

## From score to recording

A comparison between Willem Mengelberg's annotated score and his 1940 recording of the second movement, Adagio non troppo, of Brahms's Second Symphony op. 73.

Mengelberg's scores are available for study through the Nederlands Muziek Instituut. I have obtained copies of all Mengelberg's scores of Brahms's symphonies and concertos. All of these scores are full of remarks, tempo indications, metronome marks, portamento signs and much more. In this study I will concentrate on the second movement of the Second Brahms Symphony, focusing mainly on issues of tempo and tempo modifications. The central question of this study is this: How do Mengelberg's extensive markings relate to the sounding result in his recording of the piece with the Concertgebouw Orchestra in 1940, and what general conclusions can we draw about his approach to tempo and tempo modification in this movement. As a secondary line of inquiry, I will also look at concurrence between Mengelberg's recording and some of Blume's suggestions in his publication *Brahms in der Meininger Tradition*<sup>1</sup>. I recommend keeping the score, which I have scanned and attached as a separate document at hand. To further facilitate close reading of the score and close listening of the recording, I have made the audio excerpts into video's following the score bar by bar. These can be found in the links that I have included below.

### General tempo markings in the margins of the score

On the first page of the second movement we can find many indications regarding tempo, as can be seen in the scan in the attachment.

Above the music Mengelberg wrote a general remark about his approach regarding the tempo: *In Durchschnitt R[uhig] gehaltene Viertel dir. (aber 8tel fühlen = 116 Nicht zu langsam, Conduct on average calm held quarter notes (but feel 8<sup>th</sup> notes of 106 mm) Not too slow.* In the margins at the top and left of the printed notes we can find metronome marking: to the left, the indication is 58-60 in grey pencil, above the printed notes we find a correction in blue pencil, contradicting the 58-60 marking in the margin with 58- 50. A third indication related to the issue of tempo can be found in blue pencil; Mengelberg wrote *fliessend*, in the margin between the lines of timpani and first violins, but crossed it out. He underscored the word Adagio in the title of the movement. This marking seems designed to put the emphasis on Adagio, rather than the adjective 'non troppo', thus stressing Mengelberg's understanding of the title as indicative of a slower rather than a faster tempo.

### Markings in the score from bar 1 until letter A and their relation to recording

There is a marking in grey pencil in the margin between timpani and first violins; 4<sup>8</sup> supported by vertical grey lines in the score on the line of the second violins suggesting a subdivided beating of in 8<sup>th</sup> notes for the first upbeat and full bar. In bar 3 we find an indication of 4 beats in the bar, plus *in T* (in tempo) both in grey pencil. In bar 6 and bar 7 the pencil marks showing four beats are repeated.

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<sup>1</sup> Walter Blume, *Brahms in der Meininger Tradition, seine Sinfonien und Haydn-Variationen in der Bezeichnung von Fritz Steinbach*, Als Manuskript gedruckt, Suhrkamp 1933

In bar 4 and 5 we can see tenuto signs on the top notes in the cello melody in blue pencil, followed by a comma in bar 5. In bar 9 we see these tenuto signs in blue on the two top notes in the cello melody, and also a longer blue line and two red and blue vertical lines, plus the word *appassionato* in grey, circled in blue. All these markings in the score are related to the issue of tempo in an indirect manner. An instruction to subdivide a beat in 8<sup>th</sup> notes suggests a more held tempo than an indication to beat four quarter notes in a bar. The tenuto lines on the top notes in the cello melody suggest that these notes should be held, possibly lengthened, the two horizontal lines in red in bar 9, could indicate that these eight notes should be beaten out, in order to give the proper weight and emphasis. Finally, the indication 'appassionato' in the same bar does not necessarily have consequences for the tempo, it could also be expressed in sound, or for example in an over-dotting of the dotted rhythm on the fourth beat. The first thing that strikes me when I analyze the recording to see how Mengelberg's markings in the score manifest themselves in actual sound, is the tempo. Before looking at how we should understand Mengelberg's metronome marking, I think we should remind ourselves of the fact that historic recordings in general have a much greater variety of tempo than post World War II recordings. I think it is fair to assume that Mengelberg tempo marking of 58-50 should be understood as a general indication, not as something that can necessarily be applied to large stretches of the score. Nonetheless, the conclusion must be that Mengelberg's basic tempo of the opening of the movement, is substantially different from the marking in his score.

The tempo of the opening 12 bars of the movement in the recording can't be captured in one metronome mark; I would describe it as follows:

Bar 1 and 2; quarter note: 36

Bar 3; quarter note: 42

Bar 4 and 5 two substantial commas on the fourth beat and a lengthening of the top notes in the melody, of which the second one is the longest, make it very difficult to find a basic tempo for these two bars but it is close to 44 for the quarter note.

