

## Re-inventing rhythmic dislocation in orchestral performance

### Rhythmic dislocation

One of the most fascinating phenomena in 19<sup>th</sup> century performance practice, with a long history at least into the 18<sup>th</sup> century, is the rhythmic dislocation of melody from accompaniment. In the chapter on Tempo Rubato in his book *Early Recordings and Musical Style*, Robert Philip writes about this practice in early 20<sup>th</sup> century piano playing:

The rhythmic dislocation of melody from accompaniment is one of the most obvious features of much early twentieth-century piano playing. Like the early twentieth-century tendency to accelerate, this practice has been firmly discouraged in the late twentieth-century, and failure to play the left and the right hands together is now generally regarded as carelessness.<sup>1</sup>

Later on, in his chapter titled *Implications for the nineteenth century*, Philip writes that in his opinion the practice of melodic rubato is something that is not just for pianists, but “must surely have originated in music in which solo and accompaniment are performed by different musicians.”<sup>2</sup> Indeed there are historical examples of discussions of this phenomenon. In his *Versuch über die wahre Art das Klavier zu spielen*, of 1759, Carl Philip Emanuel Bach writes:

Although, in order not to become unclear, one has to keep the appropriate lengths of all silences and notes within the confinement of a chosen tempo, with the exception of fermatas and Cadenzas, one can often commit the most beautiful errors against it diligently, but with the clear distinction that, if one plays alone or with few accomplished players, this can be done in such a way that the whole of the flow of movement is somewhat violated; instead of getting lost, the accompanists will be all the more alert and able to join in our intentions; but if one plays with a larger accompanying ensemble, especially if it consists of unequally qualified persons, one can realize only in one's own part some alterations of rhythm, as the general flow of tempo should remain unchanged.<sup>3</sup>

It seems to me that in this text, the dislocation of melody from accompaniment is described, not purely as an artistic ideal with a particular expressive benefit, but as a result of limited

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<sup>1</sup> Robert Philip, *Early Recordings and Musical Style, Changing Tastes in Instrumental Performance 1900-1950*, Cambridge University Press 1992, p.47

<sup>2</sup> Ibidem p. 221

<sup>3</sup> C.P.E. Bach, *Versuch über die wahre Art das Klavier zu spielen*, C.P.Kahnt 1965, Kritisch revidierter Neudruck des unveränderten, jedoch verbesserten zweiten Auflage des Originals, Berlin 1759 und 1762 vol. 1, chapter 3, §8, p.84. (my English translation of the original German, quoted hereafter) *Wiewohl man, um nicht undeutlich zu werden, alle Pausen sowohl als Noten nach der Stränge der erwehnten Bewegung halten muß, ausgenommen in Fermaten und Cadenzen: so kann man doch öfters die schönsten Fehler wider den Tackt mit Fleiß begehen, doch mit diesem Unterschied, daß, wenn man alleine oder mit wenigen und zwar verständigen Personen spielt, solches dergestalt geschehen kann, daß man der ganzen Bewegung zuweilen einige Gewalt anthut; die Begleitenden werden darüber, anstatt sich irren zu lassen, vielmehr aufmercksam werden, und in unsere Absichten einschlagen; daß aber, wenn man mit starcker Begleitung, und zwar wenn selbige aus vermischten Personen von ungleicher Stärcke besteht, man bloß in seiner Stimme allein wider die Eintheilung des Tackts eine Aenderung vornehmen kann, indem die Hauptbewegung desselben genau gehalten werden muß.*

ability of an accompanying ensemble, due to size or quality of the musicians involved. Nonetheless it is described as a legitimate practice; the soloist shaping his alternations of rhythm independently of the accompaniment.

In his *Violinschule* of 1832, Louis Spohr writes about the responsibilities of the orchestral musicians when it comes to proper accompaniment of a soloist:

The accompanist should take care not to push the soloist forward in tempo, nor to slow him down, but to follow him whenever he should allow himself to deviate somewhat from the basic tempo. This does not apply when the soloist plays *Tempo Rubato*, then the accompaniment should maintain its calm and steady flow.<sup>4</sup>

One could argue that in comparison to C.P.E. Bach, Spohr describes a more deliberate form of dislocation, as he specifically calls for the orchestral musicians not to follow the soloist in his *Tempo Rubato*.

