

As failures go, attempting to recall the past is like trying to grasp the meaning of existence. Both make one feel like a baby clutching at a basketball: one's palms keep sliding off.

Joseph Brodsky, opening line of Essay "Less Than One"

Brahms with Johannes 2019-2022

My fellow musicians,

In September we will do our first project, playing Brahms' First Piano Concerto and the First Symphony.

I am writing to you about the changes in my approach to orchestral playing of nineteenth century repertoire that are a result of my intensified research over the past year.

The first part of this text deals with the road to the principal ideas under my approach for the project, the second part deals with the new ideas themselves. If you have limited time, you can scroll to the second part directly.

Part I

Old beliefs and new evidence

Until now my approach of historically informed performances of Brahms' orchestral repertoire has been based on a modification of what I believed to be a legitimate way of playing the great classical composers, Haydn, Mozart and Beethoven.

The research I have done over the past year however has fundamentally changed things for me. First it has made me realize that The Historically Informed Performance Practice (HIPP), which - as a performing musician - I considered myself a part of, belongs to a greater tradition than I had previously recognized.

In fact I now believe that the whole of the HIPP movement is part of the modernistic performance practice that resulted from the revolutionary changes that were made to performance practices in the 1920s and 30s. There is a lot to be said about this idea, and I will probably elaborate on it in the context of my Phd work, but for now, let's move on to the second thing that became clear to me as a consequence of this first realization:

Modifying or adapting the beliefs I had collected and developed over the past decades could not possibly result in a comprehensive new set of rules or beliefs that would include 19th century performance practices, because the very foundation of my old beliefs had been a radical move away from those practices.

Historical reconstruction

The third conclusion I reached in the course of my research concerns the legitimacy of sets of rules regarding performances practice in general, and the rules I had personally held dear until the start of my Phd research in particular.

What research *can* do for a performing musician is twofold: It can either confirm or contradict one's musical intuition. As such it can be a powerful and stimulating source of inspiration. But there is much it cannot do. I have always believed that no amount of historical research could ever result in a truthful reconstruction of a historical truth or reality.

There is a lot of literature on this subject. Much as I admire and respect the various positions people take up and the way they defend their positions, I find it a pity that the debate is often quite belligerent. In contrast a soft voice from the past has inspired me and helped me shape my ideas regarding this subject.

In the introduction to his *'Brahms in der Meininger Tradition'*¹ author Walter Blume expresses his regret about the fact that in earlier days the recording industry had not yet been sufficiently developed to give us a recording of a Brahms symphony under Fritz Steinbach.

In Blume's opinion a comparison between such a recording and a recording of one of the leading conductors of the 1930's would allow us to appreciate (*nachfühlen und verstehen*) that these recordings resulted from two totally different states of mind (*Bewusstseinshaltungen*).

Blume goes on to say that it would be impossible to explain the difference between these states of mind because when it comes to these matters the rational does not get a grip on the irrational:

¹ Brahms in der Meininger Tradition, seine Sinfonien und Haydn-Variationen in der Bezeichnung von Fritz Steinbach, Herausgegeben von Walter Blume. Als Manuskript gedruckt Suhrkamp 1933

Zu bedauern ist, dass die Schallplattenindustrie früher noch nicht so auf der Höhe und im Schwange war für Orchester-Reproduktionen wie heute. Man würde dann durch den Vergleich etwa eines "Tristan" unter Felix Mottl oder einer Brahms-Sinfonie unter Fritz Steinbach mit einer heutigen Aufführung unter ebenso bedeutender Dirigenten, wie die genannten, nachfühlen und verstehen können, wenn man sagt, dass hier aus zwei gänzlich verschiedenen Bewusstseinshaltungen heraus musiziert wird. Diese Verschiedenheit begrifflich auseinanderzusetzen, ist eine Unmöglichkeit, weil das Rationale in diesem Fall nicht an das Irrationale herankommt, wenn ich es so sagen darf.

I am struck by the subtle way in which Blume expresses his opinion. He makes an effort not to judge the new ways of the younger conductors in comparison to the ones he knows from the past. Instead he calls the new generation of conductors equally important and he emphasizes the fact that their way of making music simply comes from a different state of mind. For me this idea about *Bewusstseinshaltungen* is the most relevant of the ideas he presents here.

Following his line of thought I propose to accept his idea that all music making comes from a particular state of mind and as such is a reflexion of that state of mind.

Walter Blume was writing about the impossibility of fully appreciating the dimensions of a change in performance practice he had personally witnessed; a change that took place within the lifespan of one man.

I find in his words confirmation of my idea that a full understanding of practices that were part of the worlds and lives of previous generations is not within our reach.

This inevitably leads to the conclusion that a full reconstruction of a historical truth - certainly one that precedes the days of truthful recording - is an impossibility.

Behind the old and new beliefs

Given the fact that I have taken Blume's remarks on the subject so seriously, it might now be argued that I should make an attempt to identify my own state of mind or *Bewusstseinshaltung* in order to come to a fuller understanding of what motivates my artistic choices.

Although there would appear to be clear limitations to such an undertaking, given the fact that I would be investigating myself, I do think that an attempt to at least characterize my state of mind, or perhaps more to the point as a

translation of *Bewusstseinshaltung*; 'my way of looking at the world and myself' could be helpful.

This would by no means be an effort to make this about myself, or to present artistic soul searching in an academic context.

If we accept that extramusical factors such as ideas and ideals regarding the world and oneself are influencing our music making, it stands to reason that even if we change certain fundamental ideas regarding performance practice, these factors remain of influence.

Both my old beliefs and what I will try to do differently in the context of my Brahms research, will thus be influenced by my personal state of mind.

I do not think that this in any way diminishes the value or legitimacy of the new found or the old performances practice ideas, but I do think that it is worth investigating how they are influenced by extramusical factors such as this one.

It seems a relevant question to me whether the same results of historical research can lead different musicians to profoundly differing performances as a consequence of what Blume calls their *Bewusstseinshaltung*.

For now I think it will suffice to say that I am aware of the existence of extramusical factors behind my artistic choices.

