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Edited by Michael Musgrave and Bernard D. Sherman

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CHAPTER I

*How different was Brahms's playing style
from our own?**Bernard D. Sherman*

Daniel Leech-Wilkinson divides medievalists into two categories: those who ‘recognize features of the medieval world in our own’ and those to whom that world is ‘fundamentally different’, marked by ‘otherness’.¹ Both orientations run through the humanities today, including musical performance, notably in the historical–performance movement. Some of its adherents propose historical styles that sound radically unfamiliar – plainchant with Byzantine ornamentation, or Bach with one singer per choral part – while others propose styles that sound more or less like those we’re used to.

The dialectic applies even to a composer as familiar as Brahms. Most musicians believe that his performance style was essentially like our own (when told about this book, one musician asked, ‘What’s next? The Glenn Gould String Quartet on period instruments?’). But a few hold that Brahms’s playing was ‘fundamentally different’. Did Brahms favour concert grand pianos and large orchestras and choruses – or did he prefer Viennese-style period pianos and small ensembles? Did he, like a modern player, favour continuous vibrato and relatively steady tempos, or did he prefer more restricted vibrato and freer, more volatile tempos? Did he prefer large orchestras and choruses, or did he like small ensembles? When he performed on Steinway and Bechstein pianos in his later years, were the instruments essentially like modern grands or did they differ in some meaningful way – and, in any case, does his music work as well on them as on the period-style Viennese pianos he had grown up with? All these positions and others find support from different authors in this volume.

We might have better hopes of resolving such questions with regard to Brahms than, say, Bach or Dufay, since we have a good deal more evidence about Brahms’s performance practices. Yet the disagreements will probably never disappear. Gaps in the evidence will keep us arguing, and the evidence we do have is less straightforward a matter than we

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might hope. Performance practice is hard to capture in words, and even sound recordings, which would seem unambiguous, can be interpreted in more than one way.

Moreover, the evidence sometimes contradicts itself. Florence May reports that when Brahms gave her piano lessons in 1871 he ‘particularly disliked chords to be spread unless marked so by the composer for the sake of a special effect’.² His preference sounds modern. But Moritz Rosenthal reports that when Brahms played in the 1890s, he rolled most of his chords.³ Brahms doesn’t seem to have fallen into this old-fashioned practice only as he aged, since he was criticized for the ‘unremitting spreading of chords in slower tempi’ in 1865.⁴

Perhaps the discrepancy was between what Brahms preached to Ms May and what he practised all along.⁵ Brahms’s pronouncements about performance may not reveal exactly how he performed. Even his notation may not. In the *Andante grazioso* of his Third Piano Trio, the score indicates that the *quasi animato* middle section should continue at the opening tempo; but Fanny Davies reports⁶ that in an actual performance Brahms increased the tempo by about twenty per cent. Similar discrepancies arise when considering Brahms’s remarks and letters, which are often more vague than his notation to begin with. Avins’s chapter discusses a rule, proposed to Brahms in a letter by his copyist Robert Keller, whereby lower-case annotations (like *tranquillo*) indicate only expression, while upper-case annotations (*Tranquillo*) indicate a marked change of tempo. Whatever Brahms’s policy may have been,⁷ Davies documents a clear instance of his violating the principle, by slowing markedly for a lower-case *sostenuto*.⁸ On the other hand, how a composer plays may not reflect how he would want his music to be played by others.

To resolve the controversy over pianos, the pianist Robert Levin has posited another discrepancy, one between Brahms’s performance preferences and his compositional practice.⁹ Brahms insisted on Steinways or Bechsteins in later performances of his concertos – but it does not necessarily follow that he optimized his later compositions for such instruments. Brahms continued to keep a straight-strung Viennese-action piano in his living quarters; Levin, based on his experience as a player, believes that Brahms’s style of writing in his late piano works presupposes the balances found in the older instrument.¹⁰

There are further reasons to consider the evidence judiciously. We can question, for example, how exact and fixed the performance details were in Brahms’s conception of a work. Brahms particularly praised the conductor Fritz Steinbach in the Fourth Symphony; but Robert Pascall

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and Philip Weller point out in their chapter that Steinbach's interpretation of the Fourth seems to have contradicted instructions Brahms gave to Joachim for interpreting this work.¹¹ Walter Frisch emphasizes that Brahms appreciated interpreters of widely varied sorts, including some generally regarded by the standards of the day as free and others thought of as strict. Was Brahms's taste 'other' in Leech-Wilkinson's sense, then, or 'like our own'? It may be that Brahms, like many composers, was concerned more with a performer's ability to convey musical content than with adherence to specific performance practices. He once praised a performance that ended his last 'Serious Song' *dim.* and *p* as the score indicates; yet he also praised a performance that ended it *fff*.¹²

Other evidence suggests a similar flexibility. Brahms's close collaborator Joseph Joachim championed a spare vibrato style, but Brahms enthused about the clarinet playing of Richard Mühlfeld, who played with pronounced vibrato – far more than was typical among clarinetists of his time or of ours.¹³ Both musicians, apparently, phrased with exceptional artistry; Brahms seems to have been less concerned with their vibratos than with their musicianship.