Bar 6-12 have a basic tempo of 46, but in bar 9 and 12 Mengelberg takes much time.

In bar 9 this is in accordance with his score (the two red and blue vertical lines and the blue horizontal ones, but in bar 12 there is no such indication in the score, other than an added hairpin.

The result of the modifications in the opening bars is a gradual increase of the tempo, from 36 until we reach 46 for the quarter note in bar 6. Clearly this is quite far removed from 58-60/50.

With the exception of the metronome marking, I think that the mood and tempo of the opening do reflect what Mengelberg wrote in the margins of the score. Also, his markings in the score seem to have a clear connection with the sounding result in the recording; given the slow tempo we hear in the first two bars, it makes sense that these would be beaten out in a subdivided 4 (8<sup>th</sup> notes). The change to quarter notes, with four beats in bar 3 is consistent with what we hear also; a more flowing tempo. In bar 4 and 5 the tenuto signs in the score clearly translate into lengthening of these notes and to their expressive nature. The comma that is marked in bar 5, arguably happens in bar 4 and 6 also, not so much in the sense of creating a gap, but in the sense of taking a lot of time before the last 8<sup>th</sup> notes of each of those bars.

This kind of rubato can be understood as an implication of the hairpin in the bass line and accompanying voices in bars 4 and 5. In bar 9 the combination of the signs and the word *appassionato* are in correspondence with what we hear in the recording, which I would describe as ‘emphatic declamation.’ No indication for the *rallentando* in bar 12 can be found in the score, other than the changing of Brahms’ *crescendo* to <>. With the entry of the violins in bar 12 the tempo settles into a basic 40 for the quarter note, with modifications as in the corresponding places in the opening 12 bars, but adhering somewhat closer to the basic pulse. As the cellos have done at the beginning of the movement, the violins now also break Brahms’ *legato* slur in two equal halves. Given the slow tempo, this is a logical decision. All we can say is that clearly this was a price Mengelberg was prepared to pay for his tempo. He is in good company, as all of the historical recordings I listened to provide evidence of the same decision not to honor the original slurs in this theme. Mengelberg’s tempo is slower than his own marking, but not out of character when compared to that of others, as can be seen in this table, containing my measurements from some of the oldest historic recordings of the Second Symphony.

Table 1

conductor	bar 1-2	bar 3	bar 4-5	bar 6-7-8	bar 9	bar 10-12	bar 13-17	year
Damrosch	40	36	rubato around 36	44-slows in 8	slows down to 36	34	around 36	1928
Stokowski	36	40	rubato around 40	44	rubato around 44	gradual slow down to 36	around 36	1929
Fiedler	34	44	rubato around 44	48-50	slows down to 44	slows down in 12	38-40	1930
Busch	38	40	rubato around 40	44	slows down to 36	around 36	around 34	1931
Toscanini	42	48	rubato around 50	56	pushes trough	52	46-48	1938
Abendroth	46	48	rubato around 46	46	rubato around 46	46	around 44-50-46	1939
Walter	42	40	rubato around 40	46	rubato leading to	50	around 38, rubato	1940

Klick on the link to hear bar 1-18 from Mengelberg’s recording:

m.1. [Mengelberg Brahms 2.1 beginning- letter A](#)

There is one other string of markings concerning the tempo in Mengelberg’s score, that deserves our attention. He has marked in red pencil the moments in the score when he was supposed to reach the 1, 2, 3 (etc.) minute mark. These markings can be found in the margins above and under the printed score. The first such marking can be found at the bottom of page one, below bar 13. The last marking is in the margin after the final chord of the movement. It reads: 8 min. As we can see in this table, this does not correspond to the length of the recording, which lasts 9:22. (Table 2)

Table 2

conductor	duration	year
Damrosch	10:11	1928
Stokowski	09:45	1929
Fiedler	09:49	1930
Busch	10:16	1931
Toscanini	08:31	1938
Abendroth	09:13	1939
Walter	10:14	1940
Mengelberg	09:22	1940

The difference between 8 minutes and 9:22 is substantial, but it is not clear what kind of conclusions we can draw from this discrepancy. The markings only appear in the second and third movement. Mengelberg marks at the end of the third movement that this movement takes 4:30. In fact, the length of his recording is 5:10, again a substantial difference. Mengelberg expert and biographer Frits Zwart suggested to me, that these markings may only have been a rough indication of the timing for the purpose of gramophone recording. Mengelberg conducted the Second Brahms symphony with the Concertgebouw Orchestra on 51 occasions in the period 1896-1933. As we have seen his recording was made in 1940. This was 7 years after his last performance of the work with the Concertgebouw Orchestra. There is no evidence to suggest that he may have become slower in his tempo preferences over the years. Mengelberg recorded the Brahms symphonies only once, so I could not investigate any recorded evidence of such changing preferences in this repertoire. Frits Zwart says that Mengelberg's recordings of the Beethoven symphonies, of which there are more available, do not suggest any significant change in this regard. On the other hand, the metronome markings clearly suggest that -at least in his mind- Mengelberg must have envisaged a faster tempo in earlier years. To add to the confusion, I must point out that in the margin after the final chord of the last movement, Mengelberg marked that the total duration of the symphony was 43 minutes. In effect the duration of his recording is 37:12. If Mengelberg had realized his duration of the second and third movement as marked in his score, the total duration could have been shortened by 2 minutes. Another discrepancy between marking and reality.