I would like to now take a closer look at the ways in which I have gathered and developed ideas regarding performance practice over the past decades.

The basis of my old beliefs

Studying performance practices of the 19th century has made me acutely and sometimes painfully aware of the fact that my old beliefs regarding the correct performance of eighteenth and early nineteenth century repertoire were much more formed by practical experience than by a profound understanding of historical methods or sources.

I believe my experiences in recording sessions for example have shaped my ideas much more than any method or treatise I have ever read.

None the less I have always considered myself to be part of the so called Historically Informed Performance Practice (HIPP).

I have felt at home in the inspiring musical biotope that the musicians who believe that historical information can help shape truthful performances have created.

But when I reexamine my ideas about performance practice I must come to the conclusion that they are largely formed in practice.

My belief in the value of HIPP performances remains unshaken, but in the course of my research in to nineteenth century performance practices I have come to feel slightly uncomfortable with the name.

A question of semantics?

Let us - for the sake of argument - say that the opposite of 'Historically Informed Performance Practice' is 'Historically Uninformed Performance Practice'. That label sounds profoundly unattractive.

"Fitting" one might say, as the performances of those who chose to be historically uninformed often sound unattractive as well.

Nonetheless I prefer to use the term 'inspired' instead of 'informed'.

I would argue that the opposite of the historically inspired performance is not necessarily the historically uninspired performance, but rather the *otherwise* inspired performance.

I have two reasons for my preference for this label.

The first relates to the amount of information that is obtainable.

For me it is important to realize that any quantity of historical information we may use to base our performance practice on, must be considered minute in proportion to what we might know if it were truly possible to know the past.

Against that background I find the term 'historically informed' uncomfortable.

How informed are we? What level of informedness warrants use of this term?

It could be argued that there is only a gradual distinction between someone conducting historical research in an academic context, and any musician in possession of a smartphone and access to the internet, when it comes to their respective levels of informedness.

Secondly I find it important to stress that historical information only in rare cases leads to direct conclusions as to how we should perform something now; it seldom provides compelling evidence resulting in unavoidable choices regarding performance practice.

Apart from the fact that we lack a complete understanding of the historical context of the evidence, the evidence itself is often contradicted by other evidence from other sources.

We need to make sense of it by interpreting the findings. We try things out and modify ideas and we tend to select what makes sense to us today. In my opinion this process of giving meaning to the historical information is the crux of the matter.

This is the factor creating its relevance in the field of performance practices of various natures today, much more so than the level of informedness discussed above.

I am certainly aware of the fact that any label has its limitations when it comes to fully defining the performance practice in question.

Weighing the accuracy of the labels however is of more than semantic importance to me.

It goes to the question of what it is exactly that we are doing when we base our performances on historical information.

I find the activity of making sense of the historical information the most important quality of the process and I prefer a label for it that emphasizes this aspect more than the information gathering aspect.

Having made my case for using the term Historically Inspired Performance Practice rather than Historically Informed Performance Practice, I should maybe take it one step further.

For me it is time to drop even this improved label and choose instead for something that I would call Historically Inspired Modernism.

Historically Inspired Modernism

I am aware of the fact that writers such as Georg Barth² refer to the new practice that developed as a result of the changes in the performance practice of the 1920s and 30s as modernism.

Putting my beloved tradition of Historically Informed Performance Practice squarely in the domain of the modernist tradition as I have done above, has a nice provocative ring, but I am quite serious about it.

² Effacing Modernism, or How to Perform Less Accurately Through Listening Author: George Barth, Source: Historical Performance, Vol. 1 (2018), pp. 148-189 Indiana University Press

Let's briefly consider the term modernism in this context.

In general, modernism may be characterized as a movement that arose from transformations that took place in Western society during the end of the nineteenth and the beginning of the twentieth century.

In philosophy and art the term has a wide variety of meaning and usage with implications and connotations that do not necessarily apply to the subject of musical performance practices.

It does however apply to this subject in so far as it can be seen as a movement that affirms the power of human beings to create, improve and reshape their environment with the aid of practical experimentation, scientific knowledge, and technology.

In musical performance practice the modernism that developed at the beginning of the twentieth century sought new ways to express the full content of music of the past using these tools.

Practicing and rehearsing can be seen as a form of experimentation.

Over the course of the nineteenth century these processes were constantly developing. The creation of conservatories formalizing and structuring musical education from the beginning of the century and the emergence of the conductor as a more and more influential factor in orchestral rehearsals throughout the second half of the century, contributed substantially to this development.

Seen in this light, the tool of practical experimentation as a characteristic of modernism does not set it apart from the nineteenth century practices.

One might argue that over the course of the nineteenth century this tool was developed and foreshadowed modernism.

The scientific approach to research into historical performance practices and sources resulting in a base of scientific knowledge, can be seen as a new element setting the modernistic performance practice developing in the 1920s and 30s apart from the nineteenth century practices.

Biographies of composers for example, became more based on documentation and historical evidence. At the same time editions of the works of the great composers were based more on research into primary sources, resulting in urtext editions, rather than in annotated editions by famous interpreters of the past.

The third, and perhaps most decisive modernistic tool is technology. In the case of music making the technology of sound recording.

The capacity to truthfully record (orchestral-) performances improved rapidly at the beginning of the twentieth century. Robert Philip³ in his book on Early recordings writes about the importance of the recordings for the changes in performance practice:

The early twentieth century is the earliest period for which the primary source material of the performance practice - the performance itself - has been preserved. It lies at the transition between two musical worlds, the old world in which performers were heard only in actual performance, and each performance occurred only once, and the modern world, in which a performance (which may not even have been a complete performance) can be heard simply by playing a recording.

The recorded performance is available to anyone, including the musician who performed it, and can be repeated any number of times. The recordings of the early twentieth century are themselves transitional in character. They are of the new world, in that they are available and repeatable, but the performances that they preserve are largely of the old world, survivals of a style evolved for unique performance to an audience.

The changes in performance practice over the century have been greatly influenced by this shift of emphasis. (. . .) . . . the general change in emphasis (. . .) has been from characterization of musical events to the reproduction of the text.

