



# Performance Practice in the Romantic Era: *Evoking the Soul of the Composer*

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# Why Performance Practice?

- Music is the only time machine that exists today!



- The teaching of musical style is important!

# Why Performance Practice?

“Important as the elements of music are to understanding and enjoyment, music must also be grasped as an entity. In this sense, the structure of music is to be found in its totality. This total-the sum of the elements or parts-which we call music has many perspectives and meanings. The varied, countless, and fascinating ways in which the parts can be arranged and interrelated result in that complex yet fundamental musical phenomenon-style. Musical style is a basic principle in the structure of the discipline of music. Thus understanding musical style becomes a valid and significant objective in music education.”

– Maynard Anderson

# Why Performance Practice?

- News Flash: A conductor's role is not to conceive of the most "entertaining" performance of a given work. We are to divine, to the best of our ability and knowledge, the essence of the artistic vision of the composer.

“ . . . the singer or player must transmit this so exactly in his performance that he plays as if from the soul of the composer.”

- Johann Adam Peter Schulz, "Vortrag" in  
*Sulzer's Allgemeine Theorie der schiinen  
Kiinste of 1775/92*



## Characteristics of the Period:

### Extrinsic Societal Characteristics:

- French Revolution and Napoleon's rise (and fall) inspire artistic and patriotic fervor across Europe
- Public Performance on the Rise – rise of the Middle Class
- Lessening of Church's involvement in music/civic culture
- Bourgeoisie Salon culture=creation of works in miniature
  - Art Song
  - Character Pieces for Piano
  - Vocal Quartets and other Chamber Music (now sung in choral ensembles)
  - Piano Trios
  - String Quartets

# Characteristics of the Period:

## Extrinsic Societal Characteristics:

- Establishment of music publishing/copyright
- Emphasis on innovative genius and self-expression:
  - Composer as genius AND performer
  - Rise of the virtuoso solo performer
  - Rise of the conductor (leader/interpreter/visionary)
  - Heavy focus on originality ultimately lowers productivity (they don't "churn" out the symphonies anymore!)
- Foundation of the Community Orchestra and Chorus
- Increase in size of musical forces
- Hub of musical ingenuity moves from Austria to Germany

# Intrinsic Musical Characteristics:

- Program Music
- Extremes of tonal and rhythmic relationships
  - increasing harmonic and tonal complexity
  - greater rhythmic freedom
  - larger palette of orchestral colors
  - longer movements and compositions
  - *Threatened aural coherence and demanded much more from performers and conductors!*
- Ultimate Goal: creating a higher art form by synthesizing more than one form of artistic expression
  - Art Song (poetry, singing, keyboard)
  - Wagner's *Gesamtkunstwerk*
  - Program music

# Debate between the Conservatives and Progressives



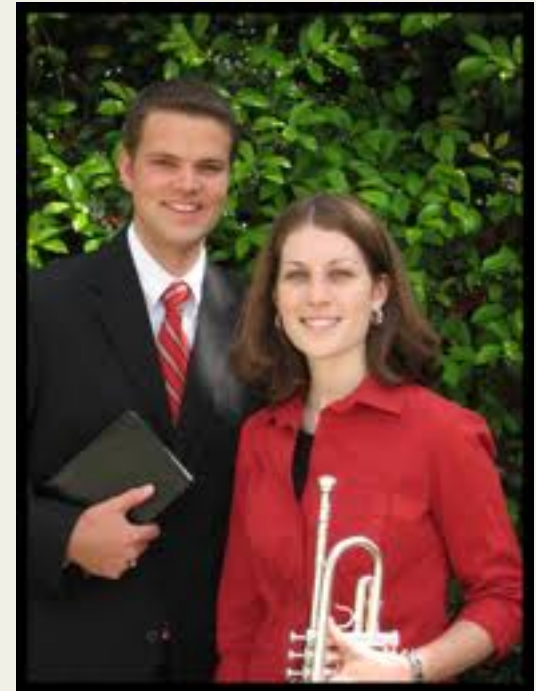
**VS.**





# Conservatives

- Cultivated the traditional genres of absolute music: Symphony, Sonata, String Quartet, Concerto, etc.
- Perfection/Intensification of Classical style/form
- Expansion of Harmonic Daring within the framework of said tonal architecture
- Extremes of emotion – intensification of *Sturm und Drang*
- Composers: Schubert, Schumann, Brahms, Mendelssohn



