

A closer look at some tempo modifications in my recording of Brahms's Second Symphony

In my study *In search of sounding evidence of traces of Fritz Steinbach's approach to Brahms's Second Symphony* I investigated and compared six historical recordings of the first movement of the symphony.

I went through the first movement of the symphony not so much bar by bar, but point by point in Walter Blume's manuscript entitled *Brahms in der Meiniger Tradition*¹. My aim was to analyse the way the various orchestras and conductors had addressed the issues listed in Blume's printed manuscript. My intent was to make a comparison between the way these issues were handled in the recordings and the solutions Blume had suggested in his writings, without any assumption that any concurrence might be regarded as proof that conductors were following Blume's suggestions. As I wrote at the time my intent was not to prove any lineage of tradition. Blume's manuscript is a unique source of information, as it is the most complete written document on performance issues in the Brahms symphonies of the pre-World War II period. I wanted to look at the recordings through the lens of Blume, focusing on the performance issues he had selected for his writings. By doing so, I found that this process was a two-way street, in the sense that it also gave me information that allowed me to review Blume's writings in the context of other people's solutions for the same issues he had addressed in his text, and indeed also the things he did not write about. Many of the interpretative freedoms that deviated from Brahms's notation which I discovered in the recordings were not discussed by Blume. In particular, I found a series of often subtle and sometimes radical tempo modifications that are present in the recordings, but not suggested in his writings. Analysing these, made me reconsider how to calibrate my own compass for such modifications. The tempo modification aspect of my study prompted me to prepare my score for my performances in 2020 in such a way as to commit to orchestral tempo modifications, not as a special effect in some places, but as a rule for the whole Symphony. I strived to make a distinction between micro-modifications, often related to smaller and medium sized hairpins which might be taken as implying tempo rubato in the true sense of the word (giving back later what was initially stolen without changing the basic tempo), and tempo modifications relating to longer stretches, pushing forward or relaxing the tempo. I even went so far as to mark up a score with all intended modifications, which I provided together with the study, as an attachment. I have marked the modifications in the orchestral parts as well, using the same arrows, hairpins and verbal instructions that can be found in my annotated score.

Now that the final result of my recording has become available, I have examined it in the same manner as I investigated the historical recordings in the study. In this article I focus on some of the tempo modifications in the exposition of the first movement. In addition to looking at the relevant points raised by Blume in his manuscript, I have discussed my tempo modifications and my motivation for applying them. I have also addressed the question 'to what artistic goal' my use of the modifications is intended, whilst trying to show how my subjective choices are based upon my understanding of the historical sources. I have begun the discussion of each point with Blume's instructions, followed by the corresponding

¹ Walter Blume, *Brahms in der Meiniger Tradition, seine Sinfonien und Haydn-Variationen in der Bezeichnung von Fritz Steinbach* (Suhrkamp 1933)

segment from the historical recording that, in my study, I had found to be most consistent with his instructions. Having these audio examples next to the segments from my own recording, which I included at the end of each chapter, will hopefully facilitate comparison. In the text I have shown whether or not I chose to follow Blume's suggestions or base my interpretation on what I heard in the historical recordings and what motivated me to do so. In a paragraph titled 'other considerations' I have addressed performance issues that were not directly addressed by Blume or in the recordings but were important to me. I recommend keeping a score at hand, as I have been referring to specific bars and details in Brahms's markings.

1

Blume begins his chapter on the Second Symphony by suggesting a specific way to phrase the opening 19 bars of the first movement. He suggests that the 3-note-motif, as it appears in the first bar, should be played with a comma after the third quarter-note each time it appears in the piece. He goes on to specify the way that the main theme should be phrased, proposing the following bar structure: both four bar phrases in the horns 1-1-2; in the woodwinds 2-1-1- for the first phrase and a somewhat more complex 2-1-2-1 for bars 14-19.

In my study I concluded that Damrosch is entirely consistent with the phrasing proposed by Blume. After a distinct comma at the end of bar one, both 4-bar phrases of the horns are clearly played 1 bar-1 bar-2 bars. The counter phrases in the woodwinds too, appear to be phrased in concurrence with Blume; 2 bars-1 bar-1 bar, though towards the end of the section the distinction between comma and no comma is a bit less clear.

m.1 [Damrosch bar 1-20](#)

For my recording I chose to follow Blume's proposed phrasing, applying the same commas as he suggested. I did so, not so much because Blume suggested it, but because his suggestion made me realize that the interval structure of the thematic material can be effectively shown by allowing a bit of space between the notes forming a bigger interval, whilst playing the notes that are closer together more legato. This kind of nuanced micro phrasing can help avoid the evenness often found in modern day recordings, if it brings out uneven patterns, as it does in this case: 1-1-2; 2-1-1 etc. In rehearsal I have experimented with the amount of separation. In my opinion it is now clearly distinguishable without sounding like an exaggeration. This of course is a matter of taste; what sounds exaggerated to one listener may sound very subtle to another. I am reminded of the words of cello and viola da gamba player Wieland Kuijken, who famously said of an articulation played by an orchestra in a rehearsal I attended: 'this smells like pencil'. Whether or not we are able to smell the pencil, or whether or not the way I have applied my solution for the phrasing of the theme, fall into the domain of the '*kaum merkbar*' (hardly noticeable), a term often used by Blume and others, must remain a subject of speculation. What guides my decisions in this field however is clear: I intend to always apply my phrasings in such a manner that the listener has some space to interpret what he or she hears. I am prompted to do so by Brahms's criticism of Hans von Bülow's style of phrasing as quoted by Robert Pascal and Philp Weller in *Performing Brahms* by Musgrave and Sherman.