In using modernistic tools of practical experimentation, scientific research and particularly technology in the form of recording technique, the new found modernist performance practice distanced itself from the performance practices of the nineteenth century.

This is not the place for a full discussion of the exact content of the emerging modernist performance practice, but characterized in one word, the new practice strived for more *evenness*.

Even tempo, even sound, even vibrato, even articulation and intonation. The new ideal of evenness also applied to structure: performances that emphasized the structure of a work were deemed superior. If rubato was permitted, it was on structurally relevant moments in the score. This is why sometimes the practice is referred to as structuralist performance practice.

³ Early recordings and musical style, changing tastes in instrumental performance 1900-1950 , Robert Philip, Cambridge University Press 1992 chapter 9, p.230

My main reason for placing the HIPP tradition in the domain of the modernist practice, is the fact that it uses the same tools; experimentation, scientific knowledge and technology.

Even when I look at the many differences between the specific performance rules applied in the early modernist performance practice and those used in the HIPP I find no reason to argue that HIPP should be seen as an independent practice outside the domain of modernism.

When it comes to the underlying ideal, characterized above as one of evenness, I find more similarities than differences.

This is no more than a secondary argument for placing the HIPP inside the Modernist practice, but an argument nonetheless.

Now I would like to look at the position of the new found beliefs that shape my approach to the performance of Brahms' orchestral music in relation to the modernist performance practice.

The question is obvious: do these new ideas constitute a new practice or are they merely a variation of the HIPP and as such part of the modernist approach?

I gave you my answer of course in the title of this paragraph when I labeled my approach as Historically Inspired Modernism. It is not a revolutionary new performance practice, but an adaptation of HIPP and in my opinion clearly part of the modernist approach.

Modernism of the past and present

All music has once been modern music as every philosophy as to how to perform this music has once been modern too.

I find it utterly unattractive to discard or ridicule previous traditions and to claim that finally we can do justice to compositions of the great composers of the past because we have rediscovered the correct instruments to perform the music on, or have found sources inspiring us to change performing traditions.

Every generation has sought to do justice to the scores of the past, certainly since a large portion of our concert programs became dedicated to the music of past generations.

If adjustments were made, they were never intended to go against the composer's intentions as they were understood by the musicians involved.

The results of these efforts have changed from musician to musician and

generation to generation as they were an expression of the different states of minds of the performers and a result of the usage of different tools.

Musicians through the ages have tried to bring the music to life for their contemporary audiences with the tools and techniques that were available to them and that they found most suitable.

In our time, experimentation, historical research and technology are important tools allowing us to re-examine forgotten techniques and means of expression.

To think that the reimplementation of these techniques and means of expression would make our performances more true or profound than those of previous generations is an illusion.

I find it quite liberating to think of my Historically Inspired Performance Practice of Brahms's orchestral music as modernistic.

I make use of the available tools: experimentation, historical research and technology, as many have done before me and are doing today, to come to performances of the music I love, that make sense to me, given my particular state of mind.

I can only hope that reimplementing forgotten techniques and means of expression will help me realize truthful performances.

My goal is to serve the intentions of the composer as I understand them through my research. I do not have the pretension that I can recreate a historical truth.

Johannes Brahms Zum 100. Geburtstag.

Man sieht ihn jetzt "historisch", man klassifiziert und rubriziert ihn, die fleissigen Leute erfassen alles, nur nicht das Lebendige und unaufhörlich Wirkende.

Alexander Berrsche, Trösterin Musika, 1933

Part II

New Principals of performance

For practical purposes I will divide the rules regarding our style of playing Brahms in three categories: Tempo, Vibrato and Portamento.

Using this division into categories helps me to present the rules that I wish to apply, but I can not stress enough that viewing them as separate subjects

does not do justice to the fact that they are always related to one another when it comes to their practical application.

Ultimately they need to be considered in connection with each other, not as isolated phenomena. This process - of considering vibrato, portamento and tempo modification in connection to each other - will constitute a large part of our rehearsals.

Before we look at the three categories separately, I would like to examine the general trend of the changing performance practices of the beginning of the twentieth century.

Robert Philips, in his book on 'Early Recordings and Musical Style'⁴ that I already quoted from above, gives a clear summary of the changing performance practice of the 1930s:

The most obvious trends in performing style over the first half of the twentieth century are easily summarized. Broadly speaking, early twentieth century playing was characterized by the following habits: the sparing use of vibrato by string-players, it's discrete use by singers, and the general avoidance of vibrato on woodwind instruments by most players except those of the French school; the frequent use of prominent, often slow, portamento by string-players and singers; the use of substantial tempo changes to signal changes of mood or tension, and the adoption of fast maximum tempos; varieties of tempo rubato which included not only detailed flexibility of tempo, but also accentuation by lengthening of individual notes, and the dislocation of melody and accompaniment; and the tendency, in patterns of long and short notes, to shorten the short notes, and to overdot dotted rhythms.

Instruments were also different from their modern equivalents in some ways - gut strings (used to decreasing extent after World War I), wooden flutes (widely used except by the French school), French bassoons (not in Germany and Austria), and . . . the continued use of narrow-bore brass instruments. By the 1930s there were clear trends away from these early twentieth century characteristics: the spread of continuous vibrato on stringed instruments, its increasing prominence among singers, and its adaptation by many woodwind players, including a movement towards slower vibrato than the fast tremor sometimes heard earlier in the century; the decreasing prominence and frequency of portamento on both strings and voice; a trend towards stricter control of tempo and slower maximum speeds; more emphatic clarity of rhythmic detail, more literal interpretation of note values, and the avoidance of

⁴ Early recordings and musical style, changing tastes in instrumental performance 1900-1950 , Robert Philip, Cambridge University Press 1992 chapter 9, p.229-230

rhythmic irregularity and dislocation; the adoption of steel on the upper strings of stringed instruments, the increasing use of the metal flute, the German bassoon, and wider-bore brass instruments.

It is possible to summarize all these elements as a trend towards greater power, firmness, clarity, control, literalness, and evenness of expression, and away from informality, looseness, and unpredictability.

Tempo modification

Fundamentally what I intend to do when it comes to tempo modification is the opposite of what I have done in the past.