# Progressives



- **Program Music**
  - Symphonic Poem
  - Programmatic Symphony/Sonata
  - Reliance on program music also sought to hold the attention of audiences in extra-musical ways!
- **Motivic conception of organization (idée fixe & leitmotif)**
- **Extremes of harmonic expression**
- **Preoccupation with tone color (timbre) and harmonic color**
  - Expanded orchestra to include complete string, woodwind, and brass families
  - Modernization of Instruments allowed more exploration of range and colors possible within each section
- **Composers: Berlioz, Liszt, Wagner, Strauss**

# Nationalism in Music

- Smetana and Dvorak (Bohemian)
- Mussorgsky and Tchaikovsky (Russian)
- Grieg (Norwegian)
- Traditional genres- revealed German influence
- Nationalistic aspirations seen in operas, songs, and program music

# PERFORMANCE PRACTICE IN THE ROMANTIC ERA



**Concepts and Principles for which  
we are most sure:**



**Most 19<sup>th</sup> Century composers considered symphonic music, opera, and lieder better suited than choral music as the ideal expression of Romantic principles.**

# Composers left the conductor very little choice of instrumentation and selection of voices. The new question: How many voices to use in a given performance for proper balance?

- Baroque: Instrumentalists (older, softer instruments) outnumber the voices as much as 3:2 (24 to 16)
- Nineteenth Century (modernization of instruments): use ration of 3:2 or 2:1 (younger voices)
- Berlioz used 200 singers for his *Requiem* (the larger sections with four choirs of brass)
- Brahms/Schuman “choral lieder:” demand a small chorus, able to achieve subtlety of articulation/dynamic
- Majority of these small works were actually composed for mixed quartet
- Smaller singing societies that performed these works with 20-24 singers.

# Tone Quality

- Obsessed with tone quality.
- “Tone sustained with equal power is the basis for all expression” – Richard Wagner, 1869
- 19<sup>th</sup> Century = beginning of scientific approach to singing & trend away from *Bel Canto (natural) singing*
  - 1855- development of the laryngoscope by Garcia
  - New approach to registration:
    - Move to three registers (from 2)
      - Chest
      - Middle (Balance between the two)
      - Head

# Tone Quality

- **Domination of Opera led to an increase of solo-esque singing within the chorus**
  - Practical approach to increasing the volume/ presence of the chorus in relation to the much larger/louder orchestra
  - Led to exploration of pseudo-solo style of choral interpretation
    - Resonant Sound
    - Rubato
    - Cadenzas
    - Added Dynamics
  - **DANGER: do not confuse fully resonant tone with LOUD TONE**
  - Choral interpretation of the period necessitated analysis of proper tone with careful attention to each phrase. A variety of tone colors were used as were appropriate!





# Consult the Urtext!

- **Obsession with genius and individuality in performance resulted in numerous editions of 19<sup>th</sup> Century works.**
  - Editors strove to personalize the performance of each work according to the performer, not the composer.
  - Cluttered editions abound!
- **Consult the Urtext – just do it.**
  - Go to the library and compare your edition with the complete works. (Scholarly stamp of approval.)
  - Order the Urtext edition for yourself
  - Don't necessarily assume that Barenreiter is the way to go . . . consult the Grove and an expert
- **Educational Music Service!!!!**
  - That's it!





# **Ornamentation**

## **Robinson/Winold Handout**

# Tempo – the essence of the Romantic Era



“The essence of all that matters for a correct performance of a composition on the part of the conductor is that he should always give the correct tempo; for his choice of tempo immediately allows us to recognize whether he has understood the composition or not.”

–Richard Wagner (1869)

# The Metronome



- Developed in 1816 by Johannes Mälzel
- Provided an objective standard of tempo determination
- Beethoven: “We would do well to dispense with headings. The words which describe the character of the piece are a very different matter. These we could not give up; whereas the tempo is really no more than the body, these refer rather to the spirit of the piece. I have often thought of giving up these absurd terms allegro, andante, adagio, presto. Mälzel’s metronome gives us an excellent opportunity to do so. I give you my word, in my future compositions I shall not use them.”
- Beethoven quickly changed his tune – as the mechanical device was not compatible with his thoughts and emotions: “100 according to Mälzel, but this must be held applicable only to the first measures, for feeling also has its own tempo and this cannot entirely be expressed in this figure.”