His conducting (Bülow's) is always calculated for effect. At the moment when a new phrase begins, he gets (the players) to leave a tiny gap, and he also likes to change the tempo ever so slightly . . . if I had wanted this, I would have written it.²

I felt obliged to include the second half of this quotation as it is significant source on the issue of tempo modification, and I wanted to avoid the impression I might be cherry picking. I am aware of the fact that the remark about changing the tempo ever so slightly can be used against my approach of that particular subject, when taken out of context. I am convinced that Brahms's objects to the practice of introducing slightly different tempos separated by comma's, not to different tempos per se. Leaving that aside for now, what is relevant in light of the discussion here is the remark about the tiny gaps. My conclusion is that phrasing commas should not sound like 'tiny gaps' hence my preference for avoiding overly explicit commas in phrasing.

Other considerations

I have also used these phrasings to help achieve a tempo modification, using the fact that the horns begin each time with 1 bar-1 bar, to set a calm tempo (*Ruhig*), and using the fact that the first bars in the woodwind answer are joined together to achieve a somewhat more flowing tempo (*etwas bewegt*) there. I will return to this subject of tempo modification in the opening of the first movement of the symphony under point 3, below. For now, suffice it to say that in Damrosch's recording the horn and woodwind phrases are basically played in one tempo, whereas my recording - as do most of the historical recordings in my study- has a faster tempo for the woodwinds in relation to the horns.

m.2 [Leertouwer bar 1-20](#)

2

Blume's second suggestion concerns the bowing for strings in the phrase starting in bar 17 and ending in bar 31. He does not specify whether or not his suggested bowing should be applied to both octaves (in first violins and violas). The music example in his text only shows the line of the first violins. He suggests cutting both original slurs in the first violin line in two, thus creating four legato slurs, each over four bars. Blume does not clarify if this bowing is intended to be heard, but because he does not write in his usual sixteenths rest between the legato slurs, his bowing seems to be intended more as a practical solution than as a special and noticeable phrasing effect. In my comparative study I concluded that here too, Damrosch is consistent with Blume

m.3 [Damrosch bar 18-31](#)

In my recording I have followed Blume's suggestion and applied his bowing. After experimenting in rehearsal, I decided not to look for ways to bring out the bowing by applying commas between the slurs. Instead, I concentrated on producing a long line, which

² Robert Pascal and Philp Weller, citing Max Kalbeck in their chapter 'flexible tempo and nuancing in orchestral music' in *Performing Brahms, Early Evidence of Performance Style*, edited by Michael Musgrave and Bernard D. Sherman (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2003), p. 230.

I believe to be in accordance with the score, as Brahms writes an overlapping legato in the violas across the bar line of 23-24 and in the transition from violas to cellos in bar 26. If Brahms's would have written the legato slur in the same place in both violin and viola part, I would have felt encouraged to experiment with a clearly distinguishable separation between the two slurs in bars 23-24. This type of close reading of the score is, in my opinion, the first and most decisive step in determining the composer's intentions, even if we accept -as I do – that much of what a composer intended to take place in a performance, cannot be found in the score.

Other considerations

I have encouraged the string players to use individually chosen subtle portamenti in this descent from bar 20 to 32. Some of these can be heard clearly in the recording, producing in my opinion a beautifully veiled colour, which is very welcome here especially as the players, again following my instructions, avoided the use of vibrato. Brahms marks dim. in bar 27, followed by a long > sign from the last beat of that bar to the end of bar 31 in the violin and cello part. One might assume that the dim. marking refers to dynamics and the hairpin to tempo modification (*poco rallentando*), but I have decided against that, instead just taking a bit of time in the last bar with special attention for the last note, the f natural. My reason for doing so, is that we see a dim. > marking in the woodwinds in bar 20-24. Interpreting the hairpin there as a *poco rallentando*, would cause un-togetherness between the woodwinds and the strings, who do not have the hairpin. While un-togetherness or asynchrony, particularly between melody and accompaniment, can certainly be applied in a manner benefitting the expressive nature of a performance, I could not find any reward for its use in this passage.

m.4 [Leertouwer bar 18-31](#)

3

The next four suggestions by Blume relate to the bars 42 (two bars before A) until 58. In my study I addressed these four remarks together and discussed them as 3a, 3b 3c and 3d

3a

Blume suggests that the three notes constituting the three-note-motif in hemiola-form played by the first oboe and bassoon before A should be played 'kaum verzögernd' (hardly slowing down). I think it is reasonable to assume that the emphasis should be on the adjective; *hardly* slowing down. Even without that assumption, we can decide to take Blume literally and take it as a suggestion to apply a subtle *rallentando*, keeping in mind that this probably meant something different to the musicians in Brahms's days than it does to us today.

3b

Blume's second suggestion concerns the theme at letter A. He writes that this theme, which is derived from the three-note-motive, should be played in a fairly flowing manner, without special nuance.

