from those from the domains of both MPP and HIPP. Having studied many historical and late twentieth-century recordings, as well as more recent ones (some of which I discussed in Chapter 1.9), I think it is clear that the recordings I have produced with the project orchestra and present here do indeed constitute such a different result. The reactions from participating musicians, members of the audience, and especially experts in the field such as Clive Brown and John Eliot Gardiner (see the documentary films), confirm that this is a legitimate conclusion.[240]

I aimed to demonstrate how my approach is based on my understanding of historical evidence concerning nineteenth-century (orchestral) performance practice. I believe that by following this approach and describing the process of working with the orchestra, I have shown that I have arrived at this result through the reinvention and implementation of nineteenth-century expressive tools that were subsequently abandoned during the twentieth century. Though I have argued from the outset of my project that I intended the recordings to be the core of my work, with the

[240] In the first two years of the project, I expressed the hope that feedback of fellow conductors and nineteenth-century performance practice experts would help me asses the results and find a path forward. (See film 2 about the second project week, 2020: 'What's next', minute 34:54). I have consulted many peers during the project, particularly amongst the participating musicians. It became clear to me, however, that seeking external feedback or reactions from fellow conductors was difficult. However, I increasingly felt that I did not need the external feedback as much as I had thought in early stages of the project, because the feedback that was accumulated withing the project provided me with sufficient guidance to find my way forward.

written component being, as it were, an accompaniment, I have found the task of carefully explaining how my approach is rooted in my understanding of historical evidence to be both challenging and stimulating.

As historian Hayden White (1928-2018) has suggested, historians may be concerned with events which are 'in principle observable or perceivable' but they are unable to represent these without resorting to techniques that add a fictional element. By creating a hypothesis on the basis of historical evidence or simply by writing about the past, all kinds of moral, rhetorical and aesthetic factors inevitably drive or become part of the narrative. An awareness of the role that these factors play in research has been important in alerting me to the danger of becoming captive to ideological presumptions that might have been developed during the course of the research. It has helped to prevent me from forming an inflexible view of the past that would not only be untenable but also an impediment to creative thinking. White is considered a ground-breaking historian, whose work has challenged the cherished belief that history could be an objective mirror or lens rather than an imaginative construction of the past. The work of White and other post-modern historians such as the Dutch historian and philosopher Frank Ankersmit casts light on the naïve belief of many HIPP musicians and researchers that a truthful reconstruction of historical styles and practices is achievable.

Performing musicians who also engage in historical research, unlike other historians, do not have to rely on language exclusively to communicate their understanding of history. They can perform the music that they investigate in addition to writing about it. This is of course a wonderful way of establishing a feeling of connection to the past, but it runs the risk of creating illusions about historically correct or authentic performance.[241] Satisfactory results in performances (performances that musicians and or audiences enjoy or appreciate) based on an understanding of historical evidence have been mistaken by some (including the performers) as evidence of the correctness of that understanding. However, satisfactory performances of historical repertoire can be achieved through a range of different approaches with a variety of historical and non-historical aesthetic foundations. As such they cannot automatically be proof of any correct

[241] Many CD sleeves and booklets of HIPP recordings of the second half of the twentieth century describe them as 'authentic', 'true to the composers' intentions' or 'historically correct'.

understanding of historical evidence.[242] I personally find it quite liberating to embrace the idea that my efforts as an HIPP musician are nothing more – but certainly also nothing less – than a way of revitalising my relationship with history and keeping alive a connection with the works of art from the past. The fact that how I engage with the historical evidence may well say more about me and the time I live in than about the history I study does not diminish my work as a performing musician or a scholar, but it is important for me to refrain from making false claims about its historical validity. I think it is important to point out that historical evidence does not need to be seen as compelling a performer to certain artistic choices. The confrontation between historical evidence of changing performance practices and one's acquired artistic beliefs can be an endless source of inspiration for performers. The term 'historically informed' allows the performer-researcher to say: the historical evidence tells me that certain things were done in a certain way in the times of the composer, but I choose to do it differently now. As long as one claims that one is historically informed rather than presenting a performance that accurately reflects a historical truth or practice, one can be free in one's artistic choices. At the same time, I have tried to be as specific as I possibly could about the connection between the historical sources I use and my approach, so that others can challenge my understanding of the evidence, my method of re-inventing and applying my findings and the results of the process, based on detailed information. In my opinion, this remains the best way to show how scholarly knowledge about the past can be used to stimulate artistic creativity.