Musicianship, all the same, consists of a set of habits. Brahms's comments about performance may confuse us because they take for granted habits that have now disappeared. An example is the association of speeding up with getting louder, a practice much maligned by modernist interpreters like Gunther Schuller.¹⁴ This practice seems to have been more natural to musicians of Brahms's day. Consider the performance markings Brahms pencilled into the autograph score of the Second Piano Concerto.¹⁵ Those in the finale often indicate accelerations not marked in the published score, and they take place during crescendos that are marked. In another example, Tovey writes, 'From Joachim I learnt that at the first *forte* [in the D Minor Violin Sonata op. 108] Brahms made a decided *animato* [to Tovey, a faster tempo] which he might as well have marked in the score.'¹⁶ Tovey also writes of the slow movement of the Second Cello Sonata: 'The pizzicato of the 'cello here makes a splendid and novel bass to the full harmony of the pianoforte and is worked to a tremendous climax when the strain is brought back after the dark remote depths of the F minor middle episode. Hausmann, with Brahms's approval, made a great *accelerando* at this crescendo, thus providing a natural means of carrying the resonance of the pizzicato over the notes before they dry up.'¹⁷

Early recordings give many more examples of *accelerandos*. By examining them, Will Crutchfield has shown that musicians in Brahms's

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circle often accelerated during crescendo passages.¹⁸ Using recordings, Robert Philip has shown that ‘speeding up at points of high tension’ was much more frequent before the mid-twentieth century than it has since become.¹⁹

This habit sounds like a clear case of otherness, but we must take care not to overstate the differences. In the finale of the Second Concerto, speed-ups during the relevant crescendos have remained fairly common throughout the century, presumably without knowledge of the autograph markings (many of which are not usually adhered to). And slow-downs during lyrical passages in Romantic music remained part of standard practice throughout the twentieth century, Philip notes, even after acceleration had begun to seem too ‘uncontrolled’.

Besides, Brahms and his contemporaries did not apply such associations of speed and dynamics universally. Tovey reports:

In the quiet B Major passage [in the Scherzo of the op. 40 Horn Trio] where the violin and horn pull the theme out by holding every third note for an extra bar while the pianoforte interpolates pianissimo arpeggios, a custom has long arisen of taking a slower tempo. This I can testify, from the above experience [of performing the work with Joachim in 1902], to be a mistake. [...] This B Major episode is no ruminating profundity or concentrated development, but the lightest and most playful episode in the work.²⁰

In this case, Brahms, or at least Joachim, kept the tempo steady.

Tovey’s reasoning involves the projection of musical structure:

This way of ‘augmenting’ a theme (here [in op. 40] devised for the first time) became a characteristic of Brahms’s later style, [but] he had yet to come to the point when his action was so rapid and his texture so concentrated as to compel him to slacken his tempo. The time when marks like ‘più sostenuto’ are required for stormy and exciting developments is not reached until the G major Violin Sonata op. 78.

Yet structure can be projected in different ways. Modern players might be more inclined to take a broad tempo throughout the first movement of op. 78 than to take part of its development section significantly more slowly than the initial tempo, as Brahms clearly did.²¹

One area of change since Brahms’s day involves instruments. I have already mentioned period pianos; we could add that string players in Brahms’s day used pure gut for the upper strings, whereas they now use steel, and that horns, winds, and brass have also changed. But how musically significant are these changes? Did they have any relationship to changing habits of phrasing, tempo inflection, and articulation?

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Several writers have related the adoption of steel strings in the years after World War I to a contemporaneous change in bowing technique. String players in relevant nineteenth-century traditions seem to have bowed less forcefully than modern players.²² But the change to modern bowing styles may have led to the changes in instruments, rather than the other way around. Philip sees the rise of more forceful bowing as one of the factors contributing to the adoption of steel strings: 'string players were [...] developing more powerful bowing, and steel was better able to withstand it than gut'.²³

String players in Brahms's Germany and Austria also played more notes under one bowstroke than do modern players, who tend to change bows more frequently.²⁴ The relationship of today's more frequent bow changes to the rise of steel strings is not clear,²⁵ but the change in bowing habits has musical implications, which have been described recently in a personal report. Nikolaus Harnoncourt was trained in the older approach to bowing in mid-century Vienna (he 'had to practise it for at least half an hour a day'). He writes of 'this spinning out of notes, with the bow barely moving at all, and the rich tone that was inevitably produced when the same bowstroke was used for a whole minute at a time [...] With the old bowing techniques you can produce great melodic paragraphs that sound fantastic but that are also comparatively quiet'.²⁶

Harnoncourt's testimony suggests why historical performance advocates tend to deny that changes in instruments and playing techniques necessarily constitute progress. Of course, sometimes progress is undeniable: hardly anyone doubts that in bars 13 and 313 of the Symphony no. 2 first movement, the double-bass players should add the D \sharp that Brahms omitted from their parts; modern players can handle the note easily, unlike the bass players Brahms had in mind. But the question of progress is often knottier. Consider the change in violin fingering that emerged in the twentieth century. The violinist Joseph Szigeti, whose teachers had trained him in the older style, wrote in 1964 of 'the liberation which modern chromatic fingering has brought us', mentioning passages that previously had been 'practically impossible to negotiate neatly in the requisite tempo'.²⁷ It seems an obvious advance. But Clive Brown argues that something is lost with the newer fingerings. He says that by adopting nineteenth-century methods of fingering that often involve moving from one position to another with the same finger, and by using the same finger for consecutive chromatic notes, 'one can achieve a seamless legato, combined with a range of varied portamento effects,

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which is absolutely characteristic of what one hears in recordings of Joachim'. He asserts that 'one cannot get a real feeling for the sound and phrasing [of Brahms's contemporaries] without abandoning the modern style of fingering'.²⁸

Whatever one's views, such examples may at least suggest why some habits of playing that Brahms took for granted do appear somewhat 'other' today. If one agrees, an obvious question remains: what good is all this information to performers today?

One hope is that some of the discussions about performance practices will give insights into specific works. Stephen Kovacevich reports, 'When I was a kid, I played the [First Piano Concerto] under Sir Adrian Boult. He had a friend who had played it under Brahms's baton and although he didn't remember anything about the tempo, he did recall that Brahms beat the first, the third, the fourth and the sixth beats.'²⁹ Michael Musgrave suggests that Boult's friend may have been his teacher and associate, Charles Villiers Stanford,³⁰ who in 1914 wrote about this very topic, and discusses what the baton use reveals about the music. Brahms's 'conducting of the D Minor Concerto threw an entirely new light on the composition, especially as regards the rhythmical swing of the first movement. Written in the troublesome tempo of $\frac{6}{4}$, most conductors either take it too quickly by beating two in a bar or too slowly by beating six. [Kovacevich commented that 'two gives you almost no control over flexibility'.] Brahms beat it in an uneven four [...] which entirely did away with undue dragging or hurrying and kept the line of the movement insistent up to the last note.'³¹

Stanford's impression of insistent motion in this movement seems congruent with a report on how Brahms played it as a piano soloist. George Henschel, a singer and conductor friendly with Brahms, said: 'I especially noted his emphasizing each of those tremendous shakes in the first movement by placing a short rest between the last note of one and the first small note before the next. During those short stops he would lift his hands up high and let them come down on the keys with a force like that of a lion's paw. It was grand.'³²

The more such information we have, it might seem, the better. But as we learn more and more about historical performance, new issues arise. Philip has discussed a telling example:³³ the recordings by Sir Edward Elgar of his own orchestral works, played in a late-Romantic style quite different from modern orchestral practice. These recordings should allow performers the ultimate in re-creating a lost historical style. Yet few modern performers have tried to mimic them precisely. Almost

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all of them prefer to play Elgar according to modern performance habits. They have their reasons.

As we get to know the performance habits of a century ago, Philip points out, we may find them less desirable or even retrievable than we may imagine at first. Performance habits reflect performance context, and the contexts of music-making have changed more profoundly in the last century than we often realize. Philip explains, for example, how thoroughly the recording process has changed the way we play and hear music. Many performance practices of a century ago presuppose audiences and musicians who have never heard a record. For these people, any performance could be heard only once, as it was being sounded. Wrong notes and loose ensemble tended to vanish into the ether; what remained in the mind was the overall sweep of the experience. As the twentieth century unfolded, the studio and the experience of unlimited re-hearing made precision and accuracy seem vastly more important. (So did playback, which let musicians hear their own performances after they happened, as was never possible before.) Philip notes that it seemed normal in Brahms's day, for example, for different members of a string ensemble to each bow and use portamento individually in playing the same passage; but such practices may always seem unbearably sloppy to those whose main connection to music is through recordings. So will the many other examples of apparent inattention to details found in old recordings.