3c

In contrast to this indication (no particular nuance) Blume writes that from bar 52 the canonic imitations of the first bar of the theme should be brought out by swelling the first note of each entry.

Finally, Blume adds the instruction, in his music example, that the legato slurs in bars 56 and 57 should be properly separated.

Over all four performance issues dealt with here, none of the historical recordings are in full concurrence with Blume, but in quite a few instances elements of the recordings do concur. Again, Damrosch appears to be most consistent with Blume. His *rallentando* is very modest (3a). At letter A, Damrosch moves forward to a tempo of about 132 MM, consistent with Blume's suggestion of a quite flowing tempo (3b). The expressive nature of the dotted quarter notes from bar 52 on, also concur with Blume (3c), but the phrasing in bars 56-57-58 does not, as the legato slurs – clear as they are – are not really separated from each other (3d).

m.5 [Damrosch bar 32-59](#)

My *rallentando* before letter A is the result of my understanding of the whole section from bar 32 to letter A as described in the section 'other considerations' below. The result is a considerable amount of slowing down, to about 78 for the quarter note. In my opinion this is not consistent with Blume's "*kaum verzögernd*" (3a). My tempo at letter A is about 120-124 MM, so consistent with Blume's instruction to have a more flowing tempo here. (3b) I do, however, use much more ebb and flow than Blume suggests, and more than can be found in the historical recordings; in bars 46-47 I introduce a tempo modification similar to the one related to the hairpin in bars 50-51 (I have written about my motivation below). This is not consistent with Blume who writes that this passage should be played quite flowingly with no particular nuance. From bar 52, I have applied the swellings on the canonic imitations as Blume suggested. It is my feeling that the *espressivo* nature of each entry is enhanced by it and this can be used to gradually move the tempo forward towards bar 57 (3c). As in most of the historic recordings, I bring out the phrasing of the legato slurs leading into the *sf* of bar 58, but not to such an extent that one might hear such explicit commas as Blume seems to have suggested. (3d).

Other considerations

In my study I argued that the amount of *rallentando* in the two bars before letter A should be judged in the context of the overall tempo and tempo flexibility in the opening 40 bars of the Symphony. This prompted me to analyse in detail how the modifications were implemented in the six recordings. What clearly emerges is a picture of a very flexible and fluent handling of tempo³. The rule seems to be flexibility; the exception, stability of tempo over longer stretches. Much of the moving forward and backward is directly related to the structure of the phrases in the music. For example, contrasting two four-bar phrases; one calm, the answering phrase moving, as in the opening of the first movement, or, within a four-bar phrase, two bars forward, to bars backward as can be heard in my recording at letter A. In my recording I have made a clear tempo difference between horns (102 MM for the quarter note) and woodwind (112-114 MM for the quarter note). I have tried to use the three-note bass figures as flexible bridges between the four-bar phrases, in order to avoid edgy transitions, and tiny gaps. I have done so in order to enhance a feeling of dialogue

³ Johannes Leertouwer, *In search of sounding evidence of traces of Fritz Steinbach's approach to Brahms's Second Symphony*, p.15-17 (*Johannes's Brahms.nl*)

between the two parties (horns and woodwinds). I find that keeping the exact same tempo throughout, as many modern recordings tend to do, and which I believe to be contrary to Brahms's expectations, creates a feeling of monologue. A monologue with varying tone of voice for sure, but a monologue all the same. The historic evidence that I found in the six recordings (1928-1940) points at a different approach, in which articulation and tempo modification serve as tools to bring out multiple voices engaged in a dialogue. The result in my recording can be heard as a dialogue between voices of nature (a common association with horns) and human voices represented by the woodwinds. Creating a sense of dialogue was also my motivation for pushing forward slightly the woodwinds in bars 35 and 39, shadowing the modifications in the opening 20 bars, this time between the trombones (*tranquillo*) and the woodwinds (*etwas bewegt*).

I have striven to present the dialogue between trombones and woodwinds so that the trombones present 'the inevitable' playing their descending lines *tranquillo*, and the woodwinds present 'two objections'; clearly in bar 35 and somewhat less energetic in bar 39, before 'giving in' in the last hemiola, the double length version of the three-note motif before letter A. My characterization of the trombone's descending line as 'the inevitable' stems from my understanding of their descending line, as gravitating inescapably towards the resolution at letter A. I have tried to shape the objections of the woodwinds as questions, not as rejections of the trombone music. A descending line, in my opinion, would have suggested acceptance of the trombones' idea, an ascending line a rejection, and the 'wavering' figure of the three-note-figure (d-c#-d for example in bar 35), a question.

Reinhold Brinkmann, in his 1990 book about the Second Symphony entitled *Late Idyll*, writes about an exchange of letters between Brahms and the conductor Vincenz Lachner, who wrote to Brahms about this very passage in 1879:

Why would you throw into the idyllic serene atmosphere with which the first movement begins the rumbling kettledrum, the gloomy lugubrious tones of the trombones and tuba? Would not that seriousness which comes later, or, rather, the assertion of vigorous youthful manliness, have had its own motivation, without these tones proclaiming bad news? ⁴

Brahms answered him saying that he would have liked to write the first movement without using the trombones, but he needed them:

But their first entrance, that's mine, and I can't get along without it, and thus the trombones.