# The Metronome

- **Brahms:** “As far as my experience goes, everybody who has given metronomic numbers has renounced them later. The numbers found in my compositions have been talked into me by friends, for I myself never believed that my blood and an instrument can agree so well.”
- **Wagner:** “The way the conductor sets and maintains the tempo is as eloquent as his grasp of the content of the composition. Performers are guided to a correct rendition of the tempo, which, at the same time, reveals the extent of the conductor’s knowledge of the composition. But the difficulty of finding the right tempo becomes manifest when we realize that only thorough and detailed acquaintance with the work will yield this vital knowledge.”
- **Debussy:** “You want my opinion about the metronomic indications: they are true for one measure.”

# Romantic Tempo Rubato:

- Czerny (1791-1857): “Every composition must be played in the tempo prescribed by the composer and adhered to by the executant, notwithstanding, however, that in almost every line there are certain notes and passages where a little ritardando or accelerando is necessary, to beautify the reading and to augment the interest.”
- Grove Dictionary: “In music everything is relative: no element enters in without modifying, however slightly, other elements. A note held for a certain length at one pitch does not affect us in the same way as when held at another, and this difference of affection is expressed by altering slightly the note. This alteration is a matter of nice judgment, and the act of *rubato* is a golden opportunity for the exercise of economy, without which it is apt to defeat its own end.”

# Romantic Tempo Rubato:

- In 19<sup>th</sup> Century, *tempo rubato* is allowed under the following circumstances:
  - At the return of the principal subject.
  - When a phrase is to be separated from the melody.
  - On long notes strongly accented.
  - At the transition to a different tempo.
  - After a pause.
  - On the diminuendo of a quick, lively passage.
  - Where the ornamental note cannot be played *a tempo giusto*.
  - In a well-marked crescendo serving to introduce or to terminate an important passage.
  - In passages where the composer or the performer gives free play to his fancy.
  - When the composer marks the passage *espressivo*.
  - At the end of a shake or cadence.

**Late Romantics consider *rubato* the heart of expressiveness in tempo. They recognize two kinds of rubato:**

- **Classical (melodic) rubato: only the melody is affected by the change of tempo while the accompaniment is played strictly in time.**
- **Expressive rubato: affects the entire fabric of the music – melody and accompaniment.**



# Difference according to time period:

- **Early 19<sup>th</sup> Century:** the performer took certain liberty, but always within well-defined limits.
  - The rubato was to be almost imperceptible.
  - Sections of rubato carefully determined and confined to “cantabile” (song-like) passages.
- **Mid-Century:** “Compensation Plan” – basic outline of tempo maintained with extra time given to certain notes and taken away from others.
- **1850s:** Wagner and Liszt go to the extreme
  - Liszt said that mechanical time-beating “clashed with the sense and expression” of music.
  - Wagner called performers who favored uniformity of tempo “eunuchs of classical chastity.”

# Wagnerian principles of tempo:

- Primary obligation is to understand the will and intention of the composer and respect the direct instructions.
- Discover the “true” tempo of the piece: “The true tempo induces correct phrasing and expression, and conversely, with a conductor, the idea of appropriate phrasing and expression will induce one conception of the true tempo.”
- Tempo modification is necessary for musical expression.
- Sections of sharply contrasting tempi be linked “unobtrusively.”
- Singing is regarded as the essential way of selecting the correct tempo.
- The true adagio tempo could not be taken too slowly.

## How does a conductor find the true tempo?

- Have a thorough and detailed knowledge of the complete work
- Have an understanding and feeling for the melody.

## Manipulation of the Internal Subdivision Creates Seamless Ebb and Flow of Tempo



# Expressive phrasing and dynamics

- Dynamics become more and more specific as the 19<sup>th</sup> Century progresses.
  - Beethoven follows Mozart's model, but adds *messa di voce* and careful dynamic transitions to his later works.
  - Brahms carefully crafts dynamic schemes for his works – as is to be expected



# Expressive phrasing and dynamics

- Extremes of dynamic color become fashionable by the end of the century.
- Phrases are expansive and exceed the natural rhythmic inclination of meter.
- Rhythmic accent is purposefully altered to generate musical surprise and expressive color.
- Phrases become increasingly longer and more complicated.
- The performer is expected to make all phrases sing with expression regardless of length or tessitura.



## Conclusion

- Knowledge of style comes with time, practice, and dedication to study.
- Proper performance practice can make historical music come alive!
- Great repertoire from the past deserves to be performed by all ages!
- Don't be afraid! Just do it . . . Make a mistake – that's how we learn.

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