### **Markings in the score from letter A-B in relation to the recording**

Mengelberg writes a wavy line in the first bar of A (in between two diminuendo signs). Next we find a big blue 4 together with the word *Ruhig* in the score and in the margin above it we find the indication '*aber Ruhig bleiben*'. I think that this translates as: though in 4, stay calm. As such it confirms the idea that passages conducted in 8 would be played slower than those conducted in 4. After slowing down at A (wavy line), his basic tempo in this section is around 48. On the downbeat of bar 18, the second bar of A, Mengelberg creates a striking effect, that is not marked in his score; the sounding e of the first horn is played much longer than written, almost as if there were a fermata in the score. This underscores the first moment in the movement where a single instrument is playing. The horn sounds alone, after the accompaniment of the strings in the bar before has ended, before the 8<sup>th</sup> note figuration

commences. The various small hairpins <> that can be found after A, marked in blue and red, can also have implications for the tempo modification. This sign is generally understood to be not only related to the issue of dynamics, but also to expressive sound, vibrato, and rubato, as I have pointed out in my chapter on my recording of the First Symphony. The hairpins are clearly distinguishable in the recording; the top notes at the heart of each <> are played slightly longer and played with extra warmth, the lost time is made up for through a slight shortening of the surrounding notes. This is a true rubato effect, in the sense that it affects the micro timing within the phrases without changing the pulse. In bar 21 (5<sup>th</sup> bar of A) we find in blue pencil, two wavy lines and 8 vertical lines, suggesting that this bar would be beaten in 8 and would be slower than the previous bars. Mengelberg does move forward a little with the crescendo in bar 20 (almost imperceptibly), and in bar 21 indeed pulls back substantially, reaching a tempo of about 78 for the 8<sup>th</sup> notes in the first half of the bar. From the second half of the bar he slides back into his basic tempo of 48 for the quarter note. This is the kind of explicit tempo modification that Mengelberg was known for. Commentators often find it exaggerated. I am not interested in judging his performance, but I am trying to look at what it is that he does exactly, and how it relates to the marked-up score. In this instance it is clear that Mengelberg's tempo modification is very outspoken, but it does have a direct connection to the hairpin in the original score. In bar 25 we find a capital letter W and in bar 26 a capital letter R. These letters stand for W(eiter) and R(uhig). They appear often in Mengelberg's scores as signs for moving the tempo forward and backward. The moving forward in bar 25 is modest (the tempo moves from 48- 52); the slowing down in the next bar a little more pronounced (to about 46 in bar 27). On the last beat of bar 27 and in bar 28, we find again the vertical lines in blue, this time accompanied by a big blue figure 8, suggesting that the music should be beaten out in 8<sup>th</sup> notes. In the last bar of the page, bar 30, we find four bigger vertical blue lines, accompanied by the word rit(enuto), also in blue. This bar is circled in red, to draw extra attention to it. In bar 31 there is a blue 4 which I think is not related to the fingering of the first violin part, but to the tempo, suggesting that after the ritenuto of bar 30, the tempo should be more flowing in bar 31. After slowing down in bar 27, Mengelberg returns to his basic tempo of around 48 from the upbeat to bar 28. In bar 30 he pushes forward a little bit and he makes a really outspoken rallentando with a very deliberate downward glissando on the last two notes in the first and second violins (dotted figure, marked in the score<sup>2</sup>). In the following bar he restores the tempo to about 48 and he avoids a slowing down in the diminuendo of bar 31 and 32.

