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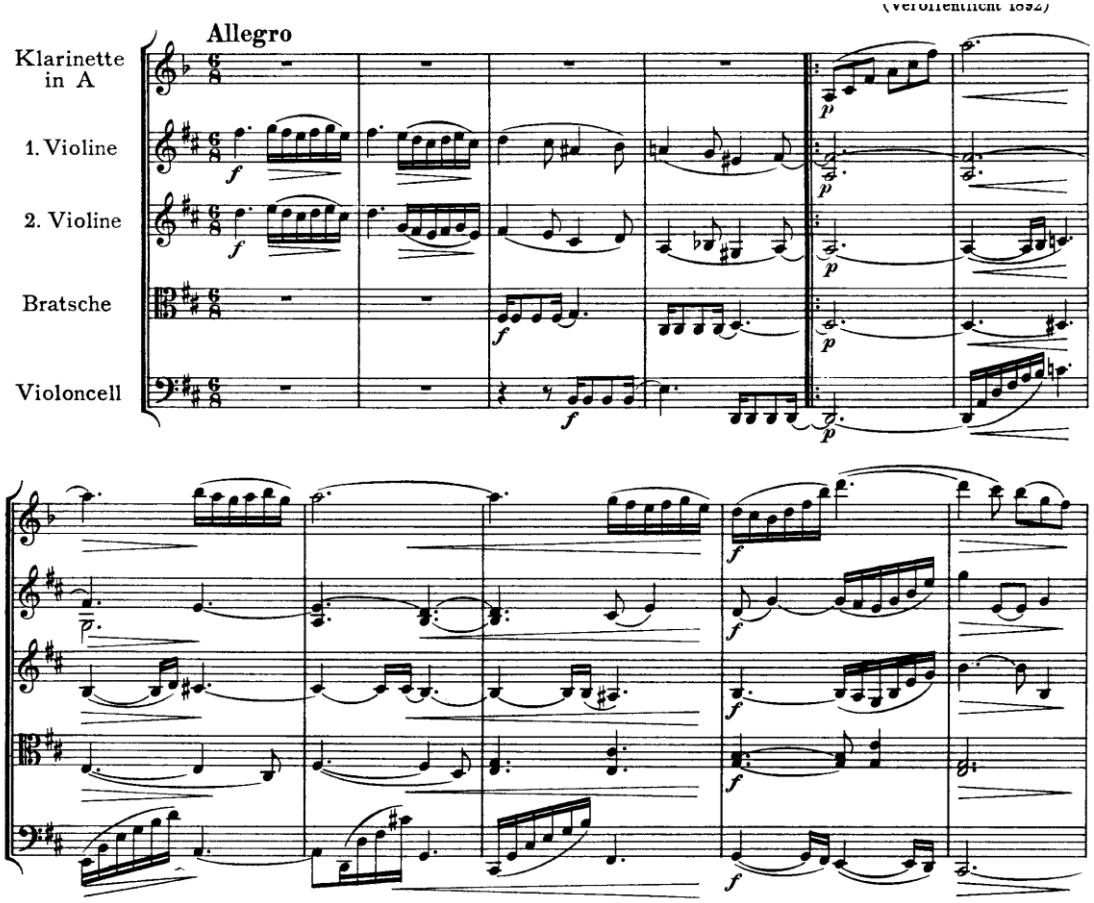
**TEMPO AND ITS MODIFICATIONS IN THE MUSIC OF BRAHMS FROM PRIMARY SOURCES AND EVIDENCE OF EARLY PERFORMERS**

**Paper gives at Symposium 'Über das Forteilen und Zurückhalten. Zur Tempogestaltung in der Musik des frühen 19. Jahrhunderts', Hochschule für Musik Hanns Eisler, Berlin, March 31st, 2012**

## Introduction

The parallel subjects of tempo and tempo modification in the music of Brahms have exercised a variety of scholars, amongst them Bernard D. Sherman, Michael Musgrave, Robert Pascall, Walter Frisch, David Epstein, Allen Forte, James Bass, Volker Scherliess, Michael Struck, Jonathan Andrew Govias and others. In this paper I aim to present to you a critical synthesis of this body of work together with a return to a variety of primary sources, entailing my own somewhat distinct conclusions, and consider this further in the context of Brahms's views on several conductors with whom he worked and who were closely associated with his work. Time does not allow this subject to be exhaustively explored from all angles; I will concentrate on primary sources as to Brahms's preferences, and a consideration of conductors who worked with Brahms during his lifetime.

Performers need to make informed decisions as regards tempo of Brahms works. How often does one hear the first movement of the Clarinet Quintet performed at something that might reasonably be described as *Allegro*?



It is equally rare [(if it has ever occurred – I am not aware of an instance at present)] to hear the third movement of the Piano Concerto No. 2[1] given the type of *Andante* character that Brahms's metronome marking of crotchet = 84 would imply[2]. In the former case, and maybe to some extent the latter, might we assume that *a priori* conceptions about the work's 'autumnall' character inform consistent decisions to perform this movement at a tempo to my ears more resembles something like *Molto moderato*? And if so, upon what basis is decision arrived at? Pictures of Brahms with a beard? A certain mythology derived from a string of biographies, combined with certain stereotypes already in place during Brahms's lifetime, as the following reminiscence by Richard Heuberger or Brahms's view of a performance of the First Symphony conducted by Hans Richter makes clear:

> If my symphony were really such a dull thing, so grey and *mezzoforte*, like Richter plays it people today, then they would be right to speak of the "brooding Brahms". That's how completely misunderstood everything was![3]

Or simply the inertia engendered by a performing tradition? Of course, all these considerations may well have some validity, and could be enlisted in support of the notion that *Allegro* should not be taken too literally in this context? Conversely, the very tempo indication could imply that some of these other presupposed attributes, insofar as they affect perceptions of the music, might be inaccurate?

**Metronome Marks**

Brahms provided metronome marks for only a small number of works, all of which have been collected by Michael Musgrave. These are:

First version of the Piano Trio No. 1 in B, op. 8 (in first edition)
*Ein deutsches Requiem,* op. 45 (in first and subsequent editions, autograph full score, copyist/part-autograph vocal score used at première). Withdrawn by Brahms in 1894.
*Rinaldo,* op. 50 (in first edition)
*Nanië,* op. 82 (in first edition)
Piano Concerto No. 2 in B-flat, op. 83 (first edition)
Piano Trio No. 2 in C, op. 87 (first movement only, autograph and first edition)

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[1] Malcolm MacDonald draws attention to the resemblance between the opening theme of this movement and both the songs 'Todessehnen', Op. 86 No. 6 and also (much more strongly) 'Immer lesier wird mein Schlummer', Op. 105 No. 2 (MacDonald, ''Veiled symphonies'? The concertos', in Musgrave (ed), *The Cambridge Companion to Brahms*, 167-168). However, as the first of these is indicated *Langsam* and the second *Langsam und leise*, one can fairly surmise that thematic relationships are probably not reflected in terms of tempo.

[2] Even one of the most 'historically informed' recordings, that by Rudolf Buchbinder with the Concertgebouw Orchestra and Nikolaus Harnoncourt (Teldec 8573-80212-2), inhabits a tempo range of around crotchet = 66-72 for at least the opening section of this movement. Sherman says 'No one I have heard plays the Andante of the Second Piano Concerto anywhere near as quickly as the MM' (p. 120)

[3] Cited in Walter Frisch, 'In search of Brahms's First Symphony', in Sherman and Musgrave – *Performing Brahms,* 280. This citation of Frisch comes from his own translation in his *Brahms: The Four Symphonies* (New Haven, 2003), p. 167, which is itself taken from the memoirs of Brahms by Richard Heuberger – *Erinnerungen an Johannes Brahms* (Tutzing, 1971), p. 88

Furthermore, a metronome mark was added by Brahms to an autograph score for the first movement of the Piano Concerto No. 1 in D minor, which had been used for conducting purposes. Fanny Davies recorded metronome marks for the Piano Trio No. 3 in C minor, op. 101 at a rehearsal with Brahms in Baden-Baden in 1890, whilst there are also a set of markings for the Violin Concerto, but these may have come from Joachim rather than Brahms.

Now, as many have cited, Brahms said the following in a letter to the singer and conductor George Henschel from February 1880, after Henschel wrote to Brahms on behalf of Otto Goldschmidt, who was preparing a performance of the Requiem:

The question in your letter received today is somewhat obscure, indistinct; I hardly know what to answer: "If the indications by figures of the tempi in my Requiem should be strictly adhered to? "

Well- just as with all other music. I think here as well as with all other music the metronome is of no value. As far at least as my experience goes, everybody has, sooner or later, withdrawn his metronome marks. Those which can be found in my works good friends have talked me into putting them there, for I myself have never believed that my blood and a mechanical instrument go well together. The so-called elastic" tempo is moreover not a new invention. "Con discrezione" should be added to that as to many other things.

Is this an answer? I know no better one; but what I do know is that I indicate (without figures) my tempi, modestly, to be sure, but with the greatest care and clearness.[4]

He had earlier written to Clara Schumann on April 25th, 1861, in the context of her providing further metronome markings for Schumann's works:

About the proposed metronomization we have already once spoken at length. So you want to do it even so?

I consider it impossible as well as unnecessary; just as I also believe less in Schumann's faulty metronome than in the uncertainty of making a decision.

Worse yet, to provide metronome markings to some dozens of works now, as you wish, does not seem possible to me.

In any case, you will naturally set the work aside for at least a year and scrutinize it from time to time. Then you will mark them with fresh numbers each time and finally will have the best selection. Consider carefully, too, that one cannot arrange performances of choral and orchestra works for oneself just for this purpose -- and on the piano, because of the lighter sound, everything is played decidedly livelier, faster, also is more forgiving in tempo[5].

Otto Dessoff, knowing this view of Brahms, looked to gauge tempos instead by comparisons between pieces, asking for example if the tempo for the second movement of the Second Symphony might be compared with that of the *Adagio molto e mesto* from Beethoven's String Quartet, or that for the third movement with a crotchet from the *Andante cantabile con moto* from Beethoven's First Symphony, with which Brahms heartedly concurred.

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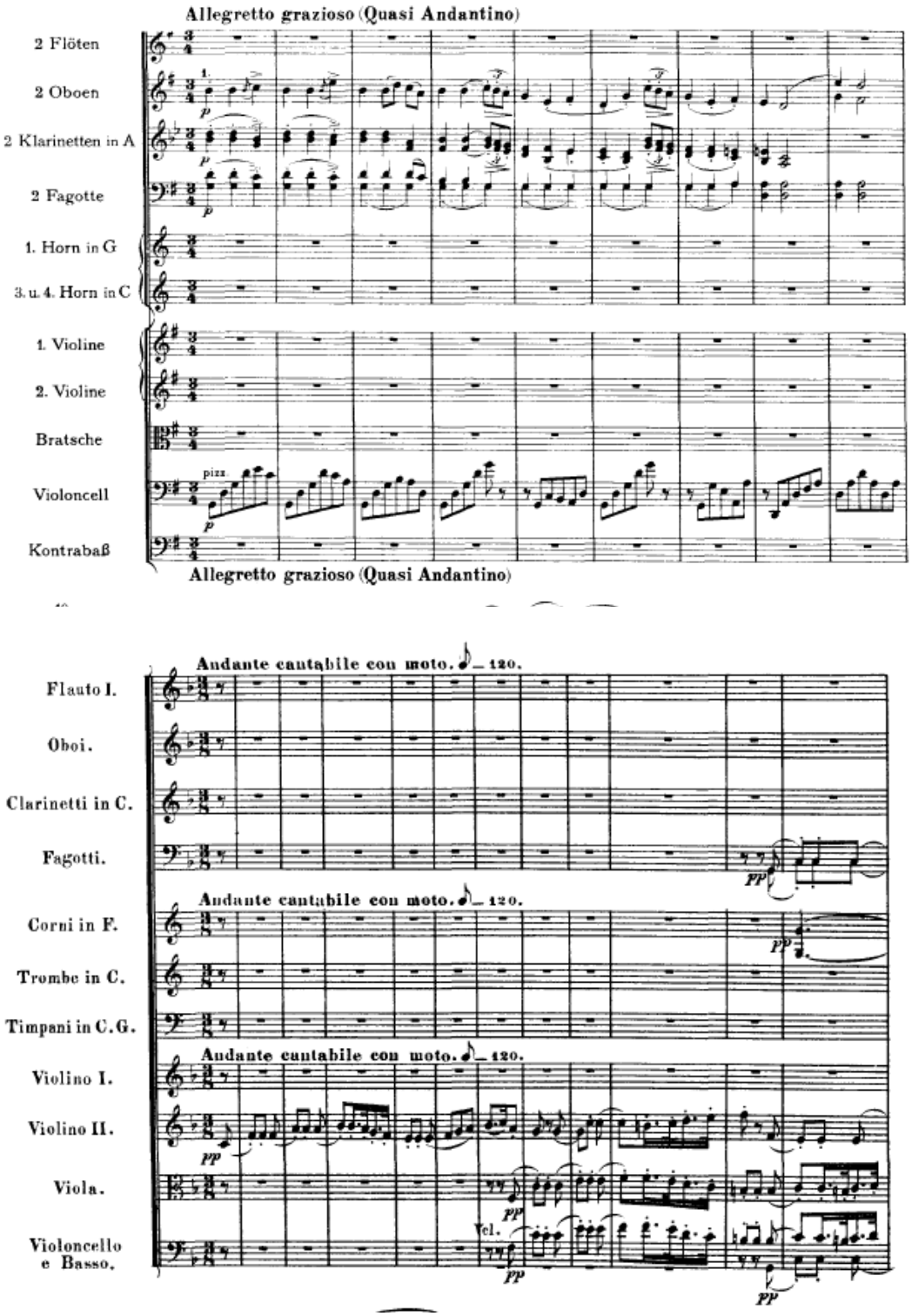
[4] Henschel, *Recollections of Brahms*, pp. 78-79.
[5] Avins, *Life and Letters*, p. 232.




However, in a letter from Brahms to the viola player Alwin von Beckerath, who had asked about the speed of an overture, Brahms wrote that he could probably supply Beckerath with a subscription for metronomisation, whereby Brahms would be paid weekly and would supply a new tempo marking on each occasion. [Von der Leyen, pp. 93-94]

So why did Brahms provide these particular metronome marks? [Return to slide]

[For the First Piano Trio, the first edition was published in November 1854, and the first performance took place in Dodsworth's Hall, New York City, by William Mason, Theodor Thomas, and Karl Bergmann. Mason had studied with Liszt in Weimar in 1853 and 1854, and made the acquaintance of Brahms during the infamous visit in June 1853 when Brahms was alleged (on the word of Eduard Reményi, not necessarily a reliable witness) to have fallen asleep whilst Liszt played his Sonata in B minor.

There is no known extant correspondence between Brahms and Mason; the one letter from Brahms to Thomas dates from the 1890s, and that from Thomas to Brahms from the 1880s, and no extant correspondence between Brahms and Bergmann.]

The Piano Trio in B was Brahms's first published work not either for solo piano or voice and piano.

Piano Concerto No. 1 received a questionable first performance on January 27th, 1859 with the Leipzig Gewandhaus Orchestra under Julius Rietz, which was severely criticised in *Signale für das musikalische Welt* (3/2/59), the critic Edward Bernsdorf writing that 'It must be observed, finally, that Herr Brahms' pianoforte technique does not satisfy the demands we have a right to make of a concert-player of the present day'[6].[ Similarly Georg Fischer would later write that whilst finding the work 'difficult to understand, even dry and in parts eminently fatiguing', nonetheless 'Brahms gave the impression of being a really sterling musician, and it was conceded without reservation that he is not merely a virtuoso, but a great artist of pianoforte-playing'[7]. ]Brahms himself told Joachim that 'it really went very well, I played significantly better than in Hanover, the orchestra outstandingly'[8]. This may have been his putting a brave face on the performance; whether or not this is the case, the quite moderate tempo of dotted minim = 58 he placed in the autograph used for performance may be considered a guide for conductors not to take the work at a tempo which might stretch and show up Brahms's technique further.

Then note Stanford:

His conducting of the D minor Concerto threw an entirely new light on the whole composition, especially as regards the rhythmical swing of the first movement. Written in the troublesome *tempo* of 6/4, most conductors take it too quickly by beating two in a bar or too slowly by beating six. Brahms beat it in an uneven four (-u-u), which entirely did away with undue dragging or hurrying, and kept the line of movement insistent up to the last note. His *tempo* was very elastic, as much so in places as von Bülow's, though more restrained, but he never allowed his liberties with the time to interfere with the

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[6] Edward Bernsdorf, *Signale für die musikalische Welt* 17, Leipzig, February 3rd 1859, p. 71-72. Cited in May, *Life of Brahms*, Vol. 1, p. 229. Part of this letter is cited in German (though not including the comments on Brahms's piano-playing), in Renate Ulm, '"Lässt er noch keine Pauken und Drommeten erschallen?": 1. Klavierkonzert D-Moll, Op. 15', in Ulm (ed), *Johannes Brahms - Das symphonische Werk: Entstehung, Deutung, Wirkung* (Kassel, Bärenreiter, 1996), p. 140.

[7] Georg Fischer, *Opern und Concerte im Hoftheater zu Hannover bis 1866*, cited in May, *Life of Brahms*, Vol. 1, p. 226

[8] Brahms to Joachim, January 28th, 1859, in Avins, *Life and Letters*, p. 189.

general balance: they were of the true nature of *rubato*. He loathed having his slow movements played in an inexorable four-square.[9]

The same argument would account for the metronome marks for the Second Piano Concerto.

Clive Brown, in his volume on *Classical and Romantic Performing Practice*, draws attention to regional differences in performing sacred music around 1844, between Austria and Italy, where faster tempos were possibly taken, and Germany, where tempos were slower[10]. The *Requiem* was premiered in Bremen in 1868, Brahms having entered the metronome marks into the autograph full score and copyist/part-autograph vocal score (cited in Sherman, p. 100), and he did not change them until 1894, when all were withdrawn[11]. In a performance in Dessau in 1869 attended by Max Bruch but not by the composer, Bruch informed Brahms that several movements were played at wrong tempos (the second movement 'rather too fast', sixth 'unbelievably lame', etc.[12]). The requiem had three partial 'trial performances' prior to publication (of which the Bremen performance was the second, the first in Vienna consisting only of the first three movements)[13]. One possibility to consider is whether the inclusion of the metronome marks might have been a way of countering some conventions of the time in different areas as affected sacred music (especially in light of the fact that this work was performed very widely both around Germany and in other countries), which might otherwise have been applied unthinkingly at first?

For *Rinaldo* and *Nanië*, Brahms would again have to deal with choral conductors who would have rehearsed the choirs from these works, some of them versed in particular in sacred music; I would suggest that Brahms included these because of scepticism about whether these conductors would adopt appropriate tempi (bearing in mind his own extensive experience as a choral conductor), something about which he was less worried with orchestral conductors in particular who he respected.

Evidence collected by Bernard D. Sherman.

Fanny Davies wrote in 1905, comparing current Brahms performance to Brahms's own 'the tendency is usually to play the Andantes too slowly, and the quick movements, scherzos, & c., too quickly'.

Pianist Max Born: Brahms told him that people tended to play his slow movements too slowly and faster movements too quickly.

Adelina de Lara: Brahms on E-flat minor Scherzo: 'No, no, it is too fast, you must draw it out more, like this'

Violinist Franz Kneisel playing Presto non assai of Clarinet Quintet: 'Would you please do me the favour of not taking that too fast?'