Brahms goes on to write that he considers himself to be a severely melancholic person, writing that, "Black wings are constantly flapping above us". He also points to his next Opus number after the symphony, the motet *Warum ist das Licht gegeben dem Mühseligen*, characterizing it as a little essay about the great (the Second Symphony). This exchange, and particularly Brahms's answer, tells us a lot about the way Brahms thought about the symphony and about himself. Brinkmann discusses every aspect of the letter at length and in depth. For my considerations regarding the nature of the dialogue between trombones and

⁴ Reinhold Brinkman, *Late Idyll, The Second Symphony of Johannes Brahms*, (Cambridge, Massachusetts and London, Harvard University Press, 1995), p. 126.

woodwinds, it suffices first of all to see that Brahms does not refute Lachner's characterization of the trombones and kettledrums as gloomy and lugubrious. Quite apart from this exchange between Brahms and Lachner, we know of course that trombones are often associated with funeral and death. At a minimum this exchange between Lachner and Brahms makes clear that the trombone and kettledrum music of these bars is indeed a counter force against the pastoral and idyllic nature of the opening theme. That is a first level of contrast and, if you will, dialogue. Also, within this passage a sense of dialogue can be enhanced by bringing out the contrast between on the one hand the trombones, who state what I called above 'the inevitable'; a fitting text might be 'all must die', and on the other hand the woodwinds attempting to counter with 'must it be?' Or, a little more light-hearted perhaps, inspired by the discussion about the need for trombones; trombones: 'here we are, here to stay' and woodwinds: 'can't you go, somewhere else?' What matters is not the words we might attach to the music, which can easily be discarded as simplistic or silly, but the search for effective dialogue. I have given my specific words to the music to clarify my way of thinking, knowing that it might have been wiser for me to follow Mendelssohn's example, in a letter to his friend Marc André Souchay, who inquired after the meaning of some of his *Songs Without Words*:

If you ask me what *my* idea is, I say – just the song as it stands; and if I have in mind a definite term or terms with regard to one of these songs, I will disclose them to no one, because the words of one person assume a totally different meaning in the mind of another person, because the music of the song alone can awaken the same ideas and the same feelings in one mind as in another, -a feeling which is not however expressed by the same words.⁵

As I said to the orchestra in rehearsals, it is entirely possible to perform much of this symphony as one big, beautiful monologue. Indeed, that seems to be the common practice today, at least to my ears. But the historical evidence points to an approach that distinguishes multiple voices and makes them stand out through subtle tempo modification. Sharing this kind of idea about an imagined dialogue with the orchestra, made it possible to experiment with the modifications, not just in terms of the metronome, but in terms of rhetorical effect. Additionally, I would like to point out that, in my opinion, the use of historical instruments helps identify opportunities for dialogue, as the colours these instruments produce are more differentiated and contribute to the sense of uniqueness of each instrumental voice.

At letter A, I have introduced a more flowing tempo of 120-124 MM, but I have also included an extra set of hairpins in bar 46-47, looking to foreshadow the official one in bars 50-51. As I have written in my study of Mengelberg's score of Brahms's Second Symphony, I am against adding hairpins. Assuming, as I do, that the hairpins had a significant expressive value, it stands to reason that Brahms would have taken considerable care in deciding where to put these markings in his orchestral scores, and where not. At the same time however, it is clear to me that the absence of hairpins does not come with an obligation to stay strictly in tempo. In general, I do try to keep the execution of the added modifications more modest than the execution of the ones Brahms himself wrote in the score. On the one hand, I am use Brahms's criticism of von Bülow's conducting, as quoted on page 3; "if I had wanted

⁵ Felix Mendelssohn Bartholdi, letter to Marc André Souchay, October 15th, 1842

(this) I would have written it” to remind me not to overdo it. On the other hand, I must confess that the kind of constant calculation required to measure the amount of tempo deviation in each instance of modification in itself can be considered as alien to the spirit in which Brahms would have expected his music to be performed. The crux of the matter seems to lie in the proper emotional motivation of tempo modifications (proper as in derived from the inherent nature of the music itself, and the extent to which one can convince the listener of both its necessity and its organic nature (organic in the sense of forming an integral part of the ebb and flow of the music). If one fails in motivation or execution, even the markings in the score provided by the composer become problematic.

According to Natalie Bauer-Lechner in her *Erinnerungen an Gustav Mahler*, Mahler said this on the subject:

More and more, I am coming round to the idea that everything one adds in markings regarding expression is too explicit; the forte becomes too much forte, the piano too much piano, the crescendos and diminuendos and accelerandos too fierce, the Largo too slow, the Presto too fast. One would almost be tempted to write in no tempi and no expression marks, and leave it to the performer to understand and articulate the music in his own way.⁶

The variant of the tempo modification technique here, at letter A, moving forward in the first two bars and slowing down in bar 3 and 4 of a four-bar phrase, works well in my opinion. It helps to avoid rigidity in the eight-note accompaniment in violas and cellos and it helps contrast the calm nature of the first 8 bars of letter A to the gradually more purposeful moving forward in the second 8 bars (52-60). In my performance I strove to make Brahms’s own hairpins in bars 50-51 more explicit than the one I added in bars 46-47 to avoid the impression that both would have been marked by Brahms himself. I have also added a tempo modification in bars 56-60, moving slightly forward in the exquisitely displaced-hemiola-like two groups of four eighth-notes, before slowing down a little in the three sets of paired eighth-notes that follow. None of these modifications would have been on my list of goals for a performance before I started my research. They are a direct result of my changing perception of the possibilities and the effects of tempo modifications, resulting from my detailed analysis of the historical recordings and written sources.

