

A critical review of some tempo modifications in two recordings of the last movement of Brahms's Third Symphony

In *Performing Brahms*, Robert Pascall and Philip Weller argue that Brahms's preferred style of orchestral performance can be described as a 'middle way'¹. They make a strong case, positioning Brahms in between the conductors Hans Richter (1843-1916) and Hans von Bülow (1830-1894). Their assumption of Brahms's preference for a middle way, is based on a thorough investigation into various sources describing 19th century practices; they do not include 20th century performances as a point of reference.

For me, as a musician of the 21st century, the follow up question is of course: how can we relate Brahms's presumably preferred style of using tempo modifications in orchestral performance to later performance practices of the 20th century until today?

In an extended feature article in *The Times*, dated 16th of April 1910, almost certainly by music critic Fuller Maitland, we find a description of the way the Meiningen Orchestra played orchestral rubato in Brahms under Fritz Steinbach, that should give us pause:

The Meiningen Orchestra under Herr Steinbach, was *hors concours*; their Brahms playing, absolutely non-metric and absolutely unified, was a unique revelation.²

Robert Philip, in his book *Early Recordings and Musical Style*, writes that flexibility of tempo gradually disappeared from orchestral performance practice over the course of the 20th century³. I am quite convinced that, if we take into account the increasing evenness of tempo (and sound) that has been the result of this development, we would not qualify Brahms's preferred style of orchestral performance as a 'middle way' today. In other words, it may be perfectly appropriate to qualify Brahms's presumably preferred style of tempo modification in orchestral performance as a 'middle way' in the context of the 19th century evidence, and at the same time to perceive it as 'radical' or 'extreme' in the context of later 20th century practices.

In a study titled *In Search of Sounding Evidence of Traces of Fritz Steinbach's Approach to Brahms's Second Symphony*, published on my website, I made a comparison of the tempo modifications in 6 historical recordings and compared these to the suggestions that can be found in Walter Blume's *Brahms in der Meininger Tradition*. In my study I concluded that in relation to contemporary performance practices and recordings, the 6 recordings that were made in the first decades of the 20th century, contained significantly more extensive and more substantial tempo modification⁴. Admittedly, my conclusion was based on a serious investigation of historical recordings on the one hand, but on the other hand a rather general characterization of later mainstream performance practices and recordings. Since writing the article, I have listened to many more contemporary recordings, in which I indeed found the kind of evenness that I had attributed to them in my generalization. I felt no urge to write about the details of my analysis, and it soon became clear to me why this was: there

¹ Michael Musgrave and Bernard D. Sherman, *Performing Brahms, Early Evidence of Performance Style*, chapter *Flexible tempo and nuancing in orchestral music*, Robert Pascall and Philip Weller, Cambridge University Press (Cambridge 2003) p. 237.

² Christopher Dymont, *Conducting the Brahms Symphonie*, The Boydell Press (Woodbridge, 2016) p.156.

³ Robert Philip, *Early Recordings and Musical Style, changing tastes in instrumental performance 1900-1950*, chapter *Implications for the future*, Cambridge University Press (Cambridge 1992) pp. 229-240.

⁴ Johannes Leertouwer, *In Search of Sounding Evidence of Traces of Fritz Steinbach's Approach to Brahms's Second Symphony*, www.brahms.johannesleertouwer.nl, (06-2021)

was far less to write about. In the historic recordings I had been constantly struck by details that stood out and demanded further investigation. In the more even recordings of the second half of the 20th century, this was far less the case. Indeed, the recordings, almost without exception of high technical accomplishment, could serve as proof that the often-heard idea that all orchestras are beginning to sound alike, is indeed true.

I chose two remarkable recordings of Brahms's Third Symphony, to investigate further; A live recording of the Berlin Philharmonic Orchestra in a performance at RIAS Berlin on December 18, 1949, under the direction of Wilhelm Furtwängler and a live recording by the Australian Chamber orchestra, released on August 14, 2020, under the direction of Richard Tognetti. Both these recordings are a challenge to my general characterization of the mainstream performance practice of Brahms's orchestral music, and possibly to the whole idea that such a thing exists. But that is not the question I want to address here. I want to look at the way tempo modifications are used in these two recordings, and I want to write about how I think this relates to the presumably preferred 'middle way' as described by Pascall and Weller. Unlike in my study of the 6 historical recordings of the Second Symphony, I will not look at these recordings through the lens of Blume. Instead, I will focus on some of the tempo modifications and dynamics that I found most striking in the last movement of the symphony. After discussing the selected performance issue in the Furtwängler recording, I will zoom in on one or two issues in the same movement in the Tognetti recording. In his book *Conducting the Brahms Symphonies*, Christopher Dymont points at historical sources in the form of critical comments on Furtwängler's performances in the 1920s of Brahms. Dymont characterizes certain traits of Furtwängler's interpretations as being 'as distant as could be imagined from Steinbach's probable handling of the symphonies.'