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[9] Ibid. pp. 201-202.
[10] Brown, 'Tempo', in *Classical and Romantic Performing Practice*, 311.
[11] See Michael Musgrave, *Brahms: A German Requiem* (Cambridge, 1996), 72-74.
[12] Ibid. 74.
[13] See Margit L. McCorkle, 'The Role of Trial Performances for Brahms's Orchestral and Large Choral Works: Sources and Circumstances', in George S. Bozarth (ed), *Brahms Studies: Analytical and Historical Perspectives* (Oxford, 1990), 298, 306-309.

Max Rudolf 'If we are to believe reports by musicians who performed Brahms's symphonies under his direction, he would not have approved of the rushed tempi we now sometimes hear. His music making was relaxed.

Brahms letters: wanting moderate *Ländler* tempi in *Liebesliederwalzer*, and complaining about overly fast tempos in a performance of Schubert 'Great' Symphony No. 9 in C major.

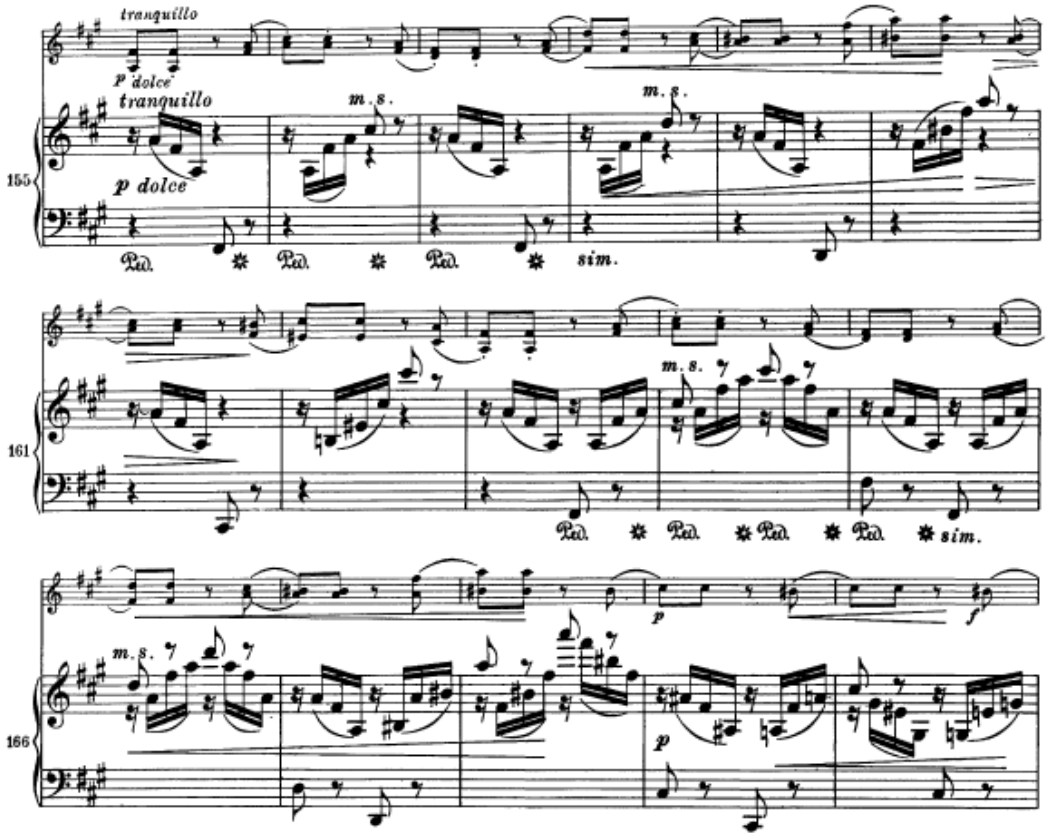
Sherman uses this evidence to imply a preference on the composer's part for moderate tempi, not too quick or too slow. Though of course one must bear in mind that (a) these terms are highly relative and (b) the performers in particular who attest to this might have their own reasons for doing so (in order to lend credence to their own approaches, perhaps). Other evidence, some of it collected by Sherman, some not, suggests that Brahms did indeed sometimes favour very slow tempi. According to pianist Carl Friedberg, who had heard Brahms play in old age and received coaching from him, one could never play slowly enough for the composer.

In Brahms's letter to Clara Schumann from May 1893, concerning the Intermezzo Op. 119 No. 1, he tells her:

> This little piece is exceptionally melancholy and to say 'to be played very slowly' isn't saying enough. Every measure and every note must sound ritard[ando], as though one wished to suck melancholy out of each and every one, with a wantonness and contentment derived from the aforementioned dissonances![14]

Eugenie Schumann also mentions an occasion on which Brahms played the piano part of the D minor Violin Sonata, taking the *tranquillo* 'so excessively slowly that nothing could happen', thinking 'There he goes tiptoeing over the eggs'.

[14] Cited in Avins, *Brahms: Life and Letters*, 706. Original German is 'Das kleine Stück ist ausnehmend melancholisch, und "sehr langsam spielen" ist nicht genug gesagt. Jeder Takt und jede Note muss wie ritard klingen, als ob man Melancholie aus jeder einzelnen saugen wolle, mit Wollust und Behagen aus besagten Dissonanzen!' (Litzmann, *Schumann-Brahms Briefe*, vol. 2, 513)




With respect to twentieth-century performances, of course, trends in performance can be studied through recordings; Sherman reprints and supplements the data studied by Frisch with respect to tempos in the First and Second Symphonies[15], as well as some reported timings of performances by Otto Dessoff and Hans von Bülow in 1876 and 1884 for the First, Hans Richter and Bülow in 1877 and 1884 for the second, demonstrating very clearly that tempos have certainly progressively slowed. Sherman views this as possibly contradicting Fanny Davies' indications that Brahms's Andantes were being played too slowly in 1905, finding instead that the durations of early recordings to coincide with the timings given for the premiere. To conclude this, one must of course assume that such timings are accurate (the scope for human error here is of course great) and also that the tendencies of tempos during from the 1920s onwards can be extrapolated backwards to 1905 (a very big assumption – it is possible that the very fact of their being recorded for posterity itself affected the types of performances and tempos employed). Sherman also reads Brahms's response to Hanslick's preference for Richter's tempo to Brahms's own, stating that the Allegretto grazioso of the Second Symphony be 'quite peaceful, especially at the end' (p. 118) as implying that Brahms's tempo was slower than Richter's. But some slower tempos do not necessarily create a more peaceful effect, and indeed can add tension to the music.

[15] See Frisch, *Brahms: The Four Symphonies*, 169-173. Some other timings were delivered by Frisch in a paper 'Who's on first? Legacies of interpreting Brahms's C-minor symphony' given at the conference, 'Brahms the contemporary', Boston, April 1997. Cited in Musgrave and Sherman (eds), *Performing Brahms*, 117

It is not inconceivable that a very slightly faster, *grazioso* tempo could be what Brahms would have found more 'peaceful'.

So what to conclude about Brahms's tempo preferences? The comprehensive evidence that Sherman marshals points in various contradictory directions. The extant metronome marks point in various directions - some seem 'brisk', others more 'relaxed' (see Sherman, pp. 120-121) – from which only tentative conclusions can be drawn in terms of recurrent patterns to be ascertained. Maybe such patterns as relate to the relationship between Brahms's desired tempos and those more common today can not really be discerned in a generalized manner; rather the question needs to be addressed simply on a case by case basis, bringing a range of different considerations to bear on the cases in question, including questions of genre (and the possibility of the composer 'working against genre'), character, relationship to other works, and all the other information we gleam about works based on studying the composer's letters, biography, working practices, that can inform questions both of performance practice and interpretation. However, I think we can conclude that Brahms was not fond of excessively *fast* tempi, but could favour those which might seem excessively *slow* today.

What *does* seem palpable is that tempo conventions that have developed during a period of over a century by no means necessarily correspond to Brahms' intentions. Without applying over-generalized rules, a great many tempo choices could only benefit from being thought through more rigorously by performers. Sherman rightly reminds us that Brahms 'wrote that any 'normal person' would take a different tempo 'every week'' (p. 123). This statement will doubtlessly be wrenched up by any anti-HIP performer or protagonist who wishes to downplay the worth of musicological study of tempo in Brahms. Yet, in my experience, different tempos every week are the very last thing one commonly hears from Brahms performers today – such a phenomenon would be a refreshing change. Study of Brahms's tempo preferences (which often yields a variety of results) can stimulate greater *flexibility* for performers, including new ideas and conceptions, perhaps multiple in nature, that could allow for new choices on different weeks. Sherman says information about metronome marks can both 'give us some insight into a few of his habits' and 'discipline our speculations' (p. 123). This to me sounds rather over-prescriptive in tone – I would prefer to suggest that such information can give us some insight into a few of *our* habits, and enrich our own range of perceived possibilities.

As suggested through some correspondence between Brahms and his editor Robert Keller, there may be reason to differentiate between capitalised and uncapitalised tempo markings, with the former indicating changes of tempo (as Brahms agreed in the case of *Tranquillo/tranquillo*).

**Tempo Modification and Flexibility**

In general, as far as the question of tempo flexibility and nuancing is concerned, most documents and accounts, as well as early recordings, all suggest that Brahms desired and executed a fair amount of both

Fanny Davies: 'Brahms's manner of interpretation was free, very elastic and expansive; but the balance was always there – one felt the fundamental rhythms

underlying the surface rhythms. His phrasing was notable in lyric passages. In these a strictly metronomic Brahms is as unthinkable as a fussy or hurried Brahms in passages which must be presented with adamantine rhythm.
[…]
He would linger not on one note alone, but on a whole idea, as if unable to tear himself away from its beauty. He would prefer to lengthen a bar or phrase rather than spoil it by making up the time into a metronomic bar.'

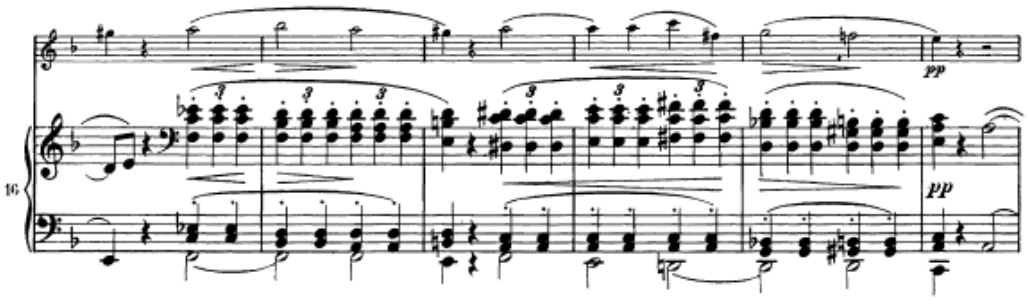
[Note the contrast between this and accounts of the playing of Chopin by Liszt and others, with Liszt using the metaphor of a tree in which the branches move but the trunk remains static; by many accounts, Chopin would insist on rubato applying purely to the melody, with the accompaniment remaining steady.]

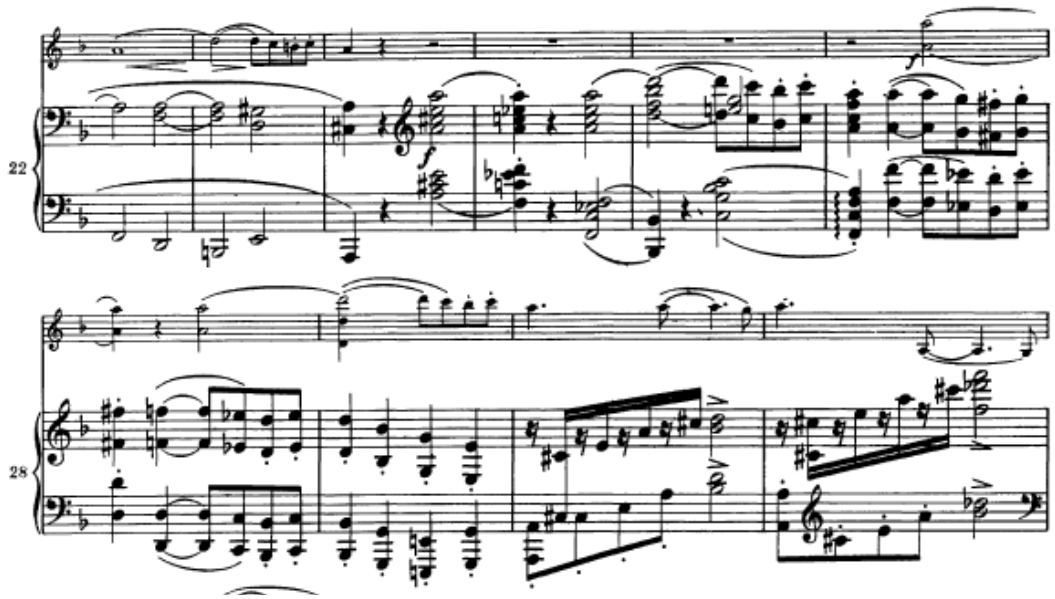
Clara Schumann wrote in her journal on March 26th, 1864 (Litzmann Eng, p. 67) Brahms's piano playing:

I cannot quite get used to the constant change of tempo in his works and besides, he palys them so entirely according to his own fancy that today, for example, although I was reading music, I could not follow him, and it was very difficult for his fellow players to keep their places.

In May of the same year, she praised Brahms's performances of Schubert sonatas, but 'especially those movements in which he cannot exaggerate the tempo which he is fond of doing' (Ibid. p. 72)

Joachim also reported that Brahms would increase the tempo markedly in the D minor Violin Sonata when the music became loud [cited in Sherman review of The Compleat Conductor]. An example of such a place where Brahms would likely have done this would be the below:

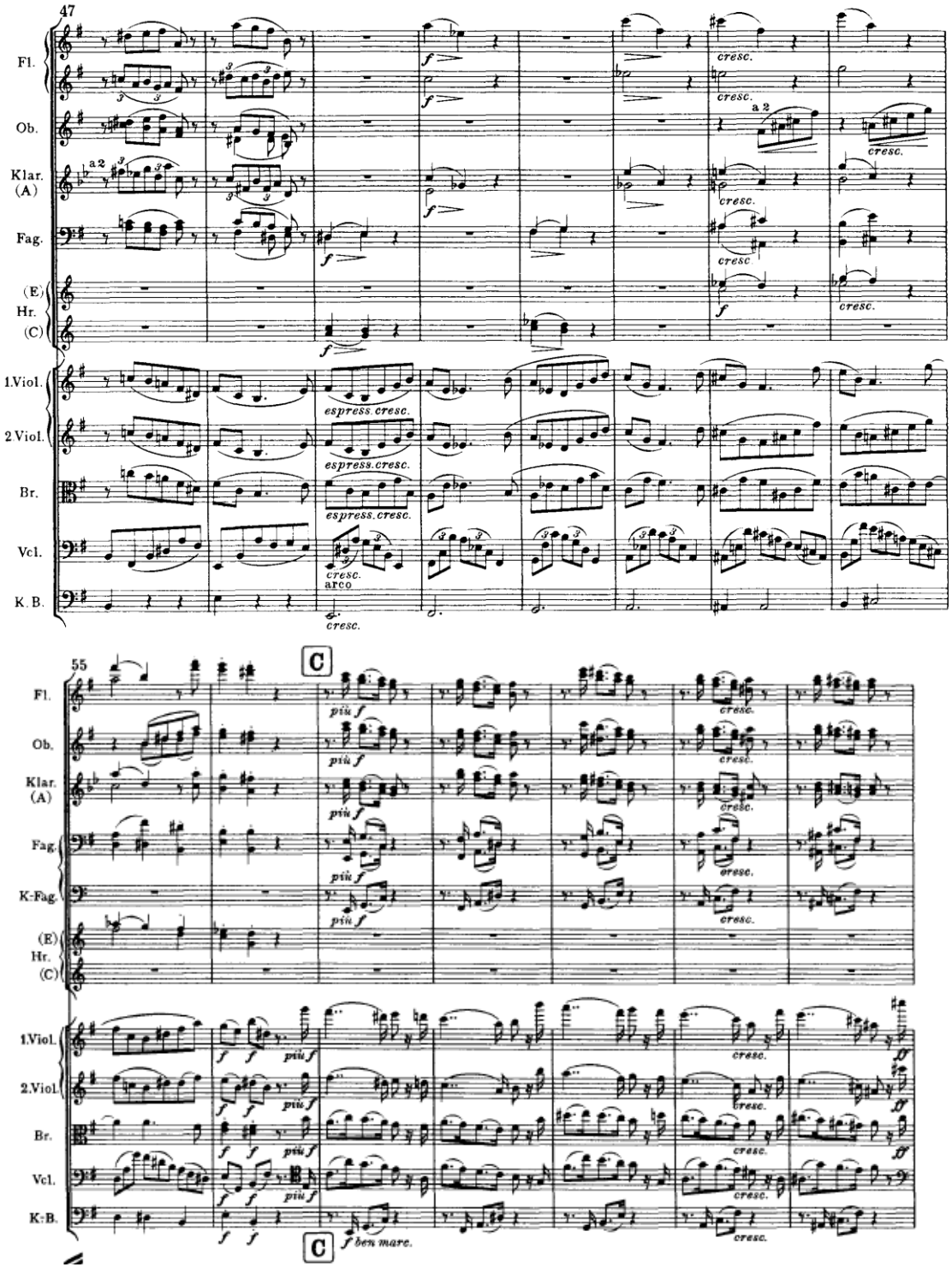




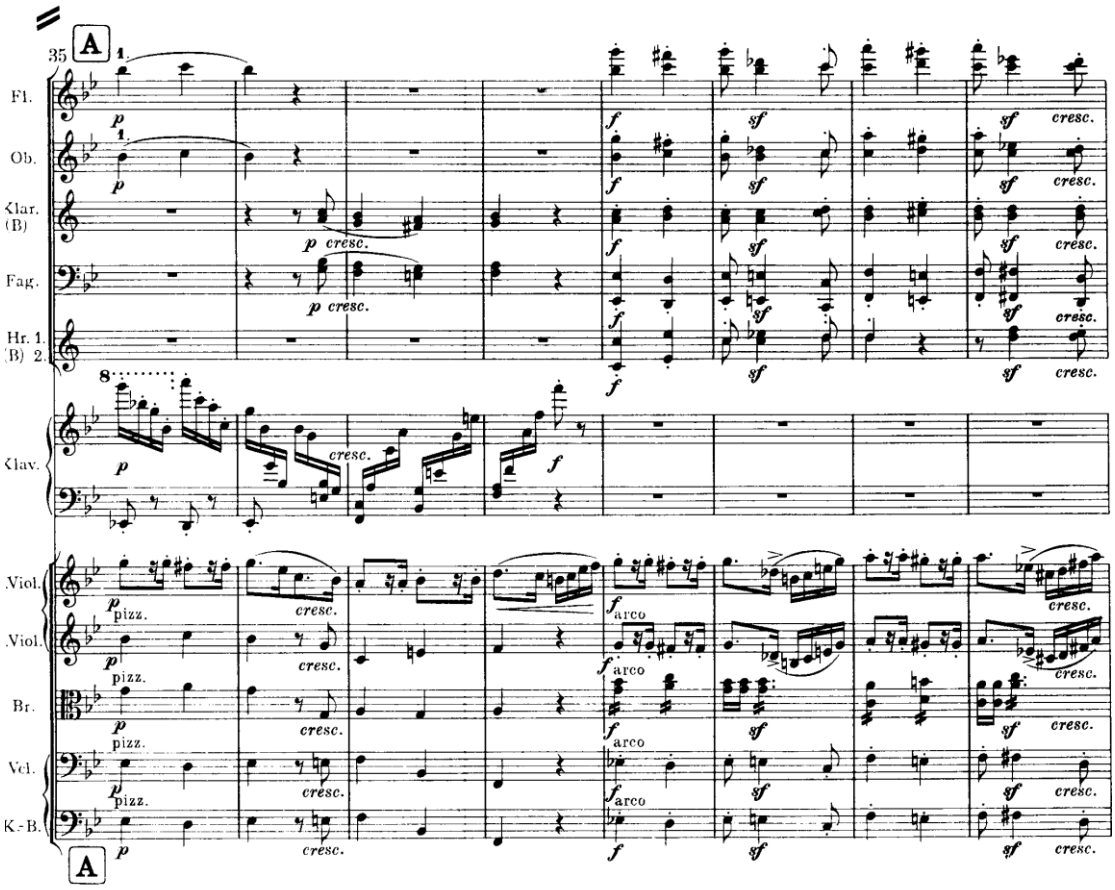

In a concert in Frankfurt on February 17, 1895, Brahms conducted the *Akademische Fest-Ouverture*, whilst Gustav Friedrich Kogel conducted the Second Symphony. Kogel had two days earlier asked tentatively if Brahms would 'not object if he took certain liberties with the symphony', to which Brahms replied 'the police will not punish you', and at the end of the rehearsal asked 'does Herr Kogel know of any liberties that we might introduce'. Brahms pointed out after the rehearsal for the concert that Kogel took the third movement too quickly, but nonetheless congratulated Kogel, who he described as the orchestra's 'very capable conductor'[16].

