

THE RECORDED HERITAGE OF WILLEM MENGELBERG AND ITS AESTHETIC
RELEVANCE

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I INTRODUCTION

The Dutch conductor Willem Mengelberg (1871-1951) is an important and provocative yet underestimated figure in the history of musical interpretation. He was a pianist and composer, but it was his work as a symphonic conductor *par excellence* that channeled an overwhelming percentage of his creative energies, and consequently his legacy as conductor that looms largest for us today. While having a sizable non-Dutch conducting career – with partial tenures in Frankfurt and New York and a plethora of guest conducting concerts all over the European music world - Mengelberg's main claim to aesthetic importance if not immortality derives from his having overseen the creation of one of the great orchestras of the world (the Concertgebouw Orchestra in Amsterdam¹) and having led it in a tenure of almost unparalleled length² and perhaps unmatched brilliance. These high technical standards coexisted with a vivid interest in repertoire of various styles and times, as well as with an ability to communicate detailed, highly personalized interpretative insights which is rare among conductors.

During his pre-World War II musical and social life, Mengelberg was incomparably more celebrated than criticized, was known as the most popular figure in Holland after the Queen, and invested himself in a bouquet of close friendships with many great musicians of the time. His

¹ Mengelberg didn't literally establish the orchestra himself. Its first conductor for seven years (1888-1895) was Willem Kes. Mengelberg was barely 20 years of age when appointed as General Music Director in Lucerne, Switzerland. Starting at the age of 24, he became the one responsible for moving the Amsterdam premier symphonic orchestra from something marginal in European music life to star status, equal in professionalism and prestige to ensembles such as Berliner Philharmoniker, Gewandhaus Leipzig, Dresden Staatskapelle, and the Wiener Philharmoniker.

² Mengelberg led the Concertgebouw Orchestra for nearly fifty years, 1895-1944. Ernest Ansermet with Orchestre de la Suisse Romande, Zubin Mehta with Israel Philharmonic Orchestra, Mravinsky in Leningrad, Takashi Asahina in Osaka, and Eugene Ormandy in Philadelphia are among the very few well-known conductors challenging or barely surpassing Mengelberg's record in Amsterdam. By coincidence, Sir Henry Wood's tenure with BBC Prom concerts, lasted from... 1895 to 1944.

post-WWII and posthumous fortunes declined on two accounts: the perception of his art as old-fashioned, overly Romantic and subjective, on the one hand, and accusations of his having collaborated with the Nazi occupiers of Holland, on the other. Sometimes these two reasons were mixed in a pernicious confusion, blending the notion of conservative musical tastes with fascist, if not downright Nazi, politics. It is misleading, however, to regard Mengelberg as overly conservative, since he was quite involved with the music of his own time.³ I shall deal with the first issues in detail. Regarding the accusations of collaborationism, this is not the focus of my work. Nevertheless, let us consider this issue succinctly before we turn to the main subjects of this dissertation.

That there are questionable things about Mengelberg's activities during the Nazi occupation cannot be denied. He was never a dissident, rather someone reflexively used to not challenge government, or administrative authorities in general. He did not seek or accept political positions during the Nazi occupation.⁴ It is not known that Mengelberg would have benefitted in any way from the Nazi occupiers or would have ever attempted to harm anybody on the basis of their ethnicity or political fragility. As in Furtwängler's case, his career hardly needed politically-motivated enhancement⁵. Unlike Furtwängler though, Mengelberg never protested publicly any

³ There is no other conductor born as early as Mengelberg or earlier to have conducted as much 20th century music as Mengelberg did. While occasionally Mengelberg could overestimate the gift of some composers (Ernest Schelling, for instance), his taste was nevertheless visionary. Among the composers stubbornly promoted by him, if not always commercially recorded, one counts not only Mahler and R. Strauss, but also young Dutch composers, Ravel, Bartok, Stravinsky, Enescu, Hindemith, even Krenek, all of whom were born after Mengelberg. Considering his generational placement, Mengelberg was at the same time a "guardian of tradition" and a pioneer of modernist taste.

⁴ As, regrettably, as talented a musician as Alfred Cortot did.

⁵ A young Austrian conductor, Herbert von Karajan, who voluntarily joined the Nazi Party, long before the Anschluss, and not once but twice, comes to mind.

Nazi action⁶. He did assist not only famous Jewish musicians asking for his help, such as the professor and violinist Carl Flesch⁷, but also at least some of the anonymous, ostracized Jewish members of his Amsterdam orchestra, the ensemble he dedicated his life to. He did though treat occupying authorities with deference and submissive manners of communications. Outwardly, Mengelberg displayed scant signs of distress in response to virulent German expansionism. He continued to conduct quite consistently, perhaps even enthusiastically, in Germany, in countries allied with Germany, and even in countries occupied by the Nazis (which Furtwängler refused to do). He was photographed, in a seemingly friendly context, with Arthur Seyss-Inquart, Holland's Reichskommissar. At least, Mengelberg could be suspected of a certain degree of opportunism, political naïveté, cowardice or some combination of the three.

On the other hand, the image of Mengelberg before World War II is anything but that of a far right sympathizer. Suggestions to the contrary, unless thoroughly substantiated, would be deeply unfair. There are not documented instances of Mengelberg showing anti-Semitism. Mengelberg was not only Mahler's close and faithful friend, but also Mahler's most fervent early proponent as an interpreter, at a time when such advocacy was neither easy nor popular. For his Silver Jubilee of 1920 (celebrating 25 years of leading the Concertgebouw Orchestra), instead of a safe, self-serving repertoire choice, Mengelberg chose to present in a single festival something approaching the totality of Mahler's oeuvre. This was the first time in history that a celebration of Mahler's music of these dimensions took place. The festival was organized in a spirit of

⁶ We have to be reminded though of Furtwängler's protests having taken part during the early years of the Nazi reign – 1933-1934 – when, risky as such actions they may have been, they were less likely to be conducive to a death sentence than in the 1940s.

⁷ In May 1943 Flesch wrote Mengelberg a letter thanking him for his help in reaching safe haven in the United States.

reconciliation, two short years after the carnage of the World War I, with guests from the participating countries, enemies not long before, being invited in an avowed internationalist atmosphere. The non-nationalist symbolism was consciously intended, and not coincidental. This was not a proverbial case of “some of my best friends are Jewish,” nor a self-serving enterprise laced by hypocrisy. Not only did the Mahler performances continue unabated in Amsterdam after 1933 and until the Nazi invasion (in fact, until a little later⁸). During the full advent of Nazi power, and as long as he had a choice, there was no change in Mengelberg’s attitudes towards – or the inviting of – either Jewish musicians, or of musicians known as being “friends of the Jews” (which in the Nazi book was almost as bad as being Jewish), or of musicians known to be, if not Jewish, despised by the Nazis because of their political leanings. In one or another of this different categories, we must mention Joseph Szigeti, Adolf Busch, Yehudi Menuhin, Ernest Bloch, Béla Bartók, and Paul Hindemith⁹ (stridently attacked by the Nazi press for his “decadent” music, abhorred by Hitler himself, and defended in 1934 by Furtwängler in *The Hindemith Case*¹⁰, Furtwängler’s naive attempt at a “*J’accuse*” type of progressive pamphlet). We should also mention Bruno Walter, who found a job in Amsterdam between 1934 and 1939, after being shamefully expelled from Berlin’s musical life in 1933, when the same Furtwängler was among the few who protested it. Then, for the history aficionado, there was Mengelberg’s curious programming of Tchaikovsky’s music in occupied

⁸ Mengelberg asked the annoyed occupying authorities for an exemption, so he could conduct Mahler’s First Symphony, which he did, in 1940.

⁹ Hindemith, shaken by the Berlinesse *Mathis der Mahler* scandal, found a hospitable, if short-lived refuge in Amsterdam, where Mengelberg received him with open arms and had Hindemith both premiere his Viola Concerto (*Der Schwanendreher*) under Mengelberg’s baton and conduct himself Concertgebouworkest in the first Dutch performance of his *Philharmonisches Konzert*. (Mengelberg will perform - Germany-forbidden - Hindemith music as late as 1940 - the recording of the premiere of the *Violin Concerto*, with the elderly Concertgebouw concertmaster Ferdinand Helman, survives.)

¹⁰ The article was published in *Deutsche Allgemeine Zeitung*, November 25 1934.

Paris, in January 1944. Politically speaking, there was one thing to perform Tchaikovsky in 1940, when Mengelberg recorded, for Telefunken, the *Piano Concerto* with Conrad Hansen, and the *Fifth Symphony*,¹¹ both with Berliner Philharmoniker. This was after the Ribbentrop-Molotov treaty and before the June 1941 attack. By 1944, after Stalingrad, one of the bloodiest battles in whole history, with Nazi power on the wane, with the Nazi power circle prey to ever-intensifying forms of paranoia and lashing out to “saboteurs,” the Russians were demonized more than ever in Nazi propaganda. It would be excessive to claim an act of political courage on Mengelberg’s behalf, regarding his bizarre (in context) 1944 programming of Tchaikovsky’s music. This is though one more indirect piece of evidence that the conductor’s conservative German education and upbringing was not documented to devolve into cultural hatred or intolerance. In his shaken, inconsistent (for reasons beyond his choosing) musical inner sanctum, he remained, not unlike Furtwängler, an idealist and a de facto, if not an ideological outsider.

At the end of the war, Mengelberg was publicly humiliated in Holland, summarily judged and found culpable of a non-criminal form of collaborationism. He ended his life in exile, in Switzerland, dying shortly before his 80th birthday, shortly before the block on his professional activities in Holland was slated to expire. Opinions differ on his degree of culpability and likely these issues will continue to remain controversial for decades to come. On a musical level, posterity was deprived of the chance of the complete recorded Mahler recordings from a conductor whose musical closeness to Mahler couldn’t be overstated. On a human level, it is relevant to quote Max Tak, one of the Jewish members of Concertgebouw Orchestra, who lost

¹¹ Another famous Tchaikovsky recording of the time was Georg Kulenkampff’s estimable 1939 traversal of the Violin Concerto, meant presumably to substitute in the catalog the best-selling recordings by Jewish violinists such as Mischa Elman, Jascha Heifetz, and especially Bronislaw Huberman’s hugely successful (in Europe) recording with the Berlin State Opera Orchestra and a conductor named Wilhelm Steinberg, who was to become “William” Steinberg of Pittsburg fame.

his own family in the Holocaust. He wrote after the war, to an embittered and lonely Mengelberg, as follows:

You once said during a rehearsal of Mahler's First Symphony that the composer could feel in that music (especially the last movement) the misery into which the world was to be dumped. In that misery I lost my whole family, murdered in German concentration camps, except for my sister Mary, who was kept hidden by Alex Wunnink of the Carre Theatre and thus saved, not without danger for Wunnink's own safety.

I have wanted to let you know at this time that your name has stayed alive for those who have so much to thank you for. May the New Year bring you whatever you desire from it and may you be persuaded that there are many whose thoughts still go out to you. And to those many belongs yours Max Tak, who was once distinguished by Willem Mengelberg with the permission to be allowed to play in his orchestra. (Letter from Max Tak to Willem Mengelberg, 20th December 1948 ¹²)

To close a controversial subject: my goal couldn't be the whitewashing any collaborators or to claim that Mengelberg would have been entirely a victim of circumstances. He exposed himself to at least some of the allegations leveled against him. On the other hand, one should look at Mengelberg's life and legacy as a whole, not to the lack of political courage or of immaculate ethical antennae of a man in his 70s. Future research might bring more evidence one way or the other regarding Mengelberg's position in occupied Holland. The extenuating aspects presented above are meant to inspire the listener to look at Mengelberg's recorded legacy not with a political eye, but with an open mind and ear, focused on musical values, without prejudice.

¹² This letter, like other documents of the time, was included in the invaluable 1995 Haags Gemeentemuseum exhibition brochure *Willem Mengelberg – Dirigent*, from now on referred simply as *Gemeentemuseum*.

Seeing Mengelberg's personal and cultural legacy in the context of his whole career creates a cognitive dissonance when reflexive extreme right allegations are thrown at him. More significantly, ignoring what Mengelberg's artistic heritage has to impart would represent a grievous cultural and musical loss.

With the advent of recorded sound devices at the end of the 19th century and beginning of the 20th century, the art of the great interpreters didn't vanish with their last breath or public appearance. Wax cylinders were followed by discs. Interpreters could now have their sound engraved and survive, in a fashion. Singers were the first to take full advantage of the new technologies, with their inherent initial imperfections. The human voice – one person singing into the recording horn – fared best on the primitive recorded devices. Enrico Caruso's 1902 recordings, his earliest, render justice to many of the vocal and musical qualities of the tenor. He was the first major classical performer whose career went from successful discs to an international opera hall presence, not the other way. Recorded barely one year later, Francesco Tamagno's heroic tenor "instrument," a voice still impressive today, takes us back to the 1888 premiere of Verdi's *Othello*, with its title role not only sung then by Tamagno, but composed by Verdi with Tamagno's specific qualities in mind.

Solo violinists or pianists were reproduced worse on acoustic discs, at least when the repertoire involved, such as with Pablo de Sarasate's recordings, pitches so high that the high frequency-impaired technology could barely contain them. Nevertheless Mischa Elman, the quintessential child-prodigy of the violin from the Ukrainian ghetto who inspired the Yiddish writer Sholem Aleichem in writing his novel *Wandering Stars*, produced a rich and beautiful violin tone, which early acoustic recordings captured rather well, especially in the G and D strings range.

By comparison, early attempts at recording an entire orchestra were woefully unsatisfactory. Little of the complex sonorities a good symphonic orchestra could produce was able to pass through the severe technological limitations of the available equipment.¹³ It was only with the advent of electrical recording in 1925-1926 that orchestral music-making started being recorded in ways in which technical limitations, still present, were not as marked as to drastically distort the experience of the listener. The relevance of these contextual considerations to the subject of recorded interpretive styles is colossal. At this point the extensive recorded heritage of Willem Mengelberg – born 1871, started making recordings in 1922, in New York, and in 1926, in Amsterdam – makes itself felt.

A brilliant pianist, a talented composer in a (Richard) Straussian vein (as his symphonic poem *Etchings by Rembrandt* shows), Mengelberg had been offered the leadership of Concertgebouworkest in Amsterdam, in 1895. There are few conductors to gain access to a post of such responsibility before they were 25. This, as well as the consideration offered almost unanimously by contemporary composers – from Grieg¹⁴ to Mahler, from Richard Strauss¹⁵ to Bartók – bespeaks of Mengelberg's being a highly musically gifted individual. On the other hand, Mengelberg obviously benefited from his historical placement in the heart of a living interpretive

¹³ When we believe we hear, for instance, "London Symphony Orchestra" in Nikisch's recordings, we have to understand that we hear in fact a few selected members of the orchestra, tuba players substituting the acoustic recording-unfriendly double-basses, and violinists being forced to use inferior instruments, such as the notorious Stroh violins.

¹⁴ "Grieg was invited to supervise a Festival of Norwegian Music to be held in one of the larger Norwegian cities. He accepted the invitation on the condition that the Amsterdam Concergebouw would be the orchestra employed, with Willem Mengelberg (just then rising into fame) as the conductor. This raised a storm of protest from some Norwegian musicians who wanted to know why a foreign conductor must be engaged to carry out a festival of Norwegian music. Grieg's reply was typical: 'Because there is in Norway no conductor or orchestra worthy of the task, and because I consider the best service we can do for Norwegian music is to let a Norwegian audience hear it, for once, as it ought to sound'."

Percy Grainger, *Grainger on Music*, Oxford University Press 1999, p. 321

¹⁵ Strauss dedicated his *Ein Heldenleben* to 27-year-old Mengelberg and his Amsterdam Orchestra.

tradition. In simple terms, he was born early enough to be unaffected by more-or-less standard(ized) recordings, but he also lived long enough to see his music-making richly immortalized on disc. While Mengelberg's recordings did not retain his repertoire in its enormous entirety, there are more than 230 entries in the Mengelberg discography, covering mostly the traditional core of Mengelberg's repertoire (such as symphonies by Schubert, Franck, Brahms, Beethoven and Tchaikovsky), but also some of Mengelberg's expeditions in new (for his time) repertoire, ranging from Debussy and Ravel to Pfitzner and Trapp, to Bartók and Kodaly, to Bloch and Wagenaar. Nevertheless, the *recorded* legacy is heavily tilted towards the core "traditional" repertoire and, inevitably, this writing will reflect that. We will therefore focus on a number of representative Mengelberg recordings. Other recordings would be worthy of comment, but the idea is to offer a substantial and representative sample of what makes Mengelberg's readings of mostly familiar works significant and important, even today, both in terms of aesthetic inspiration and specific ways of articulating, phrasing, and shaping music. Important as Mengelberg's connection with Mahler is, we address it summarily because of having been already carefully covered in existing literature, from Klaus Kropfinger¹⁶ (with one focused essay on the only Mahler symphony conducted by Mengelberg, the *Fourth*) and Henry Louis de la Grange (whose monumental biography, especially volumes 3 and 4, is peppered with illuminating references to how important Mengelberg was in the life of Mahler) to William Kinderman (whose Mengelberg-relevant writing focuses on different poetic interpretations of the Adagietto, including Mengelberg's, from the *Fifth Symphony*.)¹⁷

¹⁶ Klaus Kropfinger, *Gerettete Herausforderung: Mahlers 4. Symphonie - Mengelbergs Interpretation* in "Mahler-Interpretation. Aspekte zum Werk und Wirken von Gustav Mahler" (Mainz: Schott, 1985).

¹⁷ William Kinderman, *Aesthetics of Integration in Mahler's Fifth Symphony* in "The Creative Process in Music," University of Illinois, 2012, pp.102-137.

Mengelberg did neither live nor create in a vacuum, so many other interpreters – conductors, pianists, violinists among others – are being mentioned throughout this text, as the context in which to understand what makes Mengelberg's recorded heritage unique. That the most frequently mentioned *other* conductor is Wilhelm Furtwängler is no coincidence. Despite being fifteen years Mengelberg's junior, despite having different rehearsal methods and often diverging interpretative options, they nevertheless shared a burden and a blessing. Of representing - moreover, **embodying** - precious analytical interpretative traditions. Traditions then brought to life through concrete - new in a substantial sense - interpretative visions.

Wilhelm Furtwängler left behind a fair amount of writings, nowadays published in many languages, in which he explained his views on the responsibilities of the interpreter. His views on the subject were as far from the eccentric and the whimsical as they were from the pedantic and the literalist. Compared to the wealth of texts, either aesthetic or professional, left by near-contemporaries such as Ansermet, Scherchen, or Furtwängler - who was as coherent as an aesthetician as he was as a conductor - Mengelberg's written legacy is scarce. Besides the essay quoted at length at the end of this introduction, also briefly elsewhere, I could find a short, simple one-page article, about the communal significance of musical masterpieces such as Beethoven's *Ninth Symphony* and Bach's *St. Matthew Passion*. I therefore take the liberty of letting Furtwängler speak of some of the aesthetic and interpretative concepts that Mengelberg wrote little about. I base this on what they have in common not only generationally but also in the flexible, non-literalist recorded evidence of their music-making. Within the following chapters, numerous examples of creative, controversial - illuminating to some, irritating to others - Mengelberg textual liberties will be pointed out and analyzed. Nevertheless, it is essential that these liberties are not understood as the major component of what made Mengelberg's art

distinctive. In much of the recorded repertoire Mengelberg's ideals of accuracy, clarity, and integrity are what comes through first and foremost. This was a conductor who didn't mind presiding over a perfection-seeking tuning of the orchestra, an entire ceremony which could take up to half an hour. There was scarcely anything musical too minute to escape Mengelberg's attention, to be considered beneath him. The idiosyncratic rhythmic nuance in one passage was just as important to Mengelberg as the severe, polished straight-forwardness expressed in other musical passages. **Part of the appeal of Mengelberg's recordings comes precisely from the interplay between *tempo giusto* and *tempo rubato*. While the *tempo rubato* elements of execution lend themselves to a more exciting post factum analysis, the sheer *tempo giusto* accuracy extolled by Mengelberg as his fundamental "mode" in musical performance is just as impressive.**

In the decades immediately following Mengelberg's death, his legacy fell out of fashion to the extent that his recordings, when remembered at all, were offered as examples of what was wrong with Romantic subjectivism and excess left behind in the name of progress. In 1967, the *New York Times* critic Harold C. Schonberg included a short Mengelberg chapter in his book dedicated to conductors. Schonberg, against the trends of the 1960s, included a surprisingly fair assessment of Mengelberg's legacy: *Mengelberg's reputation fast dissipated after his death. That often happens to virtuosos, and Mengelberg was unfortunate enough to die in a period that looked down at his two greatest assets – virtuosity and romanticism. Posterity has been unkind to him; he deserves more. His music making may have been mannered by present standards, but it always had life, drive, excitement, exuberance, its own kind of conviction. As a colorist he was*

*excelled by none, not even Koussevitzky or Stokowski. The little man was an authentic force, one of the great individualists, and one of the authentic masters of the orchestra.*¹⁸

Schonberg's generous conclusion has a visionary quality to it. While not yet accepted in the contemporary "great conductors" canon to the extent Toscanini or Furtwangler were, Mengelberg's recordings are indeed more widely available and cherished than at any time since he was still alive and active. We hope that this writing will bring a modest contribution to a cogent revisitation of Willem Mengelberg's place in the history of interpretation.

While frequent quotes of excessive length are avoided in other chapters, here's a legitimate place to make one exception and offer a significant extract from Mengelberg's most elaborate written offering¹⁹. It offers a window in the "verbalized" mind of the conductor, beyond the recurring anecdotes which emphasize, in a caricatural form, the idiomatic limits of Mengelberg's spoken English, rather than the profounder content of his musical and aesthetical communications. It is relevant, vague in a slightly Romantic style as Mengelberg's writing may appear to the modern eye, to sample the conductor's own thoughts regarding interpretative aesthetics. The "spacing out" of certain words mirrors the original publication - we preserved it because in a way it reflects Mengelberg's tendency to also underline, to strongly project his musical thoughts. It is not different in spirit from how he used to annotate his own scores, in which the interplay between what needs to be interpretatively emphasized and the rest became so important. When it came to eloquently "italicizing" and "capitalizing" a musical text in performance, Mengelberg's skill was exemplary.

¹⁸ Harold C. Schonberg, *The Great Conductors*, Simon and Schuster, New York:1967, p. 269

¹⁹ This is excerpted from a talk on the occasion of Mengelberg receiving the Honorary Degree of Doctor of Music from Columbia University - New York City, Monday, January 9, 1928

THE ESSENCE AND EFFECT OF MUSIC

Music was chosen by science comparatively late as a subject of study. The cause of this lies in the fact that the nature of music is of a very peculiar character.

The art of musical composition is the most abstract of all arts. She is less bound than any of her sisters to tangible reality.

In contrast with the plastic arts or with poetry, music originates neither from the concrete nor from the material nor from the intellectually comprehensible; but it is generated in the mystery of sound.

Painting and sculpture represent the material, visible world; poetry arises from abstract, imaginative conceptions. These arts spring from reality, and through their embodiment of that reality attain to the manifestation of beauty.

Music, on the other hand, reveals a world that cannot be built up of material objects or be encompassed or shaped by abstract, imaginative conceptions. The material part of the music lies outside the domain of human perception, and, at the same time, beyond that of abstract, ideal conception.

The deep realization of this truth brought Ludwig van Beethoven to the statement:

"Music is a higher revelation than all wisdom and philosophy."

* *

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While the philosopher tries logically to evolve out of

h i m s e l f a higher law of life, music reveals this law i n i t s o w n n a t u r e.

M u s i c, then, gives man a p e r f e c t picture of what he tries to reach with his intellectual power.

While philosophy seeks to solve the higher law f r o m a n d b y m e a n s o f l i f e, music reveals the law i n l i f e i t s e l f. (...)

The nature and effect of music are, alas, often judged very one-sidedly.

The layman often perceives s e n s e i m p r e s s i o n s exclusively and recognizes the effect simply as one of "feeling".

Proceeding from this premise many people have underrated music, and - from a religious point of view - have abhorred and attacked it.

On the other hand, there have been opinions that music must be understood merely as a m a t h e m a t i c a l s c i e n c e.

Both points of view are very one-sided and fail to do justice to the significance of music.

One needs to consider only superficially the history of the last two centuries to see that the n a t u r e of music embraces m u c h m o r e.

A lively contact has always existed between the cultural and social development on one hand and the evolution of musical form on the other.

It appears clearly that the musical form is influenced and defined by that for which men are striving at a certain time. [...]

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When you follow the history of music in this manner and recognize that it moves parallel with the cultural development of the time while it yields a perfectly harmonious picture of that development, then you will agree with me that one cannot be content with calling music sheer sensuous expression or sheer science.

It is more correct to seek the nature of music in the union of these two factors, in the spirit of history.

And just that mysterious union of severe, abstract logic and human sentiment, grown out of the nature of the period, is the marvelous secret of music, the art I consider as the most human revelation of God.

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The proclaiming of this revelation, then, is the artistic task of the musician.

This high mission is sharply defined by the peculiar nature of his art.

The artist may just as little give his feelings free reign without control or reflection as he may represent the elementary, technical side of the music to the exclusion of inspiration.

Art demands duality of the artist also; through the organism of his personality he must unite technique and spirit.

Only when the reproducing, interpretive musician takes up his task in this way, when he consecrates himself with all his powers and all his feeling to music, only then does he deserve the name, yes, the title of honor - "artist".

For then only is he able to give out that in the music which is more than science, more also than mere human expression of feelings. Then only the musician reveals to us the nature of his art and

through it becomes an artist himself.

To attain this end the m e c h a n i c a l side of music must be closely studied first of all, from the very beginning, even to the smallest detail.

Every note and every sign must be produced with technical perfection; the different notes must be tuned in exact relationship to each other; in brief: the graphic picture of a score must be entirely and perfectly transposed into sound.

So every musician must study the mechanical technique of his instrument over and over again.

Even the master in his branch must turn back again and again to purely mechanical exercise.

With that, the foundation is laid for t r u l y a r t i s t i c a c t i v i t y. Technique is a matter of course. Technical difficulties as such may no longer exist. The o r d e r i n g m i n d shapes everything and d e e p h u m a n f e e l i n g gives it life.

However, technique must be under perfect control in order to allow spirit and deep human feeling free reign; all technical difficulties must be overcome with playful ease.

With this great goal before him, the young artist must work technically for years. The more clearly, the more vividly, the goal stands before him, the more i n t e n s i v e will be his work.

The simple recognition of the nature of art is in itself unproductive. Only the effect of this insight upon energy, the t r a n s m u t a t i o n o f m e n t a l r e c o g n i t i o n i n t o

m e c h a n i c a l p r o d u c t i v i t y means: g e n i u s.

That is the sense in which one must understand Goethe's words: "Genius is industry."

An artist is great in so far as he is filled with the spirit of music and in so far as he derives from it more powers wherewith to perfect his technique mechanically. The higher he develops technique, the more clearly can he express by its means the spiritual side of a work of art.

Therefore bohemianism in music, considered from an artistic standpoint, ranks low.

Here mechanical technique is not sufficiently developed as an independent factor, being scarcely more than the reflex of fleeting emotion.

Such technique is superficial and inaccurate; it can bring out only a sort of entertainment.