The golden rule of my past beliefs with regard to tempo was: try to express all colors, moods and characters you find in the music within the same basic tempo. Use changes of the tempo only as a last resort , if all else fails to bring out what you want to express.

Now I want to see what happens if I implement a tempo that is constantly changing.

To my ear any application of any technique or means of expression that is not based upon an artistic goal is a nuisance.

As a consequence I demand that I always be able to motivate my choice of tempo manipulation on musical grounds. In my view tempo modification can never be allowed to become a goal in itself.

I intend to work with different kinds of tempo modification techniques and I want to make sure that each of them serves a musical purpose.

Flexibility

The famous German music critic Alexander Berrsche (1883-1940) writes about tempo flexibility in Brahms in an short article on the First symphony⁵ written in 1909:

Elastizität der Zeitmasse ist eine besondere Stileigentümlichkeit Brahmsens, die ihn in scharfen Gegensatz zu Beethoven stellt.

Berrsche goes on to argue that in Beethoven, tempo modification (changing the objective tempo) ideally should serve not to emphasize contrasts, but to restore the unity of the subjective tempo.

⁵ Kritik und Betrachtung, Trösterin Musika, Alexander Berrsche Ellerman, 1964 p.p. 240-243

Leaving that aside, I would like to concentrate on what Berrsche writes about Brahms:

In Brahms he says this is not the case. Here the unity of movement is often broken up by the organically growing Melos itself.

Berrsche characterizes Brahms' Melos as following a more winding path, developing in a more differentiated way and as being of a more nervous nature, in comparison to Beethoven's.

Bei Brahms ist die Einheitlichkeit der Bewegung häufig durchbrochen (...) durch das organische wachsen des Melos selbst. Das Brahms'sche Melos geht verschlungenere Wege, seine Entwicklung ist differenzierter, wenn man will, nervöser als die Beethovensche Gestaltungsweise.

Berrsche then goes on to show in detail how Fritz Steinbach modified tempi in Brahms' First Symphony.

In these examples, which I will incorporate in our performances and which correspond with Blume's account of Steinbach's interpretation of the symphony, Berrsche points to the fact that Steinbach performed parts of the slow movement of the First symphony in Andante tempo and other parts in a quasi Adagio tempo.

Additionally he points to a particular way to manipulate the tempo in the development section of the first movement.

What strikes me most is his remark about possible objections to these modifications because they are not written in the score:

Man soll nun nicht einwenden wollen, Brahms habe doch derlei nicht vorgeschrieben. Die ganz feinen Dinge wird jeder Autor sich hüten, ausdrücklich vorzuschreiben. Sie würden dann nämlich sofort übertrieben werden, und es ist gewiss besser, eine Feinheit gar nicht machen, als sie zu vergrößern.

These words of wisdom serve at the same time as an encouragement to explore tempo modification in places where the composer has not indicated any such thing in his score, and as a reminder to be very nuanced and careful in applying this tool in order to avoid making a caricature of the music by exaggerated use of tempo modifications.

On the move

When I studied the scores of Willem Mengelberg (1871-1951), the famous conductor of the Concertgebouw Orchestra, I came across a tool that I want to use with regard to tempo manipulation.

Mengelberg frequently uses two capital letters in his score to indicate a forward motion and a backward one.

These are the letters W, for *Weiter* the German word for continue, or move on and R, for *Ruhig*, for calm.

When you read Mengelberg's scores you can conclude that he is always on the move to a musical goal or coming away from a goal that he has reached.

Likewise I want to be 'on the move' for large sections of the repertoire we will play. I will also mark my score with the letters W and R.

Characterization of specific themes

I will freely adopt a slower or faster tempo to bring out the specific character of a specific theme or a chapter in the score. An example of this is the slower tempo for the second subject in the first movement of the First Symphony.

Modifications in relation to dynamics

I have spent almost 30 years as a conservatory professor teaching my students to avoid accelerating in crescendo and likewise to avoid slowing down in diminuendo.

There is a lot of evidence pointing to the fact that in the nineteenth century it was common practice to combine dynamics with tempo modifications i.e. crescendo would imply a degree of acceleration and decrescendo the opposite. This is clearly supported by what we can hear in recordings, such as the recording of the First Symphony by the RSO Leipzig with Hermann Abendroth and the recording of the First Piano Concerto of the Concertgebouw Orchestra with Bruno Walter and Vladimir Horowitz.

Hairpins

The hairpins (< >) or *messa di voce* signs in Brahms' music deserve special attention.

In Spohr's *Methode*⁶ I found a detailed explanation of the kind of support from the bow that is required to bring out the vibrato in the heart of the hairpins sign.

⁶ Violinschule von Spohr, Reprint of first edition 1833, Katzbichler Verlag 2000, p.p. 125-130

Spohr proposes a technique that requires the string player to move the bow closer to the bridge and away from it in the course of the hairpins sign. The effect is an intensification and relaxation of the sound, that can be imitated by wind players for their way of handling the hairpins.

Spohr gives an exercise:

125

Adagio. ♩ 100,,

N^o 51.

Takt 1. Das Zeichen unter der Note zeigt an, dass der Ton schwach beginnen, nach und nach anwachsen, in der Mitte seiner Dauer die grösste Stärke haben und dann allmählig wieder zum piano zurückkehren soll. Der Bogen wird dicht am Frosch und in einiger Entfernung vom Stege, ganz lose auf die Saite gesetzt, so dass diese Anfangs nur von einem kleinen Theil der Haare berührt wird. Seine Bewegung ist im Anfang möglichst langsam; in dem Maasse aber, wie der Ton an Stärke zunehmen soll, wird der Bogen schneller gezogen, dem Stege genähert und stärker auf die Saite gedrückt, so dass sie zuletzt von der ganzen Breite der Haare gefasst wird. Beym Abnehmen des Tons lässt der Druck und die Geschwindigkeit des Bogens allmählig nach; auch entfernt er sich nach und nach wieder vom Stege. Hierbey kommt es nun hauptsächlich auf eine gute Eintheilung des Bogens an, so, dass mit der Mitte der Note auch die Hälfte des Bogens und mit dem Ende derselben, das Ende des Bogens zusammentrifft. Die Abstufung vom piano zum forte muss möglichst stark, dabey der Ton aber immer schön seyn. Das zarte Ansetzen des Bogens in der Nähe des Frosches und das langsame Ziehen desselben will daher fleissig geübt seyn.