m.6 [Leertouwer bar 32-59](#)

In case you are wondering if all these small modifications amount to a style of performance that is clearly separate from modern mainstream approaches, I invite you to listen to the opening section of this recordings by Bernard Haitink and the Concertgebouw Orchestra. I

⁶ Natalie Bauer-Lechner, *Erinnerungen an Gustav Mahler* (Leipzig, Wien, Zürich, E.P. Tal & Co. Verlag, 1923) p 168. “*Ich komme immer mehr dahinter, dass alles, was man an Vortragszeichen macht, zu gewaltsam ist: das forte zu sehr forte, das piano zu sehr piano, die crescendi und diminuendi und accelerandi zu heftig, das largo zu langsam, das presto zu schnell.*

(. . .) *Beinahe wäre man versucht, gar keine Tempi und keine dynamischen Ausdruckszeichen hinzuschreiben und es jedem selbst zu überlassen, was er bei näherem Befassen mit dem Werke herausliest und wie er es zum Ausdruck bringt.*”

think the sound is absolutely beautiful, but the handling of tempo is in my opinion rather unadventurous. You can keep your metronome on at more or less 104MM from the beginning until the hemiola before letter A.

m.7 [Haitink bar 1-44](#)

Other recordings such as Chailly's with the Gewandhaus Orchestra of 2013 and Harnoncourt's recording with the Berliner Philharmoniker are different from Haitink's (both have a faster basic tempo) but they are similar in the sense that they too show no use of tempo modifications related to dialogue structures in the score.

4

Blume's next suggestion is about the relation between the two bars before letter B and what follows after B. He writes that the two bars before B should be felt as 6/8 bars and from B onwards the oboe should play in regular 3/4 thus creating a very different effect. This remark does not really constitute a specific instruction as to the execution of the section. I think it is fair to say that all recordings bring out the 6/8 feeling in the two bars before B. The contrast Blume desires here, depends largely on the return to the 3/4 feeling at letter B. As I pointed out in my study, in many of the historic recordings more could have been done to create the return to the 3/4 meter at letter B. The interval structure of the first oboe line – if not compensated by the player – automatically gives the impression of continued emphasis on the second half of the bar because of the upward leap of a fourth between third and fourth eighth note. I don't think this point needs to be illustrated by a comparison of music examples. I have chosen to bring out the *sf* in bars 64 and 65 as Blume suggests. In order to create a good contrast with the following 3/4 at letter B, I have asked the first oboe to avoid an accent of the fourth eighth-note in bars 66, 68 and 70. This in itself does not constitute concurrence with Blume's suggestion. Overall, I think the interval structure in horns and oboes in themselves represent a subtle continuation of the 6/8 effect of the *sf* before letter A. This makes me somewhat suspicious of Blume's suggestion to establish a proper 3/4 here. I think that, if Brahms would have wanted to create a proper 3/4 feeling from letter A onwards, he would have written different intervals and he would have avoided the repeated entries of the second horn on the second half of each bar. However, Blume's repeated mentioning of the variation in patterns, such as 6/8 in a 3/4 context, has stimulated me not only to bring out those differences in terms of accents, but also in terms of feeling, or even 'swing' if you like. Inspired by his remarks, I have suggested to the orchestra that the 6/8 could be played lighter, in a more playful manner than the 3/4 music. In technical terms this can be understood as less tenuto, more diminuendo; or as the relaxation of sound within the rhythmical unit, in this case three eighth-notes or half a bar. This effect can be heard in many such places in my recording.

m.8 [Leertouwer bar 63-73](#)

5

Blume's next suggestions concern the second theme and its preparation:

5a

For his first point here, 'a little ritardando' (Ein wenig verzögern) before the start of the second theme, Blume does not provide a specific number of bars, as he did in suggesting 'hardly slowing down' (kaum verzögern) in the two bars before letter A.

5b

The second point concerns the phrasing of the second theme itself, and it requires a bit of close reading. Blume writes that the four-bar structure of the theme should be clarified by a slight separation between the legato slurs in the 4th and 8th bar. Other instructions can be found in the music example Blume provides (see below), not in his text. He suggests a diminuendo over the first two quarter notes in bar 4 and 8, and a shortening of the second note (that is how I read his dot on the second quarter note, preceded by a tenuto line on the first; not as separating it from the previous note, but as shortening it).

5c

Furthermore, we find the instruction 'forward' (vorwärts) in bar 94 (the third bar in the second line of the example) towards the a^1 .

5d

Lastly Blume suggests bringing out the top notes in the following string of eighth-notes by writing a tenuto-line on the g^1 and e^1 (Example 1).

Example 1

Vor dem Einsatz des II. Themas bei \textcircled{C} S. 8 ritardiert man ein wenig. Das II. Thema wird folgendermaßen vorgetragen.

Celli u. Bass.

cantando
pp sempre dol.

vorwärts

Das Thema ist 4 taktig, was durch das geringe Absetzen im 4. Takt verdeutlicht wird. Vor \textcircled{E} markieren Bratschen und Fagotte jeweils das erste von den zwei Achteln.