All this can be heard by clicking on the link to the recording from letter A-B:

m.2 [Mengelberg Brahms 2.2 letter A-B](#)

### **Markings in the score from letter B-E in relation to the recording**

At letter B, bar 33, Mengelberg gives a new metronome marking of 69 for the dotted quarter note, marked together with a R for calm and the word *fliessend* (flowing). This tempo does

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<sup>2</sup> It is perhaps worth pointing out that this downward portamento is preceded by an upward one in the first violins, in the last beat of bar 29. In the score we can find even a fingering for this one (1-2). Because it does not seem to have implications for the tempo or the rubato it is not investigated further here.

not correspond to the tempo of about 58 played in the recording. As we have seen in the opening of the movement; the tempo played is much slower than the metronome marking in the score. Though the tempo does not correspond to his metronome marking, I do think that he creates a flowing effect. To be more precise I would perhaps describe it as lilting, as a result of the swellings that can be heard where Mengelberg marked small hairpins <>, but it feels flowing in relation to the preceding pulse of 48. In bar 40 in the pp echo phrase of the strings Mengelberg creates a special effect by slowing down considerably, before returning to the basic tempo in the next bar (bar 41). The next marking related to tempo can be found in bar 43 and 44, where vertical red lines show that Mengelberg intended to beat in eighth notes and indeed he does slow down considerably to a tempo of about 44 per beat (dotted quarter) in bar 44, the last bar before the closing group. (5<sup>th</sup> bar before letter C). In the recording we can clearly hear that Mengelberg indeed slows down in bar 43, reaching a tempo of about 44 for the dotted quarter note in bar 44. The next tempo indication is a metronome mark of 69-72 in bar 45, accompanied by a big blue R, for calm. This tempo indication appears to be written over an earlier marking of a tempo of 50 or perhaps 58. In bar 48, the last bar before letter C, we can see a big W, in red. Mengelberg's tempo in the recording, as was the case at the beginning of this section (letter B) is not concurrent with his marking, but much slower. The tempo initially (bar 45), is 48 for the dotted quarter. In bar 47 he takes it up a bit to 50, before pushing it through to about 58, which is his basic tempo for the ensuing development section, beginning at letter C. In the score we see an R for calm, accompanied by the instruction '*aber leidenschaftlich*' (passionate). One special effect must be mentioned: in the last beat of bar 46 Mengelberg slows down considerably. The first violins play a rallentando with a very clear glissando down from their b to their g# (marked in the score). This glissando reminds me of the one played between a and f# at the end of bar 30. The rallentando, unlike the one in bar 30 is not marked in the score in bar 46, other than through a hairpin, the glissando is marked in the first violin line in blue. One could say that in bar 36, where the winds play their echo effect, Mengelberg hints at the rallentando he makes in bar 40, without really changing the tempo.

The next markings relating to tempo can be found in bar 53, where Mengelberg marks four vertical lines in grey pencil, indicating the beat, but also three smaller vertical lines per beat, indicating the eight notes. In his recording we can hear that Mengelberg builds up the tension by gradually moving up the tempo, from his initial 58 for the dotted quarter in bar 49, to 60 in bar 51. Given that the tempo in bar 53 is not lower than 60 for the dotted quarter, it is unlikely that the little grey markings refer to a beating pattern in eighth notes. The next indication in bar 55 however, though perhaps crossed out in blue, could well be referring to beating in eight notes. This marking a sequence of 12 vertical lines in grey, is accompanied by the letter R in the score and in the margin under the notes.

Indeed, Mengelberg suddenly takes a remarkably slow tempo in bar 55 of about 106-108 before returning to about 48 in bar 57 (letter D). The ensemble is a little shaky in these bars in the recording and possibly the marking, with the horizontal blue lines crossing the vertical grey ones, reflects a degree of uncertainty on the part of the conductor as to how best to convey his intentions. At letter D, bar 57, we again find the letter R, but also some vertical lines (two per beat in grey above the first violin part) that are not likely representing a pattern for beating out, as it would require beating two against three, in a tempo that Mengelberg previously conducted in 4 at 48 for the beat.

The next marking is a blue W in the margin of the score after bar 58, the second bar of D, followed by six vertical lines above the triplets in the first violin part in bar 59.

Mengelberg does drive up the tempo in accordance with this marking and it is quite conceivable that he did beat out the triplets in bar 59. In the recording we can hear that in bar 60 and 61 the same tempo modification is played as in bar 55 and 56, but no markings can be found in the score. In bar 62 we find the same binary markings as we found in bar 57, but the R is missing. Here too, it seems unlikely that a change of tempo or a beating in two against three is intended, and indeed we hear a steady 48 for the quarter note in the recording until Mengelberg slows down at the end of bar 63 (4 before E). In bar 64 we find eight vertical blue lines and something that looks like a stretched-out letter R. In the recording we can hear that Mengelberg indeed slows down considerably at this point, bringing the tempo down to about 40. In bar 65 he marks a blue W and indeed takes the tempo back up to his basic 48. In bar 67, the last bar of the development section, and the last bar before letter E, we find two vertical lines on the last beat, marked in blue and red, combined with a hairpin in blue. Mengelberg does move forward slightly and backward considerably in this bar, in line with the hairpin.