In his treatise Joachim makes an explicit connection between hairpins, vibrato, and agogic inflection: “The vibrato requires not only a brief lingering on the notes marked with <f>, but the bow must also support the trembling with a light pressure on the string. In this way the time lost on the vibrated note can be easily made up in the subsequent notes.”⁷

Other evidence, for example such as presented by David Hyun-Su Kim in his article ‘The Brahmsian Hairpin’⁸ shows us that this way of looking at hairpins can be found in other sources as well, from Hugo Riemann to Arnold

⁷Violinschule Joachim/Moser “Das vibrato erfordert hierbei nicht nur ein kurzes Verweilen auf der mit dem Zeichen <f> versehenen Note; auch der Bogen unterstützt die Bebung durch einen leisen Nachdruck auf die Saite. Die auf dem vibrierten Ton verlorne Zeit ist mit den folgenden Noten so geschickt wieder einzubringen” (Joseph Joachim and Andreas Moser, *Violinschule*, 3 vols. [Berlin: Simrock, 1905], III, 7).

⁸ The Brahmsian Hairpin, David Hyun-Su Kim Source: 19th-Century Music, Vol. 36, No. 1 (Summer 2012), pp. 46-57, University of California Press

Schönberg, confirming that the hairpins can be understood as being not so much dynamic markings, but rather expressive indications, frequently associated with rhythmic inflection.

In his book on Classical and Romantic Performance Practice⁹, Clive Brown notes that in Mendelssohn, Schumann and Brahms the hairpin, when it relates to one note, seems to generally require a warm but not too powerful accent, perhaps with an agogic element in some instances, and vibrato where appropriate.

Indeed on page 552 of the same book he writes that the sign generally implied vibrato.

I will return to the subject of the hairpins in my chapter on vibrato.

Here I want to emphasize the tempo modification in relation to the hairpin sign: I intend to always take some time when it comes to the hairpin, in order to bring out its agogic importance.

Blume writes about the broadening (*Verbreiterung*) of the music in the hairpin, for example in the First Symphony, as can be seen here¹⁰:

The image shows a musical score snippet for the II. Thema of Brahms' First Symphony. The score is written on a single staff with a treble clef and a key signature of two flats (B-flat and E-flat). The tempo is marked 'a tempo'. The dynamics are marked 'espr. p dolce'. The score includes several hairpin markings: a crescendo leading to a 'breit' (broad) section, followed by a 'dann a tempo' section, and another 'breit' section. The text 'zum II. Haupt-Thema.' and 'II. Thema' are written above the staff. The text 'espr. p dolce' is written below the staff. The text 'breit' is written above the staff in three places. The text 'dann a tempo' is written above the staff. The text 'ruhig wei' is written above the staff. The text 'Das Thema verlangt die eingeschaltete Verbreiterung, wie aus dem Notenbeispiel ersichtlich. Die Achtel der Bratschen' is written below the staff.

I would like to end this description of the rules I wish to apply to tempo modification with four bits of evidence I found, that function as a kind of warning signs for me, when it comes to the practical application of the findings above.

⁹ Classical and Romantic Performing Practice: 1750–1900, Clive Brown, Oxford University Press, 1999, p.p126-127.

¹⁰ Brahms in der Meininger Tradition, seine Sinfonien und Haydn-Variationen in der Bezeichnung von Fritz Steinbach, Herausgegeben von Walter Blume. Als Manuskript gedruckt, Suhrkamp 1933, p.p. 15

When conductor and singer Georg Henschel asked Brahms about metronome markings and tempo in *Ein Deutsches Requiem*, he received following answer¹¹:

I think here as well as with all other music the metronome is of no value. As far as least as my experience goes, everybody has sooner or later withdrawn his metronome marks. Those which can be found in my works - good friends talked me into putting them there, for I myself have never believed that my blood and a mechanical instrument go well together. The so-called 'elastic tempo' is moreover not a new invention. 'Con discrezione' should be added to that as to many other things. Is this an answer? I know of no better one; but what I do know, is that I indicate my tempi (without numbers), modestly, to be sure, but with the greatest care and clearness.

Hans von Bülow, the famous conductor of the Meiningen Court Orchestra, was greatly appreciated by Brahms when they worked together on Brahms' compositions in Meiningen. According to Liszt's pupil Fredric Lamond¹²:

He was the greatest conductor who ever lived - not even Toscanini approaching him. I have seen and heard them all. No one, Nikisch, Richter, Mahler, Weingartner, could compare to him in true warmth and expression. (. . .) [Brahms] was a good conductor, but did not compare with Bülow (. . .) Brahms in rehearsals [for the premiere of the Fourth symphony at Meiningen in October 1885] said to the orchestra: 'Wait gentlemen until you hear this work conducted by Bülow'.

Robert Pascal and Philip Weller in their contribution to Michael Musgrave and Bernard D. Sherman's 'Performing Brahms'¹³ cite Max Kallbeck, who quotes the composer himself in his book on Brahms¹⁴:

Bülow's conducting is always calculated for effect. At the moment when a new phrase begins, he gets [the players] to leave a tiny gap, and he changes

¹¹ Personal recollections of Johannes Brahms, George Henschel (Boston, Richard G. Bagder The Gorham Press, 1907) p.p. 78-79.

¹² The memoirs of Frederic Lamond, Frederic Lamond, Glasgow: William McLennan, 1949, p.p.40 and 49.

¹³ Performing Brahms, Early evidence of Performance Style, edited by Michael Musgrave and Bernard D. Sherman, Cambridge University Press, 2003. Chapter 8; Flexible tempo and nuancing in orchestral music: understanding Brahms' view of interpretation in his Second Piano Concerto and Fourth Symphony, Robert Pascal and Philip Weller p.p. 230

¹⁴ Johannes Brahms, Max Kalbeck, vol. 3 p.495

the tempo ever so slightly. In my symphonies I have strenuously sought to avoid all this kind of thing. If I wanted it, I would have written it in.