Br. Fag.

cresc. *zurückhalten*

In order to reach a conclusion as to how this passage was played in the historical recordings, I found it helpful to put the tempi and fluctuations in this section in a table⁷. By measuring the tempi by tapping along with a metronome, it had however become increasingly clear to me, that given the large number of micro-timings and modifications, metronome markings

⁷ In search of, p. 24

could serve only as very general indications. Many of the historic tempo modifications I have found in this section strike me as rather special. There appears to be a tendency among conductors like Fiedler and Stokowski to modify the tempo of the second subject so that the first two bars are relatively slow, and bars three and four move forward. The third quarter note in the third bar in Fiedler's recording is somewhat shortened and the next downbeat is played slightly early. This is not described by Blume; it is as if Fiedler has added a crescendo sign in the third bar, before Blume's diminuendo sign, creating a hairpin. His phrasing is in line with the nineteenth-century tradition of relating such hairpins not only to dynamics but also to flexibility of tempo. He moves forward in the crescendo part of the presumed hairpin, and he relaxes a bit in the diminuendo part of it. Something similar can be observed in most of the historical recordings in my study, when it comes to Brahms's hairpins in bar 90-93 (these are not mentioned by Blume). All conductors modify the tempo here, making the exchange between the cello and violas on the one hand, and the violins on the other, livelier. Many details in these recordings can be considered as consistent with Blume's suggestions, but none of them concur fully. It is worth pointing out that many tempo modifications take place here, that are not described by Blume.

m.9 [Fiedler bar 71-101](#)

What I have taken from all this into my own performance is a conviction that investigating how each musical event made me feel, would give me a motivation to try and build in tempo modifications that would enhance the impact of these events. I'll try to describe point by point what this has meant for me and how it relates to what can be heard in my recording. Blume's first point (5a) concerned the little ritardando before the start of the second subject. I wanted the hairpins in the four bars before C not only to contain his rallentando, which can be found in all recordings of the symphony, but also, in the first part of the hairpins (<) a sense of moving forward. This creates an effect of longing to go somewhere and only being able to reach the place by letting go. This seems to me preferable to only the relaxation of letting go. It made me think of something Bernard Haitink wrote to me: "Conducting Brahms with a big orchestra can be like walking a dog that wants to stop at every tree." If the dog was to be allowed to stop at this tree, I at least wanted to feel its desire to reach it, in order to avoid a truly uneventful dog walk.

I experimented with the second suggestion Blume gives; the diminuendos and commas in bar 4 and 8 of the example, and the result in my recording can be considered as consistent with Blume to some extent. But the more important idea came from the analysis of the timing and phrasing of the historical recordings. Walter Frisch, in his book on the symphonies, characterizes the second subject as a 'Lullaby in F# minor'⁸, while Brinkmann points at the similarities between this theme and Brahms's lullaby 'Guten Abend gute Nacht' Opus 49⁹. One might assume that a lullaby does not call for tempo changes or modifications, but analysis of the recording shows that in the second subject too, there are plenty of modifications. I have striven to organize my own, inspired on what I heard and again based on my understanding of the emotional impact of the musical events.

The most striking contrast in this section to my ear is between the easy comforting flow of the first eight bars (bars 82-89) and the second eight bars (bars 90-97). The very same calm pulsation of the basses playing two pizzicato quarter notes on the first and second beat of

⁸ Walter Frisch, *Brahms, the four symphonies*, (New Haven, Yale University Press, 2003), p.70.

⁹ *The Late Idyll*, p.94-96.

each bar, which contributes to the calm flow of the melody in bars 82-89, seems to turn into palpitations in bar 90, where the mood is suddenly full of anxiety, that gets to be resolved only in bars 94-97. I have tried to bring out the anxious mood by taking the pizzicatos in bar 90 and 92, and the answers in horns and timpani in 91 and 93, a bit faster than the original lullaby tempo. At the beginning of the lullaby in bar 82, I took the first two bars of the theme in a deliberate, calm tempo, allowing for the tune to be played in a singing style, as suggested by Brahms's instruction 'cantando'. Because I did so, I didn't need to speed up much to achieve a change of mood in bar 90, as I had found space on both sides of the spectrum, so to speak.

Two more modifications can be identified: the quarter-note motion in the 3rd and 4th bars of the lullaby is moved slightly forward towards the downbeat of the fourth bar and then back, as described in the analysis of Fiedler's recording; and in bars 94-97 the quarter-note motion is moved forwards in the added < and backwards in Blume's >. My motivation for doing so is that the slight exaggeration of the notated rhythm allows for a livelier rendition of the theme. What I am proposing consists of lengthening the first two half notes in the theme, thus moving backwards in tempo, and moving along the third and fourth bars of the theme where these relatively long notes (half notes) are absent. In this style, what is already on the page is slightly exaggerated as long notes are played a bit longer and shorter notes a bit shorter. This is not unlike what Robert Philip describes in his book *Early Recordings and Musical Style* when he writes that there was a very general tendency amongst early twentieth-century performers to lengthen the long notes and shorten the short ones in patterns of long and short notes¹⁰.