Yet as soon as it lays hands on truly great works of art it goes arbitrarily to work, changes and deforms the written picture of a partitur, and, from false notions and impotence in the presence of great art, violates its spirit.

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Therefore the musician bears a double responsibility:

responsibility toward the work and toward the public.

For the interpreting artist is the medium between the work and the audience; he is priest and educator at the same time. (...)

II. Mengelberg: Tchaikovsky's translator

Mengelberg was perhaps the first major conductor in Western Europe to take Tchaikovsky's symphonic creations as seriously as one would take Mozart's or Beethoven's.²⁰ While not benefitting from a direct idiomatic connection comparable to that of the older generation Russian/Slavic conductors, Mengelberg sought to ensure that "his" Tchaikovsky wouldn't sound like a foreign language, skillfully parroted. He dug into the roots of the language, while absorbing in mediated form the distinctive ethnic element which is sublimated in Tchaikovsky's musical style.²¹ For instance, the way Mengelberg phrases the folk song Tchaikovsky uses in the fourth movement of the *Fourth Symphony, In the Field Stood a Birch Tree*, is idiosyncratic (in a felicitous way) rather than literalistic. People who didn't grow up listening to some luminaries of Russian song have few options to absorb the idiomatic Slavic inflections other than by paying attention to how autochthonous singers phrase, pronounce, and modulate their voices. In various generations there were idiomatic Slavic singers who walked a fine line between art song and folk song, not unlike the Russian composers themselves in their reinterpretation of Germanic symphonic concepts.

At the same time, having easy access to the idiomatic roots of a composer does not guarantee an insightful interpretation. There are many ways of looking at Tchaikovsky. It is unlikely that Mengelberg, who programmed their music so frequently, would have missed the commonalities

²⁰ With the possible exception of Artur Nikisch, the Tchaikovsky interpretations of whom, not unlike Mengelberg's, were highly praised *also* in the pre-Bolshevik Russia.

²¹ Rachmaninoff, who paid a great amount of attention to Russian and Russian Gypsy singers – and even recorded an ethnically charged trifle with Nadejda Plevitskaya, improvising his accompaniment – understood that well. Piero Rattalino, Italian musicologist and specialist in piano history, also speaks about how important it is for non-German/Austrian pianists to listen to the likes of Edwin Fischer (Swiss by birth, but German by education), in order to steal the idiom they haven't gotten with their mothers' milk, as Rattalino picturesquely puts it. It is possible to observe everything that is in a score and to nevertheless make it sound like Esperanto. See Chapter 6 for more on the subject.

between two of his favorite composers, Tchaikovsky and Mahler. Despite different backgrounds and a not negligible generational gap, they had in common the goal of broadening preexisting concepts of the symphony, both as form and as genre. Both composers developed and changed traditional structures in ways which allowed for an increased incorporation of the confessional, almost entropic element within a tight sonata form structure. The same way a pianist who studies Shostakovich's fugues will return to Bach's fugues with a different perspective, Mengelberg's deep familiarity with Mahler's music likely colored the way he approached Tchaikovsky. Where other conductors, more naturally steeped in the ethnic element through birth, could inadvertently underline the banality, the populism, the dance rhythms, the vulgar appeal in Tchaikovsky's music, Mengelberg went for the subtle formal details, but also for the personal statement of utmost sincerity.

One of the conductor's most accomplished recordings is the two discs set of the *Romeo and Juliet Overture-Fantasy* from 1930, a recording that features a myriad details scarcely found in other versions. For instance, Mengelberg understands the thematic/developmental primacy of the bassoon phrase in bars 163-168.

The image displays a musical score for five woodwind instruments: Flute (Fl.), Oboe (Ob.), Clarinet in A (Cl. (A)), Clarinet in Bb (Cl. Bb), and Bassoon (Fg.). The score is written for three measures. The key signature is one sharp (F#), and the time signature is 4/4. The Flute part begins with a rest in the first measure, followed by a melodic line in the second and third measures. The Oboe, Clarinet in A, and Clarinet in Bb parts play a sustained chord in the first measure, which changes in the second and third measures. The Bassoon part has a rest in the first measure, followed by a melodic line in the second and third measures. The score is marked with a 'p' (piano) dynamic in the third measure.

Fl.

Ob.

Cl.
(A)

Fg.

Vc.
e Cb.

Bassi pp

He also comprehends the importance of observing Tchaikovsky's caesuras in the "love theme." This theme is exquisitely scored for clarinet and violas and contains an essential caesura in bar 87. Most conductors permit a legato connection between the pitches A and F at this point, but Mengelberg detaches the two pitches dividing the theme just as Tchaikovsky suggests, thereby making transparent the structural moment (the intervallic and metrical parallelism between its two halves).

C.l.

Fg.

Cor.
(F)

Vla.

Vc.
e Cb.

Solo

mf espr.

1.

p

con Sord

dolce

pizz.

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Other elements of Mengelberg's interpretative approach will come readily to light in his Tchaikovsky recordings. Compared to conductors of his generation, Mengelberg controls and

forcefully projects the contrasts of sonority between brass and strings. It could be argued that the brass and string instruments sound quite distinctive in any event. What we are attempting to define is the difference between conductors who attempt to melt the brass (and the wind) sound into the predominant string sonority (seen as the core of the nobility of generic orchestral sound) on the one hand, and the purposeful projection of instrumental characteristics in a divergent manner, on the other. Many conductors born before 1900 could be included into the "converging colors" school, while many conductors born after 1900 pay more attention to the individuality, brightness, and competitive balancing of the wind and, especially, brass instruments. There are exceptions, no doubt. For instance, Carlos Kleiber, Herbert von Karajan, Sergiu Celibidache, Kirill Kondrashin or Georges Pretre among others, all 20th century born, were/are known for their 19th century-like, "strings first" approach, not less so than Erich Kleiber or Wilhelm Furtwängler. However, I find the concept useful, insofar it corresponds to an undeniable stylistic trend to be identified therewith.

Mengelberg fits within this context as a rare, golden medium. Mengelberg seems to approach the core identity of "his" orchestral sound while avoiding false dichotomies. Mengelberg's strings project the warmth the listener came to associate with Furtwängler²² or, in a different cultural universe, Stokowski, while the clarity of articulation, the individuality, the dynamic presence of the brass and/or wind instruments even allow comparison to the extreme approach of a George Solti, as evident for instance in his Decca *Der Ring des Nibelungen* recording. (At the same time,

²² However, the technical means used to obtain the "warm string sound" could be quite different – a limited, more differentiated use of the bow combined with scarce vibrato in Mengelberg's case. The more intuitive Furtwängler was more often than not going all out, all the time, having his orchestral musicians play like a group of soloists giving the most sound and the most intense vibrato they could muster, in any climax, be it in music composed by Mozart, Beethoven, Brahms or Tchaikovsky.

Mengelberg successfully avoids over-projection of the brass presence from either forced podium decisions or from recording cabin manipulation, in the way Solti or, more recently, Riccardo Chailly²³ were sometimes prone to do.)

Part of Furtwängler's gift was to have the entire orchestra emulate the strings, when it came to orchestral colors or musical phrasing. In some ways, even Furtwängler's trombones or percussion represented a reverberation of the *Klangideal* embodied in the best of string playing. It is hard to imagine a timpani sonority which sounds more like "melos," not sheer aggressive rhythmical impact, than the sonority Furtwängler was able to obtain. Even at the onset of the recapitulation of the first movement of Beethoven's *Ninth Symphony*, Furtwängler strives to integrate the powerful timpani sound into the overall orchestral sonority. From the point of view of the interpretation, Furtwängler's ideal sound had its own distinctive virtues, but also inherent limits. An example is Furtwängler's balancing approach as applied to the second variation of the slow movement of Beethoven's *Ninth Symphony*, in which the thematic identity expressed in the winds finds itself inordinately overwhelmed by the variational development in the strings.

Mengelberg does not follow this path. With the older (and in some surprising ways more modern-minded) Mengelberg, string sonorities don't lose their inherent characteristics or noble predominance. What we perceive is more of a "give and take" between instrumental compartments - not unlike a subtle chamber-music approach amplified to grandiose orchestral dimensions yet never vulgarized as a result of the amplification. A quality suggesting chamber

²³ In an interview with the Italian journal *La Repubblica* from March 22nd 2001, right before a Concertgebouw concert commemorating fifty years since Mengelberg's passing, the conductor Riccardo Chailly commented unkindly, in my opinion bordering on foolishness, on Mengelberg's legacy, calling him a "tyrant, ideologically ambiguous and politically dangerous" (quoted in the liner notes to *Willem Mengelberg – Archives inédites III*, Tahra, Paris 2001). It is disappointing that, fifty years after Mengelberg's death, such pernicious clichés could still be used by someone of Chailly's prominence, moreover, someone inheriting the highest orchestral standards of the 20th century, made possible by pioneers such as Mengelberg.

music is projected to larger symphonic dimensions.

At a time when Tchaikovsky's works were still seen as peripheral, in a highly nationalistic and German/Austrian-centric world, Mengelberg, as early as in the years before 1900, placed a high emphasis on programming the works of the Russian composer in Concertgebouw concerts.

Mengelberg saw no contradiction between his allegiance to a German tradition and his openness towards different musical worlds. Also, Mengelberg took pride in having personally met Modest Tchaikovsky, the composer's brother, and having discussed Piotr's music with Modest.

According to the conductor, Tchaikovsky's oral wishes, as remembered by Modest and related to Mengelberg, were at the origin of some of the liberties he took in his approach to Tchaikovsky's works. Such liberties could range from small details of interpretation to huge cuts, as for example in the last movement of the *Fifth Symphony*. (The degree of veracity of Mengelberg's claims is uncertain, however some witty Concertgebouw orchestra members are supposed to have said, when the maestro was introducing some changes in one of Bach's scores, that it must have been the "Modest Bach"-imparted tradition).

Changes in the fourth movement of Tchaikovsky's *Fifth Symphony* included, first and foremost, two (one major and one minor) excisions of musical text: bars 210-316 (!) and 472-473. Smaller changes, such as adding an A (the seventh of the B Major dominant chord) in the prolonged chord (bar 470-471) before the triumphant E Major coda, combined with the canceling of the ties between bars 470 and 471. Finally, an unwritten cymbal intervention in bar 502, two bars before the beginning of "the coda of the Coda." Regarding the modification in bars 470-471, it frequently happens in the concert hall that people unfamiliar with the symphony start applauding during the rest with fermata in bar 471. Mengelberg may have changed the "pure" B Major chord into a seventh chord in order to create a harmonic instability which would discourage the

audience from applauding. Among the spoken documents featuring Mengelberg, such as interviews and speeches, a relevant one is the February 8 interview in München, published on CD by the *Tahra* label. We can hear Mengelberg himself explain, in his own words, the rationale behind the changes he brings to Tchaikovsky's *Fifth Symphony*. It is to the reader to decide how convincing Mengelberg's reasoning seems.

Interviewer: Professor, tonight you are going to conduct Tchaikovsky. I'm not saying this as a compliment, but you are considered to be "the interpreter" of Tchaikovsky and I was told that you had known him personally.

Willem Mengelberg: Oh, the term "interpreter" is somewhat exaggerated... Interpreter, interpret, they are just words. But it's true that I knew him and I was a good friend of his brother Modest, a very good man and an enthusiastic supporter of music, of beautiful music and above all of the music of his brother. When I first conducted his music in Moscow, forty years ago, he attended the concert and was delighted... we've been good friends ever since and he gave me many scores with the markings made by his brother. The markings are very interesting. There is no great composer who after his or her publication didn't make some changes in his works, once he has conducted them or heard them... and Tchaikovsky was no exception.

I: What do these markings entail? I'd like to explain this to our listeners.

WM: Small changes: for example in a tutti, he now has two wind instruments play the same passage. Other times, he substituted a forte where he'd previously written piano, or crescendo where we usually expect a diminuendo. Or he eliminated some notes... but all composers do this.

I: Whilst you were rehearsing the first movement of the Fifth Symphony, we checked with the score and discovered that you played some notes that don't exist in the original score, that's to say that you added them.

WM: Yes, Tchaikovsky added them personally in the score that Modest gave me. The last two times he played this symphony in Moscow, he made some changes, mainly in the finale. In fact, the structure of the finale was a bit of an anti-climax, in its architecture. Tchaikovsky realised he had a problem, so he shortened this section and therefore strengthened it; it is much more beautiful now. Modest asked me to play it the same way, because his brother attached a great deal of importance to the changes he had made.

I: Professor, are you playing the middle movement as it is written or are you making some changes there too?

WM: No, no, there will be no changes, I don't make any changes within a movement. I only make some adjustments; in other words I make some small improvements and only where the composer himself has made them to his own score.²⁴

Mengelberg's Tchaikovsky recordings include the following works: the last three symphonies (4th, 5th, and 6th), two overtures (*1812* and the above-mentioned *Romeo and Juliet*), the *Serenade for Strings*, the *First Piano Concerto* (with the German pianist Conrad Hansen as a soloist), and an early acoustic recording of *Marche Slave*. In few cases we have more than one version of the same music. Such is the *Fifth Symphony* (recorded both in 1928²⁵, with the

²⁴ This excerpt from the 1938, February 8th Mengelberg interview in München is being used with the permission of Myriam Scherchen, who also published the recording.

²⁵ That is besides an earlier 1927 attempt at two of the movements, not very different in conception from the complete 1928 78 set, and published only in France, as well as a close-to-complete live recording made in 1939.

Concertgebouw Orchestra, and in 1940, with the Berlin Philharmonic Orchestra) and the *Serenade for Strings*. A special case is the *Sixth Symphony*, which was “officially” recorded in both 1937 and 1941²⁶, with Concertgebouw Orchestra, as well as with New York Philharmonic-Symphony Orchestra. However, the early NYPSO acoustic recording includes just two of the movements (even those are abridged).

The existence of multiple recordings offers insights regarding the way Mengelberg's interpretive conceptions and treatment of orchestral playing evolved over time; these recordings also show how a roughly similar interpretative plan could be projected differently at the level of details, and to which extent a specific orchestra affected the interpretation or, in turn, was molded by the conductor's own conception.²⁷

Let us turn to Mengelberg's recordings of the *Pathétique*. There was no particular advance in terms of recording technology from 1937 to 1941, so we might surmise that Mengelberg was not happy with either technical or interpretative aspects of the 1937 recording²⁸. I couldn't detect anything unsatisfactory technically in the 1937 recording, so I would have to endorse the interpretative hypothesis. Nevertheless, the two recordings are mostly similar in terms of interpretative choices. The 1941 recording has slightly improved recorded sound, the bass has more presence, but the one sizable difference between the two versions consists in the fact that the later version of the fourth movement, *Adagio lamentoso*, lasts one full minute longer (circa

²⁶ Both the 1937 and the 1941 recordings of the *Pathétique* were made for *Telefunken*.

²⁷ I elaborate on this latter aspect in Chapter 5, when discussing Mengelberg's recordings of *Egmont*.

²⁸ Ironically, the 1937 recording was much more widely available in Mengelberg's posterity than the 1941 one, the latter first acquired by the author in the late 1980s, on an expensive black, out-of-print Telefunken LP.

nine minutes versus circa eight²⁹). This is one of only a couple of times, during Mengelberg's contract with *Telefunken*, that a work was recorded twice, with both versions sent into the record stores³⁰. In absence of other documentation (such as correspondence with Telefunken producers), it appears that Mengelberg may have felt the fourth movement in the ~8 minute 1937 recording was too "rushed through."

After the year 2000, the French label *Tahra* has published three volumes of hitherto unavailable Mengelberg recordings. They are referred to in the discography. In more recent years (2009), the last so far hitherto unpublished Mengelberg recordings surfaced and were published by *Malibran Music*: a couple of Salzburg Festival recordings with Wiener Philharmoniker discussed in chapter 5, as well as substantial works recorded live during Mengelberg's 1944 concerts with *Le Grand Orchestre de Radio-Paris*³¹. Among these recordings, a third – unhoped for – quasi-complete³² Mengelberg *Pathetique* was included. The duration of the *Adagio Lamentoso* exceeds twelve minutes. We are not yet in Celibidache or late Bernstein³³ territory, in slowness, but compared to the earlier version(s) the timing is 40-50% longer.

²⁹ In assessing the exact timing of a recording, a particular transfer and pitch reference can cause slight variations in the total timing.

³⁰ Telefunken also recorded Mengelberg's Beethoven Fifth Symphony twice, in 1937 and 1942 – see attached discography.

³¹ Later that year, Soulima Stravinsky was among the soloists of Mengelberg's Beethoven cycle in Paris, participating in the performance of the Triple Concerto.

³² A few bars are missing, likely due to clumsy acetate disc switching.

³³ Bernstein's view of the *Pathetique* exhibits a longer than 17 minutes *Adagio Lamentoso*, in the last, New York Philharmonic recording. By comparison the earlier Bernstein commercial version, also with New York Philharmonic, should be considered short, at less than 12 minutes. Curiously, the first halves of the two versions are mostly phrased, voiced, and colored very similarly, beyond the issue of tempo. At the end of the later, 1987 version though, during the final "requiem"-rendition of the second theme (B Minor instead of D Major, with lowered second degrees in the harmony) Bernstein goes though from a truly slow tempo to an "impossibly" slow one. It devolves to a tempo of $J = 20$, then even slower! Whether the effect is overwhelming, like being embraced by the "breath of death," or just exaggerated is not to this writer to decide. It is an interesting interpretative experiment, though, worth hearing once.

One is reminded of young Karajan's observation inspired by Mengelberg's guest-conducting the Aachen orchestra: *Karajan also noted Mengelberg's trick of using slightly quicker tempi in rehearsal so as to give his players the sense of having more time 'live' in concert.*³⁴ It could be argued that fitting the movement on two 78 sides, in the case of the commercial recordings, may have involved faster tempi but, had Mengelberg considered twelve minutes as necessary to do justice to the movement at the time, he would have likely demanded three 78 sides from the Telefunken producers.³⁵

Mengelberg's studio recordings were more than excellent, rivalling (and chronologically sandwiching between the two of them) Furtwängler's classic recording with Berliner Philharmoniker, made for HMV in 1938. The live Mengelberg recording (made as a guest conductor) is though extraordinary, with huge and meaningful tempo modifications, dark sonorities³⁶ which seem to come from a time machine having recorded some 19th century orchestral concert. One hears a type of heart-on-sleeve yet utterly sincere emotionalism which is unique even within the extensive discography of the work, not in lack of memorable recordings.

³⁴ Richard Osborne, *Herbert von Karajan - a Life in Music*, Northeastern University Press, Boston 1998, p. 104

³⁵ This is one of few instances in which the assertion of Giorgio Graziosi, according to whom Mengelberg was taking more time in live concerts than on recordings, verify. (Graziosi heard Mengelberg live on multiple occasions.) "Mengelberg (...) in esecuzioni in pubblico era molto piu lento e scandito di quanto si riveli nelle incisioni: almeno per quanto ci consta personalmente."

Giorgio Graziosi, *L'Interpretazione Musicale*, Piccola Biblioteca Einaudi, Torino: 1967, p. 177

³⁶ While not equally accomplished, the 1932 version of Royal Philharmonic Orchestra/Oskar Fried (the forgotten Mahler collaborator driven away by the Nazis and shipwrecked in Moscow, where he died in 1941), and the Nikolai Golovanov version with the Bolshoi Theater Orchestra are among few recordings which have something in common with these rarely heard orchestral colors. As a curiosity worthy of being mentioned in a writing about the "master of 'changements' ", among Stokowski's many versions of the work, the July 1945 version made with Hollywood Bowl Orchestra exhibits some interesting rewritings in the *Adagio lamentoso*, such as iterating the main theme for the last time, on the F# pedal point, with strings re-written *ottava alta* by Stokowski himself.

Based on Bruno Walter's descriptions³⁷, we can imagine this is how Gustav Mahler was rehearsing and conducting.

There is a characteristic form of rubato Mengelberg used, which could be called "structural rubato." Rather vague descriptions of rubato in past decades have given way to more systematic approaches in recent years. One of the articulate pioneers in these regards has been William Heiles³⁸, who talks about structural implications in micro-rubato – or "rhythmic nuance," as he called it³⁹ – detectable in the performances of great Romantic pianists. (This in modernist times, when "old-fashioned" rubato was frequently dismissed as a merely emotional, skin-deep flourish.) By structural rubato we mean a rhythmic/agogic modification which works both in the "now" and in the grand image. It sounds expressive in an immediate manner, in the phrase it's being applied to, yet it also helps to clarify interpretatively elements of structure which would otherwise remain obscure to anybody but analysts with pencil in hand.

Listening to Mengelberg's rendition of the second theme in the first movement of Tchaikovsky's *Sixth* – the (melodically, not harmonically) pentatonic D Major melody – one notices some phrasing never heard before. Invariably, the first three pitches (F# E D) are lingered upon. On first hearing it sounds like simple expressive hesitations on the three eighth notes on the upbeat.

In this case, **Mengelberg's rubato helps establishing the motivic connection between the "thematic head" of the D Major theme on one hand (both the first movement's developmental climax and the main theme of the *Adagio lamentoso*.** Would it be impossible

³⁷ Descriptions can be read in Bruno Walter's ample memoir *Theme and Variations* (pp. 76-79) as well as in Walter's smaller book about Gustav Mahler himself.

³⁸ William Hunter Heiles, *Rhythmic nuance in Chopin performances recorded by Moriz Rosenthal, Ignaz Friedman, and Ignaz Jan Paderewski*, DMA dissertation, University of Illinois, 1964

³⁹ More recent scholars refer to it as "metrical rubato," in opposition and/or complementarity with tempo modifications.

to establish the said thematic affinity without Mengelberg's "structural rubato"? Likely it wouldn't be, but this way the layman and even the average musician will "feel" the connection rather than analyze it,

Insert musical examples

Also earning a note is the amount of flexibility Mengelberg applies in the trio of the second movement, the *con dolcezza e flebile* section of the 5/4 waltz. Even for Mengelberg's standards the amount of rubato and tempo modifications borders on inordinate. His score bears a note about the eight-notes in the trio theme – "modification from the composer: play as triplet." Indeed the eight note which appears on the second half of the second beat over and over is started earlier in the bar and therefore expressively elongated. Whether coming from Tchaikovsky himself or not – given how close to the composer's death the symphony was finished and performed I find it unlikely he had time for the claimed "retouches" – it is an endearing detail. It sounds "flebile" indeed, and quite Tchaikovsky-like in its bitter-sweetness, more on the bitter side, on this modal, exquisitely obsessive pedal point on D.

INSERT MENGELBERG'S OWN RELEVANT SCORE PAGE

The trio is not just played in a different mood, but also in a different tempo, much slower than the main waltz theme (which is itself performed on the slow side, compared to other recordings). When the music transitions back towards the waltz (rehearsal letters *G* to *H*), Tchaikovsky opposes the two worlds. The plaintive trio theme and the insinuating waltz theme alternate for a while, bar after bar, until the waltz becomes predominant and the reprise ensues (rehearsal letter *H*). Mengelberg uses the same blatant tempo effect in all his recordings, but most prominently so in the 1944 live recording.

The bars “still in the trio” are played **more than twice** slower than the “waltz-anticipating” bars. When the “waltz-anticipating” bars take over, they experience a *rallentando* of their own, a huge one, ending in an approximate 4:1 tempo ratio before the actual waltz theme comes back for good at rehearsal letter *H*. Tchaikovsky didn’t write any of these tempo changes. This seems to be one of those instances, not many in our experience, in which the accusations of arbitrariness and exaggeration against Mengelberg seem justified. It is possible, on the other hand, to perceive these radical tempo shifts - opposing “blocks of time” more than seamless tempo modifications - as having a perhaps unintended modernist bent to them. Neither over-Romantic nor sentimental, despite a blatant lack of concern for fidelity to the text. They project something deeply unsettling, bringing out a demonic potential in the graceful piece, which merely lovely and fluent versions couldn’t. The “parallel tempos” device (blocks of tempos alternating and therefore helping in defining opposing thematic entities) we attempted to describe above is used by Mengelberg in more than one recording, but seldom as radically employed. We can’t be sure Tchaikovsky ever thought about that when he wrote this gracefully elegiac movement, but one can file this radical approach into the category of interpretations which bring out possible meanings not even the composer thought of.⁴⁰

The rest of this chapter will discuss in professional minutiae Mengelberg's approach to one of Tchaikovsky's symphonies, more precisely the first movement of the *Fourth Symphony in F*

⁴⁰ Without forcing an analogy, one is distantly reminded of this description:

“In [Stockhausen’s] *Zeitmasse* from 1955-6 for five woodwinds, one instrument sometimes retards while another accelerates; still another may at the same time be playing as fast as possible. In some places each player has a different metronome mark. (...)”

Richard Hudson, *Stolen Time – The History of Tempo Rubato*, Oxford University Press, 1994, pp. 426-427

Minor, opus 36.

The "fate motto" working as the dramatic overture - and the underlying thematic mortar - of this work has one of the most characteristic, easily memorable rhythmic profiles imaginable. While not at all Beethovenian in spirit, it could be argued that this theme is one of Tchaikovsky's closest to Beethoven themes in what regards compositional craft. Beethoven made a simple repeated pitch, within the main theme of the Scherzo of his Fifth Symphony, memorable through its sheer rhythmical profile. Tchaikovsky does something similar, with the increased complexity of the rhythmical proportions compensating for the lack of explicit (rather than implied) harmonic context. The conductor needs therefore to let the rhythmical specificity speak for itself. It is rather ironic then that two immensely gifted conductors, Leopold Stokowski and Constantin Silvestri, who gave (otherwise) memorable versions of the work, saw fit to unnecessarily distort this beginning in different ways. Silvestri's His Master Voice version, while truly amazing in most of its being, distorts the initial sixteens triplet[s] into three thirty-seconds followed by a thirty-second rest. Apparently Silvestri believed in the judiciousness of his reading, and even had some - possibly apocryphal - substantiating anecdote to account for it, but this one listener still can't see why this would really have to be done, with no undeniable musical benefit one could possibly think of.

Stokowski, in his earliest "official" Philadelphia version, substitutes two sixteenth-notes instead of Tchaikovsky's triplet. One can imagine some subjective logic for Stokowski's choice. Later on in the movement, Stokowski reverts to the original triplets, so the "fresh" triplets sound like a variational development of the initial group of two notes. However, rather than an imaginative interpretive/phrasing detail, this amounts to a re-writing of Tchaikovsky's music which, while not necessarily completely and irredeemably absurd, borders on vulgar. (Both Stokowski's and

Silvestri's readings of Tchaikovsky's Fourth Symphony are otherwise among the best on record, in this writer's estimation.)

Mengelberg's reading of the very beginning is, by comparison, uneventful, however, the conductor does underline the intervallic "reaching" within the theme - the "stuck" third in the first three measures, the interval of a fourth in the fourth measure, the fifth in the fifth measure. Mengelberg also projects well the orchestrating detail in measure seven - Tchaikovsky's adding (further) trombones and a tuba, little by little, to the already playing instruments (mainly the bulk of horns, with some color support from bassoons).

