

# THE RIGHT TEMPO

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**T**HIRTY years ago it was considered almost a duty for an ambitious performer to find interesting points of his own in well-known classical works. It was a time when conductors indulged in all sorts of rubatos, sudden pianissimos or fortissimos, surprisingly accentuated inner parts, revisions of orchestration. The general opinion seems to have been that a composer as a rule was too lazy or too secluded from the world or simply too uninterested to care for such trifles, and that a conscientious performer had to supply all the nuances which he omitted through negligence or inexperience or because of the imperfection of instruments at his time. Today we are enjoying another fashion, that of orthodox accuracy. Oddly enough one can get as many new and surprising aspects of things—and sometimes as much nonsense—by dogmatic fidelity to the letter as by its opposite. Musical notation is nothing more than a scanty sketch of the music itself, a system of conventional signs, the meaning of which can be shockingly misinterpreted if the performer's intelligence is not guided by his instinct.

Among all the details of musical interpretation the tempo is of the first importance. With a wrong speed the best performance is more or less distorted. Unfortunately there is almost no limit to misunderstanding here. It is not generally realized that many misinterpretations are caused by a wrong perception of the meaning of tempo indications in the music of earlier times. It has not been observed that this meaning has undergone a change in the course of the last century and that our use of tempo indications is fundamentally different from that in Mozart's and Beethoven's time. The composer of today, using the approved and habitual expressions such as Allegro, Andante, Adagio, has a conception of speed determined by the beat, *i.e.* the unit of the bar, as counted by the player or beaten by the conductor. In writing Allegro, 4/4, for example, I intend to indicate a speed of moderately quick crotchets approximately 100-120. This conception of tempo is applicable to the music of the last three generations, but it is already unreliable with the music of Schumann, Mendelssohn and Chopin, and it is definitely wrong if we try to apply it to the music of Haydn, Mozart, Beethoven and Schubert. I have rarely met a musician who was aware of this fact; and so it can safely be assumed that there are world-renowned conductors who have never noticed it and who sometimes, with the noble conviction of doing accurately what the composer indicated, are thoroughly mistaken in their interpretation of that indication.

Let us take an old metronome with Maelzel's trade-mark, bearing beside the numbers an odd scale of tempo indications, which may have been made by the inventor himself 120 years ago. This scale, by the way, has been changed recently; but generally one is concerned only with the number and nobody bothers about the scale at all. Nevertheless it has a precious historical value, as will be shown at once. 'Adagio' on Maelzel's scale goes from 100 to 126—an astonishing figure. We should call such a speed 'Allegro.' But 'Allegro' on the scale extends from 160 to 184, giving the utmost speed of a Vivacissimo or Presto that we can conceive. How is this possible? There can be no question of an Adagio or an Allegro ever having been played in such a tremendous hurry. But now I set the metronome beating 120—Adagio, according to Maelzel's scale—and I play the Adagio cantabile of Beethoven's 'Sonate Pathétique', Op. 13, in the habitual tempo. I find that the beat of my metronome is in complete accord with the pace of the accompanying semiquavers. Let us try another experiment, with the first movement of Beethoven's sonata in E flat, Op. No. 3 (Allegro, 3/4). I put the metronome to the utmost speed, 208. After the rubatos of the first sixteen bars it fits the quavers in the bass perfectly, representing the pulse of the whole movement. Now I take another piece of Beethoven's with exactly the same tempo indication and time-signature—the first movement of the sonata in D Major, Op. 28. It is marked Allegro, 3/4 like the sonata in E

flat. The metronome, beating the same speed of 208, coincides exactly now with the crotchets, as it did before with the quavers. This means exactly double the speed.

It will be useful to check this experiment by using the opposite procedure. Let us take three pieces with the same time-signature which every reasonable performer will play at approximately the same speed, as measured by the beat of a crotchet—for instance, the first movement of Beethoven's sonata, Op. 10, No. 2 (F major, 2/4), the second movement of the sonata, Op. 31, No. 3 A flat, 2/4), and the first movement of the sonatina, Op. 49, No. 1 (G minor, 2/4). The tempo of these three movements, as we ordinarily conceive a tempo, is nearly the same; but Beethoven's markings are very different: Allegro, Allegretto vivace, Andante. So the fact that the same tempo indication may express double the speed is confirmed by the other fact that different indications may express the same speed. We have no right to assume that Maelzel was a fool when he drew up his scale, nor that Beethoven was out of his mind when he wrote his tempo indications. The solution of the whole riddle is that they had not the slightest intention of connecting the tempo indications with the beat. It is obvious that their perception of tempo was exclusively connected with the main pulse of the music, *i.e.* with the actual, audible movement as conceived by the listener. This principle offers a simple explanation of all these apparent absurdities. The method of indicating metronome numbers according to the bigger unit—the crotchet, the minim, the semibreve—seems to have started very early; the practical advantage of this is evident. But there was still no direct connexion between the indicated unit and the beat, as can be seen in Beethoven's use of metronome marks. The modern system of tempo marking seems to have been developed by the next generation, and it was generally adopted after 1850.