On a personal note, my motivation for implementing the tempo modification in the lullaby is that it can create a feeling of tender but active caring. In my opinion the subtle tempo modification can more easily be associated with the perspective of the person singing someone to sleep, than with the person being sung to. Particularly the effect of slightly moving forwards in the quarter notes of the third bar of the theme, suggest activity. In the lullaby analogy the person singing someone to sleep is the active party, the person falling asleep the passive one. Also, the modification can help avoid any hint of trudging that might result from unimaginative repetition of the uniform rhythmic pattern in the basses in one steadfast tempo.

m.10 [Leertouwer 71-102](#)

Conclusion

Analysis of my recording makes clear that it contains many realisations of the tempo modifications I had marked in my score, which are modifications that are not unlike the ones found in the historic recordings I have studied. This may seem a very obvious statement, but I think it is important to analyse the actual results in the recording in order to be able to judge to what extent the modifications are happening in real life, as opposed to only in one's head. For me it is fruitful to subject my own recording to a similar style of analysis as the historic recordings. For traditional listeners the recording may sound very experimental, to people familiar with research into nineteenth-century performance practice, it may seem close to mainstream work. I need to be faithful to my own compass, but I also need to

¹⁰ Robert Philip, *Early Recordings and Musical Style, changing tastes in instrumental performance 1900-1950*, (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1992), p.70.

examine where it leads me. Doing so, studying the finished recordings, is much easier than doing so whilst conducting, or even at other times during the project weeks, as there is more distance between me and the sounding evidence of the project. As a performer on the rostrum, I am focussed on creating the modifications I have in mind, following my prepared plan but above all, my intuition. As a researcher, I can measure and analyse the results after the performance, by studying the recording. Of course, I intend to use my findings to further develop my plan for the next performance and to sharpen my intuition. This is an ongoing process. My goal is to keep examining and re-examining the ideas and the results, not to reach a final conclusion about either of them. The sounding results of this process are also essential to me when I try to make sense of written sources. Only through experimentation in practice, can I decide how to make use of the following quotations.

Styra Avins, in her chapter 'Clues from His Letters' in *Performing Brahms*, includes a letter Brahms wrote to the conductor Otto Dessoff, who had asked him about some specific tempo modifications, that Brahms had not marked in the score, but that he felt would be helpful in performing the *Second Symphony*. Brahms answered him:

A quasi ritard in the first movement may be just as lacking as a *più motto* at the 12/8 in the Adagio. But they are such superfluous indications. 'If you don't feel it, etc.'¹¹

Avins explains that this last part (If you don't feel it, you will not grasp it etc.) is a quote from Goethe's *Faust: Wenn ihr's nicht fühlt, ihr werdet's nicht erjagen*. I agree with Avins that this answer is crucial to our understanding of Brahms's way of making music and notating it, and the relation between notation and performance. To me it means that Brahms expected a great deal of tempo modifications, motivated by the musician's own intuition and emotional understanding of the music, to be part of any successful performance. I am convinced that many tempo modifications Brahms would have appreciated are not marked in the score, because of his dread of performances that would include such modifications without the proper feeling motivating their use. That's why I have chosen to write about my motivation for the tempo modifications in terms of the music's emotional impact on me, and hopefully on the listener. Brahms's reference to Goethe, inspires me to always try to find, and connect to an emotional motivation for my tempo modifications. I favour those modifications over imitations of ones in historical sources, if I cannot find a personal motivation for them.

Another perspective on modifications that are not marked in the score comes from music critic Alexander Berrsche in his book *Trösterin Musica*, when he writes about tempo modifications in performances of Brahms's First Symphony by Fritz Steinbach:

No one should want to argue that Brahms didn't mark these in his score. Every writer will be cautious when it comes to marking the most refined subtleties down explicitly. They would instantly be exaggerated, and it is surely better not to attempt a subtlety than to coarsen it.¹² (my translation)

¹¹ Styra Avins, 'Clues from his letters' in *Performing Brahms, Early Evidence of Performance Style*, edited by Michael Musgrave and Bernard D. Sherman (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2003), pp. 24-25: Quasi Rit. im 1ten Satz dürfte eben so gut fehlen wie ein piu moto beim 12/8 Adagio stehen dürfte. Das sind aber so überflüssige Bezeichnungen. "Wenn ihr's nicht fühlt" etc.

¹² Alexander Berrsche, *Musik und Betrachtung, Trösterin Musica*, (Hermann Rinn 1949, reprinted by Ellermann Verlag, München 1964) p. 244 Mann soll nun nicht einwenden wollen, Brahms habe doch dererlei nicht vorgeschrieben. Die ganz feinen Dinge wird jeder Autor sich hüten, ausdrücklich vor zu schreiben. Sie würden

The fact that Berrsche felt obliged to address the objection that the modifications he felt were appropriately and effectively applied by Steinbach were not prescribed by the composer, can be seen as confirmation of the fact that in the first half of the twentieth century there was (mounting) pressure to stick to what could be found in the score. Berrsche is an advocate of extra modifications, but he warns against exaggerations. This quote is a typical example of a historical source that can be used by people advocating modifications and by people warning against excessive use of them. I take Berrsche's words as further encouragement to look for modifications in places where no instructions to make them can be found in the score, and I take comfort in knowing that the proper execution of such modifications will always be in the domain of the subtle nuance, not necessarily of the spectacular effect.

A third perspective comes from what Bauer-Lechner writes about the opinion on these matters expressed by Gustav Mahler.