One of the most interesting quotations in Philip's book is about a duo of violin and piano. In a letter Philip quotes, pianist Émile Jacques-Dalcroze, Ysaÿe's accompanist, makes it clear that Ysaÿe's rubato was shaped independently of the accompaniment. Dalcroze describes a rehearsal with Ysaÿe of Beethoven's Kreutzer Sonata:

In *rubato* passages, he instructed me not to follow him meticulously in the accelerandos and ritenutos, if my part consisted of no more than a simple accompaniment. 'It is I alone' he would say, 'who can let myself follow the emotion suggested by the melody; you accompany me in strict time, because an accompaniment should always be in time. You represent order and your duty is to counter-balance my fantasy. Do not worry, we shall always find each other, because when I accelerate for a few notes, I afterwards re-establish the equilibrium by slowing down the following notes, or by pausing for a moment on one of them' . . . In the train he would try to make up violin passages based on the dynamic accents and cadences of the wheels, and try to execute 'rubato' passages, returning to the first beat each time we passed in front of a telegraph pole.<sup>5</sup>

One can only hope that Ysaÿe would have been willing to allow his duo partner equal opportunities for melodic rubato when it was the pianist who played the tune and the violin the accompaniment. Leaving that aside, it is a clear distinction that Ysaÿe proposes here: the accompaniment needs to be 'always in time' and the melody player, 'lead by emotion suggested by the melody' should shape his line freely. Unfortunately, there is no recording available of Ysaÿe and Jacques-Dalcroze playing together. Listening to Ysaÿe's recording of the arrangement of Schubert's Ave Maria for violin and piano with pianist Camille Decreus, instead of dislocation, I hear perfect alignment of melody and accompaniment throughout many modifications:

#### [Ysaÿe and Decreus play Ave Maria by Schubert \(segment\)](#)

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<sup>4</sup> Louis Spohr, *Violinschule*, Musikverlag B.Katzbichler München-Slzburg 2000, reprint der Erstausgabe Wien T.Haslinger.p.249 (My English translation of the original German quoted hereafter) *Der Begleitende hüte sich, den Solospieler im Tempo weder zu treiben, noch zurückzuhalten, doch folge er ihm sogleich, wenn dieser sich kleine Abweichungen vom Zeitmaass erlauben sollte. Hierunter ist jedoch das Tempo Rubato des Solospieler nicht verstanden, bey welchem die Begleitung ihren ruhigen, abgemessenen Gang fortgehen muss.*

<sup>5</sup> Philip, p.p.43-44

In fact, I could find no example of the dislocation as described in the quotation in any of Ysaÿe's recordings. Regardless of how together melody and accompaniment are, one does get the sense that the shaping of the melody with many small modifications of rhythm is done unrestrained by concern over togetherness. There are many possible explanations for the lack of recorded evidence of rhythmic melodic dislocation in the recordings of Ysaÿe's playing that are still available today, but they are not the subject of this study and the absence of sounding evidence in this particular instance, should not stop us from looking for opportunities to apply it ourselves. In this regard, I find the last sentence in Philip's quotation of Jaques-Dalcroze particularly inspiring, because it offers an elegant and simple description of the relation between rhythmic freedom and checkpoints for vertical alignment. Discussions about independence of accompaniment in the left and melody in the right hand of pianists from Mozart to Chopin, in my opinion, can sometimes be a bit discouraging, as indeed the verbal descriptions of the rhythmic dislocation can be. Some of these discussions make me think of what Max Fiedler said about Brahms's rubato: "In his own works, he applied a rubato that "could not be written down".<sup>6</sup> This subject is perhaps best investigated by experimentation, not discussion.

### **A possible way forward**

Jaques-Dalcroze's description of Ysaÿe on a train encourages me to keep developing an idea about the connection between accompaniment and melody I have been experimenting with as a violinist in my string quartet playing Beethoven. Perhaps as a consequence of the fact that I am still substantially conditioned by my late 20<sup>th</sup>-century training and experience, I find it very difficult to abandon the ideal of perfect synchronization between melody and accompaniment. I keep aiming for a kind of rubato that is always understandable to my fellow musicians, and allows them to be with me at all times, as I in turn try to align any accompaniments I get to play, to their rubato phrases. Meaningful un-togetherness however (meaningful in the sense that it contributes in a way I can perceive to the expressive nature of a phrase or passage) has proved to be very elusive for me. What I can do, is reduce the number of checkpoints, in the story about Ysaÿe on the train represented by the telegraph poles. My old training dictates that at every beat in every bar, the vertical alignment of the voices should be perfect. What I have found is that one can create a greater sense of freedom by gradually reducing the number of checkpoints. In a 4/4 bar for example, we can go from checking at every beat, to every half bar, to every bar, to the first beat in the first and third bar of a four-bar group. Or we can try to only aim for vertical alignment when the goal note (the note we choose to play towards, for example in the centre of a hairpin over a phrase) is reached. Through this method of reducing the number of checkpoints, I have discovered a far greater degree of rhythmic freedom in shaping phrases and melodies than I previously believed would be desirable or even possible.