All this can be heard by clicking on the link to the recording from letter B-E:

m.3. [Mengelberg Brahms 2.2 letter B-E](#)

### **Markings in the score from letter E-end in relation to the recording**

At letter E we find the marking '*a tempo poco a poco W*' in red, combined with *R fliessend* in grey pencil and a different indication '*tempo*' in blue. In addition to this, we see a number of small hairpin markings. In bar 73, the sixth bar in E, we find the next tempo indication in the form of a blue letter R and a sequence of vertical grey lines. In the next bar, bar 74, we see a big blue 4, and in smaller writing '*in 4 dir*'. Just above the first violin line in this bar, we find grey vertical line, crossed out by, or combined with a blue horizontal line.

What happens in the recording in this section is different from the marking. Mengelberg does not in fact, gradually move forward as his marking at letter E suggests.

His basic tempo of about 52 for this section is established in the first bar of E, in the accompanying voices, with the first violins playing rubato in the hairpins, floating above it. In bar 71 all voices move with the hairpin within the tempo similar to what we have seen in the exposition in the parallel bar 4. Only in bar 73, where Mengelberg marked R for calm, can we detect a new tempo, that is in fact faster than the previous tempo, namely 56. I find it somewhat puzzling that Mengelberg writes that bar 74 should be conducted in 4, because it could by implication mean that the previous bar (bar 73 with the 8 vertical grey lines above the first violin part) should not be conducted in 4, but in 8. This seems unnatural to me, as this kind of 2 against 3 beating to my taste rather goes against the marking of cantabile which we can also find in this same bar. There is no way we can say with any degree of certainty how Mengelberg beat this passage, but listening to the result in the recording we can say that his markings concerning the '*poco a poco a tempo W*' of letter E and his marking of '*R(uhig)*' at bar 73 do not concur with the results in the recording. In bar 76 we find two grey vertical lines and a horizontal blue one, combined with the word '*appassionato*' in blue. In the next bar we find '*passionato*' marked again in blue. Looking at the development of the tempo in this entire section from letter E to bar 80 in the recording, we can conclude that there are three tempo zones; from E to 73 is about 52; from 73-77 is about 56; from 77-80 is

about 66, with a *rallentando* over the last two bars down to about 56. Within that larger development, we can see that bar 76 is played with a less extreme version of what I called emphatic declamation in bar 9, the parallel bar in the exposition. Here the *appassionato* results in *rubato* with top notes lengthened, and in the next bar the instruction *passionate* results in a faster tempo. The substantial slowing down in bars 79 and 80 is not marked in the score other than with a *diminuendo* sign in grey. In bar 80 we find a vertical red line before the fourth beat. Mengelberg creates a gap before continuing in a tempo of about 56, effectively adding a full beat to that bar. This mirrors the fermata-like wait on the downbeat of bar 18 in the parallel passage in the exposition. The next indication is the letter W, in bar 84, and a marking of 4/4 in blue, in bar 87, fifth bar before letter F. I am not sure what to make of this, as this time signature is not new here, but has been in place since letter D, some 30 bars before this moment. He also adds a tempo in grey, and some vertical lines above the sextuplets in the first violin line. What we can say with certainty is that Mengelberg does drive the tempo up through his W, in bar 84 and reaches a tempo of 64 in bar 87. In bar 89 he takes the tempo up a step to around 68, before slowing down in the last two chords of bar 91, the last bar before F. These modifications are not marked in the score.

The markings in the closing group are complex. In bar 92 (letter F) we see R and hairpins in blue. Above the first violin line we see some grey vertical lines that are quite unclear, but could relate to 8<sup>th</sup> notes. In the margin above the print, we see a remark in blue after a 4 in grey: '*die 8tel Rühig singen sehr cantando*' (the eighth notes calmly singing, very much *cantando*). In bar 93 we see an R followed by a long blue line, followed by some stresses in horizontal lines above notes in the violin line in blue and grey. In bar 95, from the last beat (*breit/* broad) followed by another blue line, accompanied by R followed by a short wavy line in grey, and in bar 96 horizontal double blue lines and vertical red ones. In the recording all this results in a start of 54 for the beat in bar 92, with moving forward and backward with the hairpin followed by a very dramatic and substantial slowing down until at the end of bar 96 the eighth notes have a value of about 68. The glissando in bar 94 in the first violins echoes the earlier ones we heard in bar 30 and 46 and again seems connected to the slowing down. In the last notes of bar 96, the fifth bar of F, there is a marking that suggests that the rests should be ignored by the strings, and the notes should be held to, and even across, the bar line. Both the legato slur like arches and the word in the margin pointing to the second violin part *durch/bei/fest-halten*, in grey, suggest this and indeed the notes are held a long time in the recording. In bar 97 we find a big grey 8, repeated somewhat smaller two bars later. A big blue hairpin points to the downbeat of bar 101 and the last beat of bar 102 gets two blue and grey vertical lines, and the penultimate bar gets two in red and grey. Whatever pattern Mengelberg beat here, the result in the recording is a gradual slowing down until the end, where the tempo is below 36.