Measure 17: within the strings chord, Mengelberg does not bring out the B in the violins, as most conductors would, but the pitch E in the violas, common in the two chords at measures 17 and 19, but first within an E Major chord (measure 15), and in measure 17 within an augmented chord in which the pitch E becomes, from a "stable" pitch, the leading tone to the inexorable F Minor chord. Not an earth-shattering detail, to be sure, but rather characteristic of Mengelberg's uncanny eye for such usually overlooked details.

Moderato with anima (measure 27): Mengelberg phrases this theme in a somewhat simple way, without a lot of rubato, but he also makes a point of phrasing beyond Tchaikovsky's relatively fragmented slurs (which could be interpreted as bowing, rather than phrasing, anyway), grouping his phrasing impulses on three [compounded] beats patterns, following [beats] 2/3/1, 2/3/1, 2/3/1 etc. patterns.

From measure 48 to [upbeat of] measure 53, the listener witnesses a carefully judged ritenuto, in which the "one by one" articulation of the descending scale from measure 50 to 53 is being integrated within the cadential slowing down pattern. The teacher in Mengelberg tells us: "now

something else starts". Not in a pedantic way, though, but with enough fluidity as to redeem the somewhat predictable rhetoric.

During the transitional fugato between measures 53 and 70, Mengelberg shows interest in balancing the orchestral compartments, not only according to Tchaikovsky's stated dynamics, but also according to the necessary projection of polyphonic clarity. E.g.: in measures 60-63 Tchaikovsky writes crescendo, reaching a general *mezzo forte* in bar 63. Mengelberg shapes that slightly differently. In measure 64 he instills an unwritten diminuendo in the strings, allowing for the wind instruments' entrance to capture the listener's attention. Not only that but, in measures 62-63, Mengelberg has the lower strings play louder than the second violins, despite Tchaikovsky's written dynamics suggesting that the lower strings reach a *mezzo forte* within crescendo later than the violins (second part of measure 63).

We have already mentioned the sense of chamber-music collaboration Mengelberg could instill in his hundred-some musicians. That skill was involved obviously in passages which were already written in a chamber-music-like style – transparent orchestration, little wind solos responding to each other on an (amplified) string quartet background – such as the transition towards the second thematic group, and the second thematic group itself – measures 104 to 116, and then measure 116 and after. It would be a stretch though to claim that the application of chamber music skills to such musical passages would be unique or very highly characteristic of Willem Mengelberg and of Willem Mengelberg alone. There are a considerable number of highly skilled conductors, from both Mengelberg's generation and others, who accomplish that to various degrees. What is, if not unique, highly peculiar to Mengelberg is the application of similar skills to passages which are extremely densely orchestrated, sounding under most batons like scarcely differentiated, generic tutti. In a nutshell, I am talking about subtle dynamic

differentiation *within loud, thick tuttis*, one of the hardest things to do for a conductor.

Discussing these skills would be quite germane to Mengelberg's two recordings of Richard Strauss's *Ein Heldenleben* – the epitome of the conductor's skill in clarifying hugely dense textures through unwritten, pragmatic rhythmical and dynamic nuances.⁴¹ Nevertheless, a good example of it can be found in this very recording, between [upbeat of] measure 82 and measure 104. For a good three pages of the general score, Tchaikovsky wrote down a couple of accents, a couple of fortes in horns and trumpets (only in the first ten measures), and a good number of reiterated fortissimos for all the other parts, for the entire twenty+ measures. No wonder many recordings of this section sound rather bland, with the uninflected strength of the orchestral tuttis losing perceptual interest through dynamic inflation.

Not so with Mengelberg. The complexity of the interpretive decisions he makes is remarkable. Measure 82: the interplay between winds and lower strings is clarified by asking the cellos to play softer in the beginning, when they double the secondary ("filling") sixteenths of the viola, and louder when they shift gears into doubling the thematic material in the double basses. The violins, which expose a scalar counterpoint in measures 82-86, are also shaped, starting their pattern in a softer dynamic, perhaps *mezzo forte*, following a strong accent followed by sudden diminuendo and becoming more present at the end, with an accent on the highest note, without surpassing a *forte*. Not only that, but the long notes by horns and trumpets, simply notated by Tchaikovsky as *forte*, are being granted by the conductor an initial accent with *subito diminuendo* as well, followed by a *crescendo*. Therefore, through skillful means of unwritten interpretive articulation, even within these secondary, non-thematic elements, an aesthetical

⁴¹ Mengelberg's work on *Ein Heldenleben* is being cogently described by Bernard Shore, in *The Orchestra Speaks*, pp. 118-124

correspondence between the long notes in the violins (measure 82 and 84) and the long notes in the trumpets + horns (measures 83 and 85) is being created, contributing to the meaningful complexity of the musical experience. Further down, in measures 86-92: Tchaikovsky takes the characteristic uneven triplet from the opening “motto” theme and repeats it obsessively, with no other rhythmic event happening, fifteen times! A challenge inherent in the orchestration is that the switch back and forth from the strings to winds and vice versa does not happen on the “strong” note of the triplet, but after it. Therefore, in many performances, the listener unfamiliar with the score may be confused about the metrical structure of the music. An unaccented, an ordinary, generic *fortissimo* performance nourishes the erroneous illusion of the second note of the triplet being the first, especially as music is usually being experienced without the help of a score. Things become metrically clear again only in measure 92, with the familiar downbeat of the theme in its original, F Minor key. Evidently mindful of that, Mengelberg asks both strings and winds to accentuate slightly the third note of each of their groups – which “third note” is the first note of each triplet! Any possible confusion is avoided in a way which will be “instinctive” to the audience, but highly cerebral from the point of view of the conductor’s decisions involved. Last but not least, Mengelberg instills an unwritten *diminuendo* between measure 87 and the upbeat of measure 92. I repeat, Tchaikovsky only wrote a *fortissimo*.

It could be argued that Mengelberg’s reasoning may have followed the (rhetorical) question: if indeed measure 91 is (still) in *fortissimo*, why writing another *fortissimo*? Another – second - possibility is that Mengelberg took Tchaikovsky’s dynamic indications to have more of a “*loco* effect,” a la Schumann. Thirdly, on an aesthetic/emotional level, one needs to ponder the significance of the return to F Minor, here and later, within this specific composition. After exposing the theme (measure 27 et seq.) in f minor, after a great deal of modulatory inflections

within this thematic group (F Minor/ [dominant-focused] B Flat Minor/ [dominant-focused] E Flat Minor/ chromatic passage/ A Minor / d minor / g minor / e minor / a minor), Tchaikovsky uses (measures 87 to 92) a (chromatically embellished) Italian augmented sixth chord (not coincidentally, the same chord first enunciated in measure 15 of the introductory, “motto” theme), in which chord the obsessive fundamental (D Flat) “brings back to memory” the pressure of the “Db C” musical gesture – the “sigh” which starts the theme in measure 27 and is first exposed in the transition (measures 23-26).

(Tchaikovsky “confessed” to having been inspired by Beethoven’s Fifth Symphony. Without doubting the weight of that first-hand testimony, one has to wonder whether some piano music didn’t haunt Tchaikovsky’s memory as well. The obsessive way in which Beethoven uses the “Db C” semitone gesture in his *Sonata opus 57 in F Minor* comes to mind, as well as Chopin’s Fourth Ballade does. I find a comparison between the final page of the Coda in Tchaikovsky’s Fourth – measures 412-end) and the last descending run in the coda of Chopin’s F Minor (F Minor again) Ballade most instructive, in terms of both harmonic and figurative approach. Also, read below the references to Beethoven’s Sonata opus 13.)

Let’s return to Mengelberg’s decision to use that unusual, unwritten *diminuendo* in measures 87-92. To my understanding, his interpretive touch projects the complexity and the significance of the harmonic/thematic events succinctly described above, more satisfactorily than a mere linear fortissimo.

Second (A Flat Minor) theme (measure 116 et seq.): this is pure orchestral chamber music, at its finest. As Mengelberg is concerned, it is to be noted, within the delicate string accompaniment, the characteristic attention granted to the bass, as well as the agogic (rather than dynamic) interpretation of the accents on each the first note in the group of four thirty-seconds – a slight

prolongation of that first note, which, to my judgment, works better than more direct, dynamics-based accents would.

The unwritten “echo” effect in the new strings figure (measure 134 vs. 133, 138 vs. 137, etc.), one of the few (and deliberately weak and transient) musical motifs in this movement written in the major mode, is lovely but rather traditional, meaning one can find it in a good number of recordings and performances. The “sneaking in” of an ambiguously quasi-major/chromatic/modal version of the first theme, as an unsuspected counterpoint to the new theme, is being slightly underlined by Mengelberg through a subtle fermata on the first note in the upper strings in both measures 147 and 151. Measure 165 et seq.: the already commented-upon metrical/rhythmical clarity - as respects the uneven, potentially metrically ambiguous triplets - is being reiterated. In this case, the conductor’s intervention and right accents are being called upon even more strongly, insofar the emphasis on second-eight-note-syncopation is being accentuated within Tchaikovsky’s orchestration, through the trombone/clarinet/bassoon’s reinforcing the referred syncopation.

Once the development starts, Mengelberg’s artful pacing and especially voicing expose some of the same qualities we have commented upon already. Tchaikovsky actually starts (measure 211 et seq.) to willfully emphasize in his writing, with explicit accents, the by-now-notorious second eight-note in the uneven triplets but, on a perception level, Mengelberg’s having already rendered the “baseline” so clear within the exposition provides the perfect background for “against-the-grain” accentuations to occur, with no loss in clarity.

At measure 237 a moment of peculiar compositional mastery occurs. One witnesses (measures 237-254) one of the most memorable - and memorably long - sequences in symphonic history. The specialness of this sequence is due to the composer more than to any interpreter. It is a

moment which risks to either sound trite, parodically so, or to impress through the composer's ability to animate a potentially enervated, repetitious sequence with harmonic brilliance, with a sense of the cumulative detail which redeems it into an ample arch of sustainable dramatic insistence.

Mengelberg's extremely self-conscious, yet fluid art of agogics (micro-rubato), combined with skillful tempo modifications, is in full play here. The "pay attention, something special is about to happen" moment is being interpretively signaled through the conspicuous slowing down (almost doubling) of the two pick-up eight-notes in the violins and violas preceding measure 237. The tentative *a tempo* following is necessarily faster than the pick-up, but not yet as fast as the "main tempo" preceding them. Between measures 237 and 254 the conductor speeds up quite gradually, reaching again and then surpassing the measure 235 tempo. By the time measure 254, after just the most apt on-the-bar-line *Luftpause*, is being reached (a point within the musical form which I would define as a false recapitulation in Beethovenian vein, the "wrong key" and the "motto" theme of the introduction, rather than the "legitimate" first theme being used), the tempo of the very beginning is being suggested, but with a slightly more alert pacing, given the almost-climactic (pre-climactic) character of the moment.

After one more false (tentative?) recap, measure 264, moved half-step up from A Minor to B Flat Minor, Tchaikovsky finally lands on the "right" key, at measure 278, with trumpets playing (originally in the horns) the motto theme with the same pitches as in the original utterance. Only that, instead of the original unison, one hears simultaneously the exact moving harmonic sands I have referred to in a paragraph above, i.e., the characteristic "Db C" bass-line (here in contrabasses, tubas, and bassoons), superposing Italian augmented sixth chords over the already familiar motto theme. Tchaikovsky marks the moment as *fff*, which with him might mean "really

loud,” as opposed to *f* or *ff* - “merely/somewhat loud”. Not unlike Beethoven’s use of *f* versus *ff*. (Beethoven used *fff* extremely sparingly, in places such as the recapitulation of the first movement of his *Eighth Symphony*.)

Later in life, particularly in his Sixth Symphony, Tchaikovsky used dynamics such as *pppppp* or *fffff*, Ligeti-like in their apparent excess, which asks the performer to create more subtle, intermediate levels of dynamics, for dynamics such as single *forte* or single *piano*, rather than a level of softness or loudness exceeding either the limits of the audible range, or those of producible decibels still qualifying as music⁴².

On an interpretative level, Mengelberg does not use any striking devices in this passage, allowing the music to speak to a certain extent for itself, but, as always, he does make a point of balancing the orchestral compartments in ways which go beyond the generic *fff* suggested by the score itself.

This writer is certainly not the first to notice a well-spread tendency within Romantic sonata form to compress the recapitulation, often as a compensation to the expanding the coda. It could be that composers became gradually fonder of the idea of avoiding sheer repetition, with the mere switching of some tonal centers, in favor of creating even more developmental material in an expanded coda, which becomes a second quasi-development, occasionally rivaling the “legitimate” development in both size and dramatic import. (The first movement in Beethoven’s

⁴² Insofar there is a limit to how loud and how soft an instrument can reasonably play, one should look for more intermediate nuances, rather than for more extreme... extremes, as Schuller observes. When Tchaikovsky writes during the last eight bars of the exposition, in his Sixth Symphony, *ppp*, then *pppp*, then *ppppp*, then (for the last four notes, given to the bassoon) *pppppp*, the only way of projecting that is by having the *ppp* played like a regular *piano*. Toscanini intimidating his poor bassoon player (regarding those notes apparently never being soft enough) is an example of literalism gone bad.

Third Symphony might be epitomic to such a train of symphonic thought.) Chopin pushed things even further, in a somewhat odd way, excising in the first movement of both his later piano sonatas the first theme from the recapitulation altogether, and going back directly to the second thematic group in way of “aborted” recapitulation. No wonder Chopin’s most organic and original formal accomplishments survive in Ballades, not in the sonatas.

In Tchaikovsky’s *Fourth*, the problematic denouement of the first movement’s recap is accentuated by the ambiguity of the place the “motto” theme (measure 1) plays versus the traditional “first theme” (measure 27) within the thematic economy of the section. Tchaikovsky was perhaps strongly influenced - while he hadn’t imitated it at all - by the initial movement of Beethoven’s *Sonata opus 13*, rather than, for instance, by Beethoven’s *First Symphony*. In the latter (in other works as well), the introduction is a true introduction, with little claims to the developmental identity of the main sonata form. In the *Sonata opus 13* instead, Beethoven seems to be undecided, to experiment, and it is this experimental quality which renders the form both ambiguous and challenging. The introduction is so weighty, so important, so thematically charged, memorable, and full of potential, that it appears, in highly concentrated/concise shapes, both at the beginning of the development and at the end - (*not*) at the beginning, though - of the recap. Not only that, but the “pathétique” motif (incidentally but not coincidentally used, pitch-wise, by Tchaikovsky in the main theme of his Sixth Symphony - C D [Eb] Eb D in Beethoven versus B C# D C# in Tchaikovsky) even provides some hidden thematic counterweight at the beginning of the development in Beethoven’s *Sonata Pathétique* (octaves in E Minor - bars 139-140 and in G Minor - bars 145-146).

Tchaikovsky makes more of the return of the motto theme than of that of the “first” theme, and he concentrates (shortens) the latter within a pedal point, second inversion D Minor-based,

within the space of a mere 8 measures (284-292). Mengelberg chooses to underline the “new” trombones-placed counterpoint, which seems to contain in it (measures 287-288 especially) the many-times-augmented profile of the descending chromatic figure pertaining to the secondary theme (see measure 296).

We will not dilute this analysis by commenting upon similar elements of interpretation, due to the similar nature of reiterated musical material. About the coda: compositional magic is being exercised in the phrase between measures 365 and 377.

The image shows a handwritten musical score for measures 365 through 377. The score is written on multiple staves, each labeled with an instrument or voice part. The instruments listed on the left include: Fl. 1, Fl. 2, Ob. 1, 2, Clar. 1, 2, Bassoon 1, 2, Horn 1, 2, 3, 4, Trumpet 1, 2, 3, 4, Violin 1, Violin 2, Viola, Cello, and Double Bass. The score is written in a single system, with measures 365, 366, 367, 368, 369, 370, 371, 372, 373, 374, 375, 376, and 377. The notation includes various musical symbols such as notes, rests, beams, and dynamic markings. The score is written in a clear, legible hand, with some corrections and annotations visible. The overall layout is typical of a musical manuscript, with the instrument names on the left and the measures numbered at the top.

Handwritten musical score, measures 1-4. The score includes staves for Flute 1 (Fl. 1), Flute 2 (Fl. 2), Clarinet in B-flat (Cl. Bb), Bassoon (Fag.), Horn in F (Hr. F), Violin 1 (Vcl. 1), Violin 2 (Vcl. 2), Viola (Vla.), Cello (Vcl.), and Double Bass (Cb.). The music is written in 2/4 time, featuring melodic lines for the woodwinds and strings, with some measures containing rests.

Handwritten musical score, measures 5-8. The score includes staves for Clarinet in B-flat (Cl. Bb), Horn in F (Hr. F), Violin 1 (Vcl. 1), Violin 2 (Vcl. 2), Viola (Vla.), Cello (Vcl.), and Double Bass (Cb.). The music is written in 2/4 time, featuring melodic lines for the woodwinds and strings, with some measures containing rests.

The bass-line (a simple scalar descending figure, from Db to F) seems to have an existence of its own, a modicum of “parallel music” (not going anywhere near Ives’ concept of such). However, Tchaikovsky builds up an enormous musical parenthesis (measures 365-373), in which the D Flat Major universe seems to have existence and stability, due to the complexity of the musical events above the bass-line – the flutes theme, the first theme-derived inner voices, and more. However, in bar 374, it all seems to be a last illusion crumbling again. The stable, static bass-D Flat (the falsely bucolic beginning of Mahler’s *First Symphony* comes to mind, rather than the beginning of Wagner’s *Ring*, in terms of analogical “static major” moments) slides down into the fatal C. Not only is the moment a compositionally and emotionally augmented reiteration of the already mentioned, emblematic “Db C” sigh first exposed in measures 23-26⁴³ but, considering the whole Db C Bb Ab G F line of the bass, it also represents an Urlinie-reduced, a hypostasis of the first theme (see measures 27-30), “hidden” in the bass, like a fateful grinder of all hope and illusion.

⁴³ Similarities with the modulational relationships in Beethoven’s *Appassionata* and Chopin’s *F Minor Ballade* would be worthy of a separate study.

27. Moderato con anima (d. = In movimento di Valse)

Horn 2 in E-flat

Viol. 1

Viol. 2

Vla.

Vc.

Kb.

Moderato con anima (d. = In movimento di Valse)

Mengelberg projects this imagery (bars 365-373) as if conducting with three hands at the same time. The tension inherent in the static D Flat pedal point is neither impeded nor interrupted by the necessity to actually beat the relatively complicated musical events built upon it. Neither is the flutes' phrase interrupted or affected in any way by the rhythmical counterpoint in the higher strings.

Some of the imagery we've alluded to may seem a tad overblown or unduly programmatic. Let's not forget though that, in a letter to Taneyev, who had expressed critical reservations towards the *Fourth Symphony*, Tchaikovsky himself defended his approach to the symphony genre with a *cri de coeur* of Mahlerian intensity: "Ought not a symphony, which is the most lyrical of all musical forms, express everything for which there are no words, but which the soul wishes to express and cries out to be expressed?"

III Mengelberg's Brahms

One of Willem Mengelberg's most revered teachers was Franz Wüllner (1830-1902), himself an influential musical figure during the second half of the 19th century. Wüllner counted among his mentors Anton Schindler, the somewhat controversial (testimonial credibility partially restored today) "private secretary" and devoted disciple of Beethoven. Mengelberg wasn't shy about explaining some of his "changements"⁴⁴ (sic) in Beethoven's music he was conducting through a direct Beethoven lineage.

Bernard Shore, who used to be principal viola in BBC Symphony, left a vivid portrait of Mengelberg in rehearsals, mostly positive, anecdotal quirks apart.

"His interpretations, intensely personal and vivid, have his great conviction behind them.

*Though he may depart from the directions of the composer, audience and orchestra alike are carried away by the grip and mastery of it all. He holds everyone close, and a whole department of strings will think that his eye is compelling each man individually".*⁴⁵

The idiosyncratic claims already hinted at. *"Beethoven, like many other composers, sometimes made changements in his scores, even after publication, and then he also was deaf. So vy not the conductor also, who often knows mooch better than the composer? I vos de best pupil of Svhidler* [note the license here, in fact Mengelberg was at most the pupil of a pupil of "Svhidler"], *who vos the best pupil of Beethoven, zo I know vat Beethoven meant. Zo, in dis verk of Strauss* [Ein Heldenleben, which Strauss dedicated to Mengelberg and his Dutch orchestra]; *I haf been great friend of Richard Strauss since I vos a boy, and I know joost what he wants, and ve vill make*

⁴⁴ "Changements" is being quoted by Shore as the French-English "word" Mengelberg used to describe his score alterations.

⁴⁵ Bernard Shore, *The Orchestra Speaks*, Longmans, Green and Co., London 1938, p. 125

some changements also!"⁴⁶ (Bernard Shore attempts to imitate Mengelberg's own English. The subsistent spoken documents have Mengelberg speak in Dutch or German. It is difficult to evaluate whether his English accent was really that strong or Shore exaggerates for comic effect.)

Willner, as a conductor and musical friend of Mengelberg, was strongly connected to both Wagner and Brahms. "(...) Mengelberg also went to his former teacher for advice on Bach interpretation. Willner could advise on tempos in such works as the *Missa Solemnis* of Beethoven, practical solutions for instrumentation in Bach's cantatas and for soloists for the *St. Matthew Passion*".⁴⁷

Recorded evidence of Mengelberg's adventuring into Wagnerian territory is scarce. An early acoustic disc of *Flying Dutchman*. A *Meistersinger Prelude*, played with less elemental darkness-in-light, but with more transparency than the famous Furtwängler recording made during World War II in Berlin. A few other small extracts, arguably chosen for the reason of fitting so well gramophone discs rather than as choices of musical favorites per se. A recurring choice seems to have been the *Tannhäuser Overture* (the Dresden version), which, in itself, is more of an orchestral showpiece than an expression of any kind of commitment to the Wagnerian cause.

Mengelberg, alone among the most famous conductors of the time, was not an opera conductor. He defined himself as a symphonic conductor. The one biography published during his lifetime

⁴⁶Bernard Shore, *The Orchestra Speaks*, Longmans, Green and Co., London 1938, p. 119

⁴⁷ *Gemeentemuseum*, pp. 20-21

was called *Mengelberg And The Symphonic Epoch*. Towards the end of his doctoral presentation in 1928 mentioned at length in the introductory chapter, the conductor wrote:

Every age creates its ideals, its own forms in the cosmos. Our age has found the deepest, most enduring, most comprehensive expression in the symphony. The whole social life of the last century has become, as it were, transcendental reality in symphonic art.

Here is a spiritual, a rich possession!

Brahms was second only to Beethoven and Tchaikovsky in Mengelberg's preferred 19th century repertoire. His recordings show an affinity with his music based on decades of patient study.

(During the second half of his career, Mengelberg did not often conduct Bruckner and no known recording has surfaced. Yet he remained an active proponent of Bruckner's music at the threshold of the twentieth century. According to the biographer Fritz Zwart, the conductor programmed in Amsterdam all of Bruckner's symphonies except no. 5, which seems odd, inasmuch as its finale contains a monumental fugue, a feature that should have attracted Mengelberg. Mengelberg's favorites among these symphonies were the two works in D minor (nos. 3 and 9), a circumstance perhaps linked in turn to Mengelberg's great esteem of Beethoven's final symphony in the same key.)

Mengelberg's recorded Brahms legacy reads as follows:

Symphony no. 1

-the third movement (Columbia studio recording, 1930)

-a complete live recording (1940), which was part of the Philips label's legacy of live

Mengelberg

-another complete live recording (1943, discovered posthumously, and published for the first time in 2000, on the Tabra label, at the initiative of Myriam Scherchen)

Symphony no. 2 - one recording (Telefunken studio recording, 1940)

Symphony no. 3

-a studio recording (Columbia 1932, observes the repeat of the exposition in the first movement)

-a live recording (February 1944; as far as known, it might be part of the last recorded concert of Mengelberg with the Concertgebouw Orchestra⁴⁸; it skips the repeat of the exposition)

Symphony no. 4 -one recording (Telefunken studio recording, 1938); *Academic Overture* - one recording (Columbia studio recording, 1930); *Tragic Overture* - one recording (Telefunken studio recording, 1942); *Ein deutsches Requiem* - one live recording, 1940.

Violin Concerto – one live recording (1943, soloist being the 23 years old violinist Herman Krebbers, later to become Concertgebouw Orchestra's esteemed concertmaster). All the above-mentioned recordings were made with Concertgebouworkest Amsterdam.

While these recordings have been, for decades, esoteric "collector items," Mengelberg's Brahms recordings are easier to find nowadays, in decent-to-excellent CD transfers. Listening to them reveals both general characteristics pertaining to the interpretive trends of the era, and extremely individualized performance decisions, allocable to Mengelberg only.

We mentioned Mengelberg claiming a direct lineage to Brahms through his conducting teacher, Franz Wüllner (1832-1902). The latter was a friend and collaborator of Brahms; they even published together, in 1891, an edition of Schumann's Fourth Symphony. If today his

⁴⁸ Mengelberg's truly last concert with Concertgebouw, and of his entire career, which went unrecorded, took place on June 18th, 1944, and featured, appropriately, Beethoven's *Ninth Symphony*. It wasn't long after Mengelberg came back from his last international tour.

compositions are forgotten, Wüllner was nevertheless a strong influence in the German musical life, towards the end of his life mostly in a pedagogic way, in his elected residence, Köln. While it is possible that his professor gave Mengelberg first-hand details pertaining to an arguably genuine oral "Brahms tradition", this kind of claims is often debatable (to be taken *cum grano salis*), unless corroborating evidence exists. The connection Mengelberg-Wüllner is nevertheless well established.

"Of those conductors who modified tempo in the first half of the twentieth century, particularly Willem Mengelberg (pupil of Franz Wüllner), Herman Abendroth, and Wilhelm Furtwängler (pupils of Felix Mottl, himself a pupil of Otto Dessoff), may well have retained vestiges of the Brahmsian ideal, and passed these on to us through their important legacy of orchestral recordings. But, as may be readily deduced from all the evidence in this study, individual conducting personalities and capabilities were (as they indubitably are also today) sui generis" (...)⁴⁰

What interests even more though is what Mengelberg himself saw in (and conveyed in his interpretations of) Brahms's symphonies.

In *The Essence And Effect Of Music*, Mengelberg asserted: *"Dreamy, romantic accents (Mendelssohn, Schumann) arose in it [the 19th century individualism], followed by contemplative and finally melancholy, pessimistic moods (Brahms, Tchaikovsky). Then there grew out of pessimism a great longing and the striving toward a new ideal: toward a community transcending the individual."*

⁴⁰ *Flexible tempo and nuancing in orchestral music*, in *Performing Brahms – Early Evidence of Performing Style*, Cambridge University Press, p. 237

Even if one might wish he developed his written ideas on Brahms more than that, there may be a key to the aesthetic placement of Mengelberg in relation with Brahms. After all, the conductor wrote in the same address [capitals in the original]: "PHILOSOPHY IS THE HIGHEST ASPIRATION OF MAN; MUSIC IS THE MOST HUMAN REVELATION OF GOD" couldn't be that far away from Brahms's own understanding of music as a spiritual, consoling force.