In an article written by Brown for *Early Music* in 2010, he discusses the yawning chasm between contemporary performance practice and historical evidence. Since that article, much work has been done in the field of solo and chamber music performance, but not a great deal in relation to orchestral performance. Brown lists a number of reasons why historical evidence has generally been ignored by performers, ranging from the nature of the education system and the expectations of record producers and

[242] I leave aside efforts to legitimise unsatisfactory performances with historical arguments, though one could claim that these constitute satisfactory performances by a particular set of chosen criteria and as such fall into the category of "satisfactory performances" referred to in the body of my text.

audiences to the attitudes and habits of established performers.[243] In Chapter 1.11, I discussed some of the factors I think have contributed to the fact that the results of historical research have not been applied extensively in orchestral settings.

My proposed way of playing Brahms's orchestral works is not only substantially different from what has been produced in the field of HIPP, but certainly also from what is considered 'proper' performance in MPP and in the field of (higher) music education.[244] I have tried to avoid a combative tone in my writing but I cannot deny that my work can be seen as challenging the current practices. I like to think of my project as a small part of the ever-changing and intermittently evolving ways in which musicians and audiences think about the performance of music from the past. Challenging how music from the past is performed is a way of keeping our relationship with it alive. I contribute to scholarly knowledge and artistic development by explaining how and why I think that particular expressive tools are not just 'proper' for the execution of the music but are indeed an essential element of it.

There has been some discussion among my supervisors about the question of whether the title I chose for this dissertation was defendable. Some might argue that the art of modifying rhythm and tempo never really disappeared from the world of orchestral performance practices, making it impossible for me to claim that I could "re-invent" a supposedly lost tool. It is true that where performances may initially appear to be very rigid in their handling of rhythm and tempo, and very literal in their representation of the printed score, closer inspection invariably reveals some deviations from a metronomically maintained tempo. It is also true that musicians tend to find plenty of opportunities in Brahms's orchestral music to slow down the initial tempo and to take time over transitions and passages that they feel need such treatment, an approach that is certainly not metronomically accurate.

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[243] Brown, C. "Performing 19th-century chamber music: the yawning chasm between contemporary practice and historical evidence," *Early Music,* August 2012, Vol. 38, No. 3, pp. 476-480.

[244] I am using the adjective 'proper' to refer to performances that are consistent with the beliefs about how this music should be played, as held by the majority of professionals in the fields of MMP, HIPP and (higher) music education. In the field of professional education as a string player in conservatories and universities all over the world, for example, it is considered proper to play Brahms with a continuous vibrato, little or no portamento, and in a steady tempo.

Yet I believe that such deviations from the tempo are something entirely different from what was understood as the high art of modification, which I described and discussed in Chapter 1.8 and which – when it comes to the performance of Brahms's orchestral works – was epitomised in the performances of the Meiningen Orchestra under Fritz Steinbach.

Although my research is a serious effort to approach the elusive style of Steinbach's flexible treatment of rhythm and tempo with the Meiningen Orchestra, I would find it preposterous to pretend that what I do with my orchestra today might closely resemble what they did at the time. As I have shown, Blume commented on how Steinbach's style was utterly lost in the 1930s. Berrsche mentioned that, with Steinbach, Brahms had died a second time, because the performance practice of Brahms's orchestral works by Steinbach had not yet taken root by the time of his death. Given the fact that these contemporaries of Brahms and Steinbach considered it an impossibility to recreate their style almost one hundred years ago, I should dismiss any claim that, in a literal sense, I might be able to do so today. Having said this, it is perhaps important to acknowledge that musicians at the beginning of the twentieth century would have had few incentives to abandon, for example, vibrato or any of the other tools that were then passionately believed to be essential in 'modern' performance by a majority of musicians and music lovers. Using historical evidence about performance practices that they had discarded allowed me to reimagine something that is possibly closer to the Brahms/Steinbach approach than any of them would have been interested in.