### **A historic example**

In the 1933 recording of Tchaikovsky's Swan Lake Ballet Suite, with the London Philharmonic Orchestra, there is some very adventurous melodic rubato played by the first oboe in his opening solo. I have marked the rubato in red in the score below, example 1. At first glance, the oboist seems free of any concern to be together with the orchestra. On closer inspection

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<sup>6</sup> Gaston Dejmek, *Max Fiedler Werden und Wirken*, Vulkan Verlag Essen, 1940, p.29

however, it would seem that he knows exactly what he is doing. I think he deliberately takes the risk of being somewhat un-together with the arpeggios in the harp and the tremolos in the strings, but he establishes contact with the pizzicato in the cellos and basses even if this does not always result in perfect synchronization. To the modern ear, the shortening of the last of the 4 legato 8<sup>th</sup> notes in bars 1, 5 and 6 may sound as a lack of control, resulting even in a kind of stumble, but it creates a wonderful effect. It reminds me of something Alexander Berrsche wrote about the clarinet solo in Brahms's First Symphony, discussed on page 8 and given in the example on page 9 below (second page of the example). In his *book Kritik und Betrachtung, Trösterin Musika*, Berrsche describes the effect of the way the clarinet solo in the second movement of the first symphony was played in performances conducted by Fritz Steinbach as "the scared fluttering of a bird."<sup>7</sup> My conclusion is that thinking in these kinds of terms about the effect of a particular way a melody is played, is not alien to nineteenth century listeners. If we think of the oboe melody here in the Tchaikovsky as representing a bird, it seems to me that it would be unchained and full of life. I wonder if this kind of feeling of freedom can effectively be created if all voices are in perfect vertical alignment. In fact, the whole concept of perfect vertical alignment of all voices at all times, so universally strived for today, can suddenly appear quite rigid and constraining, once we have taken in the effect of expressive un-togetherness, whether it be in this example or in the rolling of chords in Reinecke's piano playing on the Welte-Mignon rolls, or in playing slightly after the bass (cello) of the upper voices, in the early recordings of the Klingler Quartet. In the Tchaikovsky/Barbirolli example, the harp and string tremolos don't function as a bird cage because the oboe soloist takes his rhythmic liberties without concern for togetherness with them. Now let's look at the relation between melody and pizzicato. In bar 4, the oboist plays a subtle ritenuto, that could have resulted in a coordinated landing on the downbeat of the next bar, bar 5 in perfect alignment with the pizzicato. But the oboist plays a shortening of the last 8<sup>th</sup> note of bar 4, the result of which is, that he plays the downbeat of bar 5 just before the pizzicato players do. Needless to say, that this kind of un-togetherness would not survive the editing process of mainstream 20<sup>th</sup> century performance practice. I would describe the effect as one that enhances the sense of freedom and independence of the melody. In bar 8 the oboe again plays a ritenuto. This time he does not shorten the last 8<sup>th</sup> note of the bar and the result is perfect alignment with the pizzicato on the downbeat of bar 9. The effect of this to my ear is one of conclusion of the first section of the piece. In the next section the rubato of the oboe is as I would expect it to be; in correspondence with the hairpins, moving forward in the first part and backward in the second part of it. The pizzicato in the second half of bar 10 is un-together within the sections (cello and bass). Some players seem to react to the oboist moving forward more eagerly than others. In the second and third hairpin everybody is tuned in, and the accompaniment is in perfect alignment with the melody. The un-togetherness in bar 10 would certainly be edited out in modern studio recording practice, and I can understand why, because I can't find an expressive musical effect that it creates in terms of impact of the narrative of the music on the listener. It does create a momentary sense of imperfection. This in itself needn't have a negative effect on the experience of the listener. In trying to assess the impact of registering this kind of minor mishap on me personally, I found that it briefly changed my perspective as a listener. I became aware of a group of people performing, trying to get it right, but not always achieving perfection and also of people taking risks. Rather than focussing only on the