One of the things that fascinate in Mengelberg's personality is his protean musical adaptability. He was true to himself, at the same time so different in each performance, so free – ironically, given some of the criticism thrown at him – of inchoate mannerisms.⁵⁰ Mengelberg evidenced non-continuous use of vibrato, rich portamentos (an important aspect that shall be discussed in detail), predilection for ritenutos at the end of the “crucial” phrases, due emphasis on secondary elements of the score (e.g., a viola figuration or a flute-staccato “subsidiary line”) and, last not least, what we called structural rubato. These are unpredictably and discriminately involved, as per the specific musical work they are used in.

Emotional complexity and wholeness coexist with an eagle eye for the intricacies of the symphonic textural details. We've already suggested Mengelberg could afford more rhythmic and agogic license than other conductors because he could also be very precise, when he wanted to. Mengelberg employs various unwritten interpretative inflections in Brahms's *Fourth Symphony*. We note a suddenly slower tempo (approximately sixteen metronome-points) as soon as bars 13-14. (Effect: the first motive within the first theme, the descending third, here diminished in half when compared to the initial values, becomes recognizable.) The movement is slightly sped up in bars 15-16. (Effect: the A-A#-B motif, latent in the violins in bars 15-16,

⁵⁰ Mengelberg certainly employed certain consistent manners of articulation, but he was not applying them thoughtlessly, rather in relation with the challenges of the individual composer and specific work.

motif which will be, much later, part of the *Passacaglia* theme, is brought out.) A new *ritenuto* in bars 17-18 clarifies the double-octave-registered response (w. first violins, then oboe on beats 3 and 4, in bar 17). In the cello-horn theme (bars 57 et seq.), Mengelberg seems unhappy with the degree to which the successive syncopations (bars 59, 61, 63, 67, 69, 71) are naturally heard, so he "helps" them, by introducing some idiosyncratic "Luftpausen" (i.e., by shortening the value of each note that precedes a syncopation). In bar 73, Mengelberg is keen to observe with utmost exactitude the precise placement of the fourth beat (in the strings, flutes) in the middle of the other winds' triplet (as opposed to the wrong rendition of that rhythm – having the fourth beat played simultaneously with the last note of the triplet). In this way, a less than obvious Brahmsian "2 against 3" does not pass unnoticed, nor its rhythmical/metrical potential wasted. In bar 80, Mengelberg "corrects" (better said, puts in perspective) Brahms's balance, by asking the winds to play *mf*, not *forte*, in order to match the dynamic level of the string *pizzicato*. A new *ritenuto*, in bar 94, is attracting attention to the fact that, after bars 91-92-93 (in which first and second violins played, synchronized but at the distance of an octave, the same melody), in bar 94 the first and second violins start dialoguing lovingly, in an intimate *intermezzo* manner.

Mengelberg brings out the *celli divisi* and the basses, in bars 155-156, because the bulk of harmonic events happens in that section of the orchestra, and because Mengelberg is aware that the development started in the same way as the exposition. Only in bars 155-156 cellos and basses bring the modulation to the new key, G Minor. (On a compositional level, this is also a delicate Brahmsian homage to the way Mozart modulates from G Minor to F Sharp Minor at the beginning of the development in his 40th Symphony, first movement, and also at the beginning of the finale's development.)

Moreover, that procedure is repeated on a (dynamics-wise) greater scale, in bars 167-168, this time from G Minor to B Flat Minor (which gives a development's harmonic scheme of E Minor-G Minor-B Flat Minor, in thirds again). One rarely hears the eighth note-two sixteenth notes rhythm rendered so perfectly (in *Allegro giocoso*), or the articulation of the accentuated quarter notes followed by staccato triplets (bars 258-275 of the same, third movement) so properly proportioned.

Ingenious interpretative options are reserved for the final Passacaglia, besides the expected high-quality articulation and clarity. (As an example of the latter, in the strings sixteenths variation, bar 65 et seq., Mengelberg registers a sudden tempo decrease, avoiding an aberrantly fast tempo for those technically awkward string figurations. A technique-motivated decision corroborating a mood/character element of diversity, within the variational development.) A more substantial challenge with the fourth movement is the Passacaglia theme being frequently inaudible in many variations, due to it being hidden in an orchestration which doesn't always make it obvious, or to insufficiently clear balances imposed by conductors. However, Mengelberg does indeed bring out the Passacaglia theme even in demanding parts of the score.

For instance, Brahms placed the theme of the Passacaglia in the violas' and cellos' pizzicato (bar 17 et seq.). Due to frequent neglecting of viola material in orchestral balances, as well a trend towards an excessive smoothness of pizzicatos (they are frequently as well blended as to be inaudible), also due to the fact that the cellos have relatively complicated chords to play pizzicato, finally due to the fact that horns are only playing the first three pitches of the Passacaglia theme, the listener seldom perceives the underlying thematic material "happening" under the winds. Mengelberg notices that Brahms doubles the violas with the upper part of the cellos' pizzicato chords, so he asks for an assertive sound from the violas themselves. Thus the

theme is presented with clarity and eloquence, not covered up by the "solo" winds. In bars 81-86, Mengelberg privileges the cello pitches in the bars 81-85 (E F# G A), with molto vibrato applied to the violins on their A# in bar 85. This way, Mengelberg reconstitutes the mosaic of the "encrypted" Passacaglia theme, out of disparate cello and violin pitches, like in a **Klangfarbenmelodie** *avant la lettre*. In bars 89-92, Mengelberg asks for an unwritten big crescendo-decrescendo, in the cello-viola octaves, again redeeming on a perceptual level an otherwise inaudible theme. The flute variation, an epitomical example of Brahms's reimagining the ancient art of recitativo, is shaped with well-judged rubato, taking advantage of a texture which lends itself to flexibility, in its chamber-music like transparency (*piano dolce* in strings and Horns in E).

A structural element in the "second climax" of the first movement in Brahms' *Fourth Symphony* shouldn't be overlooked. It is the climax that takes place within the Coda, which, rather than a Coda, becomes a second development. (Not unlike in works such as Beethoven's *Eroica*, *Waldstein*, *Appassionata*, the *Ninth Symphony*. This Brahms movement is, not coincidentally, the only among the four of its kind not to have the exposition repeated, like Beethoven's opera 57, 110, and 125 among others.) The structural element mentioned above is more a compositional than an interpretative one. An element which in older recordings (admittedly, not only in Mengelberg's, but also in versions left by Furtwängler, Walter, Klemperer, the younger yet traditionalist in his aesthetics Carlos Kleiber) is being emphasized with particular vividness.

Our conjecture is that Brahms was fascinated with the extraordinarily dramatic enharmonic modulation used by Schubert in his own *Erlkönig*, in a concentrated form, in the climax of the piece. For the sake of drawing the harmonic parallel more clearly, let's assess Schubert's lied as being written in E Minor, not in G Minor. What is needed to substantiate this conjecture is

simply to compare the harmonic procedure used by Schubert in the climax of his own *Erlkönig* (on the words “Mein Vater, mein Vater, jetzt faßt er mich an! *Erlkönig* hat mir ein Leids getan”) with what Brahms does in bars [with upbeat] 381 - 394.

The image shows two musical staves side-by-side, comparing the harmonic procedure of Schubert's *Erlkönig* (top) and Brahms's *Der Erlkönig* (bottom). Both are in 3/4 time and E-flat major. The top staff is Schubert's score, and the bottom staff is Brahms's score. The lyrics are in German and English.

Top Staff (Schubert's *Erlkönig*):

Va - ter, mein Va - ter, jetzt faßt er mich an! Erl - kö - nig
 fa - ther, O fa - ther, now now keep your child! Erl - King has

Bottom Staff (Brahms's *Der Erlkönig*):

hat mir ein Leids ge - than! der
 seized me, the loss is child! Erl King

The 18th century of the 19th century. The 19th century of the 19th century. The 19th century of the 19th century.

The similarity is striking, not only in the structural harmonic outlook (E Flat as the ninth of a clashy D chord, becoming eventually the leading tone D Sharp bringing the impending tragedy to its inevitable closure), but also in the emotional projection as well. A musical metaphor of “passing the River Styx,” succinctly created. In Schubert’s song, based on Goethe’s famous ballad, the moment has more of a story-telling quality to it. Brahms seems to project it as an existential assumption of the inevitability of death, no matter how much one tries to avoid it.

(The attempted avoidance is also expressed harmonically, as Brahms tries to digress harmonically by drawing for a moment what I would call a “false cadence,” in a diversionary and as such short-lived F Major, bar 384, before being ineluctably attracted by the tragic gravity of the E Minor tonic.)

130

Measure 381

The musical score consists of four systems of music, each with a grand staff (treble and bass clef). The key signature is one sharp (F#). The tempo/mood is marked 'Allegro' and 'sempre più f' (sempre più forte). The score is divided into four systems, each with a grand staff (treble and bass clef). The first system starts with a treble clef and a key signature of one sharp. The second system continues the same key signature. The third system continues the same key signature. The fourth system continues the same key signature. The score ends with a double bar line and a repeat sign.

Mengelberg's recording, while not unique in this regard, projects all that as well as any and better than most.

Similarly perspicacious interpretive options inform all Brahms recordings left by Mengelberg. They will not be discussed at the same level of detail, yet some aspects need to be mentioned.

A Brahms recording which is of historical importance but, as an accomplishment in itself, disappoints somewhat is Mengelberg's live 1940 version of the *German Requiem*. While this musician obviously admires Mengelberg, pointing out objective limitations is part of what assessment of an artist's legacy should be. In order to place in context Mengelberg's vision, we've listened to most of the commercially available recordings of Brahms' *German Requiem*, score and text in hand. Both the orchestral score and Brahms' own four hands piano version have been consulted.

It would be banal to assert this is not a facile piece. Not easy to play, not easy to listen to, not even today. 140 years ago it was really hard for a choir to get the mere pitches right, professionally speaking. Brahms' harmonization, far from the conservative stereotypes (especially in this work), was quasi-avant-garde, it must have sounded bizarre to some of the contemporary ears. Contemporary responses to the German Requiem reveal a strange mixture of awe-filled praise and distinct lack of comprehension. In part, misunderstanding may be attributed to balance problems such as the timpani pedal point on D drowning out the fugal section closing the third movement. Brahms had to revise his markings at this point, in order to discourage the timpanist from seizing this as their shining moment, mainly by indicating more *piano* in the timpani part. At any time, the Requiem can suffer from inadequate and dreary performance, if given inadequate shaping from the podium and insufficient vocal preparation on behalf of the soloists and chorus.

There are a number of versions which are expectedly professional yet, at a high level of exigency, can err on the side of blandness, such as the Karajan versions. Thoughtful choral conductors like Robert Shaw have the inherent advantage of neither skimping on nor delegating the painstaking choral preparation which in my opinion is essential to a well-considered performance of the work. The idea of a choral conductor doing the legwork while the maestro comes in at the last moment may be expedient, or even logistically necessary in the context of modern musical life. It won't lead to an ideal cohesion between the minutiae of phrasing as shaped in the orchestral and in the choral parts. We won't insist on "historically informed [period] performances" which sound inappropriately light and happy.

Within the classic interpretative canon, we found rewarding, on the slow side (especially slow in the first movement), the underrated Fritz Lehmann version (better than Celibidache's or Tennstedt's, within a compatible interpretative paradigm imposing an extremely slow tempo, particularly on the first movement). Whether in the Amsterdam or the Stockholm versions, both live, this is one of Furtwängler's least focused, technically prepared interpretations, despite the conductor's signature depth of sonority. Some moments are hauntingly expressive indeed, but the ethos of the whole seems to be more inadvertently lugubrious than cathartically consoling.

Toscanini's versions from 1937 (in poorly recorded sound but exhibiting a more flexible of Toscanini's best days on record, in London) and 1943 (with NBC orchestra) are better than predicted. A lack of transcendental insights is compensated by a moving sincerity, a lack of pretension, as well as a well-paced fluency which helps the musical experience. Elements of grandeur, nobility, and (sixth movement, with its defiance of death C Minor theme) apocalypse can be found in Klemperer's approach to the *Requiem* (Klemperer's live version in Köln exhibits a more exciting spontaneity than the better known EMI reference recorded in studio). Rudolf

Kempe offers a somewhat central, slightly generic version which is nevertheless solid, a good starting point to get acquainted with the work. A fluent, visionary, and unexpectedly youthful Bruno Walter in New York is arguably the most accomplished of the historic versions, especially in the soloist-less fourth movement, with its promise of paradisiac happiness. Among more recent, yet already accepted as reference versions, Giulini/Wiener Philharmoniker and Raphael Kubelik/Bavarian Radio Orchestra are among the best balanced and most thoughtfully phrased versions.

So which would be a truly excellent recommendation, for the little my opinion may be worth? The Herbert Kegel (1920-1990) studio version from 1985, with the Radio Leipzig Orchestra and Choir. (There exists one other Kegel version, live in Japan with Japanese forces, which shows a remarkable ability to not only transplant unadulterated his musical vision to a “foreign land,” but even the subtlest elements of German diction. Corresponding with some German and French archivists led to the realization that the Requiem was somewhat an obsession for Kegel, as multiple other versions recorded throughout the years, between ~1960 and the end of his life, exist, as of now not published.)

With the risk of sounding encomiastic: the two soloists may be “merely” good to excellent. The Leipzig Radio orchestra is impeccable. (Kegel may have achieved even more memorable marvels of profundity and flexibility, generally speaking, with the Dresden Philharmonic he led during the last years of his life, before committing suicide.) The Leipzig Radio choir though is extraordinary. The inordinate amount of thoughtfulness that went into this recording is the qualitative equivalent of what Mengelberg did for *Matthäus Passion* or Furtwängler for Beethoven's *Ninth Symphony*. Kegel's approach to music is surely different to an extent, more modern, more introverted, sometimes more obviously calculated - yet not at all emotion-lacking

- but the result is the same: illuminating from within a musical work to an extent and with an intensity one didn't hitherto think possible. There's more meaning and artisanal perfection in a consonant of the choir (the "sch" in *Fleisch* and the "s" in *Gras* - "Denn alles Fleisch es ist wie Gras" - for example, in the second movement) than in hours of generic music-making. The detailing of articulation, the intonational perfection, the immaculate balancing of notoriously "impossible" to balance passages, the amount of mutual, creative listening (with the consequence of a beautifully integrated interpretation) which goes on between the choir and the orchestra is, in my opinion again, unparalleled in this work, and the sheer wonders of perfection and vividness of this version cannot be exhausted even in dozens of auditions.

We are purposefully avoiding excessive interpretive comparisons between the many versions in relation with Mengelberg's legacy. An exception has been made above, and the insistence on the merits of the Herbert Kegel version of the *German Requiem* can be explained as follows: the Requiem is, its pietistic spiritual content notwithstanding, a musically avant-garde work, which fits admirably Kegel's *résumé*⁵¹; even admirers of historical recordings have to accept that some visionary works in the repertoire were done true interpretative justice later in their recorded history rather than earlier. More relevant to this writing, because Kegel, among the many sources of learning and inspiration he absorbed, learned a lot from Mengelberg's recordings, portamento concepts, rehearsal methods, and even the manner of annotating scores. (Compare below a page of music annotated by Mengelberg and one by Kegel, as reproduced in Kuschmitz's biography

⁵¹ A specialist in post-World War II avant-garde music, among others.

of Kegel.⁵²)

⁵² Helga Kuschmitz, *Herbert Kegel – Legende ohne Tabu*, Altenburg: Verlag Klaus-Jürgen Kamprad, 2003, p. 122.

A page from Tchaikovsky's 6th *Symphony* annotated by Kegel could be taken for one of Mengelberg's scores.

Handwritten musical score for a symphony, likely the 5th by Peter Tchaikovsky, arranged by Herbert Kegel. The score is written on multiple staves, including woodwinds, strings, and percussion. The notation is dense and includes various musical symbols, clefs, and dynamic markings. The score is written in a cursive, handwritten style.

Partiturseite Peter Tschaikowski
 „Symphonie Nr. 5 h-Moll“ in Herbert Kegels Einrichtung

We mentioned that Mengelberg's version of the Requiem, despite soloists and the choir showing some flaws, is still significant as a document. It's one of few major vocal-symphonic works we have on record with Mengelberg. It is also one of the earliest complete recordings of the Requiem.

(Among the recordings which so far didn't go beyond a rumor stage, one has to count, aside Mahler's *First Symphony*⁵³, a reportedly recorded version of Beethoven's *Missa Solemnis*. However, we do have multiple versions of Beethoven's *Ninth Symphony* and especially a deliberately abridged - from Mengelberg's perspective, "complete" – Bach *Matthäus Passion* from 1939, as well as some excerpts from 1936; for Bach's masterpiece the choir, while not necessarily impeccably prepared, is nevertheless well-rehearsed and, on an expressive level, superb.)

During the first orchestral phrase of the *Requiem*, Brahms leaves out the violins from the orchestration. (In a way reflecting perhaps, *a rebours*, the way Beethoven doesn't include the double-bass at the beginning of the orchestral exposition of the *Fourth Piano Concerto*, until the tonic is being first "recaptured" by the orchestra, which started their theme in B Major rather than in G. The first double-bass note therefore reinforces the missing tonic, a detail which the conductor should emphasize.⁵⁴) Once the intonation-wise risky horn F octave is being disposed

⁵³ Mengelberg loved this symphony – it was the last Mahler work to be performed under the Nazi occupation, at Mengelberg's personal exhortations to the occupying authority, as mentioned once before. Bruno Walter, who resented on some level the disputation of the "authorized Mahler discipleship" mantle by anybody other than himself, was rather critical with Mengelberg's Mahler ways, unlike the composer himself.

"Willem Mengelberg was a great admirer of Gustav Mahler's works, but with all his strong talent as a conductor, one could not say that he strove to satisfy the intentions of the composer. I remember having found in Amsterdam, when I conducted Mahler's *First Symphony*... the printed score full of red corrections from Mengelberg's hand – all pointing to a tendency for exaggeration."

Erik Ryding and Rebecca Pechefsky, *Bruno Walter – A World Elsewhere*, Yale University Press, p.404

⁵⁴ Piano introduction – bars 1-5; first orchestral phrase bars 6-13; double-bass comes in at bar 14.

of, not impeccably so, Mengelberg “imprints” the music with his idiosyncratic articulation. In bar 10 and bar 11 the upper violas play almost the same three pitches (G E F, Gb E F). Nevertheless the harmonic function underneath the viola is not similar. In bar 10 we witness the first breaking of the F pedal point... but the shift to D Flat happens in the inner voices (lower violas and the cellos), the bass-line is still F for two beats, only two beats later, in bar 11, the change to B Flat also being propagated into the bass-line. Mengelberg has the upper violas slide between G and E in bar 10, but not between Gb and E in bar 11, when the listener’s attention is adequately shifted towards the bass/horn F-Db “bass” gesture.

I.

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Mengelberg uses portamento not only as sonorous embellishment or as a means of establishing a microclimate of sentimentality, but also as a structure-reinforcing device. Perhaps nowhere in these Brahms recordings is the element of portamento as memorable as in a passage during the second (slow) movement of the *First Symphony* (an element present consistently in both the 1940 and the 1943 recordings) which will be discussed later.

Throughout the 20th century, few conductors on record (Stokowski also comes to mind) used deliberate portamento on a scale as large as Mengelberg. String portamento is omnipresent in Mengelberg's recordings. The history and the semantics of string portamento are fascinating and crucial in what regards the evolution of the musical arts and of musical interpretation in particular. Few performance practice means are more exciting or controversial than this one. Portamento is, or can be, a technical device as well as an expressive one. During the last hundred years it became gradually less fashionable to employ it at all in classical music performance,

when not specified in the score. Even where required by the composer, there are Mahler performances which exclude the portamentos altogether. The controversial aspect of portamento may be due to the fact that, at its most indiscriminate level of employment, it brings proof of faulty technique, not of expressive playing. (Imagine a singer gliding continuously and annoyingly from one pitch to the next. It is the first element any parody of poor opera singing will employ.)

At its best, sliding in strings playing isn't a technical necessity but the aural projection of an aesthetic intention to tame down the dotty, choppy extemporization of a melody. Perhaps traditional Western music notation⁵⁵ conditions us to see the "becoming" (with a word dear to Furtwängler) of a melody merely as a combinatorial, interruptible, pitch by pitch process. Ernst Kurth had a different take on it: *"Psychic energies [which] pass over into sensually perceivable wonder of sound as does the Life-Will into worldly images. (...) The boundary where the creative will and its reflection in sonorous expression make contact lies in the melodic line... The melodic line is the first projection of the will unto 'matter.'"*⁵⁶

To the modern eye such pronunciamientos, rooted as they are in German Romantic philosophy, seem a little vague (perhaps "intuitionist") but one is entitled to wonder: who was organically more intimate with the universe of Brahms, Wagner and Tchaikovsky, if not the luminaries of that time and culture? In terms compatible with the idealist aesthetics of that world, one can see in Mengelberg's exquisite use of portamento a way of expressing nostalgia for the "state of grace" of the melody. Pitches yearning to be together. A state in which the melody's unified

⁵⁵ I am thinking of the inescapable reality of pitches being represented in writing through dots rather than, for instance, lines "walking through" specific pitches.

⁵⁶ Lee A. Rothfarb, *Ernst Kurth as Theorist and Analyst*, University of Pennsylvania Press, p. 15

essence, with the end in its beginning, is part of the inner creative process (Kurth talks about "inside" [inner] and "outside music"). When the melody wasn't yet "sent out" of the proverbial Platonic "cave of essences," in the fallen world of real time, of graphic and aural clarity and separateness. A world which is inevitably in opposition with the ideal "oneness" the melody once existed in, (if only) in its nascent state.

When unhiddenness occurs, hiddenness and concealing are overcome and removed. The removal of concealment, that which acts against concealing, we shall henceforth call de-concealing [Entbergen]. The characteristic perceiving of the idea, this projecting, is deconcealing [ist entbergend]. (...) Deconcealing is the innermost nature of looking-into-the-light.⁵⁷

Not only the great string players but also some of the greatest singers in various traditions, including Ponselle, Caruso, Schipa, Tauber, Slezak, Supervia, Koshetz, Olivero, used vocal portamento with deliberate artistic consciousness, as expressive elements of their technical apparatus.

String portamento use and misuse was theorized by string instruments' masters, even before Carl Flesch and Leopold Auer, two outstanding violin pedagogues at the turn of the 20th century. Nevertheless, until the end of the 19th century, the use of portamento was an obvious element of standard performance practice so, generally speaking, no notation of it was considered to be needed. Composers considered these decisions an optional and flexible task of the interpreters themselves. Portamento was fundamentally an unthinking acculturated performance habit. Nevertheless, even then important distinctions were made between sloppy shifts due to

⁵⁷ Martin Heidegger, *The Essence of Truth - On Plato's Cave Allegory and Theaetetus*, Continuum, London, New York, p. 54

insufficient technique⁵⁸ and deliberate, controlled, significant use of portamento. A quote from a letter by Anne Mischakoff-Heiles (the author of *the* reference research on American concertmasters and the daughter of Mischa Mischakoff, famous concertmaster):

*"My generation of string players has venerated Heifetz for his tasteful use of portamento, as it has Kreisler for the warmth and tasteful slides he used. My father's fingerings early in his career (in his oldest violin sheet music, often of pieces that have fallen out of fashion) show same-finger shifting to nearby notes (one position away), what I regard as a typically Russian slide. I'm hearing increasing numbers of long upward slides from younger players (...) and find them tiresome. I think the critical factor is combining the portamento with a lighter bow pressure (more effective) vs. a heavy-handed pressure that 'grows old fast.' "*⁵⁹

When Mahler or Elgar indicate specifically portamento, it's something similar to Beethoven's special pedal indications in the first movements of the *Sonata opus 31 no. 2* and *opus 57*, or the slow movements of the *Second* and *Third Piano Concertos*. It doesn't mean at all that pedal has to be used only where indicated. It means though that pedal should be imperatively used in those places, in the specific (arguably extra-ordinary, longer than "normal") way indicated by the composer, in addition to the implied use of pedal, left to the taste of the performer himself. Specific indications of portamento should be seen in a similar vein. Mahler tried to narrow down the moments, timing, and manner in which such manner of playing *should* be employed, in addition to anything else. One way to "read between lines," regarding the portamento practice of the time, is to corroborate the surviving recordings of artists born and/or trained in the 19th

⁵⁸ As early a figure as Leopold Auer, the father of the modern Russian violin school, commented both on the necessity to emulate good singers when it comes to sliding, and on the annoyance sloppy, badly realized portamento can easily become – the imagery he used succeeded in insulting both poorly prepared violinists and the feline world to which they were compared.

⁵⁹ Anne Mischakoff-Heiles, in a letter to the author, March 10, 2006.

century with editions of classical and Romantic works signed by them. In some fingerings, the use of portamento, if not overtly specified, was nonetheless implied. The use of skillful portamento in orchestral playing is difficult because of the needed combination of excellent baton technique and abundant rehearsal time, were such technique to be employed at all. There are multitudes of micro-decisions to be taken, inscribed uniformly in the scores, and rehearsed until an ensemble of dozens of string players can slide as synchronously as a human voice would.

Robert Philip is among the scholars who studied these aspects as relating to Mengelberg's (and other conductors') art, with valuable insights to share. He makes a distinction between sloppy, disorganized sliding (such as that present in early orchestral recordings from England) and systematic, deliberate use. He also comments in some detail about the differences between the placement and frequency of portamento in the Mengelberg recordings of the same work - Tchaikovsky's *Symphony no. 5* - by Concertgebouw Orchestra (1928) and by Berliner Philharmoniker (1940).⁶⁰ (In the literature of the field the same examples and analytical paradigms were used by Clemens Romijn, in a short but substantial essay: "The Performer must help the Creator,"⁶¹)

Robert Philip hypothesizes regarding the reasons for those differences (less frequent portamento in the Berliner Philharmoniker recording than in the earlier Amsterdam recording): "*Did Mengelberg leave the Berlin orchestra to play in the style they were used to under Furtwängler? Did he attempt to persuade them to play in the Concertgebouw's style and fail? Without other*

⁶⁰ Robert Philip, *Performing Music in the Age of Recording*, Yale University Press, 2004, pp. 100-101

⁶¹ Clemens Romijn, *Der Interpret muss dem Schöpfer helfen*, in Willem Mengelberg 1871-1951, Niederlande-Studien, Waxmann Verlag GmbH, Münster 2006, pp. 51-68.

evidence one can only guess, but this example suggests that the characteristic sliding of the Concertgebouw was something that Mengelberg cultivated over years, and that he could not just apply it when visiting other orchestras.”⁶²

The following is not meant to question Robert Philip’s merits in the Romantic performance practice scholarship but it seems that he may have missed another fact: Mengelberg used to travel on tour with his own scores and carefully annotated orchestral parts, and one can easily hear similar choices of portamento-placement in the same work interpreted with various orchestras – e.g., the sublime recordings of the Bach-Mahler *Air from the Third Suite*, made in Amsterdam (1938 or 1942, depending on the source) and New York (1929).

In the absence of these parts, teaching specific portamento placement in a symphony, from scratch, to a “new” orchestra, would have necessitated dozens of rehearsals. For some reason Mengelberg’s own parts (exhibiting similar portamentos in the various Concertgebouw recordings) were not used in the Berlin recording. Whether he was reluctant to impose his own parts to an(other) illustrious orchestra, as if their own fingerings were “not good enough,” or whether the concertmaster refused to adopt them would be a matter of speculation.