Other reasons come to mind. The historicist venture may conflict with the artistic inclinations of some performers precisely when scholarship is most informative. There is enough wiggle room in Baroque performance scholarship to allow performers a great deal of decision-making authority; some medieval repertoires allow limitless wiggle room. Thus, it is argued, performers feel exhilarated rather than restricted by their attempts to re-create historical styles in these repertoires. Perhaps trying to imitate Elgar's recordings is too restrictive to inspire the kinds of performances that we, or for that matter Elgar, would want to hear. Perhaps, also, the finest playing comes about when performers put their ingrained habits to the service of insights into the music. Focusing too much on surface mannerisms that conflict with life-long habits may stifle spontaneity.

On the other hand, exploring period performance practice can give new insights into music. Moreover, modern habit can lead to routine, and when it does, historical evidence can stimulate and inspire performers. Taking one's performance of familiar music towards the more distant of

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Leech-Wilkinson's poles can be invigorating, at least when the unfamiliar practices have been assimilated sufficiently to seem exotic no longer.

The latter possibilities help justify the present volume. We hope that readers will find many reasons for rethinking Brahms performance, and that these will help bring fresh appreciation to his music and its performance.

NOTES

- 1 Daniel Leech-Wilkinson, 'Translating medieval music', in *Perspektiven auf die Musik vor 1600: Beiträge vom Symposium Neustift/Novacella*, ed. Anna Maria Busse Berger, Annegrit Laubenthal, John Stinson, and Reinhard Strohm (Hildesheim, forthcoming).
- 2 Florence May, *The Life of Johannes Brahms* (London, 1905; 2nd edn c.1948), vol. 1, p. 18.
- 3 Allan Evans, 'A conversation with Charles Rosen', *Fanfare* 14/3 (January/February 1991), p. 97.
- 4 A quotation of the 'critic of the *Karlsruher Zeitung*, commenting on a performance Brahms gave of his First Piano Concerto on 3 November 1865'; see Robert Pascall, 'The editor's Brahms', in *The Cambridge Companion to Brahms*, ed. Michael Musgrave (Cambridge, 1999), p. 265.
- 5 Ms May says that he told her not to emulate his sloppy technique, but that is a different matter.
- 6 Discussed by George Bozarth in chapter 7.
- 7 His terse reply to Keller was 'Wegen *stringendo*, *tranquillo* etc. ist mir Alles recht wie Sie es vorschlagen' ('What you wrote is all right with me.').
- 8 There are numerous cases of Brahms following a lower-case *sostenuto* with 'a tempo'. In the finale of the First Piano Concerto, for example, Brahms writes *poco sostenuto* (all lower-case, in bar 310), and follows it with 'a tempo' in bar 311. The letter from Keller did not cause Brahms to change this usage in later works. In the last ten bars of op. 108, the same marking – *poco sostenuto* in lower case – appears in bar 328, followed by dotted lines stretching over bars 329 and 330; and in bar 331, it is cancelled by 'in tempo'. Also, in op. 115, in the first-movement development section, *quasi sostenuto* is followed by 'in tempo'. Here, even a tempo that is 'as if' *sostenuto* changes the tempo enough to require an instruction to return to the main tempo. As for markings other than *sostenuto*, it is perhaps of interest that Tovey (*The Main Stream of Music and Other Essays* (Oxford, 1949), p. 329) wrote that the lower-case *tranquillo* 'always with Brahms [...] meant a decidedly slower tempo'. Admittedly, this is not first-hand evidence, but it does come from a close associate of Joachim. See below, p. 229, for another discussion.
- 9 Personal communication, February 2000.
- 10 Robert S. Winter also argues that a late work (op. 118 no. 6) presupposes a Viennese piano. See his 'Orthodoxies, paradoxes, and contradictions:

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performance practices in nineteenth-century piano music', in *Nineteenth-century Piano Music*, ed. R. Larry Todd (New York, 1990), pp. 33–35.

- 11 This point is made in chapter 8 in a discussion of this evidence by Robert Pascall and Philip Weller.
- 12 In *The Well-Tempered Accompanist*, ed. Ashley Pettis (Philadelphia, 1949), Coenraad V. Bos recounts accompanying the 1896 première of Brahms's 'Four Serious Songs'. After the concert, says Bos, 'Brahms came to the artists' room and warmly thanked both [Anton] Sistermans and myself for our performance which, he said, perfectly realized his intentions.' But two weeks later Bos accompanied another singer, Raimund von Zur-Mühlen, in the same songs. Says Bos: 'During the rehearsal von Zur-Mühlen told me that he could not sing the final phrases . . . as Brahms had marked them: *diminuendo* and *piano* . . . So he instructed me: "When you approach the ending of the fourth song, not only make an intensification of tone at the reiteration of the words, but continue the crescendo after I have finished singing to the close of the piano postlude, ending *triple forte*." . . . Afterwards, von Zur-Mühlen said to Brahms, "Master, I hope you are not furious with me for ending your Biblical songs with a great climax." Brahms replied "You sang them magnificently. I did not notice anything wrong."'
- 13 C. Lawson, *Brahms: Clarinet Quintet* (Cambridge, 1998), p. 72.
- 14 Gunther Schuller, *The Compleat Conductor* (New York, 1997).
- 15 Pascall and Weller, chapter 8 below.
- 16 Donald Tovey, from 'Brahms's chamber music', in *Cobbett's Cyclopedic Survey of Chamber Music*, ed. W. W. Cobbett (London, 1929). Repr. in Tovey's *The Main Stream of Music and Other Essays*, p. 264.
- 17 *Ibid.*, p. 262.
- 18 Will Crutchfield, 'Brahms, by those who knew him', *Opus* 2/5 (August 1986), pp. 12–21, 60.
- 19 Robert Philip, *Early Recordings and Musical Styles* (Cambridge, 1992), p. 35.
- 20 Tovey, 'Brahms's chamber music', p. 250.
- 21 Jenő Hubay gave first performances of Brahms's violin sonatas with the composer. Joseph Szigeti, a pupil of Hubay's, writes that according to his teacher, '[Brahms] would insist that the *poco a poco più sostenuto* in the development section of the first movement of the G major sonata should be really *più sostenuto* until the recapitulation which is in the (faster) tempo primo.' See Szigeti, *A Violinist's Handbook* (London, 1964), p. 152.

One can hear this effect, by the way, in the 1931 recording of the sonata by Adolph Busch, whose main teacher, Bram Eldering, had played all three sonatas with Brahms. Szigeti's 1947 recording with Artur Schnabel has a milder relaxation of the tempo (it has been released recently on a CD, Arbiter 121).
- 22 Clive Brown notes evidence in the writings of Viotti and in the Beethoven sonata edition prepared by Ferdinand David. Personal communication, December 2000.

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- 23 Philip, *Early Recordings*, p. 97.
- 24 Aside from the treatises and editions cited in the previous notes, 'old orchestral parts belonging to the Vienna and Berlin Philharmonics indicate that many more bow-notes used to be played in one bow-stroke than is customary today'. Colin Lawson and Robin Stowell, *The Historical Performance of Music* (Cambridge, 1999), p. 143. A caveat: Clive Brown (personal communication) notes that these parts may have been shared by players who were expected to bow as they chose individually rather than collectively as modern string sections do. Thus, bowings in orchestral parts may not indicate exactly what was played.
- 25 Clive Brown (personal communication) notes that Joachim recommended more frequent bow changes in his edition of the Beethoven sonatas than did his teacher Ferdinand David, even though both used gut strings. See also an essay by Brown, 'Ferdinand David's editions of Beethoven', in *Performing Beethoven*, ed. Robin Stowell (Cambridge, 1994), pp. 117–49, esp. p. 149.
- 26 'Nikolaus Harnoncourt talks to Walter Dobner', booklet essay accompanying Harnoncourt's recording of the Brahms symphonies, Teldec 0630-13136-2 (1997), p. 19. Brown notes that a distinction may hold between solo and orchestral playing: 'Larger orchestras make very long, very quiet bows possible; what would sound impossibly weedy from a single violinist can be magical when played by twenty' (personal communication).
- 27 Szigeti, *A Violinist's Handbook*, p. 56.
- 28 Personal communication, October 2001.
- 29 Quoted in Rob Cowan, 'Aimez-vous Brahms?', *Gramophone* 75/890 (July 1997), p. 45.
- 30 Musgrave (personal communication). Boult was closely connected with Stanford, first as a student at the RCM, and later when he shared direction of Stanford's conducting class in Stanford's last years. See Sir Adrian Boult, *My Own Trumpet* (London, 1973), pp. 49 and 56.
- 31 Stanford, *Pages from an Unwritten Diary* (London, 1914), pp. 201–02.
- 32 George Henschel, *Personal Recollections of Johannes Brahms* (Boston, 1907), p. 18.
- 33 Philip, *Early Recordings*, pp. 228 and 235–40.