As Leech-Wilkinson rightly argues in *ormancerformance*, performance constantly changes over time:

> First of all, what we think is proper to a composer or a score is already slightly different from what our teachers' generation thought. And over a century, as recordings show, these differences accumulate to such an extent that musicianship becomes in some respects unrecognisable.[245]

[245] Leech-Wilkinson, "Performance changes over time," https://challengingperformance.com/the-borfok-3/. (Last accessed July 2022).

I cannot say that my personal experience corresponds entirely with Leech-Wilkinson's idea regarding unrecognisable musicianship, as I always feel that historical sources like recordings and texts reveal various ways of handling the same performance issues, which I address in my own way. This, for me, results in a feeling of connection with other, earlier interpreters, as I can recognise their musicianship even though it led them in different directions. Yet Leech-Wilkinson's main point, of course, is that performance changes constantly and ideas about what is proper in performance differ from generation to generation because of our changing ideas about both history and aesthetics. Through my research, I am challenging the way my own generation and earlier twentieth-century generations now perform or used to perform Brahms. I consider this challenge to be warranted particularly due to the remarkable inflexibility of both MPP and HIPP when it comes to modifications of rhythm and tempo in orchestral performance, as discussed in Chapter 1.10. I do however believe that my project sits firmly within the tradition of HIPP. The fact that I have produced results that differ from what has hitherto been produced in this tradition is the consequence of the relationship I have developed with historical sources, particularly during the years of my PhD research, and the fact that I have not been concerned with following established guidelines to produce a commercially acceptable result.

Whilst substantial work has been done in the field of researching and playing Brahms's solo and chamber music, in an endeavour to bridge the gap between the historical evidence and how the music is performed today, this has not been the case for orchestral repertoires.[246] Apart from the complete cycle of Brahms's symphonies on period instruments by Sir John Eliot Gardiner and his Orchestre Révolutionnaire et Romantique in 2007 and a CD recording of the piano concertos by András Schiff and the Orchestra of the Age of Enlightenment in June 2021, there are, to my knowledge, no other projects currently ongoing on Brahms's orchestral music that involve recordings on period instruments. After carefully studying the landmark recordings of Gardiner and Schiff, I think I can safely say that when it comes

[246] The work of pianists Anna Scott and Neal Peres Da Costa was already mentioned in Chapter 1.8, as was the work of cellists Kate Bennett-Wadsworth and Job ter Haar, in Chapter 3.3 on portamento. More recent additions are the dissertations by Leeds PhD students Jung Yoon Cho and Miaoyin Qu, who focus entirely or partly on Brahms performance; see the White Rose website for more information: https://etheses.whiterose.ac.uk/. (Last accessed November 2022).

to modifications of rhythm and tempo, they do not reflect what I believe to be the flexible style that Brahms might have expected to hear. Gardiner's handling of tempo is rather conventional, whilst Schiff's recording and the orchestra's contribution to it, to my ear at least, support the view that using historical instruments does not in itself guarantee a style of performance that can justly be described as historically informed, particularly in relation to the modification of rhythm and tempo. Their tempi are handled rather uniformly; there is little variation in pulse or density of accentuation; and the orchestral sound is clean and even. There are some projects in which historical research is used as a basis for orchestral performance practice in other repertoires. Philipp von Steinaecker, for instance, focuses on Mahler symphonies in his *Originalklang Project* in the Süd-Tirol. Conductor Kent Nagano and Concerto Köln are researching and performing Wagner operas through a project called *Wagner Readings*. In Sydney, Neal Peres Da Costa leads the *Re-invigorating 19th-Century Performan*ce project at the Conservatorium of Music, and in Oxford, research fellow Claire Holden is overseeing an exceptionally well-funded project called *Transforming 19th-Century HIP.* The Oxford project is described as a five-year project that started in 2016, aiming to transform nineteenth-century HIPP. I fail to see how any single project could ever realise such a far-reaching goal.[247]

I have made a small beginning with the re-invention and implementation of some nineteenth-century expressive tools, and I hope to continue experimenting with modifications of rhythm and tempo, with portamento and with vibrato as an ornament in eighteenth and nineteenth-century music after the completion of this project.