Pascal and Weller also quote Richard Strauss, who worked as Bülow's assistant at Meiningen as saying that : ‘

After the hyper-refined, inventive and resourceful manner in which von Bülow had interpreted Brahms's music, Brahms's own simpler and more sober way of conducting these pieces made no particular impression. But one heard the work itself'.¹⁵

This is only a very small section of sources that could help us understand to what extent tempo modification played a role in interpretation and performance practices of the nineteenth century.

Given the abundance of information and the contradictory nature of much of it, I would argue that the true challenge for the performer is not to find the ultimate and compelling piece of evidence, but to make inspired choices against the backdrop of historical evidence.

As I have written in the first part of my text, so far, as a performer, I have been inclined to strive for unity of tempo. I would characterize my own performing tradition as conservative, when it comes to tempo modification. This realization is a reason for me to now go a step further and look for tempo modifications to a much greater extent than I would previously have done, and work against the direction my instincts have previously taken me.

Not because I believe it to be the only way forward, but because I want to see where it leads me and what I can learn from it.

Dislocation of melody and accompaniment, exaggeration of rhythms and general chaotic nature of performance

I am well aware that the three subjects that I have mentioned in this header are to be taken seriously and should be addressed in any effort to rediscover lost nineteenth century practices.

I am also aware of my limited understanding of these phenomena.

This for me is without any doubt the field in which my life long training will be a true hindrance.

¹⁵ Johannes Brahms, als Pianist, Dirigent und Lehrer, (Karlsruhe, 1935) p.49

Brahms with Johannes 2019-2022

I love the transparency that can be the result of a well organized performance by an orchestra with great discipline. As a performer I am interested in getting not only the beginnings of notes, but also their endings, together.

These are all things one would not necessarily expect to have been able to hear much in the nineteenth century, as rehearsal time was limited and orchestral rehearsal technique was still being developed to the level it reached at the beginning of the twentieth century.

It is clear to me that I need more time to study these practices to be able to come up with any kind of comprehensive approach.

For now I will look at the three phenomena as follows:

In so far as a general chaotic nature of performances can be seen as a result of insufficient rehearsal time (a general condition of the nineteenth and early twentieth century practices) they are of no interest to me as a performer.

In so far however as un-togetherness is a side product of emphasis on specific expressive tools bringing out other aspects in a performance, it seems to me that is a price worth paying.

In other words; when it comes to implementing my ideas about tempo rubato and general flexibility of tempo, I will prioritize these above perfect ensemble.

Not prioritizing togetherness is rare but not completely alien to contemporary orchestral practices; I remember vividly the account of one of the members of the Concertgebouw Orchestra after a rehearsal with Carlos Kleiber on a Beethoven symphony. Kleiber had answered, in rehearsal for everyone to hear, a woodwind player who had been concerned about ensemble in a particular section: 'But you can't seriously think that I am interested in you playing together there, can you?'

I heard Nicolaus Harnoncourt scream at an orchestra member who could not fit in his notes in a section of a Strauss Waltzer: 'Einz, Zwei, Drei? Ich kann's nicht, ich will's nicht, ich tue's nicht!' Ist mir egal ob ihr zusammen seit!

When it comes to dislocation of melody and accompaniment, I will look for specific opportunities in the scores, because as yet I do not have a consistent general workable proposition.

In the slow movement of the First Symphony there is a section in which I intend to encourage the oboe solo to be played as freely as possible in relation to the accompaniment of the strings.

This by the way, is a section that Blume talks about in his aforementioned document 'Brahms in der Meininger Tradition'¹⁶. In Berrsché's description of Steinbach's conducting in his 'Trösterin Musika'¹⁷ we find corroboration of this practice, as Walter Frish points out in his chapter on The First Symphony in 'Performing Brahms'¹⁸.

I want to try if playing the oboe melody very freely against the off beat pulsating accompaniment of the strings, can contribute to a dreamy atmosphere. Berrsché says Steinbach's way of having this section performed left an unforgettable impression on everyone who ever heard it.

Finally the exaggeration of rhythm (shortening short notes in dotted rhythms for example) is a truly interesting tool, but like the dislocation technique one that I find hard to use. Robert Philip in his book on Early recordings and musical style¹⁹ describes the general features of these types of exaggeration as follows:

Flexibility of tempo, different kinds of rubato, and the variable treatment of long and short notes add up to a rhythmic style which is very different from that of the late twentieth century. (...) Lightened short notes now sound unclear, accelerated loud passages seem uncontrolled, dislocated rubato sounds poorly coordinated. (...) There is an informality, an improvisational quality about it [the disorderly nature of early twentieth century rhythm²⁰]. The rhythmical repertoire of the early twentieth century musician seems designed to explore different possibilities as one plays a piece of music. There is an impression that it could all be different at the next performance. A certain amount of disorderliness is necessary to make this possible. [Modern rhythm] has lost much of the informality and rhetorical unpredictability of the early twentieth century playing. (...)

When it comes to exaggerating rhythms by shortening the short notes in dotted rhythms I intend to try in the third movement of the First Symphony to

¹⁶ Brahms in der Meininger Tradition, seine Sinfonien und Haydn-Variationen in der Bezeichnung von Fritz Steinbach, Herausgegeben von Walter Blume. Als Manuskript gedruckt, Suhrkamp 1933, p.p. 22-23

¹⁷ Kritik und Betrachtung, Trösterin Musika, Alexander Berrsché Ellerman, 1964 p.p. 243

¹⁸ Performing Brahms, Early evidence of Performance Style, edited by Michael Musgrave and Bernard D. Sherman, Cambridge University Press, 2003. Chapter 10 'In search of Brahms' First Symphony' by Walter Frisch, p. 283-284

¹⁹ Early recordings and musical style, changing tastes in instrumental performance 1900-1950, Robert Philip, Cambridge University Press 1992 chapter 9, p.92-93

²⁰ in brackets my completion of his sentence

apply it in the wind parts in bar 11 and following for example, as is suggested by Blume in 'Brahms in de Meininger Tradition'²¹

Die Holzbläser behandeln ihre Sechzehntel lieber als 32 tel, als dass sie nach der Triolen-Seite hin schlampen.