Mengelberg brought, more than any other conductor in the 20th century⁶³, the use of the portamento (fundamentally a pre-20th century mannerism) to a modern degree of conceptualization and aesthetical use. One of Mengelberg's main concerns while preparing the

⁶² Philip, *idem*

⁶³ I am making this distinction (20th century) because *written* sources, such as Alan Walker’s invaluable *Hans von Bülow: A Life and Times* (Oxford University Press, 2009) suggest that Bulow in Meiningen may have achieved a comparable degree of orchestral coordination within the legendary Meiningen string section. It is highly unlikely any of the missing Bulow cylinders - including, tantalizingly so, a complete *Eroica* reported by Alan Walker to have been recorded in New York - would ever surface.

orchestral parts (always to the last minutiae, as admiratively testified by Hermann Scherchen in an aside in his treatise on conducting⁶⁴) was the frequency and the exact pitches between which portamentos were to take place.

At the beginning of the 20th century, the use of portamento "by default" started to come under criticism. The score of Mahler's *Adagietto* from the *Fifth Symphony* includes many written-out portamentos, some of them on unprecedented big intervals (as between a sound on the G string and one on the E string, which involves particular techniques of "portamento distribution" between strings). Mengelberg's uniquely beautiful 1926 recording of this *Adagietto* uses authentic Mahlerian portamentos, avoided or mishandled by some conductors in later recordings and performances.

"Many, certainly not all, conductors speak privately with concertmasters about small points, as far as what concertmasters have told me. Sam Magad in Chicago emphasized that these matters go beyond bow directions. I know that my father [Mischa Mischakoff] and Toscanini often consulted over finer points in the score. So it would not surprise me that Mengelberg, who was fastidious about details (the Mengelberg exhibit book shows that through the markings in his scores!), would make suggestions or requests about fingerings. (...)

By and large portamento does seem a lost art among orchestra players. I think all the professional orchestras I've played in have attempted "portamento" in Mahler's Adagietto, but it looks to string players like a "glissando," and unless the conductor works, as Mengelberg did, on the timing - specifying it and rehearsing it - the section smears rather at random".⁶⁵

⁶⁴ Herman Scherchen, *Handbook of Conducting*, New York: Oxford University Press, 1989, p. 150

⁶⁵ Anne Mischakoff-Heiles, idem

X

In Brahms's First Symphony, Andante sostenuto, Mengelberg prescribes portamentos, for instance: in bars 13 and 14, between the pitches C# and F# of the first violins (bar 13) and cellos + basses (bar 14), making more eloquent the voice leading, the contrapuntal imitation. In bar 15, portamento is being drawn between G and E in the first violins, emphasizing the seventh diminished chord that supports that segment of melody. Where the significance of a portamento (how much it being employed changes the way one perceives a theme) is best heard is at bar 91. Mengelberg asks his concertmaster (who could have been either Ferdinand Helman or Louis Zimmermann - they were for a long time, at that time included, Concertgebouworkest's trusted concertmasters; they were, so to speak, the Arnold Rosé's of Amsterdam⁶⁶) to play a descending portamento between the pitches E and B, in the violin solo (doubled by horn and oboe). It is one of those details which is so seamlessly accomplished that, at least in this listener's perception, becomes part of the "music itself" to the extent that performances which don't employ it sound, if not objectively "wrong," which of course they aren't, poorer.

The Mengelbergian concept of structural rubato is also discussed in other chapters (2 and 6), but there is an example we want to point out: the phrasing of the third movement of the *Third Symphony* opus 90. As mentioned before, we have two recordings, 1932 (studio) and 1944 (live). They both exhibit the same abstract "planning" in terms of phrasing, but the differences in realization show both how Mengelberg could be more extreme in live recordings, and how his conceptions could evolve over time.⁶⁷

⁶⁶ Arnold Rosé was yet another one of Mengelberg's many close musical friends who suggest an incompatibility with the tenets of Nazism.

⁶⁷ This is an issue already mentioned and discussed in Chapter II, in relation with different versions of Tchaikovsky's *Pathétique*.

The main theme in the *Poco Allegretto* movement is tuneful in a rarefied “sentimental waltz” mode, which makes it immediately memorable, not always the case with Brahms’ themes.⁶⁸ This may distract one’s attention from the elegant and skillful phrase structure. It is a twelve-bar phrase instead of the instinctively predicted eight-bar phrase. Bars 2 and 4 see the pitches G and then B Flat reached in an ascensional, aspirational manner. Bars 8-12 consist of an amplified, reiterated in augmentation mode reaching of the “high-point” B Flat, with the consequent, “depressed” falling in thirds (B Flat in bar 9, G in bar 10, E Flat in bar 11).⁶⁹ Mengelberg emphasizes the structure of the extended phrase by employing a particular kind of rubato in bar 9, in which a slide between F and B Flat is combined with an agogic accent obtained through the delay of the B Flat. By doing so every time the phrase appears⁷⁰, yet to different degrees, Mengelberg makes the structure of the whole first section of the movement clearer than straightforward phrasings might.

Mengelberg’s Brahms recordings remain relevant today, on both an immediate illumination/enjoyment level and in what regards their connection with 19th century performance practice aspects, applied by the conductor not only judiciously, creatively as well.

⁶⁸ No wonder that this was *the* theme used obsessively by Georges Auric in his soundtrack for the Francoise Sagan-based, 1961 movie *Aimez-vous Brahms?*, both in its original instrumentation (the horn iteration at bar 98) and in modernized variations.

⁶⁹ Also to be compared with bars 156-158, where the essence of the ascensional gestures of the main theme is being marvelously condensed in one last gesture, a scale on the surface, in reality one last time the third-based melodic points of reference (C E Flat G B Flat) are being launched in the movement, blended within the innocuous scale.

⁷⁰ For rather obvious instrumental reasons, when the theme is exposed in the winds + horn (bar 41 et seq.), Mengelberg doesn’t use a slide, only the rubato.

IV Piano concertos

"I liked Mengelberg. Him I played with many times. He was crazy. In the Chopin E-Minor Concerto, he followed beautifully. All the rubatos. And when I changed something, he was always there." – *Claudio Arrau*⁷¹

Mengelberg abilities as an accompanist were legendary. Performing with him were experiences cherished by many soloists, some of them speaking highly of him in their interviews or memoirs. That doesn't mean that accidents didn't happen. Yehudi Menuhin, in *Unfinished Journey*, mentions how, as a child, his experience with Mengelberg wasn't pleasant, insofar Mengelberg took tempi quicker than those the soloist wanted. A cruelly caricatural description of both Mengelberg's rehearsal mannerisms and of his claims of authenticity comes from Gregor Piatigorsky's memoir (the events happen in New York, Carnegie Hall, 1930): *I discreetly asked him to take a faster tempo. (Mengelberg) responded loudly, "I studied this concerto with the composer himself, and the tempo I am taking is the right one." (...) Judson (...) said smilingly that Mengelberg's musical information came semidirect, from a grand-grandnephew of Beethoven, or grandaunt of a grand-grandson of Bach. "You see, he has made it clear that while all others seek guidance from printed scores alone, he, having known Schumann, Brahms, Wagner, Dvorak, and others in person, has weightier shoulders of authority to lean on."*⁷²

The place of the concerto genre is solidly established today. We almost take for granted that we are likely to hear a piano or a violin concerto in a typical symphonic program. In the late

⁷¹ Joseph Horowitz, *Conversations with Arrau*, Limelight Editions, New York, 1984, p.86

⁷² Gregor Piatigorsky, *The Cellist*, Da Capo Press, New York, 1965, p. 190-191

classical/early Romantic world, programs were more likely to be either conductor-centric, or meant to expose an aspiring composer, or to be soloist-focused, or on occasion a chaotic combination of the above.

The ambitious *Theater an der Wien* 1808 Beethoven concert, including among other "numbers" the *Fourth Concerto*, parts of the *C Major Mass*, the *Fifth* and *Sixth* symphonies, as well as the *Choral Fantasy*, is still a matter of legend, as a composer/performer marathon of both exhausting length and exhaustive substance. Chopin, in Vienna (on his way to Paris), then later on in Paris and London as well, used recitals – with the odd concerto thrown in – as a vehicle of making his own music better known. Conductors ranging from Berlioz to Wagner, Hans von Bülow and Mahler often conducted all-symphonic programs, the presence of a virtuoso soloist not required to attract an audience. Such concerto-less programming was emulated within 20th century concerto life by conductors relying on their box-office attraction, or making symphonic programming varied enough to allow for the absence of the "solo virtuoso." While concerto collaborations such as Rachmaninoff-Stokowski or Edwin Fischer-Furtwängler could not be ignored, Stokowski, Koussevitzky, Furtwängler, Scherchen, Klemperer were among the star conductors able to fill a concert hall through their presence alone, when they dispensed with the presence of a soloist. To Mengelberg programming and conducting a concerto was not a secondary challenge. He was putting as much thought into it when given the chance. As a young man, pianist of great promise, Mengelberg performed as a soloist Liszt's *Concerto no. 1*⁷³ and Beethoven's *Concerto no. 5*. (From various sources we know that pre-World War I Mengelberg conducted in Liszt's *E Flat Major Concerto* soloists like Artur Schnabel⁷⁴ and, in St. Petersburg,

⁷³ In Utrecht, January 4th 1890.

⁷⁴ Add source.

Ignaz Friedman⁷⁵). We possess live recordings of both concertos conducted by an older Mengelberg, with less famous soloists.

Edna Richolson Sollitt's biography of Mengelberg was published in 1929, in New York. Sollitt's writing may be long on encomia and short on musical detail. Nevertheless, she remains the only biographer with unimpeded access to Mengelberg himself, being a close friend of his. Her account of Mengelberg's own piano debut, based on the conductor's own recollection, is worth quoting: *He studied conducting with Willner, piano with Isidor Seiss, and composition with Jensen, and received the highest honors and distinctions possible for the Conservatory to bestow. Three first prizes: an unequaled record there. Just after leaving the Conservatory he was invited to play with orchestra at Utrecht during a festival of the Toonkunst under the direction of Richard Hol. Although only seventeen, he displayed technique and musicianship of a superlative order. And an incident of this concert revealed this lad as the possessor, also, of poise and self-control astounding in one so young. His piano-chair had been damaged in delivery, but the fact did not become known until well into the concerto, when it began to give trouble. The Concerto being the Liszt E flat, there was no pause when a change might have been made; once embarked upon this work, one either goes to the end or suffers shipwreck. Mengelberg went through, playing magnificently, ignoring with imperturbable calm such creakings and wobblings as might well have ruined the performance of a routined artist. The quality of his work and his courageous self-command gained him an ovation remembered to this day. His Utrecht success was the beginning of a period of touring, interspersed with teaching at the Conservatory, a*

⁷⁵ Allan Evans, *Ignaz Friedman: Romantic Master Pianist*, Indiana University Press, 2009, p. 71

*period which lasted until his twentieth year. A notable career as pianist seemed certain. But greater things were destined.*⁷⁶

From Bruno Walter we have the recording of the whole *D Minor Concerto* by Mozart, conducted from the keyboard. From Furtwängler we have some of Bach's *Brandenburg Concertos*, as well as Hugo Wolf lieder recital, in a Salzburg recital in which he accompanied his protégé Elisabeth Schwarzkopf. From Mengelberg, the only trace of piano playing left to us is an improvisation recorded in private at his Swiss villa, during his last years of life. That also represents the only recorded trace of music-making of any kind of Mengelberg in exile, when his career was finished for good, between 1945 and 1951⁷⁷. Wandering around in nostalgic Wagnerian chromaticisms, Mengelberg's piano sonority is indeed distinctive.

The Liszt *First Concerto* features the Dutch pianist Marinus Flipse (1908-1997), recorded in concert, 2/27/1944. Not a particularly polished performance, especially by Mengelberg's standards. The pianist seems nervous and technically challenged by the work, the ensemble under-rehearsed, while the orchestral playing suffers from an atypical number of inexactitudes. By 1944, due to the exclusion of Jewish members from the orchestra, due to other vicissitudes of occupation, Concertgebouw Orchestra wasn't at the level of 1940 or even 1942⁷⁸. Even so, the performers seem to have had an evening worse than usual. Nevertheless, this remains a pertinent document, due to the fact that Mengelberg, born in 1871, is generationally not far from Emil von Sauer (1862-1942) and Sauer's almost precisely coetaneous Felix Weingartner (1863-1942),

⁷⁶ Edna Richolson Sollitt: *Mengelberg and the Symphonic Epoch* (New York, 1929) add page

⁷⁷ Never made available commercially, the recording was generously put to my disposal by the French organist and collector Hubert Wendel, one of the world's few experts in Mengelberg.

⁷⁸ The last Telefunken recordings made by Mengelberg, in best sound for the time, show that the standards of the orchestra have not been weakened by 1942.

both representing a link to the Liszt tradition in the interpretation of the concerto⁷⁹. In the Flipse version, the listener's attention is captivated immediately by the supplementary overdotting of the already double-dotted initial rhythm, as well as by the two long fermatas in the chords which interrupt the initial chromatic motifs. Wagner's concept of dramatic fermatas (while talking about the beginning of Beethoven's *Fifth Symphony*) being held "firmly and unyieldingly"⁸⁰ is being applied here by Mengelberg (and also by Weingartner, in the Sauer-Weingartner version).

There are similarities in pacing, as well as in the mentioned use of overdotting. With exceptions - such as Mengelberg's perfectionist 1929 version of *Les Préludes* recorded for Columbia - Liszt's more modern orchestration aspects, taking over from where Berlioz left, were seldom rendered justice by older generation conductors. It is difficult to quote one name of a "Liszt specialist," similar to known "Beethoven specialists" such as Nikisch⁸¹, Weingartner, Mengelberg, and Furtwangler. As late as the 1950s, Nikolai Golovanov (1891-1953), the Bolshoi Theater conductor who left a pioneering set of Liszt's symphonic poems - recordings in which passion, drama and vivid color cannot be denied - also evidenced some technical negligence in the treatment of details. Regarding the scherzo of the *E Flat Major Concerto*, both Mengelberg and Weingartner do not pay enough attention to - then novel - the use of the triangle. A mushy, over-reverberating use of triangle renders rhythms indistinguishable. The gradual improvements in the use of triangle in the last two "movements-within-the-movement" of the *E Flat Major Concerto* and elsewhere can be observed historically, to such a predictable rate that one has to wonder to which extent conductors become better with it, or it rather was the increase of its use in 20th

⁷⁹ Sauer and Weingartner have also recorded together Liszt's *Second Piano Concerto*.

⁸⁰ Richard Wagner. *Über das dirigieren*, quoted in *The Conductor's Art*, New York, Columbia University Press, 1965, p. 80

⁸¹ Incidentally, the Nikisch recording which gives a remotely enticing approximation of the conductor's flair and sense of color - is not the 1913 *Fifth Symphony* by Beethoven, but Liszt's Hungarian Rhapsody no. 1.

century repertoire which made the percussionists themselves able to deal with its subtleties of articulation and timing. The triangle players of Mengelberg's Amsterdam orchestra or Weingartner's Paris Conservatoire Orchestra are already superseded by the Philadelphia Orchestra player in the Cliburn/Ormandy recording or the Moscow Philharmonic one in the Richter/Kondrashin's version. By the time of the Katchen/Argenta recording with London Philharmonic, the listener can almost believe the part is written differently, in terms of prominence and clarity. The triangle is being mentioned because this is one of few instances in which Mengelberg's conceit that there's nothing about orchestral playing he wouldn't know⁸² doesn't measure up to recorded evidence. Of course, even in this recording, certain felicitous touches make up for the flaws - the lyrical cellos in Quasi Adagio expose a dreamy quality of sound and smooth yet sober phrasing which was not heard again until the post-WWII recordings of Eastern German orchestras, from both Leipzig and Dresden.

The earlier mention of Emil von Sauer was not coincidental. There is only one other concerto recording left by this Lisztian veteran with impeccable credentials.⁸³ That is the 1940 live recording of Schumann's *Piano Concerto* in Amsterdam. While also not an epitome of perfection (the pianist was seventy-eight at the time), the recording reveals interpretative insights, more than the Liszt Concerto mentioned above. Sauer, the old lion at the piano, if we may indulge once in that cliché, had lost some of the steel in his fingers, but little of the silk. The tricky third movement arpeggios and runs are not played impeccably but the pianist acquits

⁸² "Mengelberg inspires an orchestra to its utmost power, and to sit under him is to sit at the feet of a great virtuoso. As he says, and it is most true, 'There ees nothing I do not know about der orchester.'"

Bernard Shore, *The Orchestra Speaks*, Longmans, Green and Co., London 1938, p. 125

⁸³ Two notes: Sauer was also a representative of the Nikolai Rubinstein school of teaching, Liszt was a "maturity mentor" to him; secondly, late in Liszt's life and especially after Liszt's death there was an epidemics of people who claimed the Liszt mantle with less than sufficient justification.

himself well overall. More important is emphasizing the interpretative insights present in this recording.

The concerto starts with a piano mini-cadenza following one note from the orchestra establishing the dominant function. Sauer's playing surprises through a rare, for the time, under-dotting of the piano rhythm. (Robert Philip⁸⁴ in his writings, as well as recorded evidence, suggest that the rule of the day, going back centuries in fact, was overdotting, rather.) Sauer's playing sounds instead like a triplet. His being unaware of it seems out of the question. It is plausible that Sauer aims for a thoughtful, searching (as opposed to heroic) ethos for the first few bars of the music. The slightly over-dotted utterance of dotted rhythms at the end of the first movement - after the cadenza - suggests the opposed concepts of songfulness (at the beginning) vs. volitional energy (at the end).

(On the subject of overdotting in real musical practice, rather than in theory, I find particularly useful to connect what we have in way of old treatises with recorded performances of artists born as early as ~1830. They are obviously not Baroque-old, due to the lack of the technology necessary to record actual Baroque artists at the time. The specific amount and style of overdotting, as expressed in old recordings, is nevertheless more relevant as a bridge to an even older past than sheer words on paper. There are minute, infinitesimal nuances which cannot transmit. One (sound) image is worth indeed a thousand words. In the long-going debate over overdotting, I would have to go with Stephen Hefling: *Overdotting is not a delusion, as Neumann has claimed. But neither is the "French Overture style one of our best-attested conventions of baroque interpretation," as Donington would have it; and Dart's sweeping*

⁸⁴ Robert Philip, *Early recordings and musical style*, Cambridge University Press, 1992, the whole Chapter 3 (*Long and short notes*)

*advocacy of overdotting from Monteverdi through Beethoven extends well beyond what the sources support.*⁸⁵

The main A Minor theme featured in the winds exhibits distinctive phrasing, to the extent that it would be impossible to mistake this recording for any other. Too often the conceptual coherence of a lyrical musical phrase is mistaken in interpretation with the physical connectedness of the component pitches. (The two concepts can coexist but there's no inherent causality linking one to the other.) It seems that, according to this misconception, the more uninterrupted legato there is the more "expressive" the phrase becomes, as a matter of course. Research such as Neal Peres da Costa's shows this not to be the case: (...) *early in the nineteenth century, certain pianists, evidently aware of the effect of portato on the clavichord, assigned an alternative though not less expressive articulation for the portato sign in piano playing. (...)*⁸⁶ Among the elements of articulation which distinguish pianists like Pachmann, Rosenthal, Hofmann, and Friedman in comparison with contemporary Chopin performers is that, instead of employing an uninterrupted legato, they studied and projected Chopin's many shades of staccato-legato and portato. There is a parallelism with Mengelberg's refusal to allow for continuous all-bow usage in the orchestral playing⁸⁷ of string instruments: "*It ees no goot, dhat long bow in de orchester, it looks well, yes in der front, but de notes are not dhere! A soloist may do it perhaps, but eet es no goot in der orchester.*"⁸⁸

⁸⁵ Stephen E. Hefling, *Rhythmic alteration in seventeenth- and eighteenth-century music: notes inegales and overdotting* (New York: Schirmer Books, 1993)

⁸⁶ Neil Peres da Costa, *Off the Record – Performing Practices in Romantic Piano Playing*, Oxford University Press, New York, 2012, p. 70

⁸⁷ Carl Flesch and George Enescu made also a point, as professors/soloists, not to allow for continuous all-out use of the bow. An exemplary use of economical bowing was left to us by the Hungarian violinist Joseph Szigeti, at least in his pre-World War Two recordings which represent him at his considerable best.

⁸⁸ Bernard Shore, *idem*, p. 122

Asking for continuous physical legato in performance entails confusing the conceptual arching of a musical phrase (the “legato of the mind”) with its specific articulation - including smaller slurs, caesuras and such. Beyond Baroque composers (for whom such practice was a matter of course), composers from Mozart and Beethoven to Schumann, Brahms,⁸⁹ Tchaikovsky, Bartók and Enescu continued to use small slurs in order to suggest a varied articulation *within* the long phrase. Schumann, in bars 4-11 of the concerto, is equally detailed and explicit in the articulation of the oboe theme. There are two dangers in the realization of such small-scale slurring. The first is to overlook it altogether, bringing a generic, amorphous, predictably over-blended lyricism to any particular phrase. We dealt with it in the paragraphs above. At a high level, conductors one could call post-Romantic, such as Karajan or Bernstein, could do that on occasion. The music sounds therefore “nice” but too much alike, with various compositional styles and phrasal structures becoming insufficiently undifferentiated in execution.

The other danger is to over-project the slurred/detached detail to the extent that the lyrical phrase becomes choppy, separated in small units detached by some kind of “hiccupping.” A number of performers who study diligently the old treatises regarding articulation use over-distinctive articulation as a goal in itself, not as a means to a convincing aesthetic reality. Paying *too* much attention to generic slurring and other elements of surface articulation can entail not paying enough attention to the specific harmonic realities encapsulated under the indications of

⁸⁹ Brahms is the only of these composers who left a couple of recordings, a few minutes of recorded music in all. Extremely poor in sonic terms, these cylinders nevertheless offer at least a limited opportunity for interpretative analysis. We can also compare Brahms’ phrasing in the *Hungarian Dance no. 1* to violin versions signed by people from his circle, such as Joseph Joachim and the much younger Bronislaw Huberman, whom Brahms heard as a child prodigy in his own concerto and praised his playing to the sky. (See liner notes to the *Arbiter Records* editions of Huberman’s recordings, notes signed by the Huberman specialist Allan Evans.) We also have a surprisingly ample recorded heritage emanating from Clara Schumann’s disciples. Recent years have uncovered some recordings from Tchaikovsky’s circle, hidden for more than one century. Published by Marston Records, they include gems such as Mozart’s *C Minor Fantasy* played by Sergei Taneyev as early as 1891 – the earliest Mozart recording by a major musician – as well as recordings by Pabst and Arensky, all preserved on cylinders of unexpectedly clear, for their age, sonic quality (much superior to the worn-out Brahms cylinders).

articulation"⁹⁰. Mengelberg's golden medium seems to navigate between these extremes quite convincingly, most of the times, even if it's certainly not the only possible way to read a score.

In the oboe theme (accompanied by other winds and horns). Mengelberg uses almost entirely Schumann's own articulation, except for bars 8-9, where he moves the breath two notes later (after "G F" instead of before). This is an example of Mengelberg combining thoughtful license with acribia. The latter is evident in the violins' phrase following the oboe theme. In bars 19-23, Schumann's slurring can seem a little odd or at least unexpected. Because of the quasi-improvisational aspect of the preceding solo (piano) exposition of the first theme, the scoreless listener could perceive the last beat of bar 19 as a first beat, rather than an upbeat. The mental grouping of the pitches will then follow in a similar misleading pattern: E F E / D C B A / E F E / D C B A. That leads to a rhythmical/metrical displacement which, based on the score, was not desired by Schumann. Besides the obvious metrical disposition of the material, we have the indicated slurring that follows the bar-line pattern (E) E F E D / C B A E / F E D / C B A, as suggested by the metrical placement. Not only is Mengelberg one of few conductors who make the distinction intended by Schumann, moreover he makes it sound justified.

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The dialogue oboe-piano in bars 102-111 is a true chamber-music moment, the oboe playing with an auburn tone-quality, while the experienced Sauer adapts to the flexibility of Mengelberg's beat. This is a prefiguration of the longer, memorable A Flat Major piano-clarinete

⁹⁰ As a concrete example, the opening chorus in *Matthäus Passion* experiences, in some versions, repetitious exaggerations of the slurring detrimental to the other elements of the language. The vision of Via Dolorosa charged with horror and collective guilt ("auf unsre Schuld") - reinforced by Bach through long pedal points and other means of creating harmonic tension - is being substituted by an inappropriately light, dance-like approach. The contrast between such approaches and Mengelberg's well-architected musical cathedral, impressive 75 years after that 1939 concert, could be neither more striking nor more epitomical as regards interpretation being essential in the understanding of a composition.

duet (bars 162-185), where Schumann created perhaps the most lyrical development section in a sonata Allegro between Schubert and Mahler. The playing is admirable in its rhythmic nuance and calculated spontaneity.

One “Mengelberg-like” feature missing in this version is Alfred Cortot’s manner of emphasizing a usually overlooked structural element at the beginning of the finale (third movement, bars 1-8).⁹¹ That is the only time in the whole movement when the theme is started twice. The second time (bar 9 et seq.) the rondo theme is exposed the “regular” way – as it returns later. It’s the first eight bars which are singular. The theme is finally announced, yet this is not the “real thing,” more of a concise overture – grand entrance, gates opening. The first motif of the main Rondo theme, then a “formal” harmonic cadence, the flowing theme itself doesn’t “happen,” yet. Ignoring this formal “crevice” can create the inadvertent effect of a botched start followed by another try, not unlike a musical stutter or an LP disc getting stuck. Cortot must have been aware of this risk, as all his four known recordings exhibit a far-from-subtle ritardando in bars 4-8. (The last recording - 1951, live, Ferenc Fricsay conducting Berliner Philharmoniker⁹² - inflates the rallentando to arguably excessive levels.) Cortot’s agogic rhetoric at the beginning of this movement is an example of possibly objectionable means being employed to solve an objective structural challenge. Slowing down a lot may not be the only way to solve that challenge, but just “passing it by” doesn’t seem a worthy solution either. One has to agree with Karen Taylor, who writes:

⁹¹ Until 2009 there was no Mengelberg-Cortot recording available to the public. It is then that the January 20 1944 version of Chopin’s *F Minor Concerto* was published. Regrettable historical circumstances apart, the performance is marvelous and it includes Cortot’s own changes in orchestration, as well as his “new” ending to the first movement.

⁹² This is the closest consolation we have for the World War Two concert with Cortot conducted by Furtwängler not being among the radio tapes confiscated after the war by the Soviet victors. (They did perform it together.) We do have a Gieseking/ Furtwängler/Berliner Philharmoniker version from the same period, less memorable than the Gieseking/Mengelberg collaborations in Franck, Debussy, and especially Rachmaninoff.