The kind of rhythmic freedom that Brahms undoubtedly wanted in the performance of his symphonies, which Steinbach gave him as abundantly as he needed, tended more to the finer nuances of detail than to Furtwängler's characteristic broad swathes of substantial departures from basic tempos.⁵

My closer look at the modifications in this essay can be seen as further corroboration of Dymont's conclusion. Dymont includes Furtwängler's recordings in his analysis of recordings of the Third Symphony. He particularly looks at the way his selected conductors handle the performance issues that Walter Blume wrote about in his document *Brahms in der Meininger Tradition*.⁶ As Dymont looked at the recorded evidence through the lens of Blume he chooses to leave out the last movement, because Blume does not write much about it. For me however, some of the most striking tempo modifications in the performances of both Furtwängler and Tognetti happen in the last movement and that is why I have chosen these as a subject for this essay. I recommend keeping a score on hand, as I will be referring to specific letters and bar numbers. In the audio fragments, that can be accessed by clicking on the links below, I have added annotated pages from the score.

⁵ Dymont, p.137

⁶ Walter Blume, *Brahms in der Meininger Tradition, Seine Sinfonien und Haydn-Variationen in der Bezeichnung von Fritz Steinbach*, Als Manuscript gedruckt Ernst Suhrkamp (Stuttgart, 1933)

Fourth movement, Allegro

Overview of Furtwängler's tempo modifications

The movement opens with an unharmonized first theme, marked *p(iano) e sotto voce*, in octaves and in unisono in strings and bassoons. In Furtwängler's recording, the tempo is remarkably slow with about 64 for the half note. When he reaches letter A (bar 18) with the chorale-like-theme taken from the second movement, the Andante, the tempo becomes substantially slower still, with about 48 for the half bar/half note. Then, at letter B (bar 30) in the explosive forte of the tutti, Furtwängler suddenly introduces a new tempo of about 78, which he accelerates in stages until he reaches 98 at the fortissimo of bar 46, which he only slightly relaxes into a tempo of about 96 at letter C, for the second subject. This remains – with some modifications of course – the fundamental tempo for quite some time, but in the section from bar 81 there is an intensification in the chromatic lines (bar 83 and following) and Furtwängler pushes forward even further, reaching about 102-104 for the half note at letter F, bar 91. At letter G, bar 104, follows a remarkable change; a ritardando leads from the very energetic tempo of 102-104 back to the tempo of the beginning, so that the development section is played at a tempo that bears a semblance of the opening tempo; 76 for the half note. This stays the fundamental tempo for quite some time, with some modifications (as in the beginning, mainly on cadences) until we reach letter I, bar 149, where the chorale-like-theme is played in canon in the winds. At this point Furtwängler slows down, presenting the music in *pesante* character (Brahms writes *ben marcato*) at about 66 for the half note. In the following section he pushes this forward to about 72. At the fortissimo in bar 167 and following, he does play with extra emphasis, returning to a tempo of about 68, close to that of the beginning of this section (66 at letter I). At letter K, bar 172, he abruptly returns to the faster tempo of about 90, which he pushes further forward from bar 178 on, to about 100 in the fortissimo of bar 188. At letter L the second theme returns, and the tempo is as the first time about 96. The tempo modifications are similar to the first time, reaching 100 for the half note at letter M, bar 217 about 102 for the half note until we reach the Coda at letter N, bar 246. Here we find a ritardando similar to the one at letter G, bar 104, which leads us to a much calmer tempo of about 68 for the viola solo at bar 253. After this, Furtwängler continues his ritardando, reaching about 64 at letter O, bar 261. At bar 267 he reaches 48 for the half note (Brahms marked this place 'Un poco sostenuto'). He keeps a tempo of about 42-44, with some rubato in the hairpins, continues until the final statement of the opening melody of the first movement. From this moment, at bar 301 the tempo arguably becomes too slow to be measured in half notes, as the rallentando results in a tempo of about 60 for the quarter note.

Selection of performance issues and critical review

Opening

In my opinion the most striking tempo modification in Furtwängler's recording of the last movement of the Symphony, is the sudden change of tempo at letter B, bar 30.