My efforts to re-invent and implement nineteenth-century expressive tools can be seen as a challenge to the effects of twentieth-century 'modernism' in musical performance.[248] My research shows it is possible to challenge these effects based on an understanding of historical sources; in other words, from within HIPP. This is perhaps not as obvious as it may seem. As I have argued in the introduction of this dissertation, one can identify important features, particularly regarding evenness of sound and

[247] Rather than transforming nineteenth-century HIPP, I fear that this project, with its grandiose claim, risks transforming the way in which some HIP practices are evaluated, both in the field of performance and in academia.

[248] For an example of a challenge to such traditional performance practices, see George Barth "Effacing Modernism."

tempo in performance, that MPP and HIPP have in common. Just as the period instrument movement, once promoting itself as anti-establishment, has been incorporated into the power structures of concert organisers and promoters, its fundamental artistic principles seem to me to have become part of the mainstream way of making music, certainly when it comes to the performance of baroque, classical and romantic repertoire. I am convinced that the findings of historical research can be used to broaden the scope of performance styles, not only in nineteenth-century repertoire but also in music from the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. It does require an open-minded investigation of historical evidence, an acceptance of the uncertainties regarding present-day understanding of such evidence and a willingness to experiment in practice with expressive tools that do not necessarily lead directly to commercially acceptable products. The act of making sense of what one hears or reads about past performance practices and using research findings in performance involves more than merely processing information. One needs to transform, re-imagine or reinvent that information. These efforts can mitigate the effects of the modernist revolution of the early twentieth-century, particularly by making use of expressive tools that were discarded when the modernist performance practice came to such dominance, but I see them mainly as a way of revitalising and perpetuating our relationship with the music of the past. I think it is too early to tell if the present wave of reconsidering current performance styles can best be seen as a new chapter in the same modernist tradition, as a (postmodernist) rejection of modernism or as a new practice with the potential to replace the modernist tradition.

I consider that my project and the way I have conducted it – including the way I have looked at and experimented with the historical sources – offer glimpses of expressive possibilities that have been gradually forgotten, neglected or rejected in today's performance practice of the orchestral works of Brahms and others. At the same time though, I am cognisant of the fact that it is impossible to return to a style of performance that fully represents the character of pre-modernist performance practices. I have added one more voice to the enormous richness of possible relationships one can have towards notation and relics from the past. I am looking forward to hearing many more such voices in the future. Above all, I hope that my work can

serve to expand the ever more narrowly defined domain of "correct," "proper" or "approved" performance of nineteenth-century repertoire.

Though my research is limited in scope, it has had a profound effect on me as a performer and scholar. It has changed my conception of the music I had previously studied. The notion that historically informed performance practice offers merely a perspective on the music of the past, as if one were looking at it through a HIPP lens, no longer satisfies me. This would mean that one would be looking at the same unchanged object through a chosen lens as if the object itself (the music) could be seen as a thing of specifically defined and agreed upon dimensions and properties; or as if the score *were* the music. In fact, a historically supported approach not only offers a particular perspective but often changes the idea of what it is one is looking at. Historical research demonstrates that composers did not notate all the expressive practices they expected performers to employ; it is nevertheless clear that they considered these practices as being integral to a beautiful (rather than merely correct) performance of their music. My idea of the identity of the Brahms compositions I have studied in my research now includes my new-found understanding of the expectations Brahms was likely to have had of those performing his music. Because of this idea, my research has also changed my understanding of my role as a HIPP performer. Basing one's musical performance style on historical sources can, in part, be seen as an effort to make the performance more about the music than about the performer. Indeed, this was one of the ideals of HIPP that I found so attractive when I first encountered it. But, as I have shown - particularly through the writings of Spohr, who describes the necessity for performers to add something of their own to the performance to elevate it from the domain of "correct performance" to the higher domain of "beautiful performance" - the role of the performer has historically been very substantial and far less neutral than I had previously thought. As composer Carl Ludwig Junker put it, performer and composer need to work together "hand in hand."[249] Accepting Spohr's idea that, as a performer, I need to bring something of my own to the performance, so that the emotions in the music may be understood by the listener, begs the question of what it is that I am bringing to it. Of course, my idea of the way the music should be performed is based