This however does not really constitute the kind of free timing of short notes in dotted rhythms Philip is referring to, as it involves committing the whole woodwind section (and even the interlocking strings) into a uniform handling of the short notes.

Vibrato

A General approach to orchestral vibrato

Clive Brown, in his book on nineteenth century performance practice offers a chapter on Vibrato in Orchestral and Ensemble Music.²² In this he writes that:

There is therefore every reason to think that, unless a composer specifically requested it, orchestral string sections and wind instruments in tutti sections would have been expected not to use any vibrato.

Later on in the same chapter Brown writes that:

Nevertheless, it seems likely that, particularly where the influence of the Franco-Belgian school of string players was strong, a certain amount of vibrato on the part of individual players, in circumstances where they would have used it as soloists, might have been observed in orchestral string sections during the last decades of the (nineteenth-) century. Where the influence of the German school was strongest, however, it seems less probable that this would have been the case. These tendencies will have been particularly strong in the major orchestras, which were increasingly composed of players who had been trained predominantly as soloists rather than orchestral players in the rapidly proliferating music schools and conservatoires of Europe.

²¹ Brahms in der Meininger Tradition, seine Sinfonien und Haydn-Variationen in der Bezeichnung von Fritz Steinbach, Herausgegeben von Walter Blume. Als Manuskript gedruckt, Suhrkamp 1933, p. 25

²² Classical and Romantic Performing Practice: 1750–1900, Clive Brown, Oxford University Press, 1999, page 552

The Meiningen court orchestra, which I use as a model for my approach regarding size, proportions, seating arrangements (and rehearsal technique), can be considered to have been a very German orchestra.

Nonetheless we know that a number of influential musicians in the orchestra, such as for example the Dutch concertmaster Bram Eldering (1865-1943) and the Dutch leader of the cello section, Joseph Hollman (1852-1926), received (part of) their training in the Franco-Belgian tradition.

I think it is safe to say that a 100% non vibrato approach is not in line with the evidence.

In addition to this, I would like to point out that Blume, in his 'Brahms in der Meininger Tradition' specifically asks for no vibrato in bar 21 / Letter A in the first movement of First Symphony²³.

Clearly there would have been no need for him to do so if no vibrato was ever applied in orchestral playing.

So my conclusion is that we will generally work without vibrato, allowing for some individual variation within the sections, but not in the wind section in so far as they play tutti passages, or operate *en bloc*.

In specific cases we will use vibrato in woodwind solos, and melodically relevant lines in the strings.

Often this vibrato will be connected to sforzato signs, accents and hairpins.

As we have seen above, hairpins can relate to single notes and to shorter or longer phrases or passages.

Following the reasoning that the shortest hairpin is the one relating to one note and given the apparent consensus that the hairpin thus applied required vibrato, I want to make sure that the goal note in the centre of a hairpin sign relating to a shorter or longer phrase similarly, gets some vibrato.

Furthermore I want to make sure that this is supported by the bow as is suggested by Joachim/Moser in the quotation above (page 14).

When it comes to the nature of performing accents, and *sforzato* signs, I think there is a danger in looking for a uniform approach.

I have always found that it is better not to bring out the various types of accents at all if one isn't sure of their purpose. To my taste, nothing breaks up

²³ Brahms in der Meininger Tradition, seine Sinfonien und Haydn-Variationen in der Bezeichnung von Fritz Steinbach, Herausgegeben von Walter Blume. Als Manuskript gedruckt, Suhrkamp 1933, page 12

the musical discourse like an unmotivated accent, performed from the head, not from the heart.

For me the question of what we intend to achieve by playing the accent should always come before actually playing it.

Is it an upward or downward accent? Is it light or heavy? Does it have melodic meaning or not? In each situation there will be different answers to these questions.

I will experiment with the use of vibrato on accented notes and judge the results on the basis of the fundamental question whether applying vibrato enhances the chosen affect or effect of the accent in question.

There is huge ambiguity when it comes to the correct interpretation of the historical evidence of the accent *fp* and *sforzato* signs.

Clive Brown writes about '*rinforz*' in Brahms in his book on Classical and Romantic Performance Practice²⁴:

Brahms's use of the marking is ambiguous and may have changed with time. It occurs in the Serenade opus 11 (where, however, there is no use of sf), apparently as an accent applying to a single note. In the Serenade opus 16 both markings occur in context that suggests that Brahms may have intended rf to be less powerful than sf. (...) In works of the 1880s and 1890s Brahms scarcely employed it.

I think a 'case by case' approach as I described above, judging a sign always in the dynamic and expressive context we find it in, and executing it to the degree that it serves a clear expressive purpose, makes not only practical-but also historical sense.

I find corroborating evidence of this approach in Marion Bruce Ranken's memoirs²⁵ of her studies with Joachim in Berlin:

The subject of the sforzando, like everything else, was treated in an interesting and imaginative spirit. Thus you realized that the sign sfz might represent a variety of things—purely emotional or else of a more external nature like gestures or incidents such as occur on the stage. In the realm of pure emotion alone there would then be the wide difference between fierce

²⁴ Classical and Romantic Performing Practice: 1750–1900, Clive Brown, Oxford University Press, 1999, page

²⁵ Some points of violin playing and musical performance as learnt in the Hochschule für Musik (Joachim School) in Berlin during the time I was a student there, 1902-1909, Marion Bruce Ranken, Privately printed, Edinburg 1939

and angry emphasis, whether in the forte or piano, and tender stress ('innerliche Betonung'), and the many shades of expression betwixt these two—all of them represented by the one sign sfz. All this means thought and technical practice too, both of bow and finger. As already mentioned the vibrato was made great use of in sforzandos and the fact that it was often switched off entirely in other places made the added weight that it imparted on such occasions all the more effective. But from the ordinary standpoint the sfz sign is one which merely indicates a particular kind of dig made by bow and arm on the string—a dry and hard action which suggests to the mind of the listener nothing much beyond rosin and horse-hair.