What is more ambiguous is precisely how and where such flexibility was exercised. Robert Pascall and Philip Weller set out to investigate this in the context of the Second Piano Concerto and Fourth Symphony, and then to consider the implications for other works[17]. For both works, Brahms's added indications for tempo modifications in the score, though as the authors rightly point out, 'these represent by no means the totality of markings in each score which modify tempo, for several such were included intentionally in the first and subsequent editions prepared under Brahms's control' (p. 221). Whilst relatively few in number, these markings serve to underline other musical features (for example the indication - - *sost* - - - *largamente* in bars 54-57 of the last movement of the Fourth Symphony, at a moment of especial harmonic and contrapuntal richness).

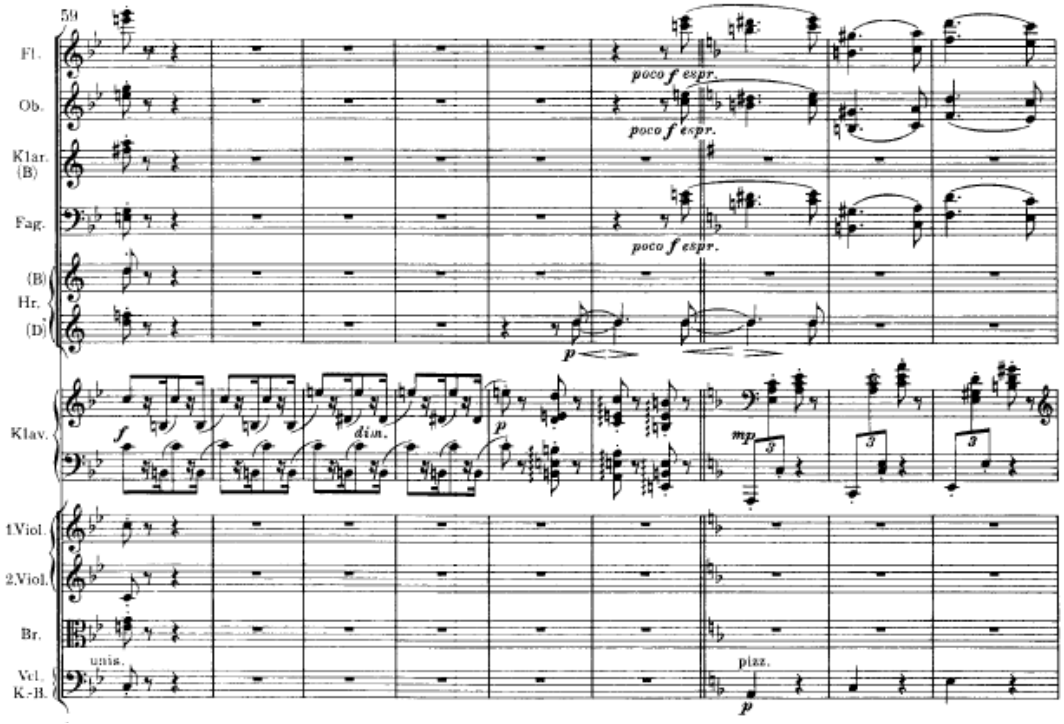
[16] Ferdinand Schumann, 'Brahms and Clara Schumann', translated Jacques Mayer, *The Musical Quarterly*, Vol. 2, No. 4 (October 1916), pp. 512-513.
[17] Robert Pascall and Philip Weller, 'Flexible tempo and nuancing in orchestral music: understanding Brahms's view of interpretation in his Second Piano Concerto and Fourth Symphony', in Musgrave and Sherman (eds), *Performing Brahms*, 220-243.



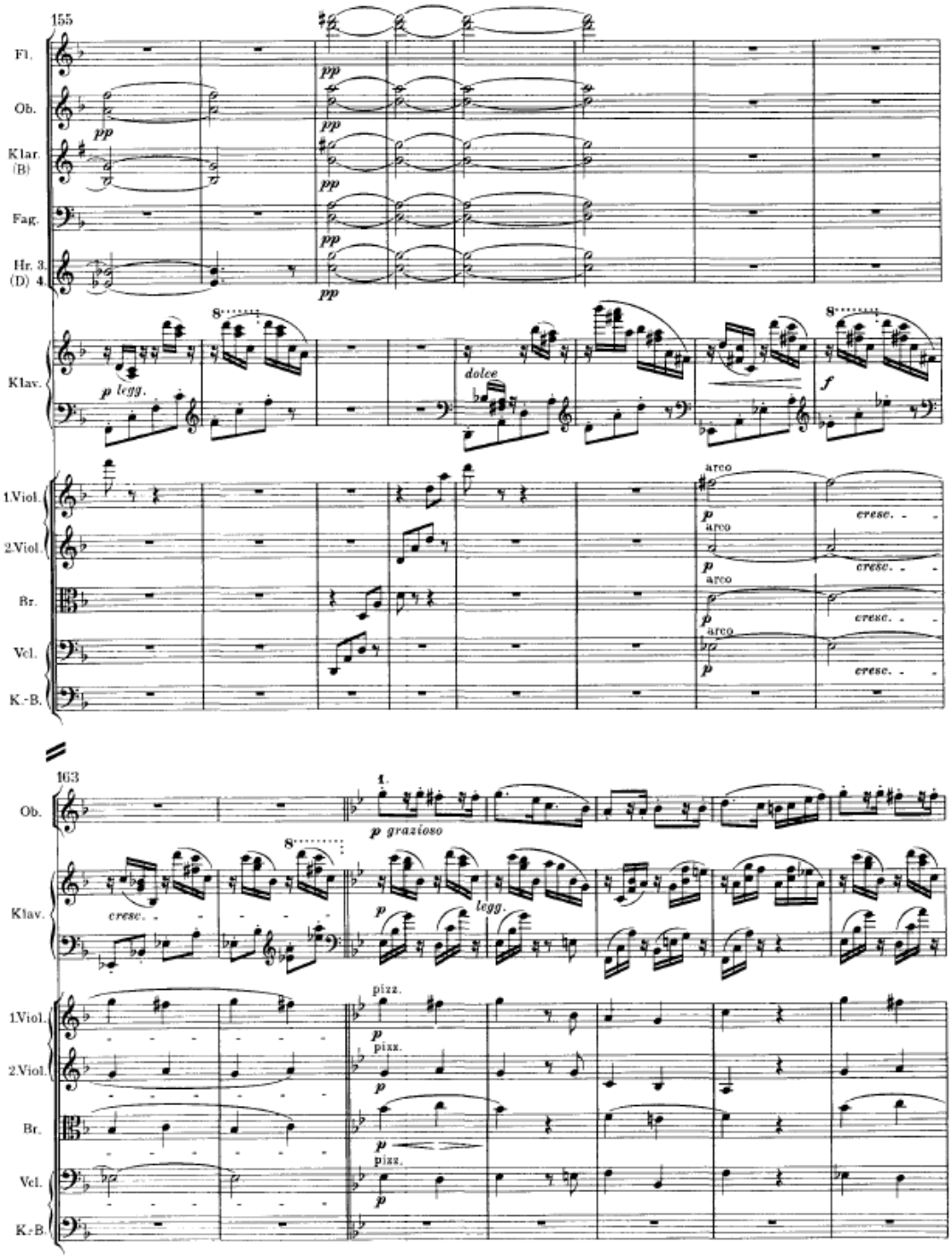

In the finale of the Second Piano Concerto, Brahms added indications such as *poco – a – poco – animato* in bars 36-39 of the last movement:




This was followed by *poco – a – poco in tempo I* in bars 59-63, suggesting that there should be some slowing back down from the previous passage thus animated.




In bars 161-165, he pencilled in *un poco stringendo in tempo*, suggesting that the previous passage might have been played somewhat slower.



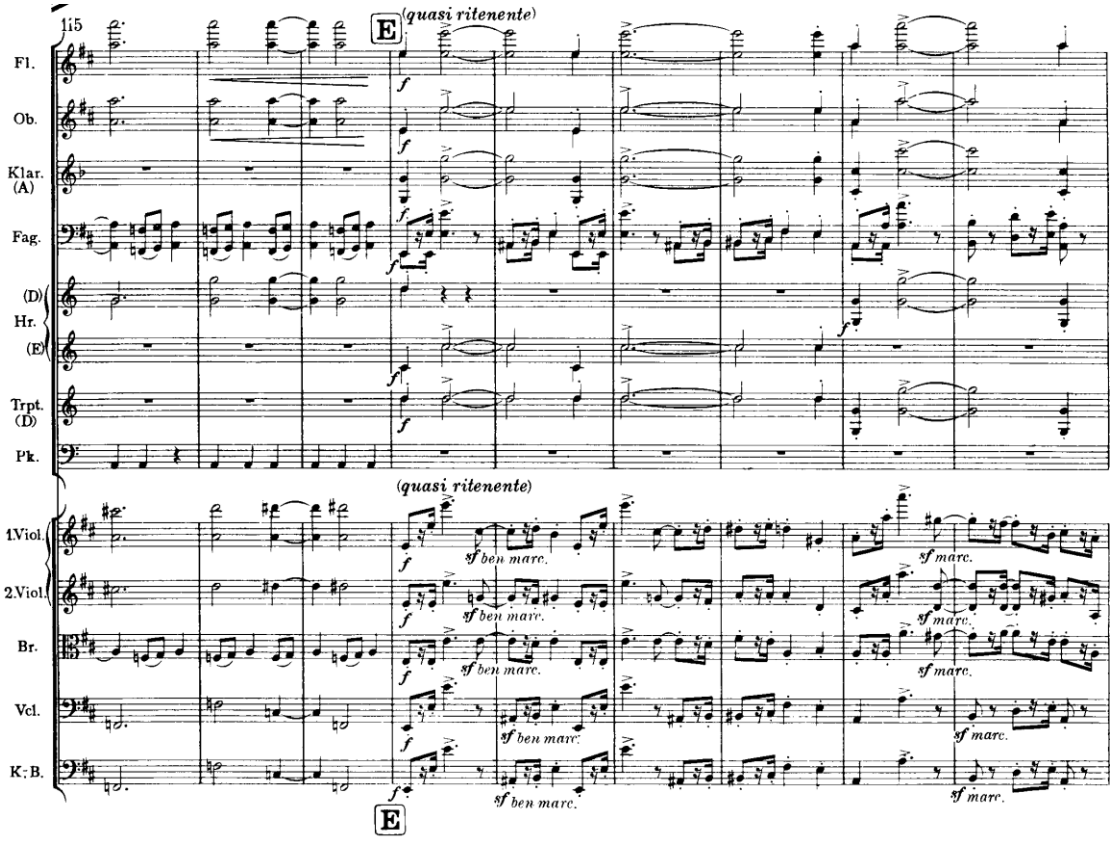

However, Brahms made clear in a letter to Joachim on (?20th) January 1886 after entering such modifications into the score:

Such exaggerations are only really necessary as long as a work is unknown to the orchestra (or soloist). In that case I often cannot do enough pushing forward and holding back, so that passionate or calm expression is produced more or less as I want it. Once a work has got into the bloodstream, there should be no more talk of such things in my view, and the more one departs from this [rule], the more inartistic I find the performing style.

I experience often enough with my older things how everything goes so completely by itself, and how superfluous much marking-up of this type is! But how people like to impress these days with this so-

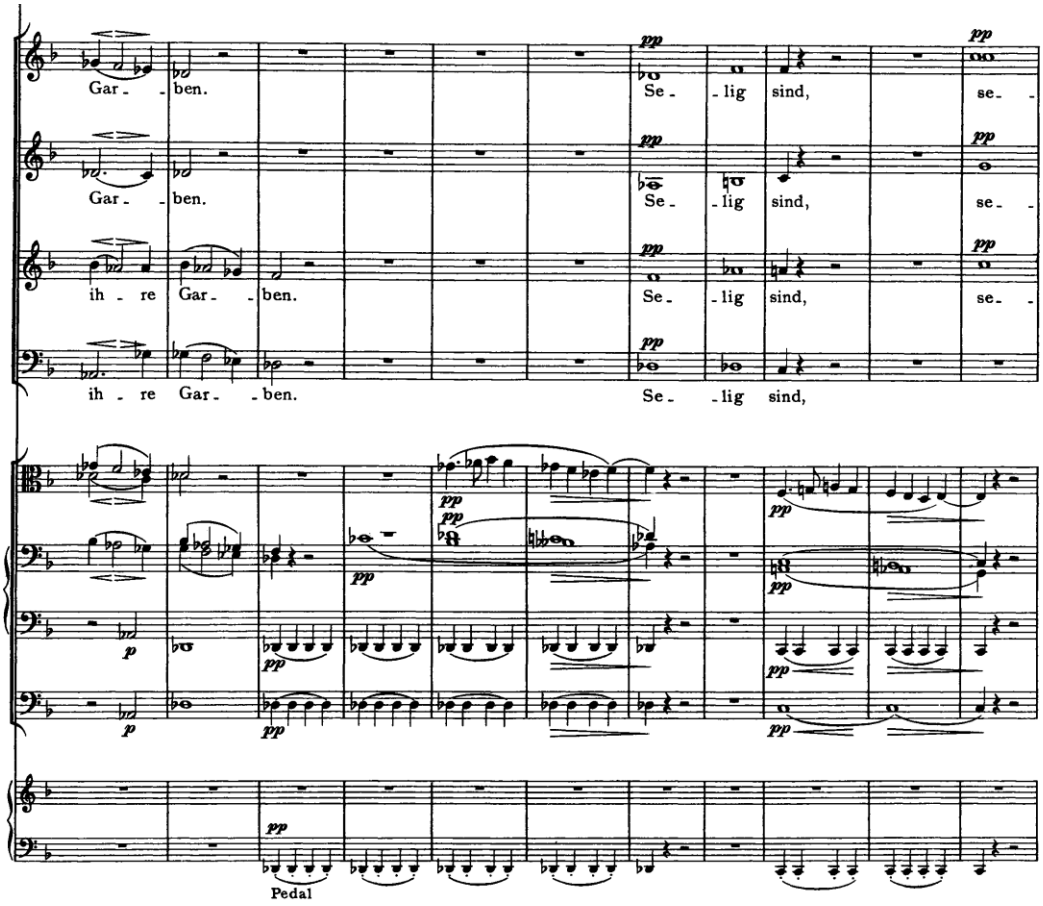
called ‘free artistic’ performing style – and how easy that is with even the worst orchestra and just one rehearsal! An orchestra like the Meiningen should take pride in showing the opposite![18]

Pascall and Weller engage in a detailed commentary on this letter (of which the above is only a part) and its implications, noting amongst other things that, in their view, Brahms was speaking of what was required from the *players’* point of view, not that of the *audience*, though such ‘exaggerations’ might be a substitute for the players’ later ability to communicate the work to audiences in a less arch manner. Brahms also suggested to Otto Dessoff in 1878 that some printed tempo modifications in the Second Symphony could by then be left out, such as the *quasi ritenente* in the first movement, perhaps for similar reasons.

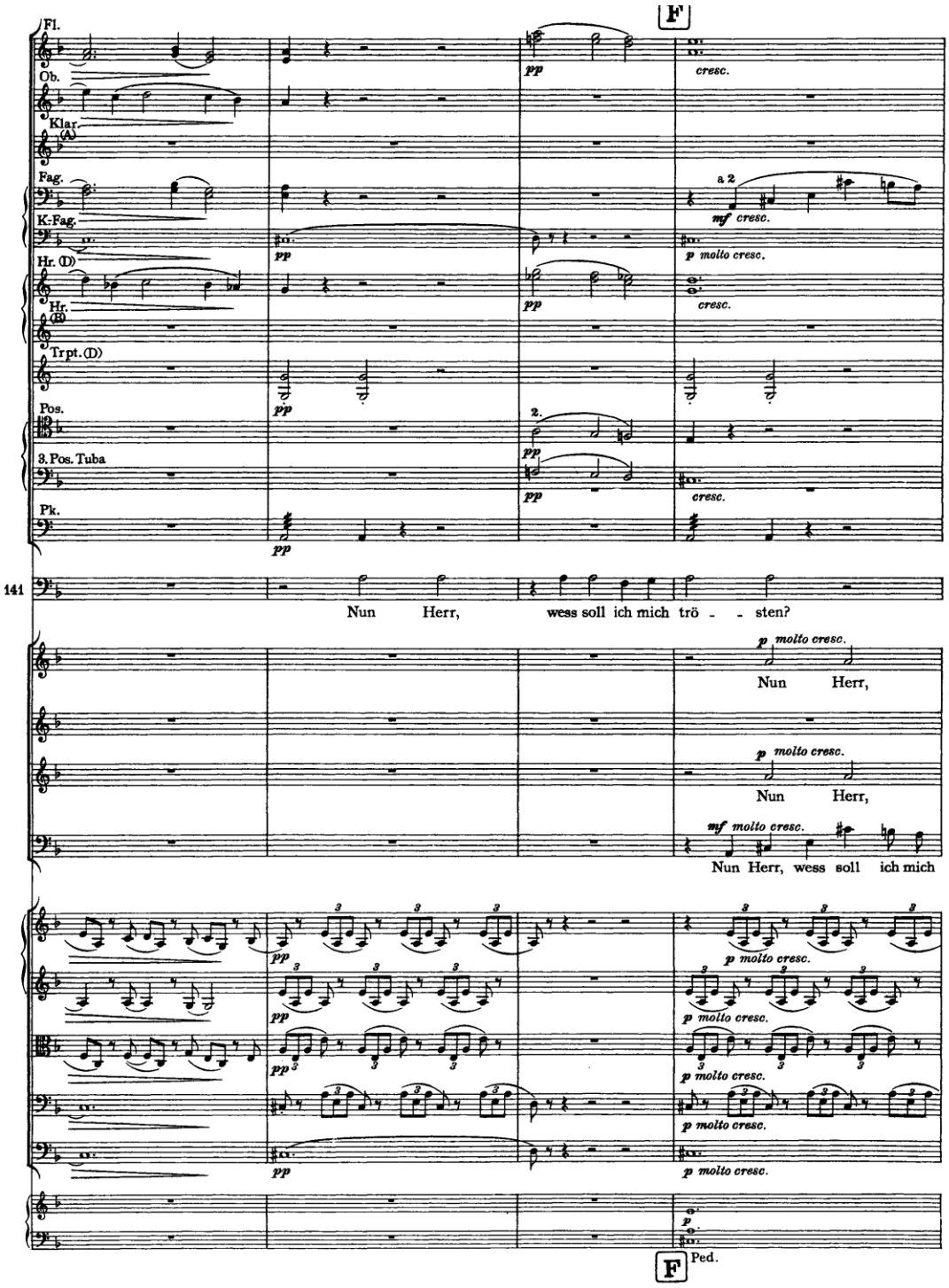



Max Rudolf uncovered a score of the Requiem with various markings by Brahms also indicating various tempo modifications. Amongst these are a slight ritardando (indicated by a serpentine line) in the *a cappella* modulation from D-flat back to F major in the first movement, bars 100-101.