[249] Junker, *Einige Der Vornehmsten Pflichten*, p. 37.

in part on my understanding of the historical sources on the use of the suitable expressive tools (the tools with which the composer was familiar and expected to be used by those performing his music). Yet I cannot escape the simple fact that it is my present-day understanding of the music and the historical context that guides my approach, and it is the extent to which I can make the music speak to my present-day colleagues and audiences that guides most of my aesthetic choices.

The idea that music of any period can be best understood through studying and understanding the music of the period before it is important to many performers and researchers who are involved in HIPP. In music education, many conservatories adhere to this fundamental belief, and it often serves as the guiding principle in their curricula, particularly in the early music departments. As the Austrian conductor Nicolaus Harnoncourt states in *Musik als Klangrede,* the music of the classical period, for example, can best be understood through the music of the late baroque period. Indeed, like Harnoncourt, I have always considered this to be the most natural way to come to an understanding of early music, less tainted by one's knowledge and perception of later repertoire.[250]

The ways in which my new-found approach to Brahms's music has spilt over into how I perform other repertoires (both earlier and later) have made me realise that the reverse order can also be pursued effectively, at least when it comes to efforts to reduce the influence of the modernist ideal of evenness of sound and tempo on one's own performance style. The nineteenth-century expressive tools all have their own history and - as discussed in Chapter 1.1 – can be traced back to performance practices of the baroque era. One can certainly argue for an overhaul of the fundamental ideas regarding HIPP of baroque and classical music, based on the research of these periods themselves. But later sources can also provide a new perspective on older music. For example, when I listened to piano rolls by Carl Reinecke playing Mozart and I realised that he was one of the most highly respected interpreters of that repertoire throughout the nineteenth century, I was compelled to question just about everything I thought I knew about the historically-informed performance of Mozart.[251] Reconsidering how

[250] Harnoncourt, N. *Musik als Klangrede,* p. 164.
[251] Reinecke recorded in Leipzig for the Hupfeld studios around 1905. Https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=C_ELXJNMIE8 . (Last accessed June 2022)

to perform Mozart on the basis of what one hears in his recordings alone would mean trying to understand classical repertoire through a later, more romantic perspective. As such, it could be seen as rowing against the current by those who believe music is best understood in chronological order. But, in my opinion, considering the (later) early recordings, in context with written sources from the classical era itself, can provide an important tool to help broaden one's approach. I have used Reinecke's Mozart piano rolls when teaching students from early music departments of conservatories and with students from mainstream or modern departments, as well as when working with professional MPP and HIPP musicians. I can testify that hearing the Reinecke piano rolls came as a shock to almost all the musicians who had not heard them before. When discussing Reinecke's style, students of early music departments and of modern departments often made objections based on similar arguments, particularly regarding his flexible rhythm and tempo. In my opinion, the fact that objections from representatives of both camps seemed to be largely based on the same idea of 'proper' (even) performance, can be seen as further corroboration of the idea that MPP and HIPP have much in common when it comes to their reasons for rejecting nineteenth-century performance practices. This observation is based on my limited personal experience and on a generalisation of two types of musicians, and I know that ideas about performance are constantly changing. It would be unfair to use these observations to characterise present-day MPP and HIPP in general, but I do believe that comparing reactions to historical recordings by people from different backgrounds can help one to understand the current perception of historical performance and what this says about today's musical aesthetics.