Everything is expressed in the greatest detail through note values and silences. This clearly concerns everything that can be represented in writing. About the much more important things such as tempo, the total conception and the construction of a work, frustratingly little can be pinned down, as these concern a living and flowing thing that can never be exactly repeated twice even in direct succession. This is why metronome markings are inadequate and almost useless, because – if the work is not to be senselessly ground out in barrel organ style, the tempo will already have changed by the end of the second bar. Therefore the right proportions between the various sections are more important than the initial tempo. Whether a tempo is a degree faster or slower often depends on the mood of the conductor and may vary somewhat accordingly without any detrimental effect on the quality of the work. As long as the whole (performance) is alive and within the bounds of this freedom is built up with irrefutable coherence.¹³ (My translation)

Reading about Mahler's concept of tempo as a living and flowing thing that can never be repeated the same, stimulates me to look for everchanging ways to express my ideas and avoid any attempt to repeat myself literally. His opinion that it is impossible to pin down the tempo, or the conception of a work, helps me understand the limitations of close reading, when it comes to grasping the essence of a piece of music.

nämlich dann sofort übertrieben werden, und es ist gewiss besser, eine Feinheit gar nicht zu machen, als sie zu vergrößern.

¹³ *Erinnerungen an Mahler*, p.25: Alles wird durch Notenwerte und Pausen bis ins Kleinste ausgedrückt. Das gilt nun freilich von dem, was sich darstellen lässt. Über das weitaus Wichtigere: über das Tempo, und vollends die Gesamtauffassung, und den Aufbau eines Werkes, lässt sich so nur verzweifelt Wenig feststellen, denn hier handelt es sich um etwas Lebendiges, Fliessendes, das nie, auch nur zweimal hintereinander, sich völlig gleichbleiben kann. Deshalb ist ja auch das Metronomisieren unzulänglich, und fast wertlos, weil schon nach dem zweiten Takte das Tempo ein anderes geworden sein muss, wenn das Werk nicht drehorgelmässig, niederträchtig, heruntergespielt wird. Weit mehr als die Anfangsgeschwindigkeit kommt es daher auf das richtige Verhältnis aller Teile untereinander an. Ob das Tempo im Gesamten um einen Grad geschwinder oder langsamer ist, mag oft von der Stimmung des Dirigenten abhängen und, ohne Nachteil für das Ganze Werk, um ein Geringes variieren. Wenn das Ganze nur ein Lebendiges, und innerhalb dieser Freiheit mit unumstösslicher Notwendigkeit aufgebaut ist.

I think it is safe to say that the three sources presented and discussed here, clearly point to the fact that a great deal of unprescribed tempo modification was used in the nineteenth century. These modifications were part of a range of expressive resources regarded as essential for the communication of music's dramatic and emotional content. Extensive and substantial unprescribed tempo modification, which continued as a living tradition into the first half of the twentieth century, has been widely documented by scholarly research. Unprescribed tempo modification however does not play a role in today's main stream performance practice or indeed in the orchestral performance practice that is regarded as HIP, nor has it done so for over half a century. Once a practice is forgotten, we cannot rekindle it, it must be reinvented. Rediscovering and utilising tempo modification as an expressive resource, requires experimentation and the development of one's sensitivity to its effect on performers and listeners.

The body of evidence on which my understanding of the lost tools of nineteenth century performance practices is based, is the result of historical scientific research as published in many excellent books and dissertations. If we are to learn about the expressive possibilities and the consequences of working with the lost tools of nineteenth century performance practices with an orchestra, we need to add a practical dimension to the written research. An essential part of this research needs to take place in practice; in rehearsals and performance with an orchestra. This is not merely a process of applying the findings of the historical research in a kind of applied science laboratory, it is also a crucial component of the methodology for investigating the implication of the historical evidence.

In fact, whereas most historians use words to describe events, I intend to describe and articulate conclusions about historical practice mainly through musical performance. As a performing musician, I am guided not only by the historical evidence as I understand it, but also by my aim to use this evidence in such a way that it can help me to convey the dramatic and emotional content of the music as I understand it, to an audience of the 21st century. I do not intend to use the historical research as legitimization of my style of performance, but I intend to be very precise in my description of the role it plays in my decision-making process with regard to performance issues.

With regard to tempo modification this means that, whilst we may be unable to say with any degree of certainty what constituted exaggeration in the minds of nineteenth- or even early twentieth-century musicians and listeners, we can be certain that the historical evidence shows us that these musicians and listeners were used to a more varied and flexible approach to tempo, than we are today. A logical conclusion would be that their tolerance for, and appreciation of tempo modification, generally speaking, was larger than ours. Hence, while we are still unable to determine what exactly they would have considered to be an exaggeration, we may conclude that in all likelihood, we would sooner think of instances of tempo modification in performances as exaggerations than they might have done. This conclusion prompts me to look for many more possibilities to apply tempo modification than my intuition alone, still substantially conditioned by my later 20th-century training and experience, would lead me to do. Above all this requires an uninhibited in-depth study of the dramatic and emotional impact of the music on me personally, as the artistic goals that result from such a study are an absolute prerequisite of tempo modifications that can be viewed both as inspired by nineteenth century practice and suitable for conveying the music to an audience today.

Johannes Leertouwer, May 2021