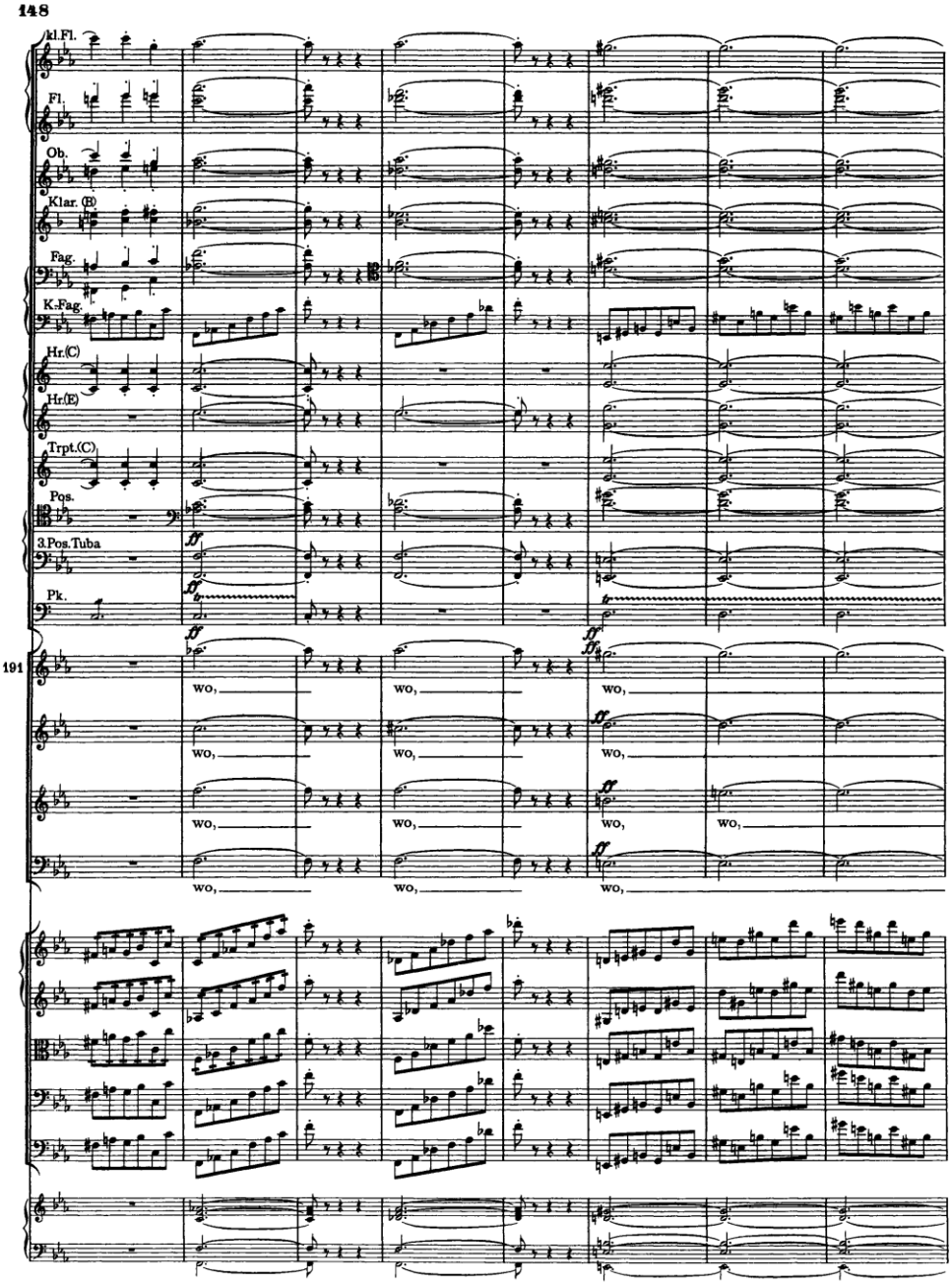
[18] Cited in Pascall and Weller, ‘Flexible tempo and nuancing’, p. 224. Original German is ‘Derlei Übertreibungen sind eben nur nötig, so lange ein Werk dem Orchester (oder Virtuosen) fremd ist. Ich kann mir in dem Fall oft nicht genug tun mit Treiben und Halten, damit ungefähr der leidenschaftliche oder ruhige Ausdruck herauskokommt, den ich will. Ist ein Werl einmal in Fleisch und Blut übergangen, so darf davon, nach meiner Weinung, keine Rede sein, und je weiter man davon abgeht, je unkünstlerischer finde ich den Vortrag. Ich erfahre oft genug bei meinen älteren Sachen, wie ganz ohne weiteres sich alles macht und wie Überflussig manche Bezeichnung obgedachter Urt ist! Uber wie gern imponiert man heute mit diesen sogen. freien künstlerischen Vortrag – und wie leicht ist das, mit dem schlechtesten Orchester und einer Probe! Ein Meininger Orchester müsste den Stolz darein setzen, das Gegenteil zu zeigen!’ (*Briefwechsel* VI, 220).



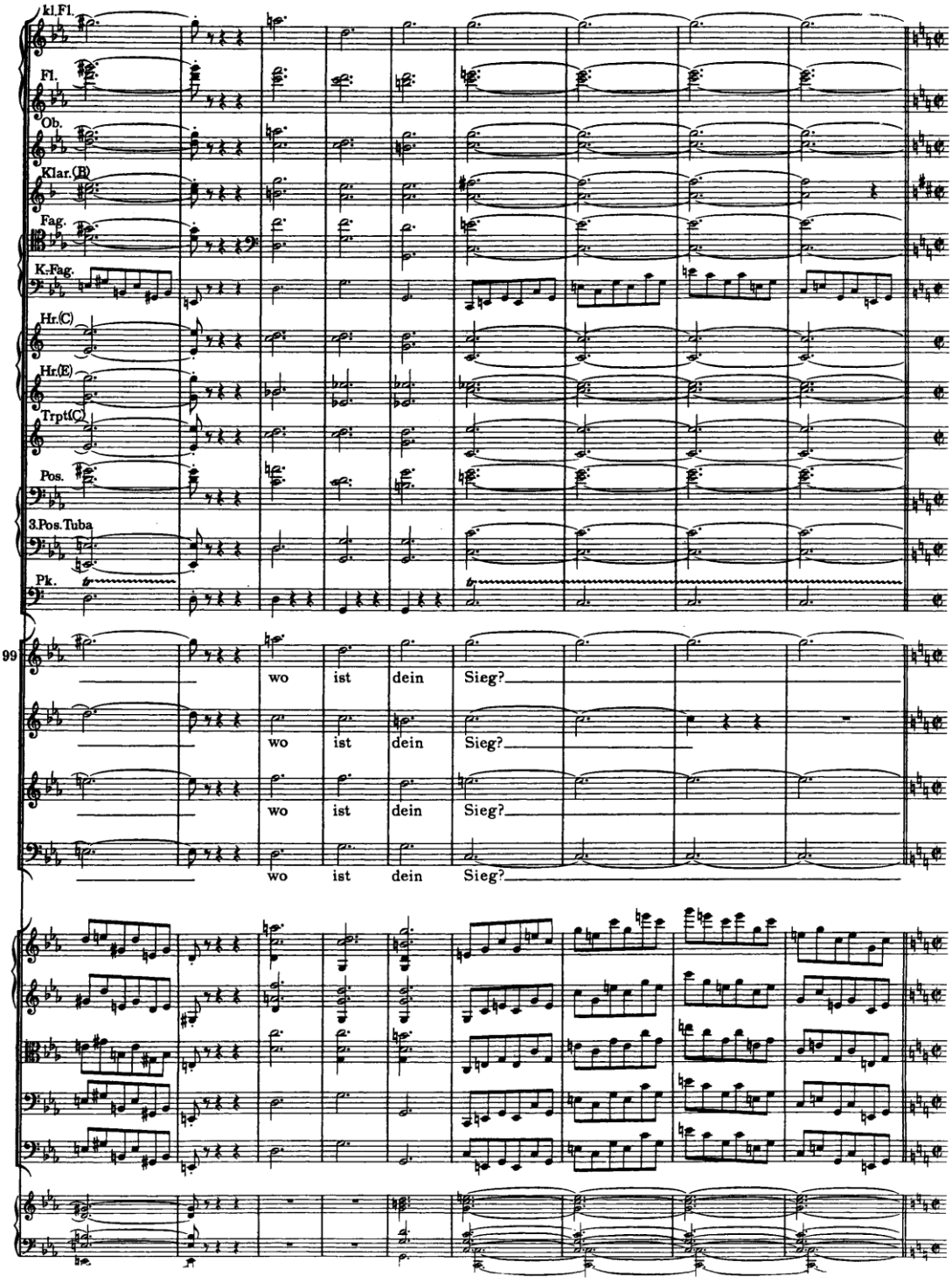

Brahms also indicated a slowing down in preparation for the *pp* in bar 142 of the third movement.




In the *Vivace* of the sixth movement leading up to the fugue, Brahms indicated that there should be uninterrupted drive from bars 192 to 195, then a short breath before bar 196.




This would be followed by a fermata in bar 200, a broadening in the next three sustained bars, then the lively tempo resumed at bar 204.




All of this is consistent with other markings provided by Brahms, and also those employed by Fritz Steinbach, which I shall consider presently.

Very briefly on the issue of proportional tempos: several writers, in particular David Epstein, have made coherent cases for viewing Brahms's tempos in a proportional manner. Suffice to say here that I believe the case for this to be questionable on the grounds of the arguments advanced by Bernard D. Sherman, pointing out that if such relationships were indeed desired by Brahms, one might have expected to find them

mirrored in the metronome marks, but the relationships there are not of such a nature. In the example from the sixth movement of the Requiem just mentioned, it is notable that Brahms's tempo the C major fugue is minim 100, whereas for the previous 3/4 section it was at crotchet 112. A clear metrical relationship between the two sections does not appear to have been Brahms's intention here.

## Conductors

### Brahms as Conductor

Apart from two short periods conducting a male choral society at Winsen in 1847-48, Brahms's career as a conductor began during his period as Kapellmeister in the principality of Detmold from 1857-59; from this time onwards he conducted works with orchestra of Bach, Händel, Gluck, Mozart, Beethoven, Cherubini, Schubert, Mendelssohn, Schumann, Joachim and others. Following this, he conducted choirs in Hamburg and Vienna.

After his first concert with the Wiener Singakademie, on November 22nd, 1863, featuring works of Bach, Beethoven and Schumann, as well as German folksongs in his own arrangement, it was mentioned that Brahms had a very clear baton (*Taktschlag*) technique. (Bass, p. 73, from Kormorn). However, the second concert, on January 6th, 1864, with works of Mendelssohn, Eccard, Schütz, Gabrieli, Rovetta and Beethoven, was by various accounts a disaster, with Brahms having to stop during the performance. Richard Specht suggested that this was due to a lack of elasticity in the wrists on Brahms's part.

Through the 1870s and 1880s Brahms conducted a great many of his own orchestral works throughout Germany, as well as in Austria, Switzerland and the Netherlands, with an especially intense period in the early 1880s, including eleven documented performances of the First Symphony, and around twenty each of the other three. In many concerts conducted principally by others, Brahms would step in to conduct his own works (this cause more than a little tension in particular in concerts in Meiningen directed by Bülow); how much this reflected the desire of the concert organisers simply to have the composer conduct their own work is unclear, but it certainly suggests a desire on Brahms's part to ensure a particular type of performance which perhaps only he could achieve. For many years he would usually take the role of soloist in his piano concertos, but in later times he was happy to swap the piano for the podium, conducting these works with Bülow, Julius Röntgen and in particular Eugen d'Albert as soloist (with the latter he gave concerts in Leipzig and Berlin in 1895-96 featuring both concertos in the same programme).

As early as 1870, Hermann Levi wrote to Brahms that 'I could see in Karlsruhe, with unprejudiced eyes, that you possess an apititude for conducting like no other'[19] (Levi would have been referring to Brahms's performance of *Ein deutsches Requiem* in Karlsruhe on May 12, 1869[20]).

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[19] 'Daß Du die Fähigkeit zum Dirigiren besitzest, wie kein Zweiter, habe ich in Carlsruhe gesehen – und mit unpartheiischen Augen', Levi to Brahms, July 14, 1870, in *Briefwechsel* 7, p. 65.

[20] Brahms had performed on a few other earlier occasions in the city as a pianist, but this was his first appearance there as conductor. On Levi's efforts to get Brahms to conduct this performance, see

Whilst Brahms had conducted various important performances with large orchestra from the late 1860s, including the first performances of *Ein deutsches Requiem* (Bremen, April 10, 1868) and the first movement of the *Triumphlied* (also in Bremen, April 7, 1871), it was with his assumption of the directorship of the *Gesellschaft der Musikfreunde* in Vienna in 1872 (which he held until 1875) that his career as an orchestral conductor became consolidated.

A review in the *AMZ* of Brahms's first concert on November 10, 1872 (featuring works of Handel, Mozart, Eccard, Isaac and Schubert, but nothing of his own); the reviewer commented on Brahms's work primarily in the *a capella* choral works, noting a sense of atmosphere, measured dynamics and plasticity of rhythm, but said little about the composer's work with the orchestra[21].

Geheimrat Wichgraf, a relative of Theodor Billroth, described the vigour, energy and passion of Brahms's conducting, and his modification of his bodily position in line with different types of dynamics, as well as how much his facial expression communicated much about his feeling about the music, but said nothing specifically relating to tempo and tempo flexibility[22]. The same is true of similar descriptions by a member of the Leipzig Gewandhaus Orchestra named Teichmüller with whom Brahms conducted the Fourth Symphony in 1886, by a relative of Theodor Billroth around the same time [Hutschke p. 44], and by Bernhard Vogel in 1888[23]. Clara Schumann had earlier commented on an 1877 Leipzig performance of the First Symphony, 'It was very exciting how he would cheer and take along the orchestra like a whirlpool. Then after that he was still able to guide the orchestra with a steady hand like a calm stream. This was a rare artistic achievement.' [Hutschke p. 51]

A substantial collection by James Bass of reviews of Brahms's conducting, of his own music and that of others, suggests very little on the issue of tempo. However, various other accounts are consistent with some of the accounts of tempo flexibility I mentioned earlier. Charles Villiers Stanford heard Brahms conduct on just two occasions: a concert on January 13, 1881, in which the composer conducted his *Akademische Fest-Ouverture* and *Tragische Ouverture* with the Gewandhaus Orchestra (the remainder of the concert was conducted by their then-principal conductor Carl Reinecke), and a concert featuring both concertos performed by d'Albert on January 10, 1896[24]. Whilst Stanford thought Brahms always to be 'a little "out of tune"' at Leipzig, on account of bad memories of the poor reception accorded the D minor Concerto when he first played it in the city in 1859, he found Brahms's conducting of that same work in Berlin to be quite revelatory:

> His conducting of the D minor Concerto threw an entirely new light on the whole composition, especially as regards the rhythmical swing of the first movement. Written in the troublesome *tempo* of 6/4, most conductors take it too quickly by beating two in a bar or too slowly by beating six. Brahms

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Frithjof Hass, 'Johannes Brahms und Hermann Levi', in *Johannes Brahms in Baden-Baden und Karlsruhe* (Karlsruhe: Badischen Landesbibliothek Karlsruhe, 1983) pp. 66-58.

[21] *AMZ*, Nr. 48 (November 27, 1872), p. 773.

[22] Wichgraf cited in Niemann, *Brahms*, p. 195.

[23] Adolph Bernhard Vogel, *Johannes Brahms. Sein Lebensgang und eine Würdigung seiner Werke* (Leipzig: Hesse's, 1888), pp. 17-18, cited in Musgrave, *A Brahms Reader*, p. 144.

[24] Stanford, *Pages from an unwritten diary*, p. 201. Stanford mistakenly remembers the Berlin concert as being in 1895, and also does not mention that it also included the *Akademische Fest-Ouverture*.

beat it in an uneven four (-u-u), which entirely did away with undue dragging or hurrying, and kept the line of movement insistent up to the last note. His *tempo* was very elastic, as much so in places as von Bülow's, though more restrained, but he never allowed his liberties with the time to interfere with the general balance: they were of the true nature of *rubato*. He loathed having his slow movements played in an inexorable four-square.[25]

Furthermore, during one performance of the Requiem, Brahms asked the soprano soloist her tempo, and after she waved a reply, he said 'Oh, we will get along, just sing and I will follow you with the chorus'. [Hutschke p. 49]

Time does not permit a consideration of the work of Otto Dessoff and Hermann Levi as conductors of Brahms's work.

Many critics and scholars have made much of the idea of Hans von Bülow and Hans Richter as representing the two poles of conducting approaches of their time, taking their cue from Charles Villiers Stanford's account in his 1922 book *Interludes*.

Richter was often stiff in his reading of an unfamiliar score; von Bülow, never. […]
Von Bülow and Richter may be said to be the archetypes from whom modern conducting has descended. Unfortunately more have followed the first than the second. . . . Richter was all for straightforwardness. He hated extravagance, and even took the *diablerie* out of Berlioz; but his mastery of the orchestra was as great as von Bülow's, and he had authority and instrumental knowledge to back it. He took everything from the standpoint of common sense: for this reason, he was strongest in what he best knew, Beethoven, Weber, and the *Meistersinger*. He was not often eclectic, von Bülow was. He had magnetism, but not so much as von Bülow. He had an even temper, which von Bülow had not. His is the safer ground to follow, but also the less alluring. The perfect conductor will possess a combination of the best qualities of both men: if we cannot have this ideal, we must learn from each separately. But there can be no question that modern conducting sprang from the stock of these two men.

In this context I believe it worth bearing in mind that Bülow's background was as a virtuoso pianist and associate of Liszt and Wagner, whereas Richter, whilst also having worked with Wagner in the 1860s and watched Bülow at work there, was a former horn player at the Kärtnerthor Theatre in Vienna and occasional trumpeter, timpanist or violinist in other venues.

**Hans von Bülow (1830-1894)**

As is well known, Hans von Bülow was at first associated with Liszt and *Zukunftsmusik*, coming to conduct the world premieres of Wagner's *Tristan und Isolde* and *Die Meistersinger von Nürnberg*, then broke with Wagner in the 1860s, following Wagner's affair with his wife, and later came to be strongly associated with the rival faction, replacing his advocacy of Berlioz, Liszt and Wagner (whose names he once attached to his own) with that of the 'three Bs' – Bach, Beethoven and Brahms. He became one of the most important conductors of Brahms's music, in particular with the Meiningen Court Orchestra between 1880 and 1885, and later the Berlin Philharmonic.

When Bülow took the Fourth Symphony on tour to various locations in Germany and the Netherlands in late 1885, soon after the world premiere, Brahms accompanied him and often took over the conducting of this work, sometimes at the last minute. Whilst

[25] Ibid. pp. 201-202.

he confided to Clara Schumann that 'I cannot exactly refuse to allow Bülow to travel around with it a bit'[26], he even took over a performance on November 3 in Frankfurt, where Bülow had strong connections through the Raff Conservatory, and pre-empting a planned further performance by Bülow in the city on November 24 (which Bülow cancelled) by conducting it in a semi-private performance earlier in the month[27]. It is clear that Brahms harboured significant distrust in Bülow's abilities to do justice to his work. Bülow himself wrote in letters to his wife soon after the premiere of the Fourth Symphony under Brahms's baton in Meiningen on October 25th, 1885 that he himself would have done a better job, making the work livelier and more impressive. [Specht p. 258]. However, he did elsewhere comment on Brahms 'I do not know any other conductor, next to Wagner, if interested, knows to conduct everyone in a musical, emotional way and convey it through his conducting.'

Brahms, according to Max Kalbeck, said of Hans von Bülow's conducting of his First Symphony:

> Bülow's conducting is always calculated for effect. At the moment when a new phrase begins, he [gets the players] to leave a tiny gap, and likes also to change tempo ever so slightly. In my symphonies I have strenuously sought to avoid all this kind of thing. If I had wanted it, I would have written it in.[28]

Pascal and Weller cite this, followed by a comment from Richard Strauss on the comparative nature of Brahms and Bülow's conducting that would serve as a red rag to some anti-HIPsters:

> After the hyper-refined, inventive and resourceful manner in which von Bülow had interpreted Brahms's music, Brahms's own simpler and more sober way of conducting these pieces made no particular impression. But one heard the work itself.[29]

Elizabeth von Herzogenberg, in a letter of 27th March 1881 to Brahms, criticised a piano recital given by Bülow of Beethoven sonatas[30], for similar types of affected pauses as Brahms criticized in Bülow's conducting. Unfortunately, no reply from Brahms has survived. Clara Schumann wrote that Bülow exaggerated many tempo modifications 'just because everything is artificial and nothing is felt, so everything is taken to extremes – all stringendos and ritardandos alike are done too much'

A notated example of this type of practice on the part of Bülow is provided by Franz Kullak in his 1898 book *Der Vortrag in der Musik am Ende des 19. Jahrhunderts*. Kullak argues that Bülow was continuing in a tradition provided by Anton Schindler, who would employ caesuras at climactic cadences in Beethoven. Bülow would do the

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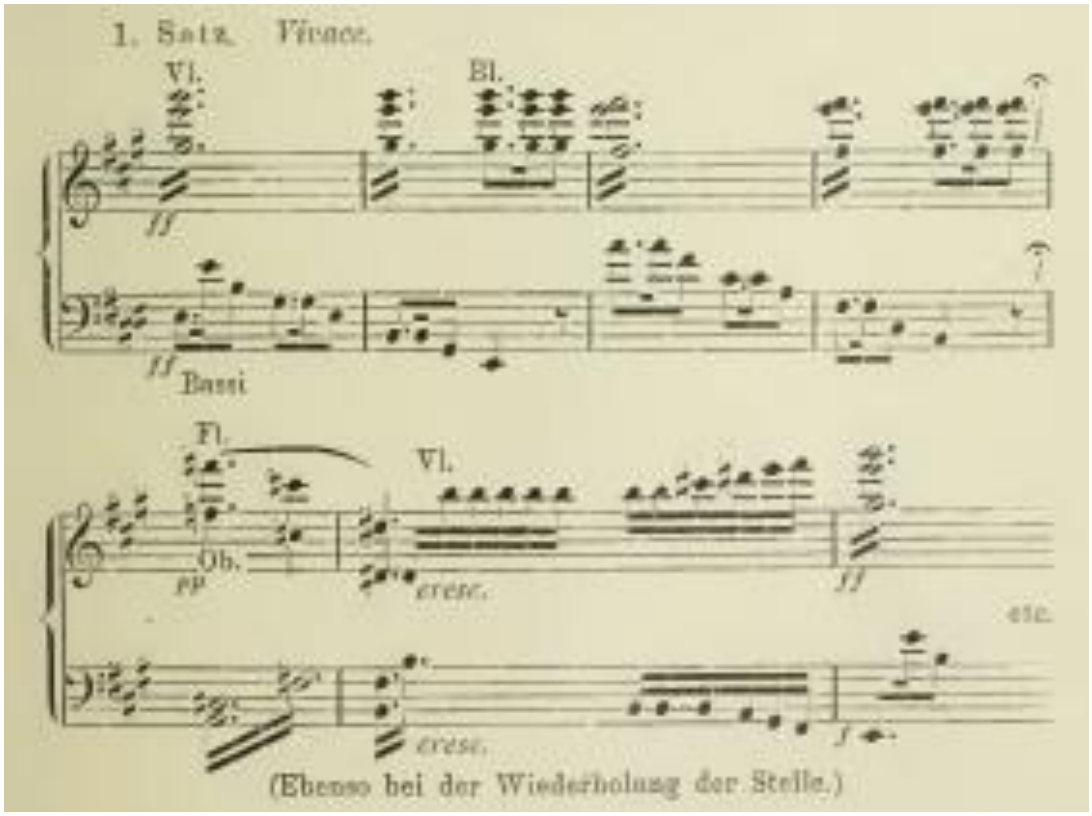
[26] Brahms to Clara, end of October, 1885, *Clara/Brahms Letters*, Vol. 2, p. 101.
[27] Walker, *Bülow*, p. 326.
[28] Max Kalbeck, *Johannes Brahms* Vol. 3, second edition (Tutzing, 1976), 495, as translated in Pascall and Weller, 'Flexible tempo and nuancing in orchestral music', in Musgrave and Sherman , *Performing Brahms*, p. 230. Original German is '"Bülow's Dirigieren ist immer auf den Effekt berechnet. Sobald eine neue musikalische Phrase einfesst, lätzt er eine kleine Pause machen und wechselt auch gern ein wenig das Tempo. Ich habe mir das in meinen Symphonien ernstlich verboten; wenn ich es haben wollte, würde ich es hinschreiben."'
[29] Konrad Huschke, *Johannes Brahms als Pianist, Dirigent und Lehrer* (Karlsruhe, 1935), 49, cited in Pascall and Weller, 'Flexible tempo and nuancing', 231.
[30] *Briefwechsel* I, pp. 145-146, cited in Robert Philip, 'Brahms's musical world: balancing the evidence', in Musgrave and Sherman (eds), *Performing Brahms*, 353.

same at passages such as the following, from the first movement of Beethoven's Seventh Symphony.




This sort of effect is symptomatic of a particular rhetorical strategy, rather than of tempo flexibility per se. The reservations of Brahms and others towards Bülow's conducting do not, in my view, stem from the extent of his tempo modifications, rather from the fact that they were mannered, over-rehearsed, and thus lacking spontaneity.

Hanslick was more positive about Bulow's conducting, describing his 'conscientious realization of the score' as 'primary and non-negotiable', whilst also asserting that 'metronomic regularity of tempo has been abandoned by all modern conductors'[31].

[31] Eduard Hanslick, *Concerte, Componisten und Virtuosen der letzten fünfzehn Hare 1870-1885,* second edition, (Berlin, 1886), 415, 417, cited in Pascall and Weller, 'Flexible tempo and nuancing', 231. Hanslick was obviously going to be favourably disposed towards a figure like Bülow who actively deserted the Wagner camp (whatever Bülow's possible personal reasons for doing so, after Cosima Liszt left Bülow for Wagner), though he was somewhat more sceptical of Bülow's grandiose projects (for example playing Beethoven's Ninth Symphony twice in the same concert, calling it 'a drastic treatment not without danger for the patient'). See Hanslick, 'Bülow (1881)' in *Music Criticisms 1846-99*, translated Henry Pleasants (London, 1950), 184-186. The quotes cited by Pascall and Weller appear in a slightly different translation in the essay 'The Meiningen Court Orchestra (1884)', in the same volume, 231-235. Hanslick here does conclude this essay by describing Bülow as 'a real individual, unduplicated in the musical present'

**Hans Richter (1844-1916)**

As principal conductor of the Vienna Philharmonic between 1875 and 1898, and also of the *Gesellschaft der Musikfreunde* from 1884, Hans Richter was the dominant musical figure in the city, and directed the majority of performances of Brahms's music during this time. But like Bülow, Richter's early career was spent in large measure in association with the *Neudeutscher Schule*[32]. A former horn player in the Kärtnerthor Theatre in Vienna, and occasional trumpeter, timpanist or violinist in other venues[33], Richter began his conducting career working with Wagner in Munich in the late 1860s, learning much there from watching Bülow at work. He assisted in the premiere of *Die Meistersinger* at the première in 1868, and conducted the Brussels premiere of *Lohengrin* two years later[34]. In 1871 he became music director at the National Theatre in Budapest, recommended for the position by Wagner and Liszt, where he remained until 1875; here he again presented *Lohengrin*, performing and rehearsing the work from memory. Richter conducted a large repertoire during this period, including much of the core German symphonic works and a large number of operas; he worked to bring in an elite of the best players from all parts of the country, also boosting the orchestra where necessary for large works[35]. Most important of all, however, was his conducting of the first complete performance of Wagner's *Ring* cycle in 1876[36], which the critic Arthur Johnstone went as far as to say inaugurated 'the period of modern orchestral conducting', demonstrating 'that conducting was a great art worthy of independent cultivation'[37]. Richter was critical of the conducting of both Wagner and Liszt, on grounds of insecurity, though found Liszt to be the clearer and more competent of the two[38], whilst George Bernard Shaw compared Wagner's 'nervous and abrupt' beat with the much more spirited and intelligible conducting, a view with concurs with that of others who witnessed both figures at the podium[39]. However, Wagner himself made some critical comments in correspondence with Richter during preparation for the *Ring* premiere, finding him prone to dragging the music, and disinclined to beat other than in crotchets, though still maintaining that he had done a great service to the orchestra[40]. Richter himself would later recall the importance of Wagner's remarks, and comment on the problems in beating in an *alla breve* style with other musicians (including those who had come from Meiningen, in

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[32] Max Graf, in his *Legend of a Musical City*, repeatedly refers to Richter above all in terms of his conducting of Wagner, despite acknowledging his performances of Brahms and others. This is despite the fact that Richter never worked again with Wagner after the 1876 *Ring* premiere, though he conducted independent Wagner performances in both the opera house and concert hall many more times.

[33] On Richter's early instrumental career, about which relatively little information is known, see Christopher Fifield, *True Artist and True Friend: A Biography of Hans Richter* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993), pp. 1-9.

[34] Ibid. pp. 10-42.

[35] Ibid. pp. 52-63.

[36] See ibid. pp. 105-118 for more details.

[37] Arthur Johnstone, *Musical Criticisms* (Manchester: Sherratt and Hughes, 1905), p. 208.

[38] Fifield, *Richter*, p. 80.

[39] George Bernard Shaw, 'Wagner and Richter', in *How to Become a Music Critic*, edited Dan H. Laurence (London: Rupert Hart-Davis, 1960), cited in Fifield, *Richter*, pp. 125-126. See also Shaw's review from the *Dramatic Review*, February 8. 1885, and other accounts, cited ibid. pp. 125-127.

[40] Wagner to Richter, June 23, 1876, cited in Fifield, *Richter*, pp. 108-109

the pre-Bülow era, to play at Bayreuth)[41]. In general, Richter appears to have applied exacting discipline to musicians with whom he worked[42].

Though Richter had performed Brahms's music as both a horn player (in the Trio) and a pianist (accompanying the *Liebesliederwalzer*)[43] from the late 1860s onwards, by some time soon before his move to Vienna a letter to Hanslick reveals that Brahms was not yet particularly familiar with him or his work[44].

From the inauguration of Richter's tenure at the Vienna Philharmonic, he at first programmed an average of one orchestral work of Brahms in each season, then averaging at two per season from the early 1880s onwards[45]. These included all four symphonies on multiple occasions, including the world premieres of No. 2 on December 30, 1877 and No. 3 on March 15, 1885, all four concerts with various soloists (including the Second Piano Concerto with Brahms himself playing on December 26, 1881), the *Akademische Festouvertüre* and *Tragische Overture* (including the premiere on December 26, 1880), Haydn Variations and Second Serenade. The first of these was the premiere of the Second Symphony, a huge success with the Viennese audience, who demanded a repeat of the Scherzo. During the rehearsals for the performance on the day before the concert, Brahms himself commented that 'the musicians are playing my latest with mourning bands because it sounds so woeful; it will be printed with a black border'[46]. Having a month earlier told Fritz Simrock that 'The new symphony is so melancholy that you won't stand it. I have never written anything so sad, so *mollig* [soft, with the punning implication of "minor key"]: the score must appear with a black border'[47], one can reasonably infer that this manner of performance was in accordance with Brahms's conception. On the day of the concert itself, Brahms wrote to Simrock that 'The orchestra has practiced and played here with a voluptuous delight and praised me in a way I've never know before!', whilst repeating the instruction to include a black border around the score 'so that it also shows its melancholy outwardly'[48]. Hanslick wrote in the *Neue Freie Presse* that Richter had conducted the work 'at the express request of the composer',

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[41] Richter's diary, February 6, 1897, citied ibid. pp. 109-110.
[42] Fifield, *Richter*, p. 134.
[43] Fifield, *Richter*, pp. 15, 55
[44] Brahms to Hanslick, 1874 or 1875, in Christiane Wiesenfeldt, 'Johannes Brahms im Briefwechsel mit Eduard Hanslick', in Wolfgang Sandberger and Christiane Wiesenfeldt, (eds), *Musik und Musikforschung. Johannes Brahms im Dialog mit der Geschichte* (Kassel, Basel, London, etc.: Bärenreiter, 2007), p. 285. Brahms was discussing in this letter possible candidates to become Hofkapellmeister in Vienna following Dessoff.
[45] A full list of programmes for subscription concerts of the Vienna Philharmonic between 1860 and 1906 is available at http://concertannals.blogspot.com/2009/04/wiener-philharmoniker-1860-1870.html (accessed 30/4/10).
[46] 'Hier spielen die Musiker meine Neue mit Flor um den Arm, weil's gar so lamentable klingt; sie wird auch mit Trauerrand gedruckt', Brahms to Elisabet, December 29, 1877, *Briefwechsel I*, p. 41. I use here the translation from Brinkmann, *Late Idyll*, p. 15.
[47] 'Die neue Symphonie ist so melancholisch, daß Sie es nicht aushalten. Ich habe noch nie so was Truriges, Molliges geschrieben: die Partitur muß mit Trauerrand erscheinen.', Brahms to Simrock, November 22, 1877, *Briefwechsel X*, pp. 56-57. The translation and commentary on *mollig* come from the English translation of Brinkmann, *Late Idyll*, p. 13.
[48] ' Das Orchester hier hat mit einer Wollust geübt und gespielt und mich gelobt, wie es mir noch nicht passiert ist! Aber Sie müssen an die Partitur einen Trauerrand wenden, daß sie auch äußerlich ihre Melancholie zeigt', Brahms to Simrock, December 30, 1877, *Briefwechsel X*, p. 65, translation from Brinkmann, *Late Idyll*, p. 65.

and had 'studied the work with the same loving patience and complete ear for the music, as brought him the highest honour'[49].

Theodor Helm, writing in the *Musikalisches Wochenblatt*, suggested that the opening of the *Allegretto grazioso* was played charmingly a quiet *pianissimo* (*ganz leise pp*), within which various elfin or gypsy-like moments appear, and otherwise drew attention to the poetic, romantic and descriptive aspects of the work in this performance[50]. Various other critics, such as Emerich Kastner writing in *Die Harmonie*, observed a quality of 'naïveté of feeling' (*Empfindungsnaivetät*) in the work in this performance[51]. Ferdinand Pohl wrote to Fritz Simrock during rehearsals of how 'Vitality and strength are bubbling up everywhere, deep feeling and charm to go with it' and then of the 'Model performance, warmest reception'[52], as well as pointing how Richter had 'gone to great pains during rehearsal'[53]. He listed the durations of each movement – 19' (including the repeat of the exposition), 11', 5' and 8' respectively[54]; as Walter Frisch has pointed out, with adjustments to account for the exposition repeat, this would yield the same total duration as that of Bülow[55]. Reinhold Brinkmann, measuring the durations of a range of recordings, demonstrates that the majority of twentieth-century conductors have taken the first movement slower, the second movement more quickly, and the finale considerably slower; he aptly identifies such tendencies as:

> symptomatic of a standardizing view of the work. Brahms's Second Symphony, played as the reflection of a serene and tranquil pastoral atmosphere, is conceived as going entirely at a medium tempo: no real Allegro in the first movement but rather an affectionate Moderato, similarly no drastically gripping finale con brio, and also – avoiding the opposite – no great Adagio pathos or extreme depth of expression in the second movement.[56]

In all the extant documentation of Brahms's responses to this first performance by Richter, I have not found any evidence of any disquiet or scepticism on the composer's part, though nor is there any clear evidence of explicit identification of Richter's conducting as being especially notable. One can fairly thus conclude that at this stage his view of Richter was essentially positive if not effusive. But this was to change as early as a year later, when Richter conducted the First Symphony with the Philharmonic on December 15, 1878. Brahms wrote to Fritz Simrock, four days after the performance, that:

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[49] 'Hof-Kapellmeister Hanns Richter, der die Symphonie auf ausdrücklichen Wunsch des Componisten dirigirte, hat dieselbe mit einer liebevollen Ausdauer studirt und in einer Vollendung zu Gehör gebracht, die ihm zur höchsten Ehre gereichen'. Eduard Hanslick (unattributed), *Neue Freie Presse*, January 3, 1878, p. 2. The version of this review in Hanslick, *Music Criticisms* (pp. 157-159) is abridged and does not include the comments on Richter.

[50] Theodor Helm, 'Brahms' zweite Symphonie', *Musikalisches Wochenblatt*, January 11, 1878, pp. 36-37. A shorter review in *Die Presse*, January 1, 1878, p. 9, drew attention to the Scherzo and Finale as being the most striking elements on this occasion.

[51] Emerich Kastner, writing in *Die Harmonie,* Nr. 2, February 16, 1878, cited in Horstmann, *Brahms-Rezeption 1860-1880*, p. 281.

[52] 'Leben und Kraft sprudelt überall, dabei Gemutstiefe und Lieblichkeit'/'Musterhafte Ausführung, wärmste Aufnahme', Pohl to Simrock, December 27 and 30, 1877, *Briefwechsel X*, p. 66, as translated in Brinkmann, *Late Idyll*, p. 16.

[53] 'Richter gab sich große Mühe beim Einstudieren', *Briefwechsel X*, p. 66.

[54] Ibid.

[55] Frisch, *The Four Symphonies*, p. 169. See also ibid. p. 171 for a comparison of these timings with those of a range of recorded performances.

[56] Brinkmann, *Late Idyll*, p. 31.

We have just had my C-minor Symphony played here – truly awful (*mise*). The audience probably imagined that the child had fallen into the well, and now can stay there.[57]

Various commentators spoke in less than positive terms about the work and its impact upon listeners: Eduard Schelle wrote in *Die Presse* that the 'excessive expansiveness' of the work and the 'lack of clear plasticity in the form' meant that it 'would probably have to struggle a long time before gaining the acceptance of the public'[58]. A review in the *Fremdenblatt* found that 'for the wider public, who demand above all results from Art, it proves itself to be a little uncomfortable'[59], and the *Neues Wiener Tagblatt* thought the work brought 'no true response from the audience' whilst 'its emptily brooding aspirations left the auditorium somewhat cold'[60], whilst the *Wiener Abendpost* thought this second performance in Vienna 'did not appear to win any new friends for the symphony'[61].

However, one factor in particular may have influenced Brahms's judgment, about which Brahms made clear to Simrock his views: the coda to the first movement, then marked *Poco sostenuto* in the score, was performed at the same tempo as the introduction; Brahms thus instructed Simrock to modify it to *Meno Allegro*.

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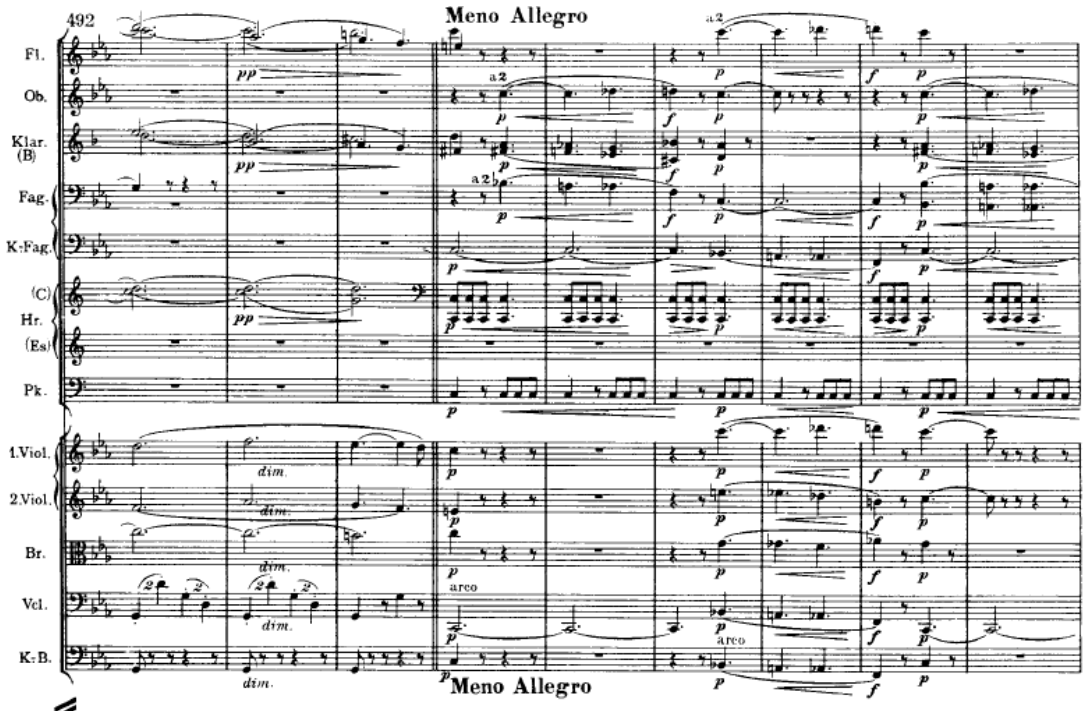
[57] ' Neulich hatten wir hier meine c moll-Symphonie – recht mise. Die Leute meinten wohl, das Kind sei einmal in den Brunnen gefallen, und nun könnt's darin bleiben.', Brahms to Simrock, December 19, 1878, in *Briefwechsel X*, p. 100. Walter Frisch points out that *mise* is a variety of the Yiddish word *mies* (Frisch, *The Four Symphonies*, p. 213).

[58] 'Die großangelegte und geistvoll concipirte Composition lahmt theils an der übermäßigen Ausdehnung, theils am mangel klarer Plastik in der Form und dürfte noch lange zu kämpfen haben, bevor sie dem Verständniß des Publicums zugänglich wird.', E[duard] Schelle, *Die Presse*, December 18, 1878, cited in 'Kritiken zu zeitgenössischen Wiener Aufführungen der ersten Symphonie von Johannes Brahms (Auswahl)', p. 499. In terms of the perceived plasticity of the work, however, Ludwig Speidel expressed the opposite view in his review in *Fremdenblatt* on the same day, cited ibid. p. 500.

[59] '...aber für das größere Publikum, das auch in der Kunst vor Allem Resultate verlangt, erweist sie sich als ein wenig unbequem', Ludwig Speidel, *Fremdenblatt*, December 18, 1878, cited ibid. p. 500.

[60] ' Die C-moll Symphonie von Brahms wollte auch dieses Mal keinen rechten Anklang beim Publicum finden, das komplizirte Tongeflechte mit den oft tief angelegten, öfter aber ins leere grübelnden Aspirationen ließ das Auditorium so ziemlich kalt.', *Neues Wiener Tagblatt*, December 18, 1878, cited ibid. p. 500. Some other reviews, in the *Konstitutionelle Vorstadt-Zeitung*, *Neue Freie Presse* and *Wiener Signale*, were more positive, however (see ibid. pp. 500-501)

[61] 'Die zweite Aufführung der Symphonie von Brahms schien ihr keine neuen Freunde zu werben.', Ludwig Benedikt Hahn, *Wiener Abendpost*, December 18, 1878, cited ibid. p. 501.




This aspect of tempo, which has a significant impact upon the structural perceptions of the first movement, may have been one of the prime reasons for Brahms's disparaging view of the performance, as also might lingering memories of the luke-warm reaction to his own conducting of the work with the *GdM* in the city two years earlier[62]. But the performance was also criticised severely by Richard Heuberger in a review in the *Wiener Tagblatt*, saying that the symphony

is one of those pieces that appear quite alien to Herr Hans Richter. One cannot approach this masterwork from the standpoint of color, and from the thematic standpoint it has perhaps not yet been sufficiently investigated.[63]

In his diary, Heuberger recorded that:

The work was simply played through twice. Richter had not done much preparation, and on the whole it was pretty rough and ready. Brahms said: 'In the end I said nothing at all any more, I just laughed when it all got too messy. If people don't want to rehearse seriously, they should leave such things well alone – and it wasn't I who sought the performance. At the very least this way of carrying on is not exactly collegial.' This was how Brahms spoke about that performance, regretting that he 'could not say all this openly to the orchestra'. [64]

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[62] On the critical reaction to this performance, which took place on December 17, 1876, see Brodbeck, *Brahms: Symphony No. 1*, p. 82.

[63] Richard Heuberger, writing in *Wiener Tagblatt*, December 12, 1878, cited in 'Kritiken zu Zeitgenössischen Wiener Aufführungen der Ersten Symphonie von Johannes Brahms (Auswahl), in *Brahms-Kongreß Wien* (Tutzing: H. Schneider, 1988), p. 515, cited in Frisch, *The Four Symphonies*, p. 167.

[64] 'Das Werk wurde bloß zweimal durchgespielt, Richter hatte sich nicht sonderlich vorbereitet, im ganzen gings recht bunt zu. Brahms sagte: „Schließlich sagte ich gar nichts mehr, sondern lachte bloß, wenn's einmal recht durcheinander ging. Wenn man nicht studieren will, so soll man derlei liegen lassen. – Ich habe ja nicht ersucht um die Aufführung. Zum mindesten ist das ganze Betragen inkollegial.“ So und ähnlich sprach Brahms über jene Aufführung, wobei er bedauerte, „das den Philharmonikern nicht ganz offen sagen zu können“.', Heuberger, *Erinnerungen*, p. 133. I use the translation in Pascall and Weller, 'Flexible tempo and nuancing', p. 233.

by Hans Richter; we recall from earlier the anecdotal evidence that Brahms called his playing 'grey and *mezzoforte*' (this does not necessarily refer to tempo modification, though). Also his 'too inflexible approach to tempo and phrasing' (p. 233) was criticized by Charles Villiers Stanford (who, as mentioned earlier described Brahms's tempo as 'elastic', and describes a story of a friend of Brahms being hurried away from a Richter performance by the composer himself).[65].

An extensive treatment of the differing styles of Bülow and Richter, based on the plentiful amount of accounts of their work, would take a whole article in itself. Pascall and Weller conclude that a 'middle way' between Richter and Bülow represents Brahms's preference, but in so doing are perhaps in danger of conflating Brahms's ideas on tempo and other matters (such as phrasing, orchestral balance, use of dynamics, say) in the case of Richter. Stanford attributed Brahms's distaste for one of Richter's performance of the First Symphony to its 'metronomic' nature, but Brahms could equally well have disliked it for other reasons (as with another Richter performance of the same work that he described as 'grey and mezzoforte', the former of which terms does not necessarily refer to tempo). However, Pascall and Weller, as well as Robert Philip argue, rightly in my opinion, against Brahms's being wholly antipathetic to Richter.

*Elasticity* of tempo, in the sense of non-rigidity for the purposes of phrasing in particular, is not the same thing as tempo *modification*, at least as I understand the terms and concepts. Pascall and Weller's description of the 'middle way' as eschewing 'both the dullness of straight performing and the artificiality of exaggeratedly nuanced 'mannerist' performing, replacing these with the artistry and intensity of felt and lived musicality' (p. 239) is too generalized to be very meaningful. I conclude from the accounts of the conducting of Bülow, Richter and Brahms himself that in the orchestral works Brahms did want to eschew excessive extraneous tempo modifications (and thus would probably have disliked, say, the performances of a Mengelberg or a Fürtwangler), whilst also wanting the phrasing not to be hemmed in by an over-rigid pulse. The dislike for the 'tiny gap' at the beginning of each phrase as Brahms described in Bülow may be a reaction to such a thing indeed becoming 'mannerist' (as most approaches to phrasing applied as a matter of routine can become), whilst still desiring that the phrasing maintains flexibility and elasticity. If the difference between a *regular* pulse and a *fixed* pulse is meaningful to those reading this, it may describe the crucial difference between Brahms and Richter. In a sense, Bülow's own readings may have been equally 'fixed', just according to a different set of reified conventions.

Walter Frisch, in his chapter in *Performing Brahms*[66], looks at slightly later performing traditions in the context of the First Symphony. He states that:

> More than orchestral size, layout, and balance, and more than instrumental techniques such as portamento and vibrato, it is the parameter of tempo (and rhythm in the broadest sense) that offers the most direct and fruitful path to an understanding of historical styles of orchestral performance, at least in the standard symphonic repertoire. (p. 278)

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[65] *Briefwechsel* X, 100. Cited in Frisch, *Brahms: The Four Symphonies*, 166.
[66] Walter Frisch, 'In Search of Brahms's First Symphony: Steinbach, the Meiningen tradition, and the recordings of Hermann Abendroth', in Musgrave and Sherman (eds), *Performing Brahms*, 277-301.

In defining what he calls ‘two basic interpretive ‘schools,’ or better, ends of a broad spectrum’ he sets up a range of possible dualisms for their extremes in a rather Taruskin-like manner: ‘strict-free, straightforward-nuanced, moderate-exaggerated, restrained-interventionist, Apollonian-Dionysian, classic-romantic, positivist-idealist, authenticist-vitalist’, suggesting also that ‘Richter and Hans von Bülow best represent these extremes’ (p. 279). Drawing attention to the numerous documented instances (from the Blume essay printed in the book) of Fritz Steinbach’s modifications of tempo as indicated in the markings from his score and related by his pupil Walter Blume, Frisch suggests ‘a Brahms-Bülow-Steinbach tradition’, finding in a review of Steinbach’s performances by the Munich critic Alexander Berrsche a close corroboration of the type of performance indicated by Blume’s essay (right down to fine details, in terms of other aspects of performance as well). In this tradition, which Frisch calls ‘free’ or ‘interventionist’, he also counts Oskar Freid, Willem Mengelberg, Hermann Abendroth, Max Fiedler and Wilhelm Furtwängler, naming Abendroth as the closest to the Steinbach tradition, tracing again specific details, as described by Steinbach via Blume, which are followed very closely in Abenroth’s recording.

The family tree that Frisch creates in terms of conductors in the ‘Meiningen tradition’ has to be viewed with some caution in light of the fact that von Bülow stands at its helm. Indeed such a tradition is deeply connected to Meiningen, but how much so to Brahms’s wishes?

**Fritz Steinbach (1855-1916)**

Steinbach succeeded Richard Strauss as director of the Meiningen Orchestra in 1886, in which position he remained until 1902, and gave many performances of Brahms's work during the last decade of the composer's life, often working closely with Brahms.

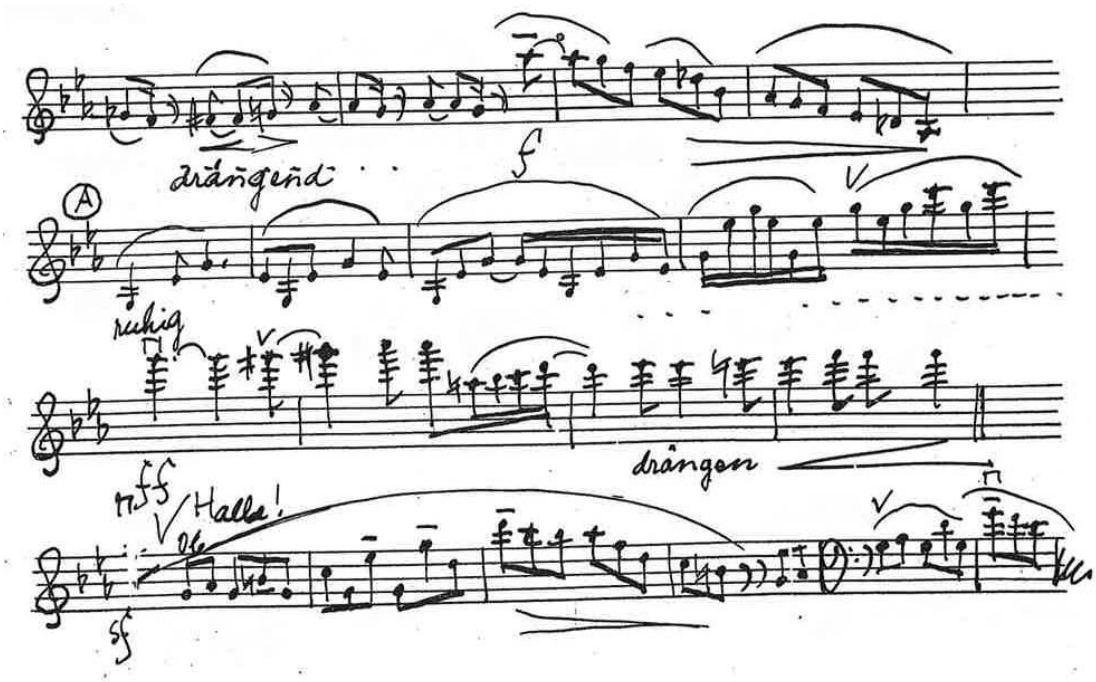
In Fritz Steinbach's student Walter Blume's book *Brahms in der Meininger Tradition. Seine Sinfonien und Haydn-Variationen in der Bezeichnung von Fritz Steinbach*, Blume provides a wide range of information taken from Steinbach's marked-up scores, which is compelling to read and has wide implications for interpretation and performance practice of Brahms’s music in general. Blume wrote his book in 1933, right at the end of the Weimar Republic, and bemoaned the tendency towards motoric rhythms such as had come to prominence during this period through the influence of the *Neue Sachlichkeit* and also of jazz, and contrasted this unfavourably with the tradition represented by Steinbach.

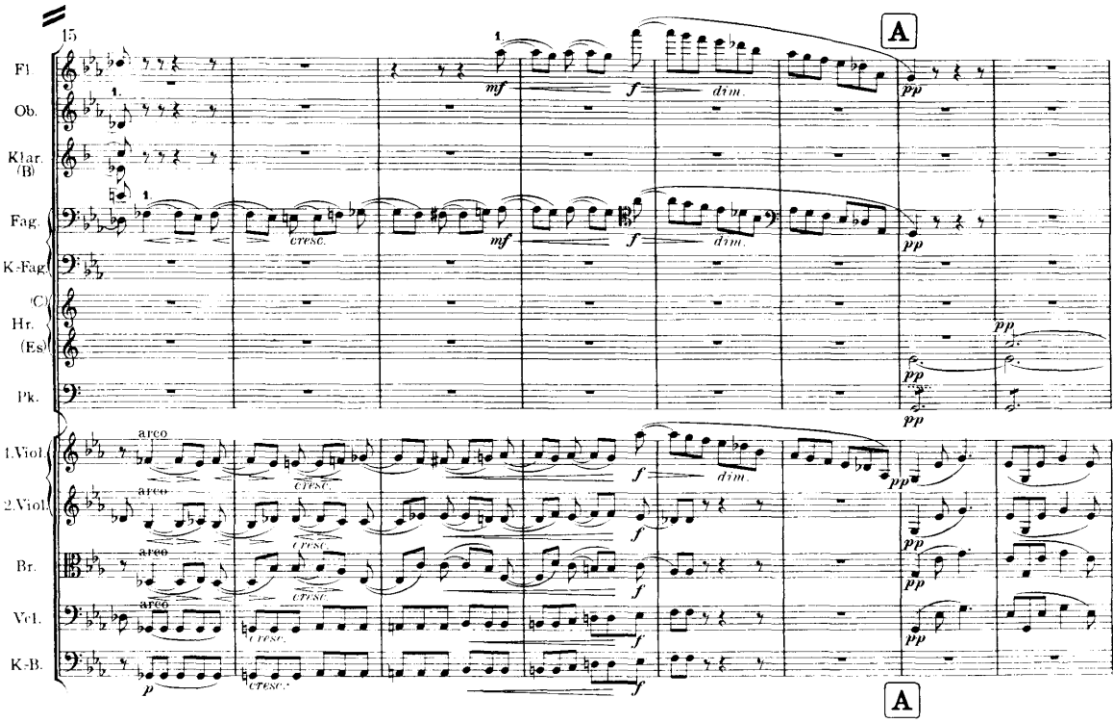
Es gilt also, das elektroskopisch feine Gefühl für geringste Tempo-Modifikationen nicht verloren gehen zu lassen, sondern es zu pflegen und zu bilden als gegengewicht zu einer nur motorenhaft präzisen Rhythmik. Dabei muß man sich aber klar sein, daß auch hier eine Gefahr lauert. Tempo-Modifikationen, Beschleunigung oder Verzögerung innerhalb einer Periode oder eines Taktes dürfen nicht übertrieben werden. Dies würde zu einer unerträglichen Maniriertheit führen und hieße das Klavierspiel der "höheren Tochter" sanktionieren. Es kommt darauf an, zwischen den beiden Polen – Melos und rhythmus – das richtige Maß zu halten. Das Zünglein an der wage ist das Tempo. Einerseits bewahren Tempo-Modifikationen den Rhythmus davor, mechanisch motorenhaft zu werden,

andrerseits verhindern sie zugleich die Erstarrung des Melodischen. Positiv ausgedrückt: Tempo-Modifikationen geben Rhythmus und Melodie erst musikalisches Leben.

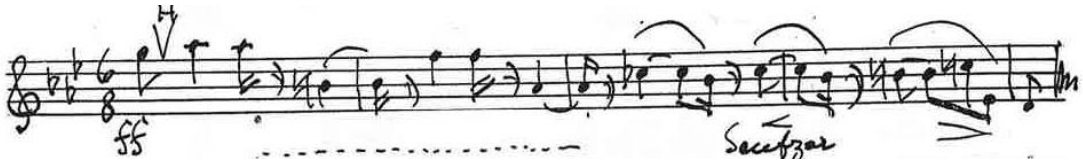
It is therefore important not to allow the electroscopically refined feeling for the minutest tempo modifications, but to maintain this and use it to provide a counterweight to a purely motorically precise rhythm. However, it must be apparent that even here there lurks a danger. Tempo modifications, within a period or a bar, cannot be overstated. This would lead to an intolerably manneristic situation, sanctioning the piano playing of a schoolgirl. It is important to maintain the appropriate position between the two poles of *Melos* and rhythm. On the one hand, tempo modifications prevent rhythm from becoming mechanically motoric, on the other hand, they also prevent melodic paralysis. Expressed positively: tempo modifications primarily give musical life to rhythm and melody.

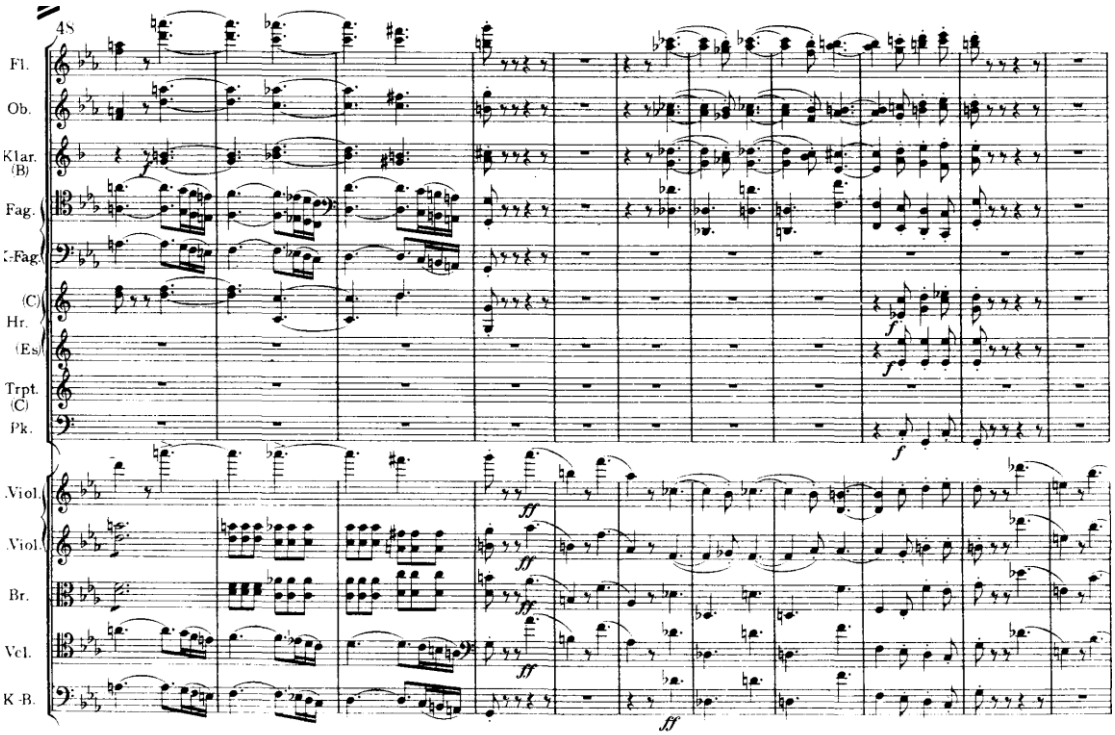
The following are a few of Steinbach's indications for tempo modification. In the first movement of the First Symphony, he wrote that the F#-G and Ab-G slurs in the lead up to figure A should be *drängend* (urgent, pressing), followed by *rubato* for the descending scalic figure in the first violins, flutes and oboes.



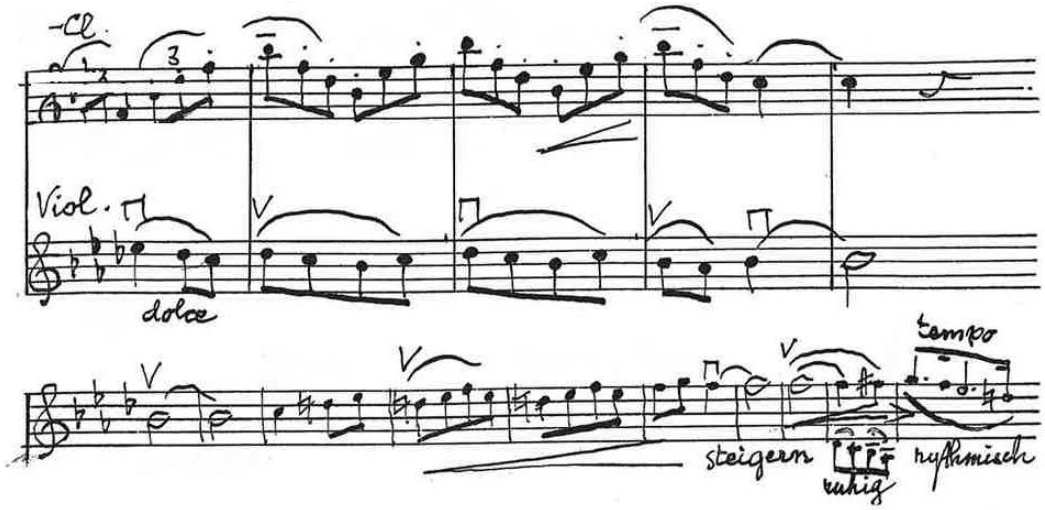


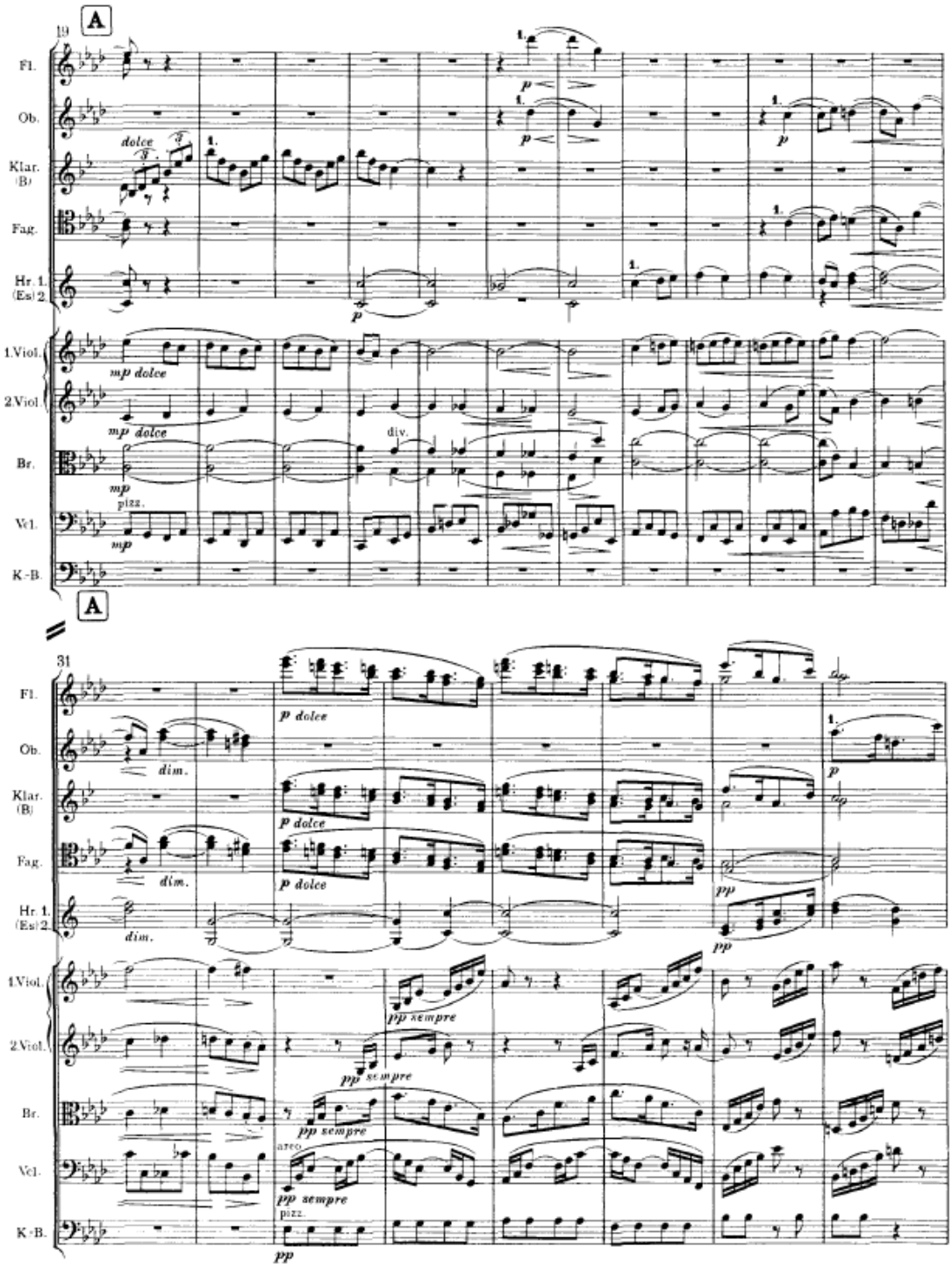

Soon after the beginning of the *Allegro*, he wrote that the C-flat/B-flat slurred groups in bars 53-55, and corresponding passages should be played *espr. wie Seufzer* (like sighing)



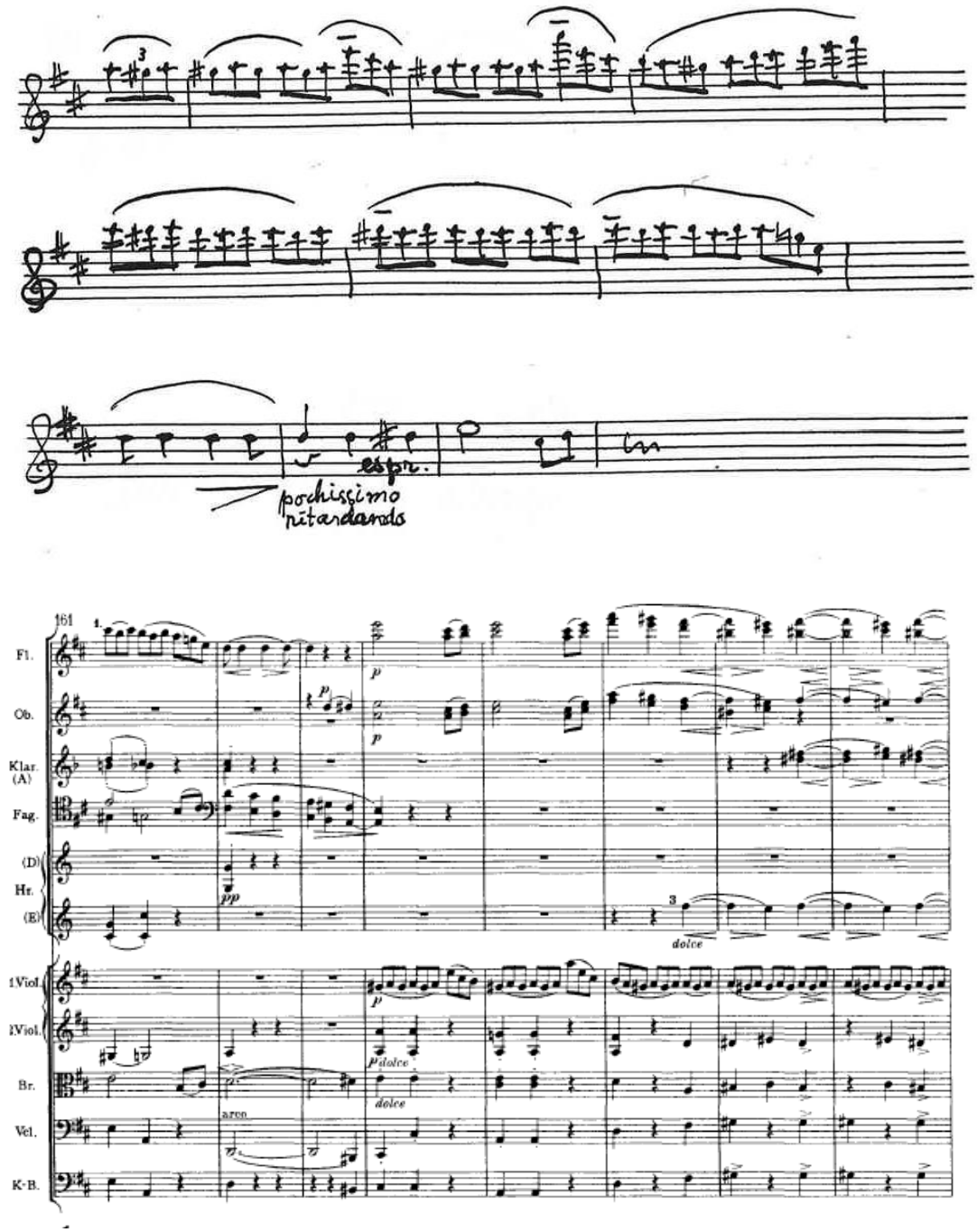



In the passage from figure A in the third movement, Steinbach writes that the music should be *steigern* (climbing) from bar 29, then *ruhig* (peaceful) in the cadential bar 32.

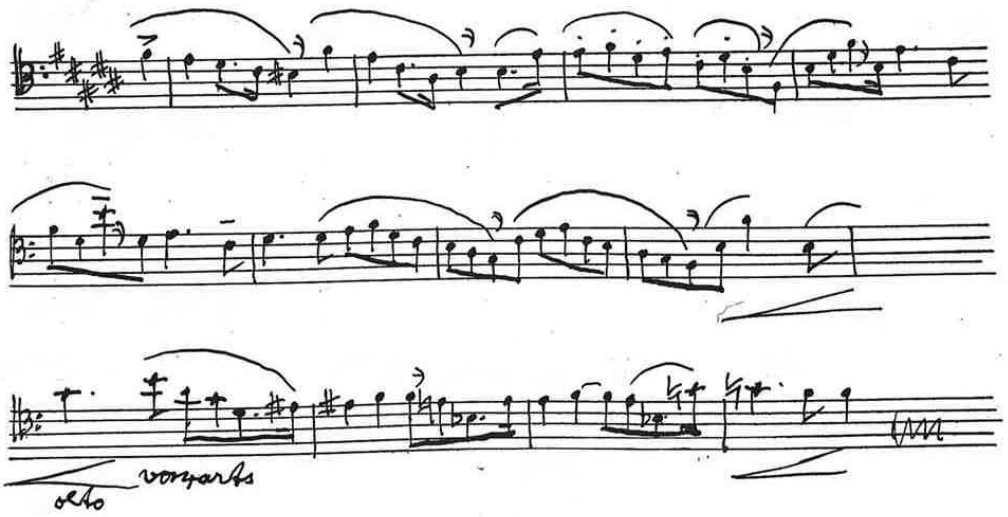


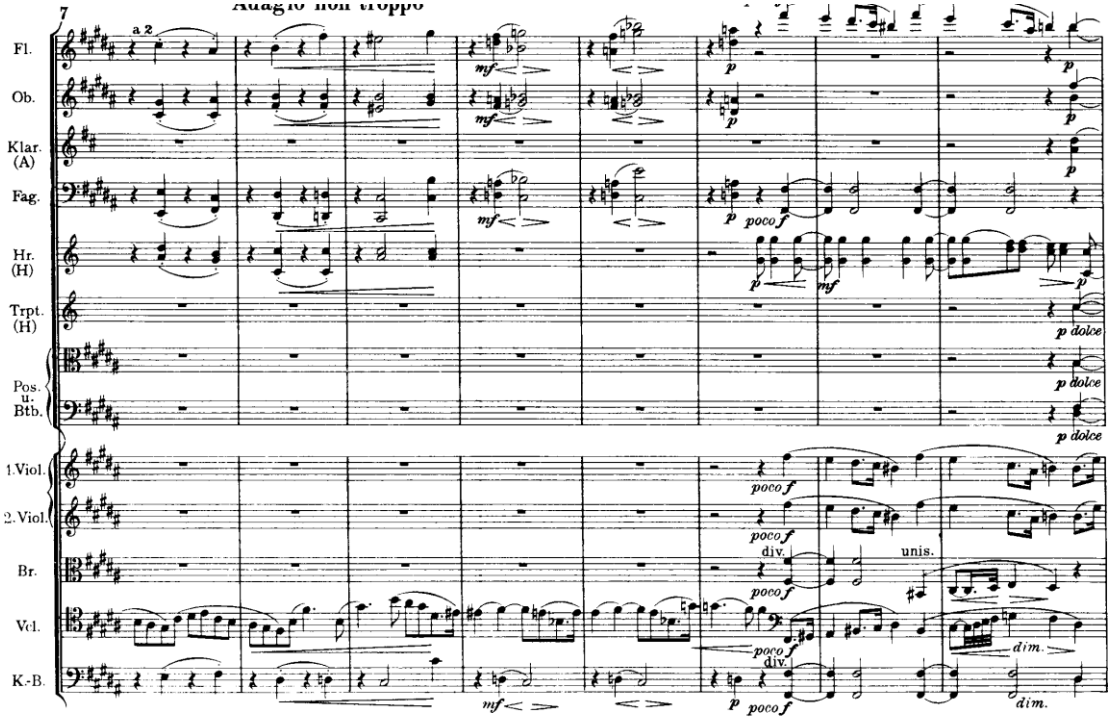



Similarly, Steinbach indicated *pochissimo ritardando* and *espr.* in the cadential bar 163 of the first movement of the Second Symphony.

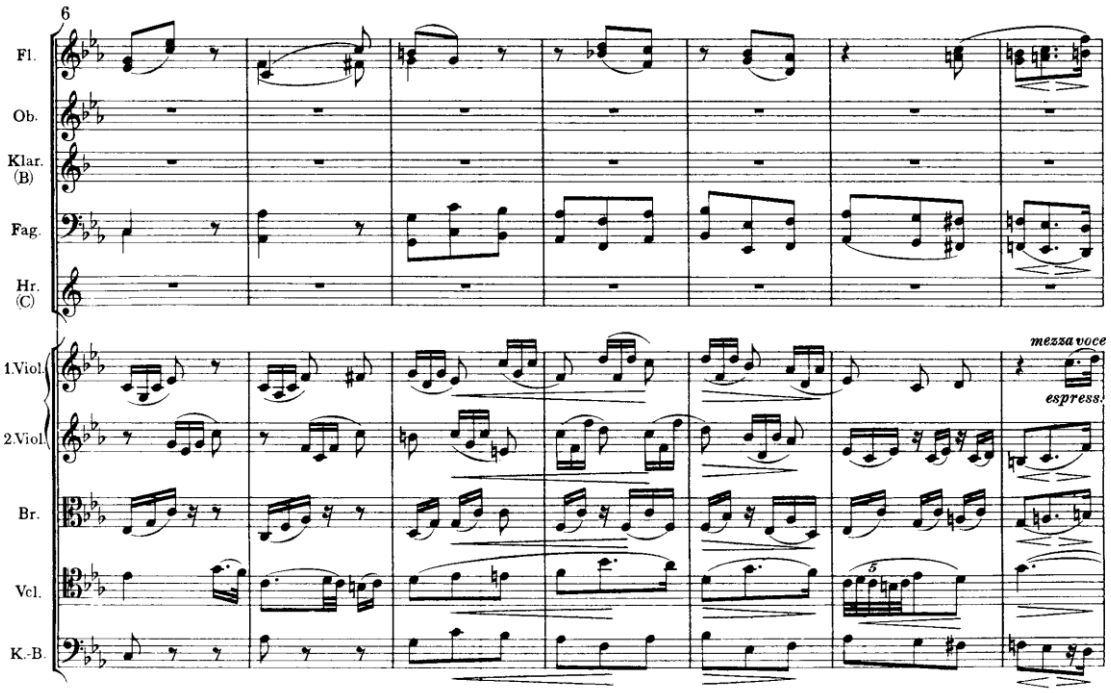



In the second movement of the same symphony, Steinbach marks *vorwärts* at bar 9, at a passage of maximum harmonic intensity.




A similar indication of *vorwärts* can be found from bar 8 of the third movement of the Third Symphony.




Many of the other tempo modifications to be found here are generally predicated on similar factors – harmonic intensity, melodic peak, or cadential function.

I would like to consider other evidence on Steinbach and Brahms's apparent endorsement of him, especially in light of his criticisms of Bülow. The evidence is quite patchy - Steinbach is rarely if ever mentioned in Brahms's correspondence, never to Joachim, Billroth or the Herzogenbergs and only in passing to Clara Schumann[67] and Fritz Simrock. There is also no mention of him in the memoirs of Richard Heuberger[68], Albert Dietrich or Konrad Huschke[69]. The source often cited for the belief in Brahms's enthusiasm for Steinbach comes from Max Kalbeck's biography. Kalbeck himself is quite rapturous about Steinbach's period at the Meiningen Orchestra:

The relationship between legislation and executive that was determined and recognised (though not too fearfully observed) by von Bülow, was again adjusted by Steinbach. Neither did the executor run the risk of diminishing themselves so as to become a subservient minion of the legislator, nor had they to be on their guard against misrepresentations or exaggerations of the creator's will, which make the executor into a bailiff, and the sovereign into a tyrant. As different from the pandering desk-virtuosi as from their pedantic time-beating counterparts, Steinbach was a conscientious type, one who sought through their work to serve their devoted friend. Also as a conductor he saw his model as Brahms himself, who could inspire and carry away with his baton as much as anyone, provided that he had a devoted orchestra and a sympathetic public. After Bülow the conquerer had followed Steinbach the consolidator.[70]

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[67] Berthold Litzmann, *Clara Schumann & Johannes Brahms*: *Briefe aus den Jahren 1853-1896*, Zweiter Band 1872-1896 (Hildesheim and New York, 1970), 571, 591, 595 n. 1. Brahms does describe Steinbach as 'der liebe Kapellmeister' in the letter to Clara from November 17th 1894 (571), but does not comment further.

[68] Richard Heuberger, *Erinnerungen an Johannes Brahms: Tagebuchnotizen aus den Jahren 1875 bis 1897*, ed. Kurt Hofmann (Tutzing, 1971).

[69] Konrad Huschke, *Johannes Brahms als Pianist, Dirigent und Lehrer* (Karlsruhe, 1935).

[70] Kalbeck, *Brahms*, Vol. 4, 81. Original German is 'Das von Bülow festgestellte und anerkannte, aber nicht allzu ängstlich beobachtete Verhältnis zwischen Legislative und Exekutive wurde von Steinbach

He also refers to an occasion in 1891 whereby:

With the First and Fourth Symphonies, the Tragic Ouvertüre and the Haydn Variations, Hofkapellmeister Steinbach scored *sub auspiciis magistri* his last viva as Brahms-conductor with radiance [*Glanz*]. Brahms was so surprised and moved by the elemental effect of his C-minor Symphony that he himself requested a repeat performance of the work.[71]

and later cites a letter between Brahms and Steinbach, which Brahms wrote on the morning he left from the Meiningen celebration of the 'three B's' (a concept invented by Bülow but continued by Steinbach), that Steinbach organized in September 1895[72]. This demonstrates through its tone the closeness between the two of them and warmth of feeling Brahms felt towards Steinbach:

Dear Friend,

However much I might be tempted, I must not interrupt your well-deserved sleep. But upon your happy awakening you will find my heartfelt greeting; how heartfelt and sincerely grateful it is I have no need to tell you in detail. You must have felt it every day you gave to me and everyone who honoured your marvellous festival, for a wholly tremendous pleasure.

Still, with this wholly secure feeling, you must probably be content, for it is possible neither in speech nor writing to express in full how extraordinary your festival was.

If I possibly could, I would remain here for the day, in order to attempt it.....[73]

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But the view of Steinbach to be found in Richard Specht's biography is quite different, as the following comments demonstrate:

The first to bring about a change after Hans von Bülow, for whom the Brahmsian world had arisen as a glorious revelation, was Fritz Steinbach, though it must be said that he did it in no Brahmsian spirit. In

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neu reguliert. Weder lief der Vollstrecker Gefahr, als willennlose Kreatur des Gesetzgebers zu verkümmern, noch musste dieser beständig auf der Hut sein vor Unterlegungen oder Übertreibungen seines Schöpferwillens, die den Exekutor zum Büttel, den Regenten zum Tyrannen machen. Vom gefallsüchtigen Pultvirtuosen wie vom pedantischen Taktschläger gleichweit entfernt, war Steinbach der gewissenhafte, der Person in der Sache dienende ergebene Freund. Auch als Dirigent erkannte er sein Vorbild in Brahms, der, mit dem Taktstock anfeuern und fortreissen konnte wie irgendeiner, wenn er ein ihm ergebenes Orchester und ein ihm sympathisches Publikum vor sich hatte. Auf Bülow, den Eroberer, war Steinbach, der Befestiger, gefolgt.'

[71] Kalbeck, *Brahms*, Vol. 4, 224. Original German is 'Hoffkapellmeister Steinbach bestand mit der ersten und vierten Symphonie, der tragischen Ouvertüre und den Haydn=Variationen sub auspiciis magistri sein letztes Rigorosum als Brahms=Dirigent mit Glanz. Brahms war von der elementaren Wirkung seiner c-moll=Symphonie so überrascht und ergriffen, dass er sich die Wiederholung des Werkes ausbat.'

[72] The festival took place from 27-29 September 1895, and featured several concerts, including Beethoven's quartets Op. 59, 95 and 180 played by Joachim's quartet, Brahms's Second String Quintet, Clarinet Quintet and both Clarinet Sonatas (played by Richard Mülhfeld and Eugene d'Albert), then in the orchestral/choral concert music from Bach's St Matthew Passion and double chorus 'Nun ist der Heil', Beethoven's Mass in D, and Brahms's *Triumphlied* and First Symphony. See Sedley Taylor, 'The First Saxe-Meiningen Musical Festival', in *The Musical Times and Singing Circular*, Vol. 36 No. 633 (November 1st 1895), 766-767.

[73] Kalbeck, *Brahms*, Vol. 4, 409. Original German is '"Lieber Freund, So sehr es mich reizt, ich darf Ihren so wohlverdienten Schlaf nicht unterbrechen. Aber beim frohen Erwachen sollen Sie doch meinen herzlichen Gruss vorfinden; wie herzlich und wie herzlich dankbar er ist, branche ich Ihnen nicht ausführlich zu sagen. Sie müssen es alle Tage empfunden haben, was Sie mir und allen, die Ihr herrliches Fest mitfeierten, für eine ganz ungemeine Freude gemacht haben. Mit dieser ganz sicheren Empfindung aber müssen Sie wohl zufrieden sein, denn weder schriftlich noch mündlich kommt man dazu, sich über so Ausserordentliches, wie es Ihr Fest in jeder Beziehung war, voll und ganz auszusprechen. Könnte ich irgend, so bliebe ich den Tag hier, um es zu versuchen - - -.'

order to enhance the orchestral brilliance, he made the violins over-accentuate and play melodic passages in a melting Italian manner, and asked the trumpeters to raise their bells high in the air. He thus obtained Berlioz-like effects at the expense of Brahms's true nature, but he at least demonstrated that this music, alleged to be so meagre and ashen, could after all be made radiant. And all those who have since heard the *German Requiem* under Furtwängler and the Symphonies under Nikisch or Weingartner, to the last of whom, by the way, we owe a very clever and pertinent study of Brahms as an artist in orchestration, know what to think of that master's "insufficient" instrumentation.[74]

The fact that this coldly majestic composition [the First Symphony] was so long in gripping the public is doubtless to be attributed in the main to unsatisfactory interpretations. Even Fritz Steinbach, Hans von Bülow's successor at Meiningen, whom Brahms esteemed as an "unsurpassable" conductor of his and other works, to my mind clothed the C minor Symphony in splendid robes which did not suit it and with his false effects gained the very opposite of the inwardness it demands. Truly perfect, nay staggering performances of this most forceful symphonic creation by the master I confess to having heard, in spite of Arthur Nikisch and his otherwise marvellous Brahms interpretations, only under Felix Weingartner, who piled it up and made it transparent as no other conductor.[75]

Specht, who elsewhere damns Steinbach with faint praise in comparison to Bülow, saying the former had 'perhaps a small mentality but a bigger heart'[76], makes his allegiances in terms of the Steinbach-Weingartner axis quite clear, whilst acknowledging that his view of Steinbach was not necessarily shared by Brahms himself. However, the fact that he feels the need to acknowledge this to my mind suggests a greater authenticity (why would he otherwise point out something that does not exactly help his own arguments?). Florence May suggested that Steinbach had become 'especially appreciated as a conductor of the works of Brahms, whose personal friendship and artistic confidence he enjoyed in a high degree'[77]. She also cites the same letter from Brahms to Steinbach to be found in Kalbeck[78]

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[74] Richard Specht, *Johannes Brahms*, translated Eric Blom (London: Dent, 1930), 104. Original German is 'Fritz Steinbach hat heir als erster nach Hans von Bülow, dem die Brahmssche Welt herlich aufgegangen war und dem sie ein neues Evangelium debeutete, Wandel geschaffen, freilich auf recht unbrahmsische Weise: um den Glanz dieses Orchesterklanges zu erhärten, liess er die Geigen überakzentuieren und die Kantilenen mit italianisierendem Schmelz spielen, die Trompeten mit aufgestelltem Schalltrichter blasen und erreichte auf diese Art zwar Berliozeffekte, aber das Brahmssche Wesen war dabei abhanden gekommen. Trotzdem: man hatte wenigstens bemerkt, dass diese angeblich so dürr und aschenfarbig klingende Musik doch zu starker Leuchtkraft zu bringen war. Und wer seitdem das Deutsche Requiem unter Furtwängler, die Symphonien unter Nikisch oder Weingartner gehört hat, dem übrigens eine sehr kluge und sachliche Studie über den Orchestrierungskünstler Brahms zu danken ist, weiss nun, was es mit der "unzulänglichen" Instrumentation des Meisters Brahms auf sich hat. (Richard Specht, *Johannes Brahms* (Hellerau, 1928), 117).

[75] Specht, *Brahms*, translated Blom, 277-278. Original is 'Sicherlich sind an dem verzögerten Durchdringen des hoheitvoll spröden Werkes zum überwiegenden Teil die zumesit sehr unzureichenden Interpretationen schuld. Sogar Fritz Steinbach, der Meininger Nachfolger Hans von Bülows, den Brahms asl "unübertrefflichen" Dirigenten seiner und anderer Werke hochhielt, hat meinem Gefühl nach gerade der c-moll-Symphonie ein ungeziemendes Prunkgewand umgehängt und mit falshen Effekten das völlige Gegenteil jener Innerlichkeit erreicht, die das Werk verlangt. Wirklich vollkommene, ja erschütternde Aufführungen dieser wuchtigsten symphonischen Schöpfung des Meisters habe ich, trotz Arthur Nikisch und seiner sonst ganz wundervollen Brahmsinterpretation, nur von Felix Weingartner gehört, der sie wie kein anderer transparent mache und zur Höhe türmte.' (Specht, *Brahms*, 300-303).

[76] Specht, *Brahms*, translated Blom, 315. Original is 'der wohl weniger Geist und dafür mehr Herzenswärme hatte' (Specht, *Brahms*, 342).

[77] May, *Life of Brahms*, Vol. 2, 605.

[78] Ibid. 649.

Rudolf von der Leyen also describes Steinbach as one destined to become the 'upholder and proclaimer of Brahms's thoughts'[79]. A close friend and devotee of Brahms, an amateur pianist who was chosen by the composer to join him in a performance of the two piano version of the Third Symphony in the presence of the Duke of Meiningen in his Italian retreat[80], and upon whose shoulder Brahms literally cried during Clara Schumann's funeral[81], his view is to be taken seriously. Widmann also implies if not quite states directly that Brahms was deeply admiring of Steinbach's work with the Meiningen Orchestra, and travelled to Meiningen often to hear them[82]. All these small bits of information in combination, from very different sources, should in my opinion be sufficient grounds for confidence that Brahms deeply admired Steinbach's performances of his music.[83]

In his book on Brahms, J.A. Fuller-Maitland made an important point on tempo issues in the last movement of the First Symphony, and the practices of various conductors:

> At the fifth complete bar there begins a mysterious passage of pizzicato quavers, which are gradually quickened to a most exciting point, where a drum roll ushers in a series of notes on the horn marked "*f sempre e passionato*" supported by the strings, muted and *tremolando*.
>
> Herr Arthur Nikisch, in order to enhance the effect of this quickening, starts these quavers [in the fifth complete bar] so slowly that they are almost identical in length with the crotchets that have preceded them. Whether it is permissible to upset the whole balance of the section for such an object may be doubted, especially when such conductors as Joachim, Richter, and Steinbach, who had the master's own traditions, give no support to this reading. Each of these great conductors was accustomed to make certain *rallentandos* at various points of the first movement, and as no written *rallentando* occurs there, the probability is that Brahms at different times of his life approved of the different readings, and at all events that he did not actively disapprove of any.[84]

This is certainly consistent with Blume's description of Steinbach's intentions at this point in the score, Blume saying that 'The tempo of the introduction is very slow. The pizzicato episode [b.6] gives good justification for this tempo'. This suggests a consistency between the first and sixth bars (Blume/Steinbach's numbering is different to Fuller-Maitland's as the latter does not consider the first three crotchets to be a full bar), though Blume does go on to add that 'This passage is played properly when a slow eighth note is beaten'[85].

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[79] Rudolf von der Leyen, *Johannes Brahms als Mensch und Freund* (Düsseldorf and Leipzig, 1905), 96. The full sentence in the original is 'In Meiningen waren die ersten unter den Auserwählten ihrer kunst: Joseph Joachim, Richard Mühlfeld, Robert Hausmann vereinigt, sie geleiteten über strahlendem Bogen die Lichtgestalten des Geistes auf unsere tönende Welt Heir auch traf ich den Generalmusikdirektor Fritz Steinbach, der sich immer mehr zu einem der berufensten Trager und Verkündiger Brahmsscher Gedanken entwickelt hat, unter dessen Dirigentenstabe Brahmssche Musik in Chor und Orchester immer neue, nie geahnte Offenbarungen feiert. –'

[80] Ibid, p. 47 ff. See also Avins, *Life and Letters*, pp. 614-616.

[81] Specht, *Brahms*, pp. 348-349, cited in Swafford, *Brahms*, p. 612.

[82] Dietrich and Widmann, *Recollections of Johannes Brahms*, 197.

[83] There could of course be some critical comments or documents that have not survived or have were edited or modified by Kalbeck before publication, but it would seem surprising if there were not some hint elsewhere of negative feelings from Brahms towards Steinbach if this were the case. For the possibilities of Kalbeck's editions of the correspondence and biography leaving out information that might be hurtful to living people, see Donald M. McCorkle, 'Five Fundamental Obstacles in Brahms Source Research', in *Acta Musicologica*, Vol. 8 Fasc. 2 (Jul. – Dec. 1976), 258-260.

[84] J.A. Fuller-Maitland, *Brahms*, second edition (London, 1911), 139.

[85] Blume, 'Brahms in the Meiningen Tradition', 267.

**Felix Weingartner (1863-1942)**

The converse tradition to Frisch's Meiningen is represented by what he calls 'the sober' (p. 292) Felix Weingartner (described in a 1950 history of the Vienna Philharmonic as a 'guardian of tradition' and as one whose 'musical taste made the greatest possible appeal to the conservatively-inclined audiences of the Philharmonic'[86]), the only conductor captured on record who knew Brahms, and about who Brahms expressed much praise in a letter to Fritz Simrock of 5th April 1895 after Weingartner had conducted the Second Symphony in Vienna with the Berlin Philharmonic (Brahms had earlier been sceptical about the value of the orchestra touring, which was highly unusual at that time (except for Meiningen)[87]):

> I was very much mistaken. Your *Philharmoniker* did extremely well here in every regard. They played superbly, and that was most enthusiastically and warmly acknowledged by the public and the critics. By far the most enjoyable and best was the second evening under Weingartner, whose healthy and fresh personality was uncommonly appealing. It began with my symphony which he conducted from memory and quite splendidly. Even after just the first movement, the whole orchestra finally had to rise in thanks. The third movement had to be repeated. The performance was quite wonderful. Yesterday, in Schönbrunn, Gutmann gave a breakfast for the gentlemen, which d'Albert, Wolff, Weingartner, and I attended as guests; it was most delightful, merry, and good.[88]

Frisch says that with Weingartner we 'get a sense of the more straightforward or Richter-oriented end of the spectrum' (p. 285) and compares 'the sober Weingartner' with Abendroth, finding the former 'refuses any indulgence of this [Abenroth's] kind and plays through this whole passage [First Symphony, first movement, b. 117-158] with no substantial inflection of tempo'. In Frisch's section at the end of his article on Gunther Schuller, who compared a wide range of Brahms recordings of the First and Fourth Symphonies in his book *The Compleat Conductor*[89], he is disdainful of Schuller's advocacy of the more strict approaches to the music. Frisch holds up Steinbach as a positive example of all that Schuller affects to dislike (performances that are 'emotionally overladen, indulgent in Romantic exaggerations and distortions which do severe damage to the music'[90]), in opposition to Schuller's preferred Weingartner and Toscanini. Frisch is as harsh on Schuller as Schuller is on some perceivedly over-indulgent conductors; yet Brahms's enthusiasm for Weingartner suggests that it is at least possible that in some forms the type of performance that Schuller favours also met with Brahms's approval. Indeed, Brahms's advocacy of Weingartner is one of the clearest sources we have on this subject.

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[86] Erwin Mittag, *The Vienna Philharmonic*, translated J.R.L. Orange and G. Morice (Vienna, 1950), 40.
[87] Avins, *Brahms: Life and Letters*, 725.
[88] Avins, *Brahms: Life and Letters*, 726. Original German is 'Deine Philharmonike haben es hier in jeder Beziehung überhaus gut gehabt. Sie haben vortrefflich gespielt, und das ist von Publikum und Kritik auf das lebhafteste und herzlichste anerkannt. Weitaus am erfreulichsten und besten war der zweite Abend unter Weingartner, dessen gesunde, frische Persönlichkeit ungemein sympathisch war. Es fing mit meiner Symphonie an, die er auswendig ganz vortrefflich dirigierte. Gleich nach dem ersten Satz musste sich schliesslich das ganze Orchester zum Dank erheben. Der dritte Satz musste wiederholt werden. Die Aufführung war ganz wunderschön. Gestern gab Gutmmann den Herren ein Frühstück in Schönbrunn, bei dem d'Albert, Wolff, Weingartner und ich als Gäste waren; es war allerliebst, lustig und gut.' (*Briefwechsel* XII, 169)
[89] Gunther Schuller, *The Compleat Conductor* (Oxford, 1997), 279-424.
[90] Ibid. 334, cited in Frisch, 'In search of Brahms's First Symphony', 297.

Brahms was also enthusiastic about the conducting of Mahler and Nikisch, both of whom were known to have employed tempo modifications.

In conclusion: Brahms could be favourably disposed to a range of different approaches to tempo modification, whether stricter as in the case of Weingartner, or freer as with Steinbach. What he disliked was that which became over-manneristic, as he sometimes found in Bülow, or evidence of lacklustre engagement, as sometimes with Richter. On balance, a freer approach appears to have been his general preference, with tempo modifications arising from moments of maximum harmonic intensity, or which serve an important structural function, but as with other aspects of performance practice, it would be a mistake to view Brahms as himself inflexible and inelastic.