A style analysis can scarcely dispense with some amount of critical assessment, but the objective here is not to offer a final judgment of Cortot's art, much less to rate Cortot's interpretations vis a vis those of other performers. Rather, it is to identify within Cortot's art those procedures and understandings which may be of practical value to the contemporary performer or teacher. Cortot's recordings, examined in depth, furnish many important lessons in musical interpretation. His Chopin and Schumann playing in particular has influenced the thinking of countless pianists who had no personal contact with him. The performances of these "disciples in spirit" prove time and again that it is possible to recover from Cortot's recorded legacy some of the insights into sonority, rhythm and character projection which he communicated to his own pupils.⁹³

In the second movement of the Schumann concerto (*Andantino*), the middle section is the most unbalanced-in-favor-of-the-orchestra section of the piece. This is an evocative sketch which could be part of the Schumann's *Third Symphony (Rhenish)*, the *Nicht Schnell* movement. (An analyst could explore the thematic similarities between bars 10-11 in that movement and the main theme in opus 54's *Andantino*.) The pianist is almost optional, with a few comments in the beginning and mostly soft, not particularly imaginative accompanying arpeggios almost exhausting what he has to do. This (bars 29-68) is the orchestra's lyrical moment. We mentioned earlier how thoughtless legato can be employed in places where more distinctive articulation is required. Here the challenge is different. Despite the simple, generous tune being distributed to different instruments, despite the secondary "sub-slurs" within the articulation, as written down by Schumann, there has to be that "one breath" feel to the musical phrases, in the grand image.

⁹³ Karen Taylor, *Alfred Cortot: his interpretive art and teachings*, (Indiana University: 1988, p. 266)

The conductor also has to be aware of the difference in “lyrical ambition” between the four bar phrases and the eight bar phrases - bars 37-44 and especially 61-68. Claims that only Mengelberg phrases this section appropriately would be untrue, but he does offer a particularly well-arched shaping of the C Major section, both flexible in rhythmic nuance and structurally aware.

Rachmaninoff's *Concertos no. 2 and 3*, recorded live with Walter Gieseking in 1940, present important disparities with the composer's own versions, recorded with Philadelphia Orchestra and Leopold Stokowski and Eugene Ormandy. Rachmaninoff was not shy about passing judgment on other conductors, as he was himself an experienced one.⁹⁴ He kept a sharp eye on fellow conductors, especially when he was entrusting them with his compositions, all the while his own opportunities to conduct in the United States being on the scarce side. On his coming to the United States Rachmaninoff refused to lead Boston Symphony Orchestra, preferring the solitude of a soloist's career. (Thus Boston Symphony Orchestra holds the distinction of having sought as leaders, at different times, three of the greatest musician-conductors in history, who all refused or simply didn't consider the job: Gustav Mahler, Willem Mengelberg, and Sergei Rachmaninoff. There is correspondence between Mahler and Mengelberg on the subject, in 1908. Mengelberg didn't pursue the Boston opportunity when Mahler suggested it.⁹⁵ The older Max Fiedler⁹⁶ led the orchestra until Karl Muck took it over. Mengelberg did negotiate taking the

⁹⁴ When young, Rachmaninoff exhibited himself more as a “composer-pianist” and as a conductor (he even conducted at Bolshoi Theatre for two years) than as the virtuoso pianist of the later American years. By the time the Soviet Revolution compelled him to look for a new life in the United States, after a short Scandinavian interlude, he was already 45 year old.

⁹⁵ Jens Malte Fischer, *Gustav Mahler*, Yale University Press, 2011, p. 580

⁹⁶ Max Fiedler (1859-1939, twelve years Mengelberg's senior) is to our knowledge the earliest born conductor to have made electric recordings of Brahms' symphonies – the *Second* and the *Fourth* – and possibly the only one to have conducted these symphonies in the presence of Brahms himself.

position later on, in 1919 but he finally chose New York as the center of his American activities. The Boston job went to Monteux and, in 1924, to Koussevitzky.)

The Victor Company accepted to record a couple of orchestral works under Rachmaninoff baton more because he was one of their glamorous, money-making “house pianists.”⁹⁷ Among the few conductors Rachmaninoff appreciated when it came to conducting his own concerts three names shone – Nikisch, Max Fiedler, Mahler (who conducted the composer in 1909 in New York, in a second performance after the American premiere⁹⁸ of the *Third Concerto*⁹⁹), then Stokowski, Mengelberg, Mitropoulos, Walter, Cortot¹⁰⁰. If we are to judge by the fact that Rachmaninoff was willing to perform in Amsterdam, and by his dedicating a favorite orchestral work, *The Bells*, to Mengelberg, he cherished him as a conductor as well.¹⁰¹

That Rachmaninoff enjoyed Gieseeking’s interpretations of his concertos, despite them being so different from the composer’s expressed view, is better documented. *It was not until the 1930s that the extraordinary mastery of piano-playingfound adequate representation in such*

⁹⁷ Even so they committed the gaffe of refusing Rachmaninoff’s offer to record Liszt’s *Piano Sonata*, among other substantial works.

⁹⁸ Mengelberg conducted Rachmaninoff’s *Third Concerto* with the composer at the piano for the London premiere of the work.

⁹⁹ One has to bring in the great cellist Gregor Piatigorsky’s recollection of the Berlin premiere (1929) of the same *Third Concerto*, with Rachmaninoff at the piano and no other than Wilhelm Furtwängler conducting: “Not paying attention to Furtwängler, who was rehearsing a symphony, Rachmaninoff sat down at the piano, looked at his watch, and thunderously struck a few chords. Perplexed, Furtwängler stopped. He looked at Rachmaninoff, who showed his watch and said, ‘My rehearsal time was ten-thirty.’ With no further exchange the rehearsal of the concerto commenced. After five minutes or so, Rachmaninoff walked to the conductor’s stand and began to conduct. The orchestra had two conductors – Furtwängler, bewildered, and Rachmaninoff, swearing in Russian. (...) Still at odds at the concert, the two extraordinary artists nevertheless brought fourth an exciting performance of a peculiar unity.”

Gregor Piatigorsky, *The Cellist*, Da Capo Press, New York, 1965, p. 151

¹⁰⁰ This may be surprising to those familiar with Cortot’s technical limitations as a pianist, but he indeed performed the work both as a pianist and as a conductor, with young Horowitz as a soloist. No recorded documents survive.

¹⁰¹ I am grateful to Rachmaninoff scholar Francis Crociata for having shared some of this information with me.

pianists as Vladimir Horowitz, the short-lived Alexander Helman, Walter

Giesecking (whose amazing performance of the concerto Rachmaninov admired more than any others), and later some of the younger pianists of the British and Soviet schools.¹⁰²

Piggott refers to Rachmaninoff's Piano Concertos no. 3, which was rarely performed during Rachmaninoff's lifetime¹⁰³, yet Giesecking made a point of programming both in the United States and Europe. The piece was considered at the time to be one of almost insurmountable technical difficulty. (That today thousands of Conservatory-graduating pianists can mostly deal with the purely mechanical difficulties of the work is not a sign of progress on *all* levels.)

It is therefore fortunate that we have these concert recordings of in the company of Willem Mengelberg¹⁰⁴. The historical significance of the recording of the *Third Concerto* may be superior - due to the complimentary comments of the composer, due to the scarcity of historic recordings of the piece, but also to the fact that, unlike the composer and his emulators, Giesecking used the extended, "loud" cadenza in the first movement (to my knowledge the first

¹⁰² Patrick Piggott, *Rachmaninov's Orchestral Music*, BBC, p. 49. One can add Francis Crociata's personal corroboration. "I can confirm from a primary source, his wife's sister and lifelong confidant Dr. Sophie Satin, that Rachmaninoff was enthusiastic publicly and privately about Giesecking's performances of the Second and Third Concertos with Barbirolli in New York". (Crociata has written, among other things, the liner notes for *The Complete Rachmaninoff Recordings* CD set published by RCA Victor.)

¹⁰³ Not even Josef Hofmann, the dedicatee of the work, ever performed it. The reasons seem to be complex, as Gregor Benko, former director of International Piano Archives and the world's foremost specialist in Josef Hofmann, explained to me on request. Benko plans to present the issue in detail in his upcoming Hofmann biography. Benno Moiseiwitsch apparently did perform the Concerto no. 3 but - unlike with the First, Second Concertos, the Rhapsody, and a handful of miniatures, all engraved in glorious recordings - no document seems to either have been made or to have survived.

¹⁰⁴ Giesecking and Mengelberg were also recorded together in concert in Debussy's *Fantasia* for piano and orchestra and in Franck's *Symphonic Variations*.

pianist on record to do so).¹⁰⁵ Giesecking's extremely slow rendition of the initial theme in the *D Minor Concerto* is also noteworthy.¹⁰⁶ No other pianist had played it even remotely as slow as that before Van Cliburn's path-opening recording from 1958, not many after either. Giesecking starts it at $J = 86$. The Rachmaninoff/Ormandy version starts at a radically faster pace, $J = 134$! Van Cliburn, in the official RCA Victor recording starts it at $J = 110$.¹⁰⁷ When Van Cliburn's recording came out, it was perceived as much slower than the norm.¹⁰⁸ We know that the choice of tempi could be attributed to Giesecking, not to Mengelberg, because the conductor commented on those tempi being different than those of the composer (see footnote 110).

The sound of the recording itself was striking on a first acquaintance. The impression was that the sound was occasionally strident. In fact we deal with a recording/transfer problem: the microphone placement and/or the sound levels create a fair amount of saturation and distortion, more similar to a majority of the Boston Symphony Orchestra live recordings acetates during the Koussevitzky era than to the rest of the Amsterdam acetates of the period.¹⁰⁹ There is a "creative

¹⁰⁵ Giesecking uses the same cadenza in his one other recording of the Third Concerto, similarly a live recording, in 1939, with John Barbirolli conducting the New York Philharmonic Orchestra.

¹⁰⁶ On the recording itself, we can hear Mengelberg whispering "Bravo!" to the pianist, at the end of the first movement. While not polished, studio recording style, the first movement cadenza is indeed very intense and risqué in a way which in the concert hall might have made for quite an experience.

¹⁰⁷ The live recording made during the Tchaikovsky Competition in Moscow (with the same conductor, Kirill Kondrashin, 1958) is subtly slower, within the same tempo structure.

¹⁰⁸ The tempo parameters described apply mostly to the main theme only. Due to its wild tempo modifications and accelerandos, it cannot be asserted that the Giesecking/Mengelberg rendition of the first movement would be slower overall. The Van Cliburn/Kondrashin starts faster than Giesecking and slower than Rachmaninoff, but then the rest of it shows milder tempo modifications towards the fast side. That explains why the duration of the first movement is circa 16 minutes with Giesecking, as opposed to 17 ½ with Van Cliburn and 14 with the composer himself at the piano. However, a meaningful comparison has to keep in mind that, unlike Rachmaninoff, Van Cliburn and Giesecking used the longer cadenza and didn't introduce any cuts in the score.

¹⁰⁹ It is not within the purpose of this thesis to discuss various CD embodiments of the same source recordings but, in this case, it has to be said that the Hubert Wendel Edition is noticeably better transferred to CD than the *Music & Arts* and other issues. The issues describe above don't disappear, but the sonic distortions are sensibly reduced and a more "natural" recorded sound emerges.

chaos,” risk-taking, and a lack of polish in these recordings, especially in the Third Concerto¹¹⁰. On a sheer music appreciation level, the interpretation of the *Second Concerto* is better integrated technically and formally. It seems better rehearsed, more cogently voiced. In the Second Concerto, the chordal piano solo introduction smartly leading from F Minor to C Minor¹¹¹ - a chromatic embellishment of a Slavic plagal cadence in minor - is performed with an impetus which has to be heard to be believed. Rachmaninoff, and his inspired emulator, Moiseiwitsch¹¹², don’t strive for ceiling-shattering climaxes, approaching this potentially sentimental work with aristocratic understatement and elegance. Nevertheless even pianists who go for the monumental and the titanic - such as, in principle, the indomitable Sviatoslav Richter - sound domesticated by comparison.

Giesecking’s exhibits his own “changements” – which could be characterized as vulgar or exhilarating, according to the listener’s taste and disposition – such as the unwritten ascending piano glissando in octaves shot out at the end of the piano cadenza in the third movement, just

¹¹⁰ We can go beyond speculation in this regard, as in the letter from Walter Giesecking, indicating to Mengelberg that because of engagements elsewhere, they wouldn’t be able to discuss the tempi ahead of time as they usually did. Mengelberg commented in writing for himself, on the margin of the list of tempi he’s been sent: “All different tempi to those played by the composer!!” *Gemeentemuseum*, exhibit 92

¹¹¹ Rachmaninoff learned the skill of this deceptive introductions, which seem to start the work in one key while leading unexpectedly to the “real” main key from Tchaikovsky. e.g., the beginning of the *Pathétique Symphony*, or the beginning of the slow movement in the *Fifth Symphony*, transitioning from E Minor to D Major, which inspired Rachmaninoff’s own modulatory transition in the beginning of the second movement of the *Second Concerto*, from C Minor to E Major. Tchaikovsky himself of course used in a more “sophisticated” manner what Beethoven taught him in that respect, in the “elementary” yet incredibly influential initial cadence of the *Ninth Symphony*, which challenged and inspired innumerable composers for - going on two - centuries now.

¹¹² “The performance by Benno Moiseiwitsch [of the *Second Concerto*] occupies a special place among the seven representative performances I will discuss. We have here the one instance where Rachmaninoff actually made a remark concerning a performance of the concerto by someone other than himself – and for which we have a recording. Rachmaninoff felt a special admiration and sympathy for his younger colleague and friend. As Michael Stenberg wrote, he found Moiseiwitsch’s performance colorful and close to the score”. Natalya V. Lundtvedt, *Rachmaninoff and Russian pianism: Performance issues in the Piano Concerto in C minor, Opus 18* (University of California dissertation, Los Angeles, 2009, p. 59.) In fact, as suggested, Rachmaninoff did comment admiratively on concerto performances not only by Moiseiwitsch but also by Horowitz and Giesecking. Also, Lundtvedt asserts that the first (1937) Moiseiwitsch recording of the Second Concerto “unfortunately has been lost” which is not the case. The 1937 HMV recording, conducted by Walter Goehr is not only not lost, but remains widely available.

before the climactic statement of the second theme towards the end. The section standing out is the reprise of the main theme in the second movement (starting eight bars before rehearsal number 26, violins coming in four bars later). Stokowski, no stranger to luxurious, sensuous, memorable legato string playing - and who recorded the work with the composer two times, in 1924 and 1929 -- would have been proud. There is a striking balance element, starting at rehearsal number 27. Besides the bass-line and the “resonating background” in the horns, the texture is basically tri-layered: the piano chords, the violins line, the triplets in the winds (flute + clarinet) taking over the arpeggiated figuration hitherto played by the piano. The initial balances suggested by Rachmaninoff in the score are *forte* for the piano, *piano* for the winds, *mezzo forte* for the strings, with multiple dynamic “forks” nuancing that further. In many recordings, the two Rachmaninoff/Stokowski versions included, the generous amplitude of the violin theme (as close to a Russian “infinite melody” as the slow movement of Rachmaninoff’s *Second Symphony*) is being sectioned away by the winds triplets.¹¹³ With Mengelberg we hear though the “infinite melody” of this whole reprise projected hauntingly and clearly (with the potentially “choppy” winds triplets subdued to the long phrase in a way which changes the character of the whole section). It is a moment of inspired phrasing and memorable orchestral sonority.

A stylistically exemplary concerto recording left by Mengelberg is that of Beethoven’s *Fifth Concerto*, recorded live with the great Dutch pianist Cor de Groot (1914-1993), during a November 9th 1942 concert. Multiple factors contribute to the relevance of this recording. Once again, it is a concerto Mengelberg was intimately familiar with, on both sides of the score, having performed it as a young pianist, even conducting it from the keyboard in a concert in

¹¹³ Sergei Koussevitzky, in a little known live recording with Arthur Rubinstein (1949) does it with more of a “long arch” feel than Stokowski.

Belgium, in 1900. At those times multitasking feats were not as common as today. Even later, Edwin Fischer recorded other Beethoven concertos conducting from the keyboard, but preferred a collaborating conductor when it came to the *Fifth*.

As opposed to Liszt's *First Concerto*, the soloist here, while young at the time, was indeed a performer worthy of collaborating with Mengelberg. (De Groot will become one of Holland's premier pianists.) The recording itself has a history. It was thought for a while to be incomplete, and it appeared as such on an old LP album published by the late British record dealer, passionate Mengelberg collector Michael G. Thomas¹¹⁴, the first format this writer encountered it in. Meantime the missing source material on acetate discs was recovered and the entire performance has become available. It finds its worthy place in a generous discography, from Schnabel who said it took him many years to find the right sound for the first piano pitches of the second movement of the *Emperor*, to Gould/Stokowski, to the Argentine Gilels/Szell. Cherished by collectors are also the two Edwin Fischer versions, the early collaboration with Karl Böhm in Dresden, and the one Fischer recorded with Furtwängler for His Master's Voice in 1951. Even in exalted company, the Mengelberg/de Groot interpretation is worth a detailed look.

De Groot had already his own ideas of the work, meshing well with the older conductor's. One can compare this early (from de Groot's point of view) interpretation with the one recorded later, with Hague Philharmonic Orchestra under Willem van Otterloo. The comparison indicates that either much of what we hear in the 1942 Mengelberg recording was of the pianist's own imagining, or that details de Groot has learned from Mengelberg were thoroughly absorbed and re-employed later on. (A similar analysis can be made regarding what is common and what is

¹¹⁴ Michael G. Thomas was among a handful of enthusiasts who published for the first time certain rare live Mengelberg recordings, at a time when it wasn't particularly lucrative to do so.

different in the way a 19 years old Herman Krebbers, born 1923, performs Brahms' *Violin Concerto* in his live 1943 Concertgebouw debut, with Mengelberg, and the way he performs the same piece later, with Bernard Haitink, at a time when Krebbers was already the concertmaster of Concertgebouworkest. In this latter case, the violinist's conception of the work seems to be much more influenced by the difference in conducting than de Groot in the *Emperor*.)

Notes on the recording: bar 6 [the last big, "unmeasured" bar before the orchestral exposition], the pianist starts the trill with an emphatic G, rather than either A flat or B flat. When the exposition starts, individual Mengelberg touches make their appearance right away. Bar 14 – Beethoven indicates *piano dolce* for the clarinet, but Mengelberg, aware of the balance problem in that place, has the clarinet play *mezzo forte*. Even without Mengelberg's annotated score (such as that of the Beethoven's *Seventh Symphony* discussed in Chapter V), the italicizing and shading of each part beyond Beethoven's bare indications can be pointed out. Anton Schindler's description of Beethoven's own playing, with inflections, accents, tempo changes, inevitably comes to mind. In the timpani part, bars 15-35, from a compositional point of view we notice the economy of means. The places where the timpani are absent "speak," musically, as much as those where timpani are involved. At the beginning of the tutti, Beethoven could have already reinforced the main theme in the strings with percussion, yet he chooses not to, starting to employ the timpani only in the sonorous block "commenting" on the clarinet solo. In bar 18 the timpani part starts with the *sforzando* indicated by the composer, followed by a sizeable *decrescendo*, the last note in bar 18 is modified from an E flat to an A flat (doubling as such the double basses), all played in *mezzo piano* rather than *forte*. This renders the richer rhythms (four sixteens followed by a quarter) in bars 21, 23, 24 more exciting, with Mengelberg asking the

timpanist to employ some *crescendo*, with an accent on the quarter note. As soon as the music moves to the dominant, the timpanist employs another sizeable *decrescendo*, in bar 19.

Compared with the usage of triangle, described critically earlier, Mengelberg's superior familiarity with the articulation and balancing potential of the timpani is much in evidence in this recording. In a work in which Beethoven uses the timpani so creatively, on a par with – if more subtly than – his famous “timpani surprise” in the fifth bar of the *Scherzo* of the *Ninth Symphony*.¹¹⁵ Mengelberg's treatment of the timpani in Beethoven's music is also evident in the shading and timing of the timpani/piano duet towards the end of the third movement (bars 402–419). Beethoven indicates in the timpani part *pp* (bar 402), *sempre pp* (bar 404), *ritardando* (spread over bars 415-417) and *Adagio* (bar 418). The amount of nuance Mengelberg adds, without contradicting much Beethoven's indications, is staggering. Especially bar 418 (the *Adagio* bar) has a continued *ritardando* combined with a well-judged *decrescendo* from *pianissimo* to *ppp*, crowned with an unwritten *fermata* over the bar line which renders the following (last in the piece) dynamic shock more powerful. The aesthetic device of adding unwritten *fermatas*, sometimes huge, over bar lines, is something Mengelberg shared with Furtwängler, but Mengelberg employed it more rarely. (The latter's most excessive “fermata on silence” must be the one in the Finale of the *Ninth Symphony*, separating the huge fermata on the F Major chord from the “new” B Flat Major fanfare section. A six to eight seconds pause in various post-WWII versions. A shorter *fermata* on the rest can be found in the March 1942 version, but only because preceded by a *fermata* on the F Major chord which must hold the world record – twelve full seconds.)

¹¹⁵ In what regards both Beethoven and Mengelberg's use of timpani in Beethoven, please also refer to the Beethoven chapter, the passage regarding the rewriting of the end of the Egmont Overture.

What distinguishes this conductor's "accompaniment" is that the dichotomy orchestral finesse versus orchestral presence isn't an issue. Mengelberg knew how to seamlessly transition from delicacy to a firm presence and back. He also makes a point of projecting orchestral detail and long phrases by interpreting Beethoven's dynamics in context rather than literally. In the second movement a section challenging to balance is the reprise of the first theme (bars 60-70 and beyond). Beethoven writes for 8-9 bars *p* for the winds and the strings, and *dolce* for the pianist. Mengelberg employs more shadings than that. The listener is "helped to hear" how the thematic material travels from the flute to the clarinet, the temporary doublings, and the resulting unison in the mini-climax, between the three wind instruments (flute, clarinet, and bassoon). The piano itself sounds *dolce* indeed, not too prominent, "sandwiched" as it is between the leading winds and the gently syncopated chords in the strings. (Too many recordings feature the piano's sixteen-notes with the agogic squareness of a Hanon exercise.)

In the third movement, the E Flat Major utterances of the rondo theme are being enunciated by Beethoven's pianist almost purely solo, if it weren't for the horns playing obsessively a B Flat octave (written as "sempre *pp*" by Beethoven, in the context of the pianist alternating between *ff* and *p*). The horn pitch, initially a "leftover" from the transitional last three bars of the slow movement, reinforces continuously the fifth of the tonic chord. As a result, one cannot ordinarily hear the horn pitch, especially while the pianist hammers out the *ff* sections of the theme.

Mengelberg couldn't condone this so he introduces his own dynamics in the horn part: a solid *mf* during the first two bars, piano during the next two bars. The B flat is actually "re-attacked" with

a strong accent in the fifth bar, where Beethoven's scoring only indicates a tie, a prolongation of the same *sempre pp* B flat.¹¹⁶

One last comment on Mengelberg's phrasing in the *Fifth Concerto*. Sometimes lingers on some notes. The manner he employs that makes themes which are familiar to us, in a "classically distant" way, instantly warmer, more "tuneful." For instance, the first movement theme which appears in bar 75 et seq., contains four descending tetrachords, each starting one fourth or one third higher than the preceding one. How often do we hear them played like indifferent figuration? Mengelberg creates a quasi-vocal, "reaching for the high note" extra-space in the middle of bar 76 and in the middle of bar 80. It's not only that the moment he chooses to do so coincides with bass/harmonic movement. His eye must have caught the detail that Beethoven phrases that moment with slurs which encompass four eighth notes, four eighth notes, then *eight* eighth notes. In most recordings one hears four groups of four notes, rather than two groups of four and one group of eight. Mengelberg's apparently sentimental lingering is his way of projecting the phrasing suggested by Beethoven himself. The musical phrase becomes thus both more tuneful, in the best sense, and structurally clearer.

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Besides routinely collaborating with internationally established soloists – *la crème de la crème*, including Gieseking, Sauer, Enescu, Kreisler, Busch, young Menuhin, and so many others – Mengelberg made a matter of personal responsibility out of giving talented young soloists

¹¹⁶ We've also mentioned Mengelberg's deliberate cancelling of ties during the discussion of the finale of Tchaikovsky's *Fifth Symphony*.

(Dutch but not only, Guila Bustabo and Conrad Hansen¹¹⁷ come to mind) a chance to perform on the august Amsterdam stage. The musical confrerie of Edwin Fischer and Wilhelm Furtwängler had to come naturally when we remember they were both born in the same year, 1886, and educated in similar traditions. The latter-mentioned couple performed dozens of times together, and we are lucky to have three major works recorded, witnessing their collaboration verging on miraculous affinity – the 1951 Beethoven *Fifth Concerto*, the risqué and inspired 1942 concert with Brahms' *Second Concerto*, as well as a rare interpretative (if perhaps not compositional) gem, Furtwängler's own *Piano Concerto*. (One hour worth of complicated thematic elaborations which, within this writer's assumed limitations, delight the mind more than the ear or the soul.)¹¹⁸

For Mengelberg to have obtained results of comparable organicity with performers such as Herman Krebbers or Cor de Groot, four decades his juniors, bespeaks of an openness of mind and delight in encouraging the passing of the proverbial torch, musically speaking, to the generations to come.

¹¹⁷ To be fair, this is not meant to be in opposition to some imaginary Furtwängler ageism or anything of the kind. Furtwängler himself promoted young Conrad Hansen in concert, and a document attesting to their collaboration in Beethoven's Concerto opus 58 was recorded live, in 1943. An incandescent performance, with a hybrid cadenza in the first movement – Beethoven's longer and more popular one interspersed with an improvisation of the pianist's own device. Hansen (1906-2002) was one of Edwin Fischer's most gifted early students and Fischer's teaching assistant. While his post-World War II career did not earn the international prominence of the younger Alfred Brendel, Hansen benefitted nevertheless from the respect and admiration of the German audiences until late in his fruitful concert life.

¹¹⁸ A rather bad-sounding, qua recording, live version of the whole long concerto exists, as well as a sonically decent 78 set of the slow movement only.

V Amsterdam's own Beethoven

Besides discussing some of Mengelberg's interpretative strategies in approaching Beethoven's music, this chapter will make some reference to Furtwängler's parallel approaches. After all, in Berlin of the 1930s-1950s Furtwängler was "Mr. Beethoven," as Mengelberg was in Amsterdam¹¹⁹. Conductors such as Gustav Mahler, Felix Mottl or Arthur Nikisch lived into the 20th century, but they either died before being recorded at all, or left – as in Nikisch's case – only a handful of technologically primitive recordings plus a limited number of piano rolls, a controversial technology. In Mahler's case we have piano rolls only. Even those documents are by no means devoid of historical interest for the passionate researcher or the devoted connoisseur, while offering though little in terms of immediate listening rewards.

(Discussing piano rolls is not a priority in our context, despite their underrated importance, in our opinion, as historical documents. As an example of how they fare in the skeptical estimation of some scholars, here's a quote from a recent, excellent Vladimir de Pachmann (1848-1933) biography: *While there are a few successful piano rolls by famous performers of the past, Pachmann's are not among them. There is little in most of these rolls to suggest that it was Pachmann who was playing. With all their faults, his disc recordings capture at least at times some of the beauty of his playing, and are infinitely preferable to rolls.*¹²⁰)

¹¹⁹ This is rather trivial, but Mengelberg joined in the superficial club of famous performers who showed an uncanny physiognomic similarity with Beethoven himself. Two others were Anton Rubinstein and Liszt's disciple Frederic Lamond.