Another modern prejudice which has to be abandoned in performing classical music is our idea that the time-signature can decide the speed. We are used to writing 2/4 or 4/8, C or  $\text{C}$  as indications of tempo. Since the sign 4/8 was practically unknown a hundred years ago the composer had no opportunity of making clear his intention when he wanted the quaver to be understood as the beat, as the unit of the bar. He simply wrote 2/4. So we have no other way than to apply our common sense: to look at the contents and to judge the tempo by referring the composer's indication to the actual motion of the music. This means, for example, that an Allegro 2/4 with prevalent semiquavers will be almost half as quick, measured by the crotchet, as a piece with the same signature but with prevalent quavers. The proof of this statement is to be found by comparing the first movement of Beethoven's ninth symphony with the first movement of the sixth, and the puzzle of Beethoven's tempo and metronome marking in the finale of his 'Eroica' is solved in the simplest way by applying this principle. Apparently the Presto of the Coda, marked  $\text{♩} = 116$ , is slower than the Allegro molto,  $\text{♩} = 76$ , of the beginning. But the Allegro refers to quavers as the prevalent movement, whereas the Presto refers to semiquavers. Beethoven's marking is incontestably consistent if one takes the trouble to examine what he really meant. There can be no doubt that, as a rule, a 2/4 with frequent demisemiquavers is to be understood as a 4/8. Tamino's aria in 'The Magic Flute', Marcellina's aria in 'Fidelio', the Allegretto in Beethoven's eighth symphony are typical examples.

Still more enigmatic is the use of the sign  $\text{C}$  in and before Beethoven's time. This signature is sometimes used in such a casual way that it is easier to say what it did *not* mean than to define its actual significance, apart from characterizing a kind of general rhythmical structure. One thing is obvious: it has nothing to do with the beat. The best proof of this fact is Beethoven's piano concerto No. 1 in C major, the first movement of which is marked Allegro, C, while the second movement bears the signature Largo, C. It is evident that the Allegro has to be beaten as an 'alla breve', namely in minims, and the Largo in crotchets. No conductor could ever have been tempted to beat minims for the beginning of the 'Magic Flute' overture, the 'Don Giovanni' overture, the 'Chaos' in Haydn's 'Creation', or the Adagio of Schubert's

‘Wanderer’ fantasy, all of which are marked  $\text{♩}$ . Generally speaking, slow movements with the time of  $\text{♩}$  should be beaten in crotchets, whereas slow movements with the time of C demand to be beaten in quavers. But this rule is not without occasional exceptions. I wonder whether anybody will find a definite reason for the use of C or  $\text{♩}$  in Allegros, considering that the first movements of Mozart’s ‘Jupiter’ symphony and Beethoven’s second symphony and ‘Waldstein’ sonata, Op. 53—typical cases of ‘alla breve’—are marked 4/4.

There can be no doubt as to the inestimable value of the metronome as an objective indicator of the composer’s intentions. But one must not overrate it, and I should dissuade anyone from taking it as an irrefutable proof. Indeed, composers like Wagner and Brahms who had had early experience of it had their reasons for being reluctant to continue using it. I cannot imagine that any conductor would seriously consider performing the overture to ‘The Flying Dutchman’ with a strict observance of Wagner’s metronome marking,  $\text{♩} = 72$ . The chromatic quavers starting in the fifth bar, when played at that pace, would rather suggest an angry earthworm than a raging storm, as Wagner intended. Beethoven’s metronome markings, some of which are utterly incomprehensible, have puzzled many performers. The simplest explanation was furnished by Nottebohm with the suggestion that his metronome might have been out of order. Since a metronome is nothing more than a crude kind of clock, any disorder might cause considerable differences or irregularities, which would easily escape the attention of an owner absorbed in his creative work. There is no possibility of settling the question of the right tempo purely by the intellect. There will always be some points of disagreement, even among the best musicians. What I should like to point out is the fact that arguments are hopeless as long as they are founded on the letter in defiance of unshakable musical reasons. The best plan for a conscientious performer is to examine the written signs of a score as carefully as possible and to check the result by his common sense, his musicianship and his experience.

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