All this can be heard by clicking on the link to the recording from letter E-end:

m.4 [Mengelberg Brahms 2.2 letter E-end](#)

## Conclusions

### Tempo markings

I have measured the actual tempi in the recording using a metronome app, allowing me to tap a tempo and then check it against the events in the recording. I have not used any advanced software to analyze the tempi, but I have taken my own measurements and double checked them numerous times.

First, it is clear that Mengelberg's instructions and markings in the score do not always correspond with the result in the recording. Some of the things he writes, particularly the metronome markings, are very different from what we hear in the recording. The metronome markings in the other movements of the symphony also sometimes differ from what happens in the recording, but at other times they do correspond. In the first movement Mengelberg has marked both 126 for the quarter note and also 116. The recording is close to 116. In the third movement the marking is 92-96 for the quarter note, the recording begins at 92 and sometimes moves forward a bit towards 96. In the finale the marking is 104-108 in grey and 100 in red. In the recording the basic tempo is around 96. The conclusion may be that in general the markings are somewhat faster than the recording. In the Adagio we find a much more substantial difference between the marking and the recording than in the other movements. In the two middle movements, Mengelberg marked the moments in the score when 1,2, 3 etc. minutes should have elapsed. These markings are off by a substantial margin. As Mengelberg biographer Frits Zwart suggested to me, one possible explanation is that these might be intended for estimating (optimistically) if and how the recording could be made to fit the gramophone format, with its limited duration per side of a disc.

Secondly, quite some things happen in the recording that are not marked in the score, as I have detailed above. A good example is the tempo at bar 87, the fifth bar before letter F, and following. Mengelberg marks 'a tempo' but his tempo is the fastest in the entire movement, moving from 64 to 68 two bars later. Nothing in the score suggests that a new tempo should be established at this point. It's perhaps important to remind ourselves that the score does not only serve for documentation of artistic and practical goals and ambitions, but also as an aide-mémoire for a conductor in performance. It is entirely possible that the things that are happening in the recording, but can't be found in the score, are examples of things Mengelberg didn't need to remind himself of.

On the other hand, some of the discrepancies may also be the result of on the spot artistic decisions Mengelberg took as the performance was taking shape. Also, it is possible that Mengelberg was well aware of the fact that his metronome markings didn't, or did no longer, correspond accurately to the actual tempo in performance, but didn't feel the need to write the new markings in.

### Tempo modifications

The recordings gives ample proof of the fact that the hairpins, often printed in the score and often added by Mengelberg, were meant to have consequences for timing, not merely dynamics. In the majority of cases the rubato is established by moving the tempo forward in the crescendo part of the hairpin and backward in the diminuendo part, without changing the basic tempo. This goes both for the short hairpins on individual notes and for the long ones related to phrases or bars. It is also clear that varying the pattern of beating into larger

or smaller units of quarter note, dotted quarter note or 8<sup>th</sup> note, serves as a tool to show tempo modifications; smaller units are suggested to slow down or show a slow tempo. Finally, the use of the letter W for *weiter* and R for *ruhig*, corresponds to the speeding up and slowing down over periods of a bar or more. The letter R can also indicate a tempo or character of a bar or a passage.

#### Mengelberg and the Blume/Steinbach tradition

Mengelberg is often portrayed as a willful conductor, with a dubious claim to a direct line of succession to Beethoven. In his book *Conducting the Brahms Symphonies*, Christopher Dymont writes:

There is no evidence that this approach (Mengelberg's) approximates that of any other among those of the most eminent Brahms conductors to whom the composer gave his approval, Steinbach in particular, and much that, as the foregoing pages of this chapter aimed to analyse, suggest otherwise.<sup>3</sup>

I have no quarrel with Dymont, who makes his case eloquently and persuasively. However, in analyzing Mengelberg's recording of the Adagio from the Second Brahms symphony, I was struck by a few instances of concurrence between what Blume describes as Steinbach's tradition in his *Brahms in der Meininger Tradition*<sup>4</sup>, and Mengelberg's performance. Blume claims that bar 30 should be played with a particular tempo modification as described in the example below (Example 1). This entails moving forward in the first half of the bar and backward in the second half, with particular attention for the length of the top a, which he gives a tenuto sign. Mengelberg creates just such an effect. To be very precise; there is little moving forward and much slowing down, starting in the second half of the bar and not on the last beat, as Blume seems to indicate in his example, but I think it is fair to say that Mengelberg's handling of these bars is concurrent with Blume's suggestions, including a tenuto top a and no slowing down in bar 32. Mengelberg of course does present a very deliberate glissando on the last beat of bar 30, which Blume does not mention.