¹²⁰ Edward Blickstein and Gregor Benko, *Chopin's Prophet – The Life of Pianist Vladimir de Pachmann*, Scarecrow Press, 2013, p.403

At this point the extensive recorded heritage of Willem Mengelberg – born 1871 – and Wilhelm Furtwängler – born 1886 – makes itself felt. This heritage is of rich significance insofar as both conductors possessed unique musical gifts, unexplainable through any historical or professional considerations alone. However, both conductors benefited from their historical placement in the heart of a living interpretive tradition. In simple terms, they were born early enough to be unaffected by more-or-less standardized recordings, but they also lived long enough to see their music-making richly immortalized on disc. Those recordings may be in mono sound, but they reproduce interpretative conceptions and dynamic range with enough fidelity as to be, more than documents, highly accomplished and directly overwhelming musical testimonies.

Among the important conductors who preceded Mengelberg in their date of birth, at least two have recorded all of Beethoven's symphonies, some of them more than once, in acceptable mono sound – Felix Weingartner and Arturo Toscanini. However, the reputation of both these conductors in Beethoven was largely based, to different degrees, not on their embodying a specific interpretative tradition, but mainly on their critical challenge to interpretive concepts connected to such traditions.¹²¹

The recorded heritage of these conductors shows that reality was more complex than simplistic dichotomies. Neither Weingartner nor Toscanini chose to remove themselves entirely from the very interpretive concepts they rebelled against -- such as tempo rubato or orchestral rescorings. Apart more or less exceptional occurrences, Toscanini and Weingartner (two rather different conductors to begin with) shared a certain faith in the basic preeminence of the score in front of any other source of interpretive authority. Moreover, Toscanini regarded the relative irrelevance

¹²¹ One can always speculate that Weingartner was representing alternatives to the powerful Wagner model – either the faster, stricter Mendelssohnian model which Wagner describes disparagingly, or the Lisztian one, as Liszt was an influential conductor in his own right.

of anything other than the fidelity to the score as the alpha and omega of his own interpretive credo. The rejected alternative sources of information and, possibly, authority included: traditional accretion (a form of communitarian experience), assumption of the cultural context, and last but not least a highly individual reaction of the interpreter to the challenges posed by the musical work. I discuss this at length in the “Objective and subjective” chapter.

Weingartner was perhaps one Austro-German major conductor to take issue with Wagner’s famous essay on conducting not only in practice – as in canceling (or rather narrowing down) Wagner’s models of tempo modifications – but also in acid, articulate writing. Weingartner doesn’t stay shy of calling some (not all) of Wagner’s “retouchings” and “emendations”¹²² in Beethoven “purposeless and tasteless.”¹²³ Even the title of Weingartner’s best-known essay is a direct challenge to Wagner, not through being different, but through being purposely the same as Wagner’s, while criticizing the former’s own content: *Über das Dirigieren*.

At the same time, placing Weingartner and Toscanini in the same proverbial boat on the subject of approaching Beethoven would be wrong and, even worse, simplistic. An unlikely advocate for Weingartner’s – and, for that matter, Mengelberg’s - Beethoven approaches was Glenn Gould, with whose own interpretative renditions this author frequently takes issue, but whose inquisitive mind and fine ears make reading his opinions challenging, illuminating at best.

In conversation with Bruno Monsaingeon, Glenn Gould, who delighted in debunking Romanticism (his description of how stale second-rate Romantic piano concertos are still makes for a hilarious read, even if one disagrees), praises Mengelberg in qualified yet not uncertain terms.

¹²² Mengelberg’s “changements” come to mind.

¹²³ Felix Weingartner, *About Conducting*, in *The Conductor’s Art*, p. 100

Glenn Gould: (...) I do find it upsetting, to put it mildly, to hear eighteenth- nineteenth-century music played on the piano with the kind of motoric license that has nothing at all to do with rubato.

Bruno Monsaingeon: But surely this is a generational phenomenon? After all, some of the great virtuoso conductors from earlier in the [20th] century were very liberal tempo manipulators.

G.G.: That's quite true, but not quite what I'm talking about. Let's take Willem Mengelberg, for example. I'm sure you'd agree that Mengelberg was one of the most formidable of orchestral technicians.

B. M. Absolutely.

G.G.: Personally, I think that, along with Stokowski, he was the greatest conductor I've ever heard on records - yet he certainly employed some strange, arbitrary (...), unnecessary tempo changes".

Getting over the irony of reading **Gould** complain about strangeness, arbitrariness, and even unnecessariness¹²⁴ (he talks in particular about some Mengelberg *ritardandos* in Beethoven's *First Symphony*), Gould makes some valid and valiant points, beyond the simplistic dichotomies deplored before, such as:

In the American context, Toscanini related to Stokowski music as Weingartner related to Mengelberg overseas. Toscanini was, or so it was said, a "literalist"; for him, the composer's instructions were gospel. (...) To my ears, it seems that the sound was edgy and unbalanced, that Toscanini's interpretations did not carry one forward with the visionary sweep of his fellow

¹²⁴ In fact it reminds me of **Leonard Bernstein** exhorting the performer "that he never interpose himself between the music and the audience." (In *The Joy of Music*, complete footnote, p. 151)

literalist Weingartner, and that the playing, by and large, born of terror rather than conviction, was sloppy. But the time was right for Toscanini.

Furtwängler and Mengelberg, in different ways, represented a diametrically opposite school of thought. By no means did they despise the singular significance of the composer's score as a main source for the interpreter. However, they deliberately and authoritatively refused to follow the interpretive indications contained in the score in a blind way.

How is that I place aesthetically Mengelberg and Furtwängler in a similar categorical space which, far from completely homogenous, is nevertheless coherent enough to justify the association? I find Mengelberg's and Furtwängler's interpretations of Beethoven revelatory, exemplary, and, more than just comparable, compatible at an essential level of "musical orality." Revelatory insofar Beethoven's music itself becomes better projected into the reality of the concert/recording experience. Exemplary in a hard-to-emulate way - it would be wrong to believe that imitating this or that other detail present in an old recording would inherently give, today, viable results. Exemplary still, in the mentioned old recordings, is the uninhibited, creative – while never purely arbitrary - attitude in front of Beethoven's scores, the manifest conviction that Beethoven's music can never be a closed matter insofar, outside a particular realization, a musical score is never self-sufficient nor finite.

Listening to Mengelberg's recordings of the Eroica symphony represents a good opportunity to note how a creative interpreter can absorb analytical insight, projecting it then through specific means, in a way which makes immediate sense to the listener, whether he is familiar with the score or not.

Take for instance the harmonic correlation between the exposition and the recapitulation in

Eroica's first movement, correlation described by William Kinderman in his book about Beethoven as such:

*The immense scope of Beethoven's first movement is reflected in his open, continuously evolving treatment of the basic thematic material. Elements of dramatic tension are exposed from the outset. After the powerful opening chords and the following triadic turning figure, the melody descends to a mysterious, low C#, with syncopations heard above this pitch in the violins. The full implications of the mysterious C# are explored only at the beginning of the recapitulation, when Beethoven reinterprets this pitch as Db, with a new downward resolution leading to an extended solo for horn in F Major.*¹²⁵

Mengelberg applies specific agogic and dynamic devices – such as a ritenuto and a decrescendo, the decrescendo preceding the crescendo indicated by the composer - devices meant to emphasize the crucial C# (D Flat) pitch – in order to help the listener recall, while listening to the recapitulation, the corresponding passage in the exposition.

Not only is the "harmonic bifurcation" thus rendered fully intelligible to the listener, but also the comprehension of further connections is assured. One of this brings the same chromatic three-pitches gesture, this time rising, from the Coda of the first movement or the same rising chromatic motif at the very end of the Scherzo – the motif labeled by Beethoven in manuscript with "eine fremde Stimme."

From Furtwängler's recordings of the *Eroica Symphony* I would quote another moment, among the many possible. Furtwängler generally didn't operate with the kind of strongly projected, obvious micro-rubato Mengelberg was a specialist of. To Mengelberg's small and many

¹²⁵ William Kinderman, *Beethoven* (second edition), Oxford University Press, 2009, which page in the second edition?

"meaningful rhythmic distortions," Furtwängler preferred unwritten tempo variations, broadly and over longer spans of musical time. Take for instance the false transition (bars 248-284) in the development of the first movement. It is arguably the tensest part of the whole movement, in which harmonic tension and use of rhythmic syncopation on a colossal scale are the closest this first movement gets to the ethos of the following Funeral March. (One should also not forget how prevalent the use of the major mode is throughout the exposition of the *Eroica*'s first movement, rendering as such the contrast with the troubled harmonic universe of the development even more striking.)

Furtwängler employs a gradual but strongly noticeable *ritardando* throughout this section, accentuating as such the "depressing" accumulation of harmonic tension which will be temporarily solved only in the appearance of the new theme – the elegiac E Minor theme -, in fact the first and only theme in minor mode written by Beethoven in this movement. (Note: as distinct from major themes "transposed" in minor modes through developmental procedures.) The tempo Furtwängler reaches for the E Minor theme is extraordinarily distant from – much slower than - the initial tempo. I would rather not quote meaningless metronome marks, as the concrete parameters evolve between various recordings, yet the conception - the **proportion** between tempi - stays fundamentally constant.

In my opinion Furtwängler did not offer always the clearest articulation of the foreground because he chose not to. An often-quoted case is the beginning of the Ninth, in which an assumedly "foggy" articulation of the initial sextuplets on the fifth "E A" seemed to reveal the elemental in that music, the primordial chaos. Judging by his already mentioned admiration for Schenker, Furtwängler apparently dealt with many "conflicting layers of clarity" – he was emphatic in his writing about instrumental clarity not being synonymous with conceptual, artistic

clarity.

Regarding the relationship between Mengelberg and Furtwängler there isn't much to go by. Furtwängler mentions in his writings, with some hardly suppressed envy, the American-like luxury the Amsterdam orchestra can indulge in, when it comes to practically unlimited rehearsal time.¹²⁶ While we have a complete Furtwängler essay musically dismantling Toscanini's tour in Germany with great acumen (especially his analysis of Toscanini's *Eroica* is worth reading), there are hardly any comments on Mengelberg himself, either positive or negative. The one I could find is on the critical and cryptic side, merely complaining about the way Mengelberg starts Beethoven's Ninth. *Mengelberg – Beginning of the Ninth Symphony. Incomprehension of the background. But one might ask: In what way should Beethoven actually express the cryptic sextole?*¹²⁷

Not only Furtwängler was not desirous of clarity in that passage, he attempted to achieve the "primordial waters" effect, color- rather than articulation-focused. The elemental fifth, out of which anything could be born.

On Mengelberg's behalf, we know that he was in the audience during Furtwängler's 1925 New York debut, and there are reports that he gave the younger confrere a wild, generous standing ovation. The two conductors did invite each other in Amsterdam, Berlin respectively, but that might have been just as much a matter of convenience and mutual practical advantage as one of shared respect. On a human level Mengelberg had the reputation of being the more generous

¹²⁶ "Oddly, [Karajan] never seems to have coveted the Concertgebouw Orchestra as he later would the Berlin Philharmonic. It was Dutch, of course, not German. But was not Karajan perhaps concerned that, after Mengelberg, so perfectly honed a musical instrument had nowhere to go but down? (Which is where Karajan later came to believe it did go after Mengelberg and Van Beinum.)"

Richard Osborne, *Herbert von Karajan - a Life in Music*, Northeastern University Press, Boston 1998, p. 103

¹²⁷ Wilhelm Furtwängler, *Notebooks 1924-1954*, Quartet Books Limited, London 1995, p. 174

colleague. His own ego – or self-awareness – not exactly undersized, Mengelberg didn't hesitate to fully recognize the merits of meritorious comrades of the baton. Pierre Monteux testified to that rare quality:

Willem Mengelberg himself came to the first rehearsal [of Stravinsky's "The Rite of Spring," an Amsterdam 1924 concert] and asked Monteux if he could speak to the orchestra before it began. Monteux agreed. As he finished his remarks, Mengelberg came to Monteux, put his arm on his shoulder, and led the orchestra in a cheer for their French visitor. Only later did Monteux learn that Mengelberg, who had spoken in Dutch, has told the orchestra "in no uncertain terms that they all owed a debt of gratitude to Monteux for bringing this colossal work for the first time to Holland, and that if he, Mengelberg, had studied it for weeks and months himself, he would never have been able to conduct it!" (...) The success of "The Rite of Spring" prompted Willem Mengelberg to invite Monteux to share the season with him.¹²⁸

Moreover, as Canarina relates, Monteux became co-conductor of Concertgebouw Orchestra for ten years, Mengelberg offering him first choice on repertoire matters with an impeccable collegial attitude.

It is true that Mengelberg liked to "plan," interpretatively speaking, more than Furtwängler did. Even the "licenses," the rhythmic nuance had to be thoroughly rehearsed with the orchestra, rather than "inspired" during the performance, as Furtwängler preferred.

Nevertheless I do not feel that Mengelberg sacrificed much that could be attributed to spontaneity. Rehearsed or not, the changes and the rhythmic nuance he applied in his performances seldom sound, to my ears, over-practiced, stale, or predictable. Somehow he

¹²⁸ John Canarina, *Pierre Monteux. Maître*, Amadeus Press, Cambridge, 2003, P.84

succeeded, in performance after performance, to rekindle the re-creative enthusiasm he must have experienced while deciding for the first time on some detail to be either changed or underlined. In 1943 he performed a legendary concert in Bucharest, with Dinu Lipatti, alas not recorded. Liszt's Piano Concerto no. 1 was followed by a Mengelberg's *cheval de bataille*, Tchaikovsky's *Symphony no. 5*. There are accounts in the Romanian press, particularly one signed by musicologist and folklorist George Breazu, which show how Mengelberg used very long sectional rehearsals, repeating sometimes one bar hundreds of times, until, at the end of the proceedings, the not so stellar Romanian Radio orchestra sounded in a way which reminded everybody of.... Concertgebouw Orchestra.¹²⁹

Furtwängler admired Beethoven's Fifth Symphony very much, wrote a whole analytical essay about it. He also felt, not uncharacteristically so for a world famous conductor, that he performed it well. So did a less subjective witness such as Heinrich Schenker¹³⁰ feel, who commented on the young Furtwängler's rendition being superior to the ones of other great conductors of the time, including even the older Nikisch and Richard Strauss, who recorded the symphony as well¹³¹. Furtwängler programmed Beethoven's Fifth Symphony in his concerts with greater

¹²⁹ The Romanian concert hasn't been recorded. However, we do possess now a recently uncovered two minutes *video* excerpt from the finale of the same Tchaikovsky symphony, performed in Budapest in January 1943. The same comments could apply there. In those times when conductors were orchestra-builders rather than jet-flying guest conductors, when average virtuosity of the orchestral musician was arguably less than what it is now, the orchestral *sound* was indeed as much the *sound of the conductor* as it was the sound of the individual musicians materially producing it.

¹³⁰ I could not find any document regarding Mengelberg's attitude towards, or even knowledge of Schenker's writings. It is known Furtwängler experienced Schenker's writings as an epiphany, as early as 1911. On the other hand, some concepts of the earlier analyst Hugo Riemann found their way in Mengelberg's interpretative treatment of musical time.

¹³¹ Nikisch's recording - not the first in history of the work, as often presumed, but the second - cannot be assessed in full fairness, insofar the conditions in which it was recorded were far from giving a realistic image of what was billed as Berliner Philharmoniker. To begin with, a drastically reduced number of musicians fit into the recording studio. On the other hand the later Strauss' version, an early electrical 78 set, does offer an extremely energetic, unexpectedly youthful, subtly flexible vision of the work.

frequency than any other symphonic work.

For the transition from the *Scherzo* to the *Finale*, Beethoven indicated that the last G Major seventh chord before the *Finale* be held through four "una battuta" bars (with no fermata), while Furtwängler conducted it in all but one of his Beethoven *Fifth Symphony* recorded readings¹³², much longer than written (between 7 and 8 bars). The most outstanding prolongation was applied in the two May 1947 "comeback" Berlin concerts¹³³ preserved on record, but that is a feature present in all but one of Furtwängler's recordings of the *Fifth*.

Furtwängler also took another meaningful (and easy to misinterpret) decision. In the long, mysterious transition from the *Scherzo* to the *Finale*, Beethoven employs long values in second violins and violas, as well as rhythmical and potentially percussive quarter notes in the timpani, later on in cellos and basses as well, mainly reproducing the elemental rhythm of the *Scherzo*'s main motif. Furtwängler unexpectedly "melts down" those rhythmic elements in the bass, in a deliberately "foggy", rhythmically vague way, in a suspended A Flat Major harmony, with the violins' "gaining height" in a surreal, "undetermined" pianissimo. The feeling is that of a stasis. There are no inadvertent crescendos or accentuations.¹³⁴ The possible becoming of the musical thread seems undecided, anything could happen. What that moment loses (deliberately) in terms of rhythmic vigor and clarity it gains in "metaphorical suggestiveness". Indeed it is hard to name another interpretation in which this moment sounds more like a "from darkness to the light" musical symbol, rather than an attempt to project with maximum clarity all the instrumental

¹³² The one among eleven versions which observes roughly the four bars duration of the G Major seventh dominant chord is the post-World War Two version studio recording for His Master's Voice, later EMI.

¹³³ ... after a "denazification" process discussed not only in the Shirakawa and Gillis books mentioned in this writing, but also in Ronald Harwood's play – with rgw movie version directed by István Szábo - *Taking Sides*.

¹³⁴ Wagner's comment on a highly chromatic unison passage in the first movement of Beethoven's Ninth Symphony being performed satisfactorily for the first time by Habeneck, on the account of the lack of inadvertent accents and the linear simplicity of the execution, comes to mind.

elements of a particular texture.

The two elements I have commented upon - the peculiar, "masterfully unclear" I would say, way in which Furtwängler balances the texture and the prolonged dominant chord - make out of this transition, arguably, the most memorable happening of the entire symphony. Indeed I cannot agree with Gunther Wand's criticism, as in my opinion Furtwängler's licenses illuminate the depths of the structure, rather than obscure them. That dominant chord leading into the C Major explosion -- with the orchestral ensemble enriched by trombones exulting in the jubilant theme -- is so important, so crucial a moment in the structure of the whole work, that Furtwängler needed to renounce for a moment the letter of the score in order to project the structural and emotional significance of the moment in its entirety.

I feel Mengelberg's approach to the Fifth Symphony is more special in the second movement than anywhere else. Mengelberg knew how to make the orchestra "sing out" a lyrical Beethoven theme not as if it was some distant classical concept that needs to be respected, but as if that was a delightful and savored tune he grew up with and was part of his "inner humming" repertoire. (It is a kind of "familiarity without contempt" which is woefully missing in today's concert life, in which many "classical" works seem more like museum items than relevant, living musical entities.)

A detail that comes to mind in this respect is the last iteration (bars 223-229) of the motif which first appears in bar ??? Following the strong *ritenuto* in bar 220 (not exactly a *Tempo I* as indicated by Beethoven), Mengelberg phrases the iteration mentioned above with a substantial amount of rubato and a characteristic slide between the pitches C and G, emphasizing the "new," more amply arched reaching of the seventh degree of the A Flat Major scale. More importantly, the moment itself seems redolent, *avant la lettre*, of a Brahmsian nostalgia which makes one

wonder where something similar has been heard. In fact, Mengelberg's keen ear has noticed the harmonic/developmental parallelism between bars 223-229 in the Beethoven movement and the moment mentioned on page ??? in Brahms' Third Movement of the Third Symphony (bars 156-158).

Mengelberg's approach to Beethoven's *Sixth Symphony* is fundamentally similar in the two live and one studio recording: brisk tempos, wonderfully varied articulation¹³⁵. A comparison between the two conductors shows Furtwängler privileged slow tempi, ample phrasings, not-too-varied string articulation, a generally applicable - if dynamically modulated according to the musical context - expressive sonority, obtained by asking for continuous vibrato in the strings and bowing on the long side. Mengelberg was adept at alternating non-vibrato, little vibrato and (only as an exception) molto vibrato passages, with more emphasis on portamento and short bowings, varieties of accents and species of staccato and spiccato.)

The most outstanding feature in the second movement of Beethoven's *Pastoral Symphony* is Mengelberg's daring textual modification that substitutes the 4 sixteenth-notes rhythm, written by Beethoven to be played on the eighth-notes 11 and 12 (out of 12), with an unwritten and unexpected quadruplet, to be played instead of the eight notes 10, 11 and 12. Unprecedented and never emulated on record, this is an epitome of an idiosyncratic interpretive decision, which, on closer examination, is not at all arbitrary. On the contrary, it bears witness to an interpretative effort to conciliate in performance score-projection and aural perception.

In the beginning of *Szene am Bach*, the conductor faces the following dilemma: if the Andante is

¹³⁵ As often when we compare studio versions and live versions of the same work, with the same orchestra, the studio recordings seem relatively tighter and more focused on accuracy, while the live recordings "breathe" more freely. This observation doesn't apply to Mengelberg only, but to most conductors who left both studio recordings and live documents.

indeed *molto moto*, as Beethoven requires, the music might exhibit the expected fluency but at the cost of rushing the sixteenth notes theme in the first violins. If the conductor, on the other hand, slows down at a pace which allows the sixteenth notes of the quoted theme to be "sung" according to the concept of *melos* brought forward by Wagner¹³⁶, the eighth notes supporting motif in the second violin, viola, and cello is in the danger of being perceived as static and repetitious, while the huge rests between the interventions of the first violin also risk to fragment the main theme beyond recognition. By spreading the sixteenth notes of the first violins over the last **dotted** quarter-note (rather than over the last quarter-note as written), Mengelberg uniquely succeeds in conciliating these musical elements in a way which has the appearance of endearing spontaneity, all the while having been thoroughly thought out, not to mention difficult to conduct. This is the kind of agogic license a highly imaginative Romantic pianist would have thought of, rather than a typical conductor. Less drastic agogic adjustments are used by Mengelberg to group the lower strings' supporting theme in a way which evidences Beethoven's own slurring "around the beat," rather than on the beat.

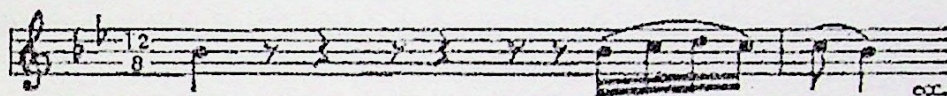
Regarding this most memorable Mengelberg "changement" in Beethoven's Sixth Symphony, one needs to take a moment to bring an homage to an almost forgotten Italian musicologist, Giorgio Graziosi. In a book of small dimensions first published in 1952, *L'interpretazione musicale*, he became one of few pioneers of comparative interpretative analysis of a kind which became more common during following decades. The following graphic representation of

¹³⁶ A little known book looking into Beethoven's piano sonatas and more is former University of Illinois piano professor Kenneth Drake's *The Beethoven Sonatas and the Creative Experience*, Indiana University Press, Bloomington 1994. Among many valuable insights, I would quote this one, on pp. 33-34:

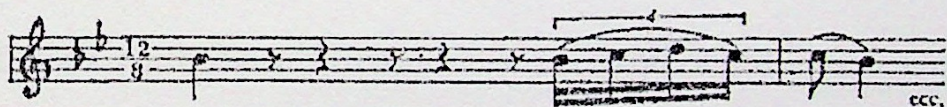
We must be reminded that instruments of multiple pitches or variable pitch derive their expressive power from emulating the original instrument, the human voice. 'Why limit the piano to the limitations of the human voice?' a student once asked. The question illustrates the importance of teaching that the pacing of a phrase should be decided by imagining a singer's breath control, and that of leaps and intricate subdivisions by the time required to sing through the notes.

Beethoven's rhythm versus Mengelberg's interpretation pertains to Graziosi.¹³⁷ Graziosi adds: "enough to notice this and to abstain from any comment." We haven't followed his exhortation.

« *Andante molto mosso* ». Detto che Kubelik realizza un rarissimo equilibrio tra archi accompagnanti e melodia dei violini I, senza peraltro governare questa con il fraseggio lungo e denso proprio di Furtwaengler, veniamo a Mengelberg che lascia su questo inizio della « Scena al ruscello » uno dei suoi più saporosi *souvenirs* ottocenteschi. Basti osservare e ci esimiamo da ogni commento.



Sopra è il testo beethoveniano; qui sotto l'interpretazione di Mengelberg.



While Graziosi speaks about this alteration in terms of 19th century "savory souvenir," he is also one of few commentators in the 1960s not to offer only warmed over clichés about how talkative Mengelberg was, and how unpardonably old-fashioned. On the contrary, he talks about Mengelberg's Beethoven as a model of rhythmic and interpretative freedom imbued with meaning. Regarding the bars 248-300 sequence in the first movement of *Eroica*, Graziosi asserts: "Generalmente I direttori non riescono a rifornirla dell'impulso necessario: ne vien fuori un che di opaco e scarso di mordente. Soltanto Mengelberg e Furtwängler – di tutti quelli che abbiamo

¹³⁷ Giorgio Graziosi, *L'Interpretazione Musicale*, Piccola Biblioteca Einaudi, Torino: 1967, p. 172

potuto ascoltare – riescono a ‘cantare’ portando le ultime battute (285-300) ad altissima temperatura (...)”¹³⁸

(In general conductors are incapable of charging [this section] with the necessary energy: what comes out is something opaque and lacking bite. Only Mengelberg and Furtwängler – of all we had the opportunity to listen to – succeed in “singing” out and bringing the last bars (285-300) to the highest incandescence.)

Another one of Mengelberg’s “thoughtful distortions” is his *ritardando* at the end of the *Ninth Symphony*, a *ritardando* which came under criticism. (E.g., from perceptive record reviewer and Mengelberg and Furtwängler aficionado Henry Fogel.)

Beethoven’s last pages of the *Ninth Symphony*’s Finale only bear a *Prestissimo - Alla breve* indication. Furtwängler used there, in all his recorded performances, from 1937 to 1954, a breathtaking *accelerando*, not unlike the same device used by him in the end of the *Fifth Symphony*. In both cases, far from a cheap effect, this is an *accelerando* expressing perhaps an irresistible augmentation of energy, at the exhaustion of which the only possible, organic consequence is absolute silence. (Also to be noted, Beethoven’s unusual, even if not unique, use of a fermata on the rest after the last note of the Finale, in the score of the *Ninth Symphony*.)

Was Mengelberg’s huge, surprising – insofar we know, unprecedented and never emulated – final *ritardando* a simple effect-seeking mannerism? Not in my opinion. After all Mengelberg, seldom or never applied similarly over-projected *ritardandos* at the end of other symphonies, unless they were spelled out in the score.