Portamento

The subject of portamento has been investigated by many researchers over the past decades. The research is sometimes dedicated to individual soloists and sometimes to the general performance practice of the nineteenth century. Examples range from Robin Stowell's 'Violin technique'²⁶ and Clive Brown's 'Classical and Romantic performance Practice'²⁷, to Job Ter Haar's work on Piatti (in preparation) and Kate Bennett Wadsworth's dissertation on Grützmaker²⁸, to name but a few.

There seems to be a consensus that the use of portamento was widespread in the nineteenth century and became more or less obsolete in the modernist revolution of the 1920s and 1930s.

There is a clear link between the growing desire for clarity and exact reproduction of the score of the modernist tradition and the decline of portamento.

If one strives to give each note in the score its exact duration, portamento is an unwelcome factor because it weakens the rhythmical contours of a phrase. It makes it more difficult to say where one note stops and the next

²⁶ Violin Technique and Performance Practice in the Late Eighteenth and Early Nineteenth Centuries, Robin Stowell Cambridge University Press, 1985

²⁷ Classical and Romantic Performing Practice: 1750–1900, Clive Brown, Oxford University Press, 1999, page

²⁸ 'Precisely marked in the tradition of the composer': the performing editions of Friedrich Grützmaker Kate Bennett Wadsworth Submitted in accordance with the requirements for the degree of Ph. D. The University of Leeds School of Music October 2017

one begins and it takes time i.e. it goes at the expense of the exact duration of the departure note or arrival note.

In his book on Classical & Romantic Performance Practice²⁹ Clive Brown points at the fact that throughout the nineteenth century the use of portamento was highly contested:

Virtually all authors who discussed portamento in singing and string-playing stressed the danger of abusing it; but their notion of abuse is directly dependent on what they considered to be the norm. (...) but here as elsewhere, ideas of what was tasteful or proportionate will almost certainly have been very different from ours at all stages of the period.

Orchestral portamento deserves separate attention as Robert Philip makes clear by dedicating a separate chapter to it in his book on 'Early Recordings and musical style'.³⁰

In this chapter Philip, after giving a number of examples of the audible use of portamento in historic recordings, comes to the conclusion that British orchestra's in the late 1920s did little to coordinate their portamento,

. . .at the opposite extreme, the Concertgebouw [Orchestra] and most American orchestra's coordinated at least the most important portamento's; and that most continental orchestra's fell somewhere between these two extremes of laissez-faire and discipline.

I intend to encourage string players in our orchestra to make all position changes audible to some extent, using the preferred style of portamento playing by Joachim and Moser and Ferdinand David as described in their methods.

On top of that I will write in the specific use of portamento in place where I would like to hear it.

As with the other tools, tempo modification and vibrato I wish to hear explicitly organized portamento by whole sections of the orchestra only if it serves a clear expressive purpose.

²⁹ Classical and Romantic Performing Practice: 1750–1900, Clive Brown, Oxford University Press, 1999, page

³⁰ Early recordings and musical style, changing tastes in instrumental performance 1900-1950, Robert Philip, Cambridge University Press 1992 chapter 7 Orchestral Portamento p.p. 179-204

In modern string playing, there is a general tendency to occasionally apply portamento with the left hand, but at the same time apologize for it with the right hand, by failing to support it with the bow.

In HIPP I have noticed a growing tendency to randomly apply portamento without specific expressive intention. I want to stay as far away from both habits as I can.

The expressive goals that will be served by the use of portamento may sometimes be difficult to put into words, as Mendelssohn wrote³¹:

Das, was mir eine Musik ausspricht, die ich liebe, sind mir nicht zu unbestimmte Gedanken, um sie in Worte zu fassen, sondern zu bestimmte.

Nonetheless I intend to at least characterize each phrase in question in key words. Of course I will try to use characterizations that were used in the nineteenth century.

In Kate Bennet Wandsworth's dissertation³² on the famous nineteenth century cellist Grützmacher, she lists a number of characteristic key words that might be suitable terms.

Bennet Wandsworth makes a distinction between expressive marking in a soft context, such as *amoroso, dolce, grazioso, lamentoso, leggiro, lugubre, misterioso, and semplice* which always occur either together with a *p* marking or just after a diminuendo, and markings such as *brillante, energico, gioviale, grandioso, imponente, largamente, pesante, and risoluto* appearing only within *f*.

Connecting the use of portamento to expressive goals and characterizing phrases with the help of expressive markings such as Grützmacher's, will mean that we will have to be able to produce a number of different kinds of portamento.

In order to achieve this, I intend to ask for macro dynamics (i.e. forte, piano etc.), micro dynamics to underpin the left hand activity with the bow in a quasi crescendo or quasi diminuendo style, and variation of speed of the slide.

³¹ The thoughts which are expressed to me by music that I love are not too *indefinite* to be put into words, but on the contrary, too *definite*. Letter to Marc-André Souchay October 1842, cited from *Briefe aus den Jahren 1830 bis 1847* (Leipzig: Hermann Mendelssohn, 1878) p. 221

³² 'Precisely marked in the tradition of the composer': the performing editions of Friedrich Grützmacher Kate Bennett Wadsworth Submitted in accordance with the requirements for the degree of Ph. D. The University of Leeds School of Music October 2017

Conclusion

It is clear that the techniques described above are not part of everyone's daily routine.

In order to prepare for the challenges ahead, I will make a list of suggested recordings to listen to and I will provide exercises for the string players from the methods of Spohr and David.

In addition to this, I will contact individual string players for coaching in the weeks leading up to the projects.

I will send you the material, the annotated parts and a list of available times at the end of the summer.

Johannes Leertouwer

Leiden, July 2019

Appendix: Seating arrangements

Hans Von Bülow, Meiningen 1882,
with the musicians playing in standing position!



Brahms with Johannes 2019-2022

Fritz Steinbach, Meiningen 1899



Berlin Philharmonic 1882



Brahms with Johannes 2019-2022

Arthur Nikisch, BSO 1891



Johannes Leertouwer, NPU 2012

