
COMMENTARY

THE GREAT BEETHOVEN'S METRONOME CONTROVERSY

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A number of scholar-conductors are recording and, as a result of the attention their records have attracted, live-conducting their way through restudied versions of the Beethoven cycle. The positive effects are self-evident on record sales (“you only THINK you own ‘The Nine’”) and on the careers of the conductors in the movement’s vanguard.

I have no quarrel with the use of authentic instruments in appropriate numbers when recording Beethoven. Interpretation is another matter.

The new gospel centers around Beethoven’s metronome markings. They are faster, some ridiculously so, than those we have come to accept from the performance traditions generated by the prose directions at the head of each movement in the printed music.

A number of critics, startled by some of the resulting musical absurdities, have looked to the condition of the metronomes Beethoven used, pointing out the fragility of the early models and the well-attested problems with those owned by Beethoven himself. What seems to have been overlooked, however, is the fact that regardless of how well the devices may have been working, Beethoven’s hearing wasn’t. His ears were broken.

Anyone who has timed a speech by reading rather than speaking it aloud is aware of the discrepancy in elapsed time, the spoken aloud version being significantly longer. The same holds true for reading a score when measured against concert or record time. There may be those who can compensate with their minds so reading and performance time match. I have yet to meet such a person.

It is extremely unlikely, were Beethoven aware of this phenomenon, that he would have been able to adjust for it. The composer had long lost any basis for comparison since he had become deaf years before obtaining his first metronome, operating properly or not.

If one accepts this discrepancy, Beethoven’s metronome markings become faster than the speed at which the music should actually set off, making this new bunch of recordings unauthentic indeed. His metronome only supplies a basis for *comparative*

tempi so long as the instrument functioned properly. In years to come, I expect collectors will look upon these recordings as we now view those by the Telemann Society on Vox-performances using new data, incompletely absorbed, but a signpost toward future, more carefully considered performances.

Norrington's Beethoven Ninth uses a baritone soloist in the finale who aspirates every syllable spread over more than one note, what the English used to call the "hobtrusive haitch." Among the major strictures which define bel-canto (Beethoven's productive life being neatly bracketed by those of Mozart and Bellini), this is a no-no, violating the principle of the seamless vocal line.

Scholars will soon be directing their attention to the authentic performance of romantic music. Here we have a body of recorded (acoustically and electrically) evidence which points to the use of such currently despised practices as orchestral portamento. After all, a composer expected to hear his music performed in the style in which his orchestras were playing their normal repertory, and felt no need to annotate these practices into his scores unless the effects were exaggerated. (Just about every conductor pussyfoots around those slurs in Mahler.)

Musicology has refuted once respected interpretations and bred newer, more proper ones, only to find them superseded as further information comes to light. William Maloch's investigations into pre-phonographic mechanical instruments supplies another source of data. I hope to see input from historians of social and folk dance, particularly toward the proper accenting of symphonic dance movements and toward authentic readings of nationalistic compositions. I would also like to see contributions from language scholars on how specific tongues affect the music of those composers speaking them.

Enough scholarly recordings have now accumulated to provoke a study of the history of 20th Century musicology when focused on absorbing the fruits of scholarship into performance. Recordings thus offer a ripe field for future investigation, a field to which the Beethoven's "Metronome Controversy" is adding fertilizer. 