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<sup>7</sup> Alexander Berrsche, *Kritik und Betrachtung, Trösterin Musika*, Verlag Ellermann, Hamburg und München 1964, p.243 (my English translation of the original German) 'das verängstliche Flattern eines Vogels.'

narrative of the music, I became more aware of the performing musicians, an effect quite similar to the feeling of presence of the first oboe player, whose personality seems to manifest itself through his highly individual timing. This is the part of recording discussed here, with the annotated score below on the following pages:

[Barbirolli, Tchaikovsky Swan Lake Suite opening](#)

SUI TE, 3  
 TIRÉE DU BALLET  
 LE LAC DES CYGNES.  
 N<sup>o</sup> 1. Scène.  
 P. TSCHAIKOWSKY.

Moderato.

Flauto I.  
 Flauto II.  
 Oboi.  
 Clarinetti in A.  
 Fagotti.  
 I.  
 II.  
 Corni in F  
 III.  
 IV.  
 Trombe in F  
 2 Tromboni ten.  
 Trombone basso e Tuba.  
 Timpani B, Fis.  
 Arpa.  
 Violini I.  
 Violini II.  
 Viole.  
 Celli.  
 C-Bassi.

Moderato.

Propriété de l'éditeur 35803 P. Jurgenson à Leipzig et Moscou.

Ob.

Slowing down, but shortened last 8th note

Harp part rhythmically indistinct

Agian shortened last 8th notes

Melody and pizzicato unotogether

Ob.

Long notes a bit longer, Short notes a bit shorter

Slowing down, this time Downbeat together with pizzicato

From here on melodic rubato in line with hairpins

arco

pizz.

Ob.

( Moving forward in < and back ward in In good allignement with pizzicati

Ob.

cresc.

cresc.

cresc.

cresc.

cresc.

cresc.

Gradually broadening tempo in cresc.

Example 1

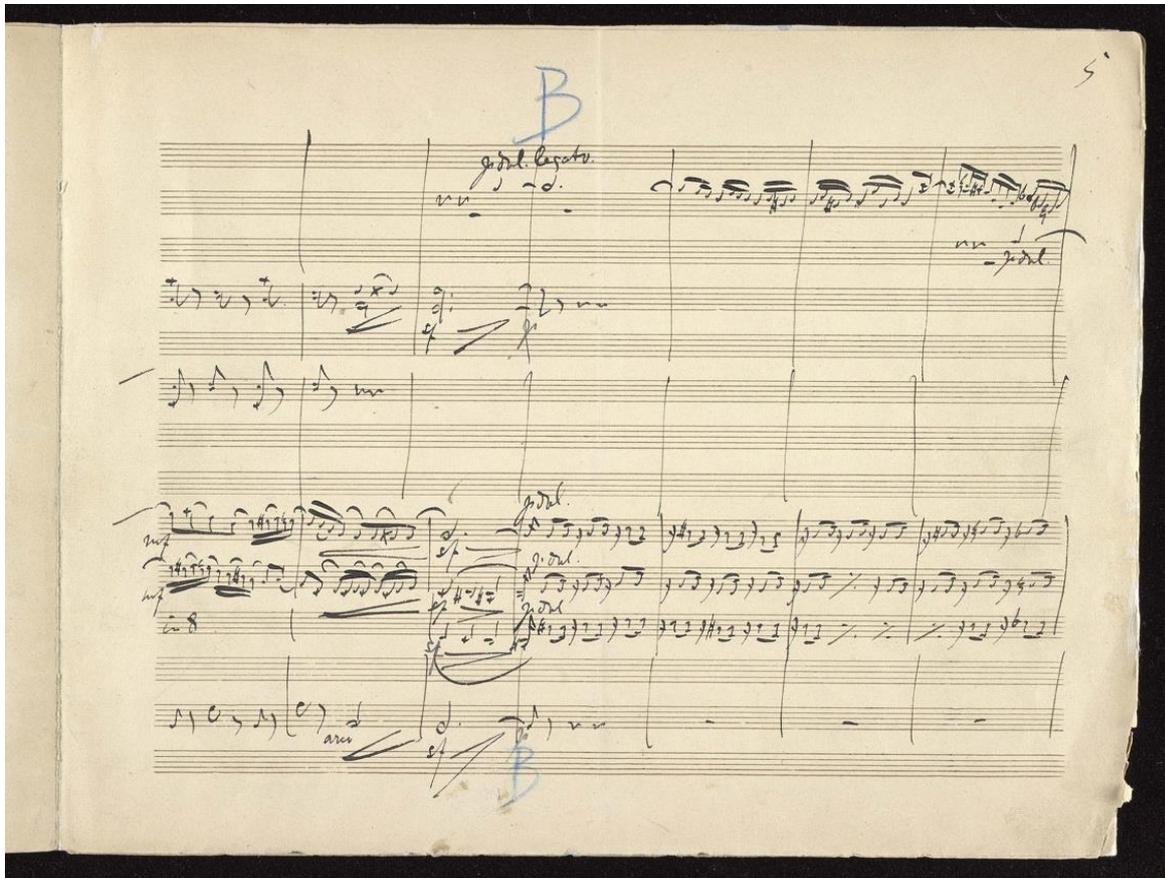
### Some results in my Brahms project of 2019