Furtwängler's opening tempo of the Final is very deliberately slow, so much so, that in my opinion there is no feeling of Allegro. In fact, one gets the impression that the movement opens with a slow introduction in two sections with two different slow tempi, after which the Allegro begins at letter B, bar 30. If we consider his choice of tempo in the context of the

four movements of the symphony, we find that the tempo with which he opens, 64 per beat, is roughly the same as that of the opening of second movement, the Andante. Brahms considered his tempo markings with extreme care, all the more so because he refused to give metronome markings, as we know from his often-quoted letter about this issue to George Henschel. After writing that he considers the metronome to be 'of no value', and that he never believed that his blood and a mechanical instrument would go well together, he writes:

What I do know is that I indicate (without figures) my tempi, modestly, to be sure, but with the greatest care and clearness.⁷

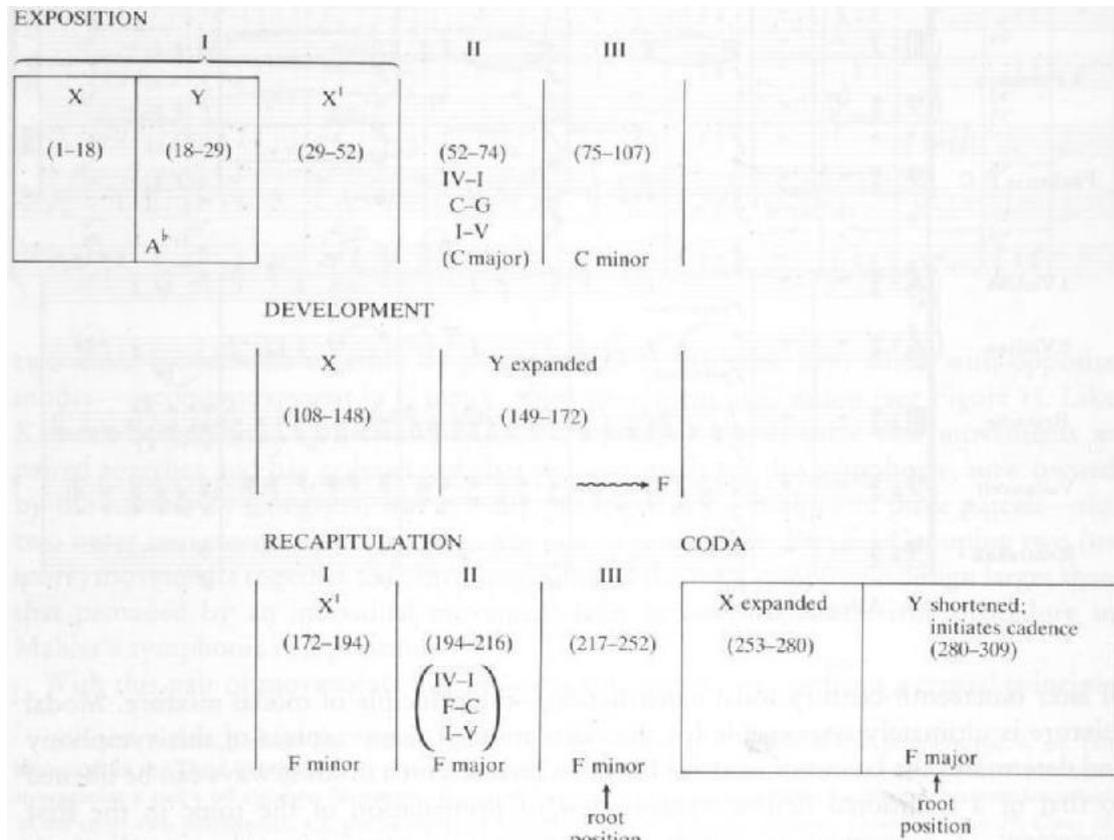
I should think that if Furtwängler's tempo, is close to what Brahms might have had in mind, he would have given some indication of it, for example by writing 'Allegro ma non troppo' or 'Allegro moderato' or by adding 'tranquillo' to the *p e sotto voce* in the score and the parts. As we have seen, Furtwängler takes an even slower tempo of 48 at letter A, where the chorale-like material from the second movement is being played. This makes the passage slower than the same material in the second movement, which is played at 56 per beat. Furthermore, the slow speed makes for a very abrupt change at letter B, where the tempo is changed within a single bar from 48 to 76, which he then pushes to 96. I think this kind of extreme modification is reminiscent of Felix Weingartner's description of Hans von Bülow's style. If my assumption is correct and this is indeed the kind of effect that Bülow was known for, particularly later in his career, this would make it at the same time a practice with a connection to a historical phenomenon of the 19th century, and an exaggeration that in the opinion of Weingartner and, in his footsteps, myself, should be avoided. In his book *On conducting* Weingartner gives specific examples of tempo modifications by Bülow, that he considered exaggerations. I think that we do not need to address the complex background and Weingartner's position in the discussion between Wagner as a championing of extreme modification and his acolytes on the one hand and the style of Mendelssohn's and his followers, who included Joachim and Reinecke on the other, to understand these particular comments by Weingartner, because they are very specific and practical rather than philosophical in nature. While acknowledging that, after hearing what Bülow could accomplish with the Meiningen orchestra, people realized that one could not simply return to beating time, he also writes that Bülow's work had harmful features. He particularly refers to a pedagogic element in his renderings.:

Where a modification of the tempo was necessary to get expressive phrasing, it happened that in order to make this modification quite clear to his hearers he *exaggerated* it; indeed, he fell into a quite new tempo that was a negation of the main one.⁸

⁷ George Henschel, *Personal recollections of Brahms*, The Gorham Press (Boston 1907) p. 79

⁸ Felix Weingartner, *On conducting*, Breitkopf & Härtel (London, Bruxelles, New York, 1906) Translation by Ernest Newman of the third edition of 1905, p.13

The 3 different tempi Furtwängler presents in the opening 52 bars of the Finale, correspond with the three zones Robert Bailey identifies in his formal analysis of the movement, as can be seen in this table⁹:



The sections X, Y and X' correspond with the tempo zones 64; 48 and 76-96. Other important changes of tempo are the result of the contrasting tempi, Furtwängler chooses for the first 52 bars. In his dissertation, Mark Biggins points at a number of perceived weaknesses in Bailey's analysis,¹⁰ but for the purpose of understanding Furtwängler's tempi for the various zones of the piece, Baileys table is very helpful, as can be seen by comparing my metronome markings with the sections of the analysis. For example, the chorale-like material of Y in the exposition has the slowest tempi in the movement. Y appears three times; in bars 118-29 at about 48 for the half note; in bars 149-172 (expanded) at about 66 and in the Coda bars 280-309 (shortened) at about 46, gradually slowing down. Other sections show a similar consistency in tempo choice. Although it appears possible to identify a connection between the various tempi and the structure of the work, I think one can hardly dispute that the three tempi presented in the opening of the movement are so different from each other, that these modifications qualify as an exaggeration as described by Weingartner, in which the introduction of a new tempo functions as a negation of the main one.

⁹ Robert Bailey, *Musical Language and Structure in the Third symphony*, in *Brahms Studies: Historical and Analytical Perspectives*, ed. George S. Bozarth, Oxford, Clarendon Press (Oxford 1990) pp. 405-421

¹⁰ Mark Biggins, *Rediscovering Brahms's Other Pastoral Symphony*, Dissertation submitted for the degree MPHIL at the University of Cambridge, 2010, p.44.

This is what it sounds like:

[Furtwängler-BSO, opening Allegro \(4\) of Brahms III](#)

Most of the modifications in the rest of the movement follow from Furtwängler's choices for three sections of the opening of the exposition. For example, the substantial ritardando he makes at letter G, bars 104-108, is necessary to return to the tempo similar to the ones he had chosen for the material of the opening, that is also being played in bar 108 and following. In fact, he returns to the tempo of the second time the material is being played X', 76-78 for the half note, bars 29-52, not the first time X, bar 1-18, 64 for the half note. This made me wonder if perhaps the initial tempo had been a miscalculation by Furtwängler (it is a live performance after all), but comparison to his 1954 recording with the same orchestra has exactly the same tempo of 64 for the half note, so it is clearly intentional. There are two other modifications in the last movement I want to look at. The first one is the way in which he goes from 78 for the half note at letter B, bar 30, to 96 at the second subject, letter C, bar 52.

Preparation of tempo for second subject

As we have seen, Furtwängler takes the tempo he reaches at letter B of 76-78 for the half note, up to a tempo of 96 at letter C. I want to take a closer look at how he does this, in order to see if we can find a connection with Brahms's markings in the score. The accelerando leads gradually from 76-78 to 98, but in bar 40, two bars before the beginning of the crescendo it the speeding up is quite sudden, taking us from about 82 to 98 in the course of 6 bars. Furtwängler starts this (extra) accelerando quite suddenly in bar 40, where the harmony stays the same for two bars, and not in bar 42, where Brahms writes *cresc.* and at which point an ascending chromatic line starts, leading to the *ff* of bar 46. By making a clearly distinguishable start of the extra accelerando in bar 40, Furtwängler, in my opinion, emphasises the fact that it was his decision to do it this way. I have no doubt that using Brahms's crescendo in bar 42 as the starting point of the extra accelerando, would have resulted in more natural or organic result, i.e., a result that does not put the spotlight on the performer, but on the ebb and flow of the music itself. What is more, I think a brilliant conductor such as Furtwängler must have known this, or at least registered the result of his decision to choose bar 40 for an extra impulse in the accelerando. Knowingly putting your stamp or signature on a passage like this, brings to mind one of the other practices von Bülow displayed and Weingartner rejected. It is as if the conductor speaks to the audience over the 'soundtrack' of the recording. Weingartner put it like this:

Bülow's *purpose* as such was always clearly recognisable and also quite correct. It was as if he said to his audience and more especially to the players: "This extremely significant passage in the "Egmont" Overture must not be scrambled through thoughtlessly; the comfortable, easy-going minuet of the Eight Symphony must not be turned into a scherzo; the main theme of the "Coriolan" Overture must be given out in a way conformable to the dignity of the work." But in the effort to be excessively clear he often went too far. His quondam (former) hearers and admirers will recollect that often when he had worked out a passage in an especially plastic

form he would turn to the public, perhaps expecting to see some astonished faces, chiefly, however, to say “See, that’s how it should be done!”¹¹

It is perhaps unfair to accuse Furtwängler of this kind of vanity, and I am certainly not aware that he, at any stage during performances, turned to the audience as Weingartner writes that Bülow once did, but it does seem to me that in choosing to structure the accelerando the way he did in this passage, he demonstrates an eagerness to emphasise the fact that it was his idea to do it, and it did not necessarily follow from the eb and flow of the music itself.

Furtwängler B-C

Closing group, letter E

A last issue in this movement I wish to discuss here is the next stage of the general accelerando from letter B, across the second subject until letter G, bar 104, the ritardando into the development section. As we have seen the basic tempo of the second subject is about 96 for the half bar. At bar 70, in the fortissimo, Furtwängler moves forward to about 100, then, at the C minor of letter E, bar 75, he takes the tempo almost imperceptibly slower at about 98, from which tempo he gradually moves up until he reaches 102 at bar 87, until letter G, bar 104, where he makes a dramatic ritardando. The subtle modification for the C minor, in my opinion is noteworthy. As we shall see in the Togenetti recording, where the opposite happens, the gravity of the minor key is lost if one speeds up at this very moment. Furtwängler first sets the tempo, before moving forward. He moves forward particularly through the dotted rhythm in the strings in bars 79-80 and 83-84. In fact, he seems to like this rhythm so much that he seems to have changed Brahms’s half notes in the intense chromatic line in bars 85-86, and asked the first violins continue the dotted rhythm, as can be heard in the recording:

Furtwangler 66-96

The music at F, bar 92, with the many offbeat accents is played at the fastest tempo in the movement. It creates a very exciting effect, but I can’t help thinking of Weingartner’s remark on accents, that they should always be considered in context, and played with an intensity that is coordinated with dynamics developments.

I would add the admonishment always to observe most precisely, whether an accent comes in a *forte* or *piano* passage, which will determine quite different grades of strength and expression for it. It is also of the utmost importance whether a *succession* of accents occurs in a passage proceeding in uniform loudness, or during a *crescendo* or *diminuendo*, in which latter case the accents also must of course have their own gradual increase or decrease. Obvious as this may seem, it is necessary even with good orchestras to point out emphatically *where* the accents come, and so prevent their being continually hammered out in the one style.¹²

¹¹ Weingartner, p 16

¹² Ibidem, p.29

Weingartner writes about the importance of dynamic context for deciding the intensity of accents and I realise that is not quite the same as what we hear in this particular place. Here the dynamic context is clearly the fortissimo, which Brahms wrote in bar 81, but within that fortissimo context, I would argue that the music would still require some shaping, as it otherwise would indeed be 'hammered out in one style'. Perhaps Furtwängler's breakneck speed does not allow the players to consider the shape of this phrases and the place of the *sforzati* in it. Whatever the cause may be, these accents are hammered at one level of intensity, resulting in a very impressive but rather mechanical effect, that gives me the impression that shape is sacrificed for effect. Again, it is hard to imagine that a brilliant conductor such as Furtwängler, would create such an effect by accident.