#### m.5 [Mengelberg Brahms 2.2 bar 28-33](#)

The second instance of concurrence I want to address can be found in the same example (Example 1). It is the suggestion to take the echo effects of bar 36 in the winds, and bar 40 in the strings, out of the flow of the tempo.

In Mengelberg's recording we find that in the winds there is a hint of such free timing, but in the strings there is a lot of it, in full concurrence with Blume, as are the added hairpins in bar 37 and 38:

#### m.6 [Mengelberg Brahms 2.2 bar 35-41](#)

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<sup>3</sup> Christopher Dymont, *Conducting Brahms, from Brahms to Boult*, the Boydell Press, Woodbridge 2016, p.119

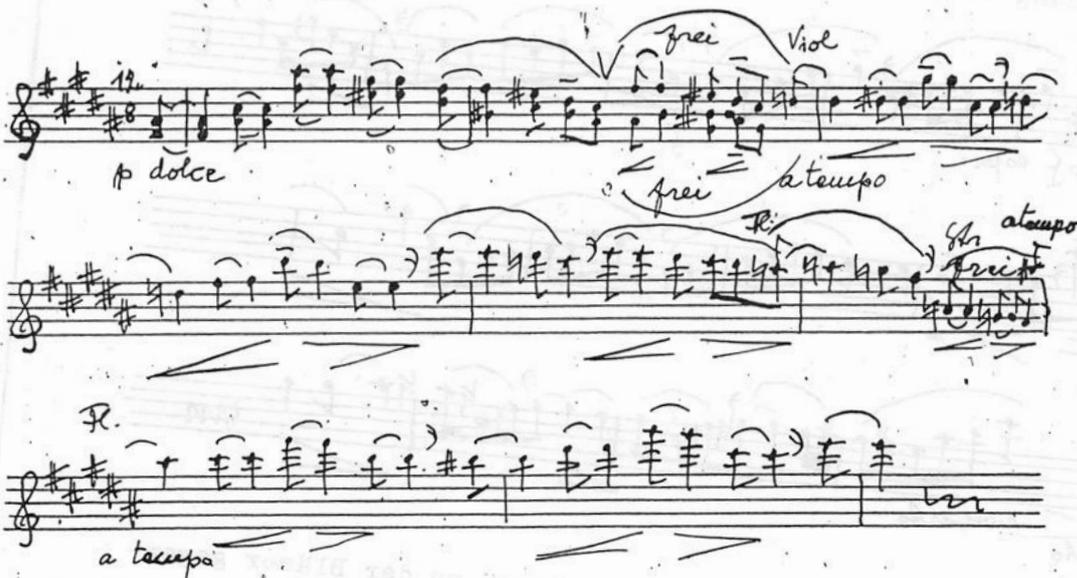
<sup>4</sup> Walter Blume, *Brahms in der Meininger Tradition, Seine Sinfonien und Haydn-Variationen in der Bezeichnung von Fritz Steinbach*, als Manuscript gedruckt, Surkamp, Stuttgart 1933

### Example 1

S.52. Ton-Wiederholungen dieser Art verlangen eine kleine Beschleunigung, welche durch das Zurückhalten im letzten Viertel wieder wett gemacht wird. NB! Ohne Ritardando in den 12/8 Takt hinübergehen.

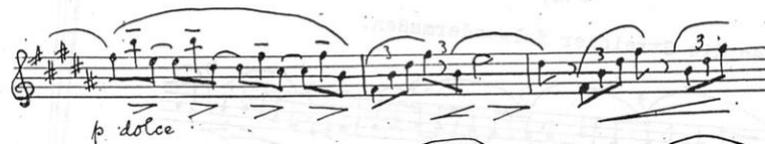


In der nächsten Episode begegnen wir im 4. und 8. Takt echoartigen Nachahmungen. Diese hebe man aus dem Fluße des Tempos durch freie Gestaltung heraus. Im Uebrigen phrasiere man, wie Beispiel zeigt.