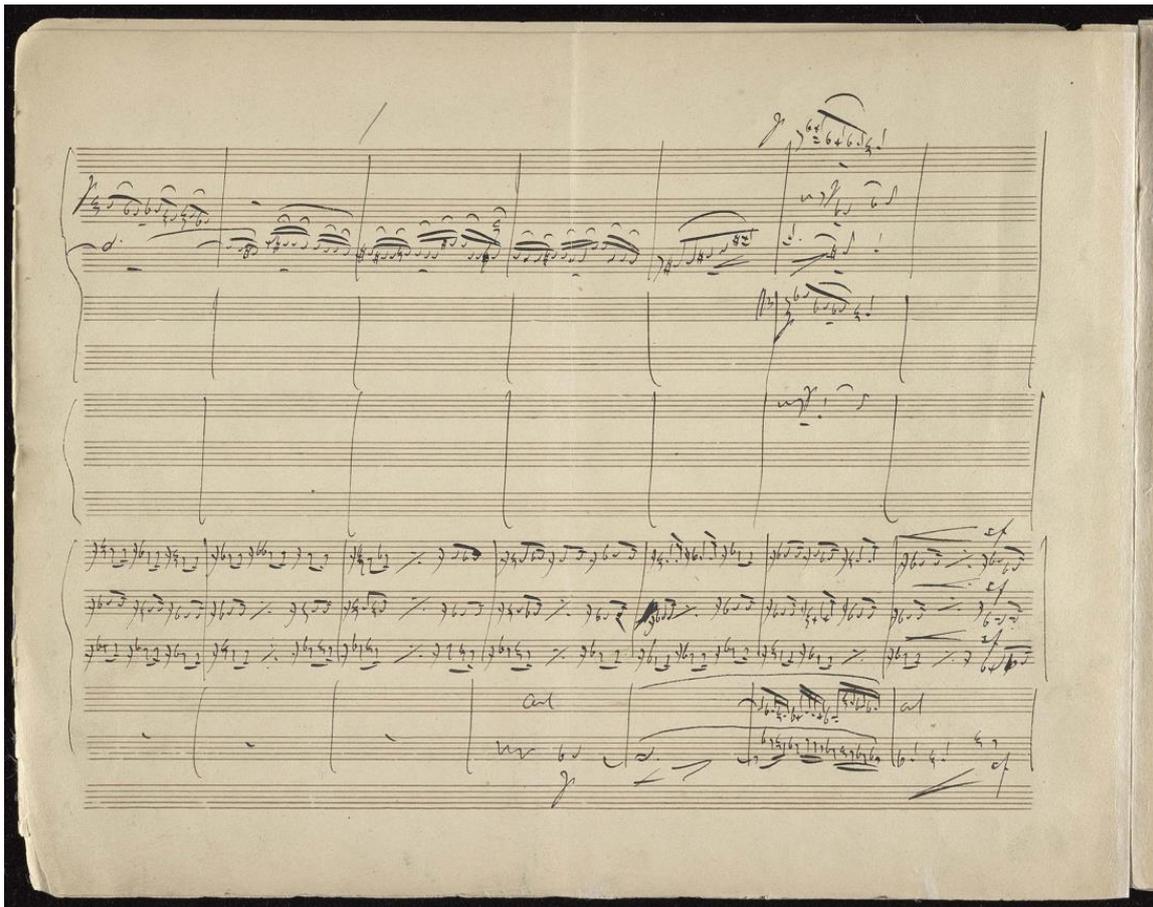
In the first two project weeks (2019 and 2020) with the Brahms Project Orchestra, I have tried to experiment with dislocation between melody and accompaniment, but the results are not what I had imagined. There are two examples in the First Symphony of places where in the future, I would love to take melodic dislocation one step further than I managed to do in 2019. These places are in the second movement; *Andante sostenuto*, between the string accompaniment of oboe and later clarinet and in the third movement; *Un poco Allegretto e grazioso*, between the first clarinet and the accompaniment in cello and horn.