To this author, with that big *ritardando* in the end of the *Ninth*, Mengelberg seems to “declare,”

¹³⁸ Graziosi, idem, p. 151

through the music itself, that the last measures of the Finale are not just the last exaltation of joy. The most emphasized musical gesture in the last bars becomes, through the gradually magnifying lenses of the *ritardando*, the concluding fifth: A - D. It is the answer, incredibly much belated, to the question contained in another fifth, in that primordial "E A", the fifth which started, as an elemental existential challenge, the first movement, 70 minutes or so earlier. "E A?" "A D!" For the music of a composer who was keen on meaningful para-musical mottos (such as "*Muss es sein?*" – "*Es muss sein,*" or the one at the beginning of the *Piano Sonata* opus 81a), this should not be seen as an excessively speculative connection. The end of the Finale, under Mengelberg's baton, is thus conceived as also the end of the entire symphony, seen as an organic entity. With that very *ritardando*, not really appealing to an old-fashioned operatic effect as it may superficially appear, Mengelberg seems to compel the listener to remember where and how the whole symphony started, seventy long minutes ago, offering an even more memorable sense of closure than simply observing Beethoven's interpretative indications would have offered. Studying Willem Mengelberg's annotated score of the second movement of Beethoven's *Seventh Symphony* and comparing it with the way Mengelberg's recordings (all three of them, with the best being the earliest, 1936 in Amsterdam) sound is a rewarding exercise.

The clarity of Mengelberg's interpretive thought as well as his capacity to project in performance whatever he wanted, once he decided to do it, are in my opinion second to no conductor of his

own generation, and was only matched or rarely surpassed in the generation of “modern post-Romantics” such as Constantin Silvestri, Bruno Maderna¹³⁹, or Herbert Kegel.

(In a Silvestri biography, an erudite Hungarian review of a Silvestri concert in Budapest after the war is being quoted: *"Not since Willem Mengelberg have we heard a Pathétique like Silvestri's; since Nikisch, such a Dvorak; since Bruno Walter, such a Mozart; since Furtwängler, such a Brahms."*¹⁴⁰ It shows how certain references still survived in the minds and in the critical apparatus of publicists who were lucky enough to have heard these un- or under-recorded luminaries and presumably to have understood their art.)

Mengelberg seems to interpret Beethoven's tenuto mark on the first (non-staccato) quarter note of the initial motif as being applicable on every initial quarter note of each apparition of the motif. He also adds a decrescendo in each of the two-bar motifs, creating as such an identifiable dynamic profile, which will later on serve to perceive the said motif as an autonomous reality, even when many other musical events are to be followed.

Among them, the most important may be the "melodicized", legato variation on the middle voice of the initially harmonic utterance (first appearing in bar 27, violas + cellos). Mengelberg's way of performing these overlapping materials in the most possibly distinct way, like some kind of parallel musical events, contributes to the listener's ability to follow further developments thoroughly.

In bar 75, Mengelberg shows sensitivity to the particular balance problem implied by Beethoven's general *fortissimo* indicated in the score. In fact the whole orchestra (initial theme

¹³⁹ A strong distinction has to be made between the way Maderna is perceived as a composer, part of the Boulez/Stockhausen circle, and his transcending acumen as a conductor, able to perform music of many different styles without any hyper-modernist analytical dryness.

¹⁴⁰ John Gritten, *A Musician Before His Time* - Constantin Silvestri, Warwick Editions London 1998, p.109

in the winds plus two categories of secondary elements in the strings - an eighth notes motif in the second violins as well as a triplets dialogue between the viola & cello and the basses) plays "against" the melodic, continuous second theme, now in the first violins. Mengelberg does dutifully ask the first violins to play *FFFF* and with "energische" tone, while reducing the dynamics of other parts to just *forte*.

At bar 150, Beethoven's indication of *piano* (throughout all parts, with a *dolce* added for the winds), if taken literally, renders inaudible the presence of the initial theme in the pizzicatos of the lower strings. Mengelberg's dynamic adjustment to *forte* of that part clarifies the texture and grants a vivid presence to the usually neglected part. In addition to changing the *piano* to *forte* for double-bass and *piano* to *mezzo forte* for cellos, Mengelberg balances the texture further by asking the first violins, playing a relatively unimportant figuration, to perform *pianissimo*.

It is little wonder that such a consummate professional and exigent commentator on issues of conducting as Hermann Scherchen comments laudatorily on Mengelberg's use of this professional device.

When marking orchestral parts, it is needful to mark them all. Directions of execution are as important for the woodwind, brass, and percussion as for the strings. Hence, a conductor must have a thorough knowledge of every instrument in the orchestra, and of all the technical problems which the players

When marking orchestral parts, it is needful to mark them all. Directions for execution are may have to face. (...) Willem Mengelberg, the conductor of the Amsterdam Concertgebouw Orchestra, uses such indications in exemplary fashion. I have seen string and choral parts used by him when conducting at the Frankfurter Museum Gesellschaft, which fulfil their purpose in every respect. They do not enslave the players' individuality, but

*show the way to the best technical solution among the several that may be possible in every one of the cases that crop up.*¹⁴¹

It is relevant to point here out one other, more exciting (or egregious, depending upon the perspective) of Mengelberg's "changements" in the orchestration of a piece, where he felt he could improve the texture and the dramatic impact of the music, using the superior number of timpani at the disposal of a post-Mahlerian orchestra. This is more interventionist even than, say, using four horns instead of one, at the C Major modulation in the introduction to the finale of Brahms' *First Symphony*, the way Mengelberg was known to do. At the end of the *Egmont Overture*, Mengelberg "composed" a whole mini-part for the timpani, not only including extra timpani [a second, octave-tuned C one, and an A]. Moreover, precisely five bars before the end, the conductor-"arranger" has the timpani, instead of the one per bar F indicated by Beethoven, double (using an F CC F C pattern) the rhythm of the brass and winds.

Studying the pattern of these changes is rendered even more complicated by the fact that there are five complete recordings of the *Egmont Overture* left by Mengelberg. Three of them are studio recordings, two live. There is the Victor version made in New York, during the last year of his tenure there (1930), two made for Columbia, in 1926 and 1931 respectively – presumably, despite electrical "78" technology already existing in 1926, the progress made in the way it was used was considered substantial enough for new matrixes of existing catalogue items to be re-recorded. (Same goes for other performers, see for instance Cortot re-recording within years sets of Chopin *Ballades* or Schumann's *Concerto* – recorded with the same orchestral forces and

¹⁴¹ Hermann Scherchen: *Handbook of Conducting*, Oxford University Press, New York 1989, p. 150

Landon Ronald conducting as an acoustic 78 set, as a second, early electric set in 1926 and then again, in 1934, replacing the older matrixes in the catalogue.)

Then there are two Mengelberg *Egmont* versions recorded live – one of them in 1943, in Amsterdam plus a recently discovered Salzburg Festival version from 1942, one of only two recordings in which Mengelberg conducts Wiener Philharmoniker. (The other one being Weber's *Euryanthe Overture* -- tapes of the rest of the two 1942 Salzburg concerts, including Beethoven's *Seventh Symphony* and the *Fifth Concerto*, with the same soloist, Cor de Groot, then Strauss' *Ein Heldenleben* and Brahms' *Haydn Variations*, which Brahms work didn't survive in any Mengelberg interpretation, are believed to have been destroyed. We owe the first publication of the hitherto unknown Wiener Philharmoniker recordings to Myriam Scherchen and her record label, Tahra.)

The relevance of this discographic data is double-folded:

- that the aforementioned changes in the timpani score is present in all five versions under review; that corroborates what we know anecdotally, that Mengelberg was using his own annotated parts on tours, not only on home turf;
- there is a colossal difference between the emphasis Mengelberg grants to the modified timpani part in all three studio recordings (CO, CO, NYPSO) versus the two live recordings (CO and VPO). Granted, a difference in the placement of the microphones could have explained that in part but, in my opinion, it is more likely that Mengelberg was more reluctant to over-project his “improvements” in a disc sold all over the world – the exciting timpani part was more of a performance practice decision than a cold, solid compositional modification considered something to share for all times. To put it bluntly, the extra timpani part sounds rather shy,

almost “covered-up” in all three studio recordings of *Egmont*, while the two live recordings (not to mention the partial video footage of the finale, in occupied Amsterdam) exposes the “adjustment” in a raw, uninhibited way. Whatever one would think about the appropriateness of the changes, the result is nothing less than exhilarating.

It is in their consummate eloquence, based on a thorough knowledge of and intimacy with Beethoven’s music that Furtwängler’s and Mengelberg’s examples reside. Rather than doing justice to a score, they did justice to the music, which bears a relationship to the score that could be assimilated to the rapport between thought and words. The versions of Beethoven’s music these incomparable conductors have left us are not meant to be put in competition, but to complementarily show how interpretation can be creative, especially when the idea of interpretation being possibly creative without being abusive is assumed as a legitimate premise.

VI Objectivity and Subjectivity in Interpretation

One could assert that in the field of ^{interpretative} aesthetics (on occasion some may be tempted to say interpretative theology), two fundamental historical positions in what regards the rapport between composition and interpretation are often asserted: essentialist versus nominalist. Like all generalizations veering from the phenomenon to its classification, this too simplifies complex, irreducible issues.

The first, essentialist position will see the composition in its written form as something self-sufficient, or at least defined well enough for the interpreter to "realize" rather than "interpret" it.

According to this paradigm, an interpreter can at his best do everything the composer explicitly asked for and do nothing against what the composer wrote into the score. This position ^{requires} ~~privileges~~

ethically humility, aesthetically asceticism, existentially a cerebral approach, methodologically and behaviorally a scientific rapport with the work of art. The specific moniker is less important

-- it was called in different times in different ways: Werktrue, Neue Sachlichkeit, "letting the music speak for itself," self-effacingness, following the composer's wishes, bringing out the score, all that is in the score, and nothing but the score.

For if one begins by questioning the reliability of the composer's notation...and as a consequence suggests that one ought to permit musicians to take various liberties with the text, then where is one to stop compromising?... By what criteria is one to know how far away from the score one may or may not (sic) depart?"¹⁴²

The second, nominalist position will see the composition more as an unfulfilled promise. A "copy of a non-existing original" (Adorno). "Virtual music vs. music in act" (Stravinsky, whose

¹⁴² Gunther Schaller - *The Complete Conductor* (Oxford University Press, 1997, p. 8)

modernist propensities didn't stop him from appreciating Mengelberg's versions of his works – none of which recorded –, and to declare his admiration for Josef Hofmann, as a pianist he, Stravinsky, tried his best to emulate – *“In so far as school life permitted, I used to go to symphony concerts and to recitals by famous Russian or foreign pianists, and in this way I heard Josef Hofmann, whose serious, precise, and finished playing filled me with such enthusiasm that I redoubled my zeal in studying the piano”*¹⁴³).

This perspective sees the interpreter as a collaborator, re-creator, responsible for bringing music back to life in a way that makes sense through that given interpreter in that given moment and for that given audience, rather than as an inherent realization of an immutably crystallized, unchangeable compositional essence self-sufficiently contained in a (holy) text. This position privileges ethically creative adequacy (ability to decode interpretive challenges, encrypted rather than spelled out, in the score), aesthetically imagination, existentially emotionalism and assumption of risks, methodologically synthesis, behaviorally the posture of the poet and of the philosopher. Furtwängler decried in passionate terms *“the crabbed, soul-destroying demand for ‘literal’ interpretations. Those propounding this view would dearly love to pronounce sentence of death on anyone who departs one iota from the composer’s written text, restricting performance to exactly what is recorded and thereby reducing any subjective freedom to the smallest degree imaginable”*.¹⁴⁴

I should endeavor to show how and why this position does not have at all the anarchist implications suggested by the partisans of the opposite perspective.

¹⁴³ Igor Stravinsky, *An Autobiography*, (W. W. Norton & Company, 2013) p.???

¹⁴⁴ *Furtwängler on Music*, edited and translated by Ronald Taylor, Aldershot: Scolar Press, 1991, p. 10

"In appearance my performance instructions stand in contradiction TO BEETHOVEN'S OWN ORTHOGRAPHY [capitals in the original] - that is, to the way he has written down the content. But this apparent contradiction resolves itself as soon as I explain the nature of the orthography. Specifically, it is not the task of the orthography, as is generally believed and taught, to provide the player with perfectly definite means for achieving effects allegedly specified and attainable only through precisely these means, but rather to arouse in his mind, in an a priori manner, specific effects, LEAVING IT UP TO HIM to choose freely the appropriate means for their attainment. What is correct, rather, is that the orthography on the contrary allows the player free rein concerning the means to be employed, just so long as they actually do attain the effect which alone was meant to be expressed by the orthography." ¹⁴⁵

At the end of the days, the two positions mentioned above are not as irreconcilable as they may seem on a first encounter. No ideational intentionality, no matter how sound, how conservative or how daring, how humble or how proud, has ever produced beautiful music on its own. "The proof is in the pudding" some say - and the same would go for musical nourishment. At a more sophisticated level, Husserl would talk about the "intuited object" - something which is not exhaustible in an explanation, an abstract traversal, a radiography of the concrete phenomenon, but in the phenomenon itself.

Claudio Arrau was a "literalist" (at least at the level of his intentions) of great reputation, and in his various readings of Beethoven's Fourth Piano Concerto, which was particularly dear to him, one has to be amazed at how Arrau seems to have studied not only every single note but also every single word written by Beethoven, and how he tried to translate all of this in his playing.

¹⁴⁵ Heinrich Schenker, "Beethoven's Ninth Symphony" (Yale University Press, 1992, p. 8)

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with memorable results. A model of "inspired literalism" – which of course does not mean that his way of reading the *opus 58 Concerto* - authoritative, thoughtful and intended-as-literal as it may be – should be construed as the one and only "correct" way of reading that score. The example of Arrau, a pianist, is chosen deliberately, rather than that of Toscanini - seventy years ago considered almost unanimously the golden standard of "purified" interpretation, objective approach, and respectful reading of a score. Not only because Arrau (see *Conversations with Arrau*¹⁴⁶) highly admired Furtwängler, but also because the same Joseph Horowitz wrote a devastating debunking of the Toscanini myth (in his book *Understanding Toscanini*). ? What?

Debunking the Toscanini myth does not entail denying the conductor's brilliant achievements, his long, prodigious career. Neither does it entail denying Toscanini's merits in professionalizing the opera standards during his early career, by comparison with the loose Italian standards of the day. Nor does it mean denying his place in the history of the popularization of classical music in American mass-culture, at the transition between the old ways and the emergence of new technologies, including television. It may mean though dismantling simple dichotomies, in which aesthetical battles were combined with actual, personal conflicts, the reverberations of which went beyond the trivial and the biographical. Grieg
Toscanini was routinely presented as the modern
apostle of pure, humble, objective interpretation, as opposed to the subjective, "sentimental,"
somehow less sound "distortions" of, at different points in time, Mahler, Mengelberg or
Furtwängler.¹⁴⁷ These real, painful - in a way which went way beyond academic or aesthetic - struggles actually happened, and – by coincidence more than by design – they all happened in New York. Of course, a hundred or so years after the fact, it would be inconsequential, as

¹⁴⁶ Joseph Horowitz, *Conversations with Arrau*, Limelight Editions, 1992

¹⁴⁷ Bruno Walter didn't escape Toscanini's curt dismissal either – Menuhin, in *Unfinished Journey*, tells us how Walter, in the Toscanini universe, was little more than a "sentimental fool."

regards the stated purpose of this writing, to fight again old battles, to go back to the press statements, to explore the tabloid fare, in style if not in substance, which faded away in the bowels of anecdotal history. Aspects of that can be still found, if required, in research signed by Daniel Gillis, Fred Prieberg, Joseph Horowitz, and Sam Shirakawa (see bibliography). On the Toscanini "defense" team, not any less passionate, one has to count Harvey Sachs, with his *Reflections on Toscanini* attempting to debunk Horowitz's debunking. Richard Taruskin put some more gasoline on the fire, in style, in *The Danger of Music and Other Anti-Utopian Essays*. I have my own opinions on all these historical matters, but I believe this is not the place to fight the thankfully settled World War Two all over again.

What is still of interest, today, is the fact that Toscanini, one of the historically most significant Italian conductors (in the opinion of this author, not as technically skillful and musically-rounded as Victor de Sabata, Inno Savini, Franco Ferrara, Tullio Serafin, or Carlo Maria Giulini, yet an excellent conductor of effervescent temperament and intended integrity), partially by choice, partially by factors beyond his control, was used as a publicity counterweight, at different points in time, to three of the most inspired conductors in history: Gustav Mahler, Wilhelm Furtwängler, and Willem Mengelberg. In the mundane world, Toscanini and his adepts won in all three instances. Mahler, sick at heart in more than one way, didn't live much longer anyway, after the contentiousness regarding influence within the Metropolitan Opera. Furtwängler, after his phenomenal debut and a couple of NY Philharmonic seasons worth of presence in New York, left the U.S., never to return. (This happened in correlation with Furtwängler's American presence in 1925-1927, that is to say before the 1935 [New York] and 1949 [Chicago] political controversies associated, with more or less justification, with Furtwängler's decision to remain musically active in the Nazi Germany. For detailed information regarding the history of

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Furtwängler's three major attempts to penetrate American musical life – the 20's, 1935, and 1949, the classical source remains Daniel Gillis' *Furtwängler and America*.¹⁴⁸ Apparently a 1955 American tour of Berliner Philharmoniker was meant to happen in 1955, but Furtwängler's death in November 1954 made the hiring of Karajan necessary for the event, and for Berliner Philharmoniker's future in general.)

Going back to the early 1920s, the duumvirate of Toscanini and Mengelberg at the head of the recently forged New York Philharmonic Symphony Orchestra (created through the merger of the New York Philharmonic and of the Mengelberg-conducted National Symphony Orchestra) wasn't any luckier. True, a huge ego and a gigantic one may have been clashing besides musical values. Also, Toscanini's laconic, occasionally less than articulate approach, was colored by rehearsal techniques involving legendary tantrums as *modus operandi* (in opera and in symphonic music alike). This approach corresponded to a higher degree, in superficial terms, to a ruthless CEO-like, mechanistic ideal of efficiency which was more akin to the social ethos of the age (see Chaplin's *Modern Times*) than Mengelberg or Furtwängler's somewhat vague concepts, steeped in the spiritual language of German philosophy.

Bref, by 1930 – despite triumphant series of concerts, despite some of the most accomplished early electrical 78s in history, featuring Mengelberg in New York during the 1928-1930 period, including the 1930 *Eroica Symphony* (the most accurate version until Koussevitzky's and Mengelberg's own later, 1940 version), despite the legendary 1928 Victor set of *Ein Heldenleben*¹⁴⁹, considered by most experts in recorded history the reference recording even

¹⁴⁸ Daniel Gillis, *Furtwängler and America*. (New York, Maryland Books, 1970)

¹⁴⁹ We mentioned that this work was dedicated by Richard Strauss to Mengelberg and his orchestra, and it could be argued that Mengelberg's two recorded versions are superior to Strauss' own.

see Toscanini box K

it's a
contest
between
Toscanini
Mengelberg

quite the contrast
German discipline

Why? Because of Toscanini?

today – Mengelberg lost the background political battle for musical influence in New York and went back to Europe. Never to return to a New World which discarded him when it found a more fashionable orchestral leader – surely so with the critics, not always with the educated music lovers. ???

Even earlier in his career, Mengelberg had to face personal opposition in Europe as well at times, like in Amsterdam when a faction of the orchestra tried to get him fired. (Later in his career this would have been unconceivable, until the different kind of post-World War II imbroglio.) Also, during his tenure at the Frankfurt Museum Concerts (1907-1920), Mengelberg and his supporters got involved into a bitter polemic. The not merely critical, malicious reviews signed by the musicologist and critic Paul Bekker, during the years before World War I, in *Frankfurter Zeitung*¹⁵⁰, owe nothing in vitriolic excess to later reviews of the 1930s, by the all-powerful *New York Times* reviewer and Toscanini supporter Olin Downes, directed against Furtwängler. One particular Bekker review succeeds in embarrassing today not only on the account of its bashing of the conductor, but also because of its tone-deaf description of the repertoire Mengelberg chose to perform during that 1911 Frankfurt season.

"Three evenings have passed without as much as a single novelty on the program. Yes, yesterday the fourth Museum Concert did bring as novelties two Romanian Rhapsodies by Georges Enesco. But whoever had expected that the originality & significance of these pieces would compensate for the previous lack of new works was sorely disappointed. Enesco brings us a few

¹⁵⁰ No, this is not a mistake, *Frankfurter Zeitung* was published between 1856 and 1943. The better known today *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* was founded in 1949.

national tunes in an operetta-like arrangement: a dance-music talent (sic) of which we have no lack, the discovery of whom scarcely belongs to the great tasks of our day."¹⁵¹

The relevance of this historical trivia emanates from such personal rivalries having not just limited, biographical consequences, but being extrapolated as far as to draw the descriptive "battle lines" of fundamental interpretative options for many years to come, with reverberations to this day. (Decades later, one can read in *Gramophone* the allegation of "agogic posturing" being thrown at Mengelberg's Tchaikovsky by Robert Layton.) It would be simplistic to claim that it was all about Toscanini versus X, or "America" vs. "Europe," or "transparent" Italianate ethos vs. "obscure" German mysticism. Competing concepts were less linear than that.¹⁵² Even in Germany itself one could witness the tumultuous activities of a young Klemperer, a disciple of Mahler after all, opposing the Romantic "excesses" on the lines of a Toscanini-influenced aesthetics.

"Willem Mengelberg, who was conductor of the Amsterdam orchestra from 1895 until 1945, was responsible for raising it to the front rank of European orchestras. He was also one of Mahler's earliest champions. But after the performance of the Symphony no. 2 on 13 April 1929 De

¹⁵¹ As quoted in *The Willem Mengelberg Society's Newsletter* no. 21.

¹⁵² For example, at some point both Mengelberg and Toscanini were used by some American critics in order to criticize Furtwängler. "Although he returned [to the U.S.] in 1926 and 1927 [after his initial success in 1925], he [Furtwängler] never regained the critical status that he had enjoyed during his first visit and was particularly distressed when the press compared him unfavorably with Willem Mengelberg and Arturo Toscanini. For a musician who was highly sensitive to criticism this was too much, and he departed at the end of his third visit feeling disillusioned and angry".

Raymond Holden. *The Virtuoso Conductors - The Central European Tradition from Wagner to Karajan*, Yale University Press, 2005, p. 215

Courant Nieuws van de Dag commented that Klemperer's faster tempi (he apparently took 87 minutes as against Mengelberg's 110 minutes) were closer to Mahler's own." ¹⁵³

(Paradoxically, an aged Klemperer was perceived, during his Indian summer in London at the head of the New Philharmonia Orchestra, as the last preserver of the very traditions he, as a young man, fought against. His own position regarding Mengelberg? He did accept to conduct the memorial Concertgebouw concert soon after Mengelberg's death in 1951. More importantly, he freely acknowledged Mengelberg being not just instrumental, but decisive a factor in the early propagation of Mahler's music.

"Willem Mengelberg was one of the first to champion Mahler as a composer. At the time, the beginning of the 20th century, he was hardly known. With unparalleled courage Mengelberg gave repeated performances of his Symphonies. His efforts came to a climax in the 1922 [sic; the correct year is 1920] Mahler Festival". ¹⁵⁴)

By a more daring choice of repertoire and arguably modernized means of expression, Erich Kleiber, even more so Hermann Scherchen were offering different reportorial / interpretative views than Furtwängler and his friend and emulator Abendroth. (The earliest Furtwängler biography was authored by Richard Specht in 1922, when the conductor took over Berliner Philharmoniker after Nikisch's death, when only 36 years old. ¹⁵⁵ The author even applied, somewhat rigidly, a dialectic triad of Hegelian roots to Furtwängler's perceived preeminence. Bülów was called the *thesis*, Nikisch the *antithesis*, Furtwängler the *synthesis*.) Some of these self-declared modern conductors may have been professing admiration for Toscanini as a model.

¹⁵³ Peter Heyworth: *Otto Klemperer - his life and times*, vol. 1, (Cambridge University Press, 1996, p. 307)

¹⁵⁴ *Klemperer on Music - Shavings from a Musician's Workbench* (Toccata Press, 1986, p. 149)

¹⁵⁵ Richard Specht: *Wilhelm Furtwängler: Eine Studie über den Dirigenten*, Vienna, 1922

but through their ability to absorb surface Toscanini-like elements (moderately fluctuating tempi, tighter rhythms, scarce rubato) within German/Middle European Romantic and post-Romantic concepts, they became de facto more organically integrated - better able to synthesize centrifugal notions - interpreters than Toscanini himself. Complex, non-linear historical trends and evolutions don't always fit in neat dichotomic categories.

Where does Mengelberg fit then in this complicated mosaic? It should go without saying that few responsible performers would advocate anarchy - according to a straw man credo "do whatever you want, if that's how you feel." Liberty shouldn't even be assumed while the interpreter is professionally incapable of rendering notes and rhythms with scholastic rigor, if and when needed or wanted. Creativity doesn't mean negligence, even if sometimes it brings imperfection closer to bring palatable. (Heinrich Neuhaus made an interesting distinction between conceptual/mental negligence and mechanical accidents, finger slips. Based on that distinction, one could say, Alfred Cortot was a much less negligent pianist, where it counts, than legions of steel-fingered young pianists, because Cortot's approach to music was never conceptually haphazard.) However, between the anarchist stance and the potentially pedantic "the score, all the score, and nothing but the score" creed there are a good number of intermediate positions, as well as potentially infinite shades of concrete interpretative realizations.

Being an astute philosopher, to be frank, doesn't make anybody's playing cleaner. Ernest Ansermet's writings about music, interesting as they can be on a speculative level, don't make his sometimes unfocused, under-rehearsed recordings more meaningful. Professionalism, at least some fundamental professional standards, should be always maintained. Perhaps though

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What?

SG is too opinionated on a personal level.

some well-intended professionals, on the other hand, tend to misunderstand the nature of the "truth of perception" in artistic matters.

What do you mean?
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Here

To use an analogy, a poet from ancient times had a different perception of the Moon than a 21st century astronomer. In our "facts-trusting" age, we tend to believe that the poet "was wrong" and the "astronomer is right". Actually they were both "right", within different sets of truth-values. Of course that the discovery of the scientific truth about the objective position of the moon in the universe does not preclude a poet from finding a different imagery, not in conflict with the knowledge of the "facts". However, something can be lost in the process, and transforming the "factual data" encrypted in a score into an absolute can become aesthetically crippling ("choking literalism" – to use a syntagm coined by the critic Andre Tubeuf, miraculously laconic for once), as I hope I was able to show within this dissertation. To turn again to Heinrich Neuhaus (the most influential piano teacher in 20th century Russia):

"It is not by accident that all outstanding musicians, composers, and performers, have always been noted for their broad spiritual outlook, and have shown a lively interest in all questions affecting the spiritual life of humanity. (...) What the musician acquires in knowledge he expresses in his compositions or performance. And hence I am entitled to express the following paradox: all knowledge is musical (...). Consequently, like every experience, it belongs to the sphere of music and inevitably enters its orbit. The absence of such experience, and still more of any experience whatsoever results in soulless, formalistic music and empty, uninteresting performance." ¹⁵⁶

There are some important distinctions in what regards one's understanding of what the score is,

¹⁵⁶ Heinrich Neuhaus, *The Art Of Piano Playing*, Praeger Publishers (New York, 1973) p ?

how important it is, why it should be respected, and how. It is legitimate to point out that the interpreter's fields of choice are, in traditional repertoire, quantitatively small. The divergence in paths one can take interpretatively become narrow when compared to the composer's clearly predominant contribution to the musical act. (Let's exclude deliberate experimental extremes in interpretation, such as picking tempi completely, vastly, and intentionally at odds with what the score indicates – on occasion, Glenn Gould, Ivo Pogorelich and Sergiu Celibidache are known to