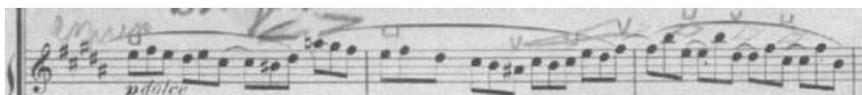


There are other instances, where Mengelberg does the exact opposite of what Blume suggests, for example in the phrasing of the first violin line in bar 70, where Blume suggests bringing out the top b's and f# (Example 2):

### Example 2



and Mengelberg opts for the descending line; f#-e-d-c#-b:



Mengelberg brings out his preferred phrasing with a bowing, written into the score to emphasize the descending line, as can be heard in his recording:

m.7 [Mengelberg Brahms 2.2 bar 69-71](#)

As I have said before I am not trying to judge Mengelberg's, or Blume's artistic choices, but – on a personal note – I would like to point out that Mengelberg's choice does make sense to me, given the fact he emphasizes the dissonances (semitone clashes) of the descending line against the line e-d#-c#-b in the horn and trombone, in bar 70, whereas emphasizing the b's and f#'s, as Blume would have us do, undermines the working of those clashes. I am not trying to depict Mengelberg as a conductor who can be seen in any way as a follower of Steinbach's Meininger tradition, but I do find it interesting that even just a few of his choices do concur with Blume's description of Steinbach style. As I have shown above, Mengelberg's tempo is in line with that of most of the available oldest recordings of the symphony. None of the oldest recordings of the Adagio have a tempo that would allow the players to play Brahms's legato slurs in the opening bars of the movement. In my opinion this means that none of them honour Brahms' Adagio *non troppo* tempo indication. Brahms rarely writes bowing slurs that are impracticable for the strings. A tempo at which these slurs are not practicable is without any doubt distinctly slower than he would have expected. This does fit reports that Brahms felt that his slow movements often were performed too slowly and his faster movement too fast. In Blume's remarks concerning the opening of the slow movement, we see the unchanged original legato slurs, as can be seen in the example below (Example 3). In other instances Blume did suggest changes to the original legato slurs. Clearly it is not a black and white matter. My conclusion, looking at the recorded evidence, is that a tradition in which the instruction 'Adagio non troppo' was understood as a suggestion to choose a tempo that would allow for the original slurs to be played, had disappeared in the 1930's and 40s. I see this as a possible example of what people like Blume and Barth meant when they wrote that the way of performing Brahms had changed profoundly since his death.

### Example 3

II. S a t z .  
Adagio non troppo

Der Aufbau dieses Satzes ist, wie bei allen Mittelsätzen Brahms'scher Sinfonien, sehr klar, daß darüber nichts Besonderes zu sagen ist. Das Thema der Celli ist laut folgender Bezeichnung vorzutragen:



The image shows a handwritten musical score for the Cello part of the second movement of Brahms's Second Symphony. It consists of three staves of music. The first staff is marked 'poco f' and 'p'. The second staff is marked 'p'. The third staff is marked 'molto rinforzato'. The music is in a major key with a 4/4 time signature and features a melodic line with various dynamics and articulations.

The results of my investigation of the modifications of the tempo in this movement, tell me that there is a clear link between the kinds of tempo modifications used in historic recordings and the structure of the music. I am not going to advocate a structuralist approach, in the sense that I would choose tempo modification to serve or to emphasize the structure of each movement, but I do think that I have found evidence that effective modification is related to structure.

In the first movement tempo modification appears often related to four or eight bar structures. Modifying the tempo in a four-bar counter phrase in proportion to a four-bar phrase, as most historic recordings show in the opening of the first movement of the Second Symphony, helps create an impression of dialogue. Keeping one strict tempo in phrase and counter-phrase, creates an effect of monologue with '*Klangfarbenmelodik*' (one voice speaking with different timbres).

In the second movement the structure of the music is different. The music unfolds as a kind of organically growing melodic development. Or as Walter Frisch in his book on the four symphonies writes:

When listening to this movement one has little sense of a predetermined larger form but rather of the form growing moment by moment, section by section out of the thematic material.<sup>5</sup>

<sup>5</sup> Walter Frisch, *Brahms, the four symphonies*, Yale University Press 2003 p.74



By studying this recording and Mengelberg's score closely and by comparing it to other recordings and sources such as Blume's text, I am trying to get a glimpse of a tradition that by 1940, had long disappeared, but nevertheless seems to have left traces behind, even in the work of a conductor who is generally regarded as so idiosyncratic as Mengelberg.

With this type of study, I am not trying to collect a series of good and effective ideas to copy into my own performance, but I am trying to see which performance issues were addressed in the early recordings. Even if the various solutions I can find in the recordings are contrary to each other or to a strict reading of the score, they are relevant to me, as they offer a glimpse of a possible foundation for my own more outspokenly shaped performance, moving away from the modernist tradition of evenness. I don't intend to claim that any choice is better than no choice at all, when it comes to emphasis and tempo modification, but I do think that every alternative for an inflexible, smooth and even way of performing Brahms is worth investigating. For the investigation with my fellow musicians in the project orchestra in September 2020 I will propose two of my findings in this article: I will look for tempo modifications in relation to the structure of the music and I will look for quasi word-tone relationships to shape the melodies and other phrases explicitly and unevenly.

Johannes Leertouwer, July 2020