This is what the first example sounds like in the recording of the first project week in September 2019:

#### [Project Orchestra Brahms 1.2 letter B](#)

Example 2 shows what it looks like in the manuscript. In future projects I would like to experiment with the woodwind soloists coming off their long notes late and making up for the lost time later on, in their sixteenths. I would encourage the strings to play a steady accompaniment without adjusting to what they hear from the winds. We could aim for vertical alignment only in the 5<sup>th</sup> bar of the solos (the first bar of the second page below) in example 2. In the clarinet solo, I would propose a more varied and 'bird like' phrasing of the paired sixteenths, again shaped without concern about togetherness with the strings.





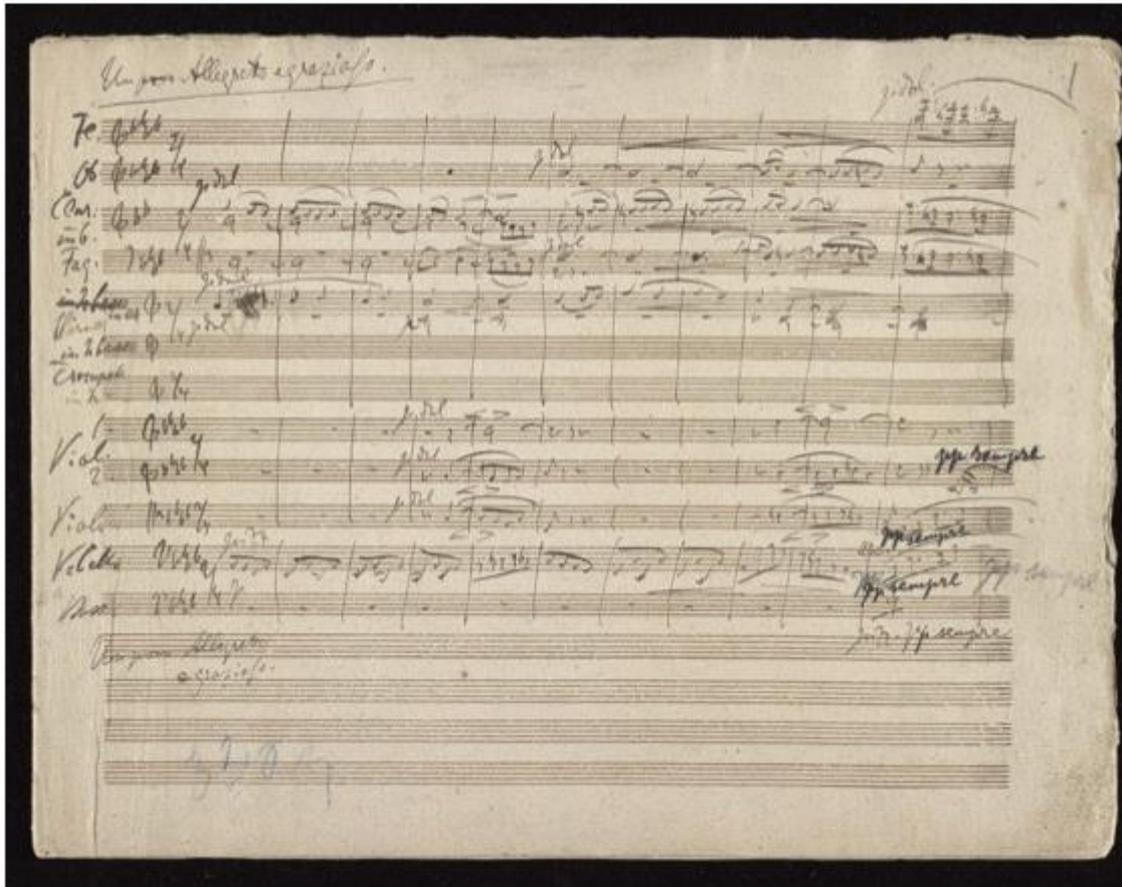
Example 2

In the Allegretto, I would like to create the possibility for the first clarinet to shape the contours of his line as carefree as possible. This is a clear example of an accompaniment in cellos (eight-note pizzicato) and horn quarter-note line, that in my experience would make any musician conditioned by late 20<sup>th</sup>-century training and experience, feel compelled to aim for vertical alignment on every beat of every (2/4) bar. I believe however, that the poetic nature of the music and the floating character of the music, emphasized by the five-bar structure, would also allow for a different approach, where only the first beat of bar one and bar five would be vertically aligned and perfectly together. In my recording I have tried to stimulate the first clarinet to play his first note extra-long, and make up for the lost time in the following bars unconcerned with playing equal 8<sup>th</sup> notes. Even as he did so, the accompaniment joined him, eventually keeping the alignment in place.

This is what it sounds like in the recording of the first project week in September 2019:

[Project Orchestra Brahms 1.3 beginning](#)

And this is the page in the manuscript, example 3:



Example 3

Because, in my opinion, meticulously organized un-togetherness is not the same thing as un-togetherness resulting from a melody player's desire to play expressively, and the accompanying musicians shaping their parts somewhat independently, I did not pursue this further in the project at the time. But I would welcome any opportunity to experiment with it further and learn more about it. Having said this, I am aware that it may very well be that the kind of coordination between melody and accompaniment, i.e., the ability of the orchestra to accommodate the rhythmic liberties of melody players seamlessly, is exactly what the Meiningen Orchestra, particularly under the direction of Fritz Steinbach, was so famous for.