One final thought about the consequences of the fundamental idea of understanding music in a historical sequence concerns the way in which ideas about the proper performance of music of earlier style periods have suffused the approach to music of later periods. My old idea of a relatively clean and even sound in music of the classical era was initially a heavy influence on my idea of sound in nineteenth-century music, though I can now see that this idea lacked a historical foundation. It seems to me a significant danger that misconceptions about the 'proper' performance of early music, through this system of understanding music in historical sequence, can have a profound influence on approaches to all the music that comes after it. If

one claims, for instance – as most early conservatory music departments, not to mention MPP students and performers, did at least until recently – that the use of portamento in Haydn is improper, it is not surprising that the rejection of this expressive tool in classical music is used as a starting point to judge the appropriateness of its use in the music of the nineteenth century. Yet, there is evidence, in the form of autographs and early editions containing fingerings, of the fact that portamento was expected in performances of Haydn's string quartets.[252]

What I have learned about nineteenth-century practices, particularly regarding the use of modifications of rhythm and tempo, portamento and vibrato, made me question how I had performed earlier repertoire. For example, my period instrument CD-recordings of Beethoven's works for piano and violin made in the 1990s and my recording of Mozart's works for violin and orchestra of 2006 represent, to a large extent, the ideal of evenness of sound and tempo. Through my research on Brahms, my approach to Mozart and Beethoven has changed. I now know that the expressive tool of portamento used in the nineteenth century was also applied in earlier repertoire. Beethoven for example, appreciated the expressive use of portamento that he heard used by double bass player Domenico Dragonetti (1763-1846), and there is evidence to prove that Ignaz Schuppanzigh (1776-1830), one of the violinists with whom Beethoven worked closely, also applied portamento.[253] With my string quartet, the Narratio Quartet, I play all of the Beethoven quartets. Over the course of the last five years, in parallel with my research project, we have gradually changed our playing style, which now includes more substantial use of portamento and less vibrato, as well as a much freer handling of tempo. The National University of Seoul, where I became professor of HIPP in 2022, has offered me a grant which will allow me to record the complete Beethoven quartets over the next three years, demonstrating our new-found performance style in the Narratio Quartet.

But I find that I also have reason to apply some of the expressive tools described above in Mozart. A review of one of my recent performances with the 'Nieuwe Philharmonie Utrecht' (Mühlfeld, Germany, March 2022)

[252] The early editions of Haydn's string quartets contain instructions for portamento, sometimes *through una corda* markings, sometimes through fingerings. Examples can be found in op.17 no. 2, op. 20 no. 3, op. 33 no. 2, op. 64 no 6 and 77 no. 2.
[253] See Clive Brown's new edition of the Beethoven Violin Sonatas for Bärenreiter, p. XXVIII.

specifically mentioned my use of tempo modification and portamento in Mozart's *Symphony No. 40* and *Piano Concerto No. 17.* In my annual performances of Bach's *Matthew Passion* with the same orchestra, I have also experimented with a more freely applied rhetorical style, particularly in accompanied recitatives (*recitativi accompagnati)*, with less concern for vertical alignment between singer and orchestral accompaniment. At the 2021 Wonderfeel Festival, in 's-Graveland, The Netherlands, I conducted a piece by the composer Calliope Tsoupaki for string orchestra, in which I applied substantial amounts of unprescribed portamento and tempo fluctuations. I find that my research has altered my approach to everything I play and conduct.

As I wrote in the Introduction, with this project I set out to find 'a different Brahms'. My interrogation of the historical evidence and my practical exploration of its implications have not only changed my conception of Brahms's music, but also my wider understanding of the expressive tools that were such an essential aspect of his musical experience and expectations. As a result, I think that I have found a profoundly different Brahms and that, in terms of orchestral performance, the fundamental difference from conventional contemporary conceptions and performing practices in this repertoire represents a significant contribution to knowledge. I am very grateful for the fact that I had the chance to turn my ideas into sounding results together with the project orchestra. Of course there is a sadness in the fact that with the conclusion of the project and the ending of its funding, the orchestra ceases to exist. As I feel a profound connection to the way we have worked together over the course of the four intense years of the project, this also means that with the close of this project, I may well have conducted Brahms for the last time. It is my sincere hope, however, that my work and the recordings of the orchestra will inspire others to find their own different Brahms: I believe strongly that the time is right, and the possibilities endless.