Overview of Tognetti's tempo modifications

In the Tognetti recording, the tempo of the opening is about 74 for the half bar. When the orchestra reaches letter A (bar 18) and plays the choral-like-theme taken from the second movement, the tempo becomes a little slower, with about 62 for the half bar/half note. Then, at letter B (bar 30) in the explosive forte of the tutti, Tognetti suddenly introduces a new tempo of about 90, which he keeps with some smaller modifications more or less steady for a long period of time, until he reaches letter E, at which point he suddenly chooses a faster tempo of 104 for the half note. This again is kept more or less steadily until the transition into the development at letter G, where Tognetti makes a ritardando leading back to a tempo of 94 for the half note, settling into 90-92 at letter H, bar 134. At letter I, bar 149, where the choral-like-theme is played in canon in the winds, the tempo is about 86 for the half note (Brahms writes *ben marcato*). This tempo is kept, with some minor modifications until letter k, bar 172, where Tognetti suddenly introduces a tempo of about 96 for the half note. Through the fortissimo at 190 he takes it down to 94 for the half note, which he reaches at letter L, bar 194, the second subject. It is played faster than the first time it appeared in the exposition). This remains the fundamental tempo until we reach letter M, bar 217, at which point Tognetti introduces (as he did the first time this material appeared) a faster tempo of 102 for the half note. This tempo is kept with some minor modifications until the Coda at letter N, bar 246. At bar 250, the 5th bar of the Coda a rather sudden ritardando takes us to the viola solo at bar 253, which is played at about 70 for the half note. At letter O, bar 261 the tempo is a bit faster, at 74 for the half note, but from bar 267 (Brahms marked this place *Un poco sostenuto*) he slows down gradually until the end. At letter P, bar 281, he reaches a tempo of about 36 for the half note. From bar 301, possibly already from bar 296, the tempo becomes too slow to be measured in half notes. Towards the end the quarter note is about 50.

Selection of performance issues and critical review

Opening

Tognetti's recording represents a somewhat less extreme version of Furtwängler's when it comes to the opening of the Allegro. He too presents 3 different tempi, but they are not as different from each other as Furtwängler's. Even so, to my ear, the new tempo of about 90 for the half note at letter B sounds like a negation of the tempo of the chorale like music immediately preceding it of about 62.

[Tognetti at letter B](#)

A sudden change of tempo at letter E

At letter E, bar 75, Tognetti suddenly introduces a faster tempo. To my ear this is not convincing, because it weakens the impact of the dramatic harmony change to C minor. The relation between harmony and tempo modification is important. I would argue that the modifications should enhance the effect of the harmony rather than weaken it. In this case I think the C minor has a seriousness that is lost if, at the precise moment the key is introduced, the tempo is suddenly taken faster. There are plenty of other opportunities to reach a faster tempo if that is the purpose of the modification; it could be done gradually from letter E onwards, or it could be done through the hairpins in bar 79-80, or through the ascending chromatic line in bars 83-87. As a consequence of Tognetti's decision to introduce the new tempo suddenly, the listener perceives it as an event based on a decision, not a gradual development. I cannot find a logical moment of decision in the rhetorical build-up of the music here, that would prompt this modification. If I try to imagine how that might work more convincingly, I would think of the music from the fortissimo in bar 70 until letter E as posing a question, and the music at letter E as the answer to the question. Something in the way of a phrase used by Beethoven in his String Quartet opus 135: "Muss es sein? Es muss sein!". The harmony of C minor would make for a troubled or fatalistic answer though. Not impossible to pull off perhaps, but to my ear not satisfactory given the alternative options available. One alternative I can think of to make a faster tempo at E work better, would be to use the accents in bars 73-74, the two bars before letter E, to play with extra emphasis. This would be fitting, as the same figure is repeated in each bar and the on the beat accents can be used to slow down a bit. After this the music at letter E, with accents only in the syncopation in the flutes and violins, not on the beat as in the two previous bars, can easily be perceived as a bit faster if one returns to the general tempo. Even so, I would still prefer the C minor to have some gravitas. This may all seem a bit far-fetched, but what I am trying to do here is find reasons why certain tempo modifications sound more convincing to me than others. It is my belief that in order to implement the expressive tool of tempo modification in orchestral performance practice successfully, we must re-invent it to some extent. This requires not only experimentation with an orchestra, but also analysis of the emotional effect of tempo modification and the impact it has in terms of rhetorical construction. I intend to investigate this subject further, and to write more about it, because we know the rhetorical element in tonal art music, from the 18th- through the 19th century, was fundamental to a meaningful performance. I hope to find a way to address the subject that is not too analytical but leaves enough room for intuition. When it comes to these matters, I am constantly reminded of Brahms quoting Goethe, in his letter to conductor Otto Dessoff:

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.'¹³

¹³ Styra Avins, 'Clues from his letters' in *Performing Brahms, Early Evidence of Performance Style*, edited by Michael Musgrave and Bernard D. Sherman, Cambridge University Press (Cambridge 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. These last words are a quote from Goethe's *Faust*: *Wenn ihr's nicht fühlt, ihr werdet's nicht erjagen.*

Conclusions

Apart from the local application of tempo rubato in a particular smaller section or passage marked with hairpins, we can identify two types of tempo modifications; the ones that involve getting faster or slower over a shorter or a longer period of time, and the ones involving sudden tempo changes. Where the first type generally can be easily connected to the ebb and flow of the music, the second type of suddenly realised contrasting tempi for different sections of the music stems from the performer's understanding of the required tempo to bring out the full character of the sections in question. Looking at the two types of tempo modification, one might argue that the first type serves to show connections and direction, whereas the second type serves to enhance contrasts. In the selection of performance issues discussed in this essay, I have deliberately chosen examples of both types of modification. With regard to the contrasting tempi in various sections of the piece, my conclusion is that these should be carefully measured against the goal of maintaining a unity of tempo, or, as Weingartner might have put it, in order to avoid that one tempo serves as a negation of another in the same movement. To be clear, I certainly think that it is fitting to play the forte in a slightly faster tempo than the *sotto voce* opening. Thanks to Donald Tovey we know that Brahms himself played a faster tempo at the first *forte* following a *sotto voce* opening in his third violin sonata:

From Joachim I learnt that at the first *forte* (in the D minor Sonata, opus 108) Brahms made a decided *animato* (to Tovey, a faster tempo) which he might as well have marked in the score.¹⁴

While I certainly think that it is natural to have a faster tempo at letter B in comparison to letter A, I think it is fair to conclude that the modifications as realised by Furtwängler and Tognetti are not fitting in the Meiningen tradition as described by Blume and in various reports of the performance style of Steinbach, nor can they be considered as being in line with Brahms's assumed 'middle way'. To be clear, I consider them to be perfectly legitimate artistic choices, just not ones that are fitting in what I understand the Meiningen tradition to have been. With regard to the second type of modification, the ones that involve getting faster or slower over a shorter or a longer period of time, my conclusion is that the goal should be that the listener experiences the changes of tempo as resulting from the fluctuating feelings and emotions of the musical narrative, not as decisions imposed by a conductor. There is a good deal of subjectivity involved in judging if performers succeed in this. Most, if not all musicians and listeners, like me, are to some extent conditioned by late 20th century training and listening experiences. We cannot recreate the 19th century musicians or audiences, nor can we recreate a historical reality. What we can do, is study the expressive tools, that according to historical research were used in the past and find ways to implement them in a way that serves to bring out the musical narrative today. If we feel that an accelerando is appropriate, we may look for possibilities to establish a connection to the markings that are already in the score, particularly crescendos. As Bernard D. Sherman writes in *Performing Brahms: The association of speeding up with getting louder, a practice much maligned by modernist interpreters (. . .)* seems to have been more natural to

¹⁴Donald Tovey, from 'Brahms's chamber music', in Cobbett's Cyclopedic Survey of Chamber Music, ed. W.W.Cobbett (London, 1929) Reprinted In Tovey's *The Main Stream of Music and Other Essays*, p. 264

musicians of Brahms's day. Sherman goes on to point at the markings Brahms pencilled into the autograph of the finale of the Second Piano Concertos, that often-indicated accelerations not marked in the published score taking place during marked crescendos. The second example from Furtwängler's recording discussed above, shows possible ramifications of clearly distinguishable accelerations that are not connected to crescendos in the score. As I have written before, I take comfort in knowing that the proper execution of tempo modifications will always be in the domain of the subtle nuance, not necessarily of the spectacular effect. In this manner I have strived to create a contrast in the finale of the Second Symphony in a place that is similar to the place discussed above in the opening of the last movement of the Third Symphony. The tempi of the *p(iano) sotto voce* opening and of the explosive forte at letter A, bar 23, are only marginally different from each other (104 to 108). I have made a small ritenuto in the 4 bars before letter A in order to enhance the feeling of contrast. This small ritenuto (*etwas zurückhalten*) is also suggested by Walter Blume in his *document Brahms in der Meiniger Tradition*.¹⁵

[Brahms II, Finale, Leertouwer](#)

This example can easily be understood as an advertisement for moderate tempo modification, and in some ways that's how I intend it. But I am keenly aware that there is a danger in claiming that this kind of example is to be followed by others. Brahms appreciated interpreters of a wide variety, ranging from strict to free. Bernard D. Sherman, in *Performing Brahms*, suggests that Brahms, like many composers, may have been more concerned with a performer's ability to convey musical content than with adherence to specific performance practice.¹⁶ I agree with Walter Frisch, who wrote that there never was one authorized or authentic manner of performing the Brahms symphonies.¹⁷ As I pointed out at the beginning of this essay, the picture of Brahms as an advocate of a middle way, can be deceptive. We can paint a picture of him based on historical documentation, we must keep questioning our arguments. After all, all arguments based on historical sources are selected arguments. In some cases, the selection is made for us over time: we don't know how the available sources relate to the sources that are no longer available to us. On other occasions we select our arguments ourselves. For example, this well-known drawing of Brahms, by Willy von Beckerath (1868-1938), might serve as a perfect illustration as his preference for the middle of any road:

¹⁵ Walter Blume, *Brahms in der Meiniger Tradition, seine Sinfonien und Haydn-Variationen in der Bezeichnung von Fritz Steinbach* (Suhrkamp 1933) p.52

¹⁶ Musgrave and Sherman p. 3

¹⁷ Ibidem, p. 279



On the other hand, this passage from Konrad Huschke's *Johannes Brahms als Pianist, Dirigent und Lehrer*, might serve to paint him as a radical:

However, Brahms could be overcome by fiery passion when conducting. (. . .) This is how Rehberg once witnessed him in Leipzig's old Gewandhaus. At this conservative site where Reinecke conducted with all too much genteel restraint, this entralling and spirited Brahms stood out all the more, especially in a rehearsal for the premiere of his fourth symphony. When the sensational Scherzo movement was practised, he went completely out of control. Everything was not phrased sharply enough for him, not vivid enough. Everyone in the orchestra had to give their best, and it was plain to see that the Gewandhaus musicians were completely unfamiliar with demands like that. At one time he even screamed into the orchestra: Gentlemen, are you all married? " Another time he jumped up from the rostrum to the kettledrum and hit it so hard that the poor timpanist was very worried about his instrument. And in the performance that evening, as Teichmüller remembered, when conducting, he made such lively and big movements that a cellist fell backwards when dodging him and dragged another one with him. Here we find an almost wild

"Brahms", whose glowing temperament drove the fieriest outburst of temper, as was once reported from Meiningen, that he had literally electrified the orchestra with his fire (Dr. J. Grosser to the Berliner Börsen-Courier dated December 1, 1885).¹⁸

When it comes to characterizing Brahms in order to justify a certain style of performance, there are many avenues to explore and many pitfalls to be avoided. It is perhaps enough to say that, just as there is no simple characterization which might do justice to the complex character of Brahms, neither is there a simple characterization that could fully define the right style of tempo modification in his music.

Both the recordings by Furtwängler and by Tognetti studied here, are full of spectacular modifications. Enough has been said about Furtwängler's style of performance and given the fact that his recording was made in 1949, I would say that it belongs to the domain of the historical recordings. The recording of Tognetti and the Australian Chamber Orchestra was made in 2020 and is part of a contemporary performance practice of Brahms. I find it to be an incredibly adventurous, brave and important recording of exceptional quality. The fact that I have questioned some of Tognetti's tempo modifications in this essay does not in any way diminish my respect and even admiration for the work of conductor and orchestra. They have produced a recording that is significantly different from others, a recording that can help us re-invent the expressive tool of tempo modification in orchestral performance. It is through such sounding results, that we can best further our understanding of the possibilities to bring out the expressive riches of this astonishing music.

Johannes Leertouwer
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¹⁸ Konrad Huschke, *Johannes Brahms als Pianist, Dirigent und Lehre*, Friedrich Gutsch Verlag, Karlsruhe in Baden, 1935, pp. 43-44 (my translation of the following) Auch feurige Leidenschaft konnte Brahms beim Dirigieren übermannen. (. . .) So hat ihn einst Rehberg im Leipziger alten Gewandhaus erlebt. An der konservativen Stätte, wo Reinecke nur allzu vornehm zurückhaltend dirigierte, fiel dieser packend-temperamentvoller Brahms besonders auf, namentlich in einer Probe zur Uraufführung seiner vierten Symfonie. Als der hahnebüchene Scherzosatz geübt wurde, geriet er ganz ausser Rand und Band. Alles war ihm nicht scharf genug phrasiert und nicht plastisch genug. Jeder im Orchester musste sein Letztes hergeben, und man sah deutlich, dass den Gewandhausmusikern so etwas ganz ungewohnt und fremd war. Einmal schrie er sogar im Orchester hinein: "Meine Herren, sind Sie denn alle verheiratet?" Ein andermal sprang er vom Pult zur Pauke hinauf und schlug derart darauf, dass der arme Pauker in grösste Sorge um sein Instrument geriet. Und in der Aufführung am Abend geriet er, wie sich Teicgmüller erinnert, sogar beim Dirigieren in so lebhaftes Schwing-bewegungen, das sein Cellist beim Ausweichen nach rückwärts fiel und noch einen mit sich riss. Hierr hatte mann einen beinahe "wilden" Brahms vor sich, den sein glühendes Innere zu feurigstem Temperamentsausbruch trieb, wie auch einst aus Meiningen berichtet wurde, er habe durch sein Feuer das Orchester sörmlich elektrifiziert (Dr. J. Grosser an den Berliner Börsen-Courier vom 1.12.1885).