### **Future opportunities**

In the project of 2019 in our work on the First Piano Concerto with soloist Paolo Giacometti, I have already experimented with a rehearsal technique in which perfect synchronization between orchestra and soloist were not automatically the first priority. I invited both Paolo and some solo melody players in the orchestra to avoid immediately trying to fix moments of un-togetherness by reverting to playing the rhythm as printed in the score as metrically precise as they could, but rather, to insist on their particular rhythmic freedom even if it would cause un-togetherness repeatedly. This eventually resulted in a feeling of much greater freedom for the players involved, but because in the end the orchestra turned out to be capable of aligning with most if not all of these rhythmic liberties, the result was not so



The question of course is how this relates to the ongoing pizzicato accompaniment. Within the third beats one can potentially be quite free, but on the downbeat of each next bar comes a pizzicato in bass and cello that will be quite distinct. Can we find a way to play the melody independently from this accompaniment? Will the pizzicato players after a few attempts accommodate any initiative from the clarinet player by slightly postponing their downbeats? And if we find a way to shape the melody freely here, will it be possible to do something similar in the second rendition of the melody, when it is played not by a single player, but by the first oboe and the viola section (bars 40 and following)?

These are questions that can only be answered in the laboratory of the orchestral rehearsal. Before the start of the project week, I will invite the participating musicians to look for and think about other opportunities to find rhythmic freedom in melodies. This can perhaps be done best by investigating the melodies in one's mind, not by staring at the print.

Internalising the melodies by singing them to oneself, without one's instrument at hand, unrestrained by rhythmic impulses from an accompaniment, in my opinion, is an ideal way to pull oneself away from the ever-compelling print on paper. Because rhythmic melodic dislocation is hard to come by in the domain of orchestral performance practice of classical music, I looked for some examples elsewhere. It is perhaps not surprising that in the genres of pop and jazz music, in which arguably the notated version of the music is generally considered to be less compelling than in the domain of classical music, there are many examples of dislocation. The most beautiful example I found is probably familiar to you in one way or another.

#### [Judy Garland sings Somewhere over the rainbow](#)

The way in which Garland lingers on some-where, before continuing with 'over the rainbow' is magical. If this is notated in 4/4, she is definitely late in relation to the downbeat of the second bar of the tune on the word 'over' (sung after the bass pizzicato on one). For me the effect of this rhythmic dislocation is not at all one of any disorder in her performance, but rather a feeling of space and freedom; indeed, a vast imaginary space beyond the rainbow. Through her use of melodic rhythmic dislocation, Garland makes me feel the meaning of the text. It is this kind of magic that I would love to hear in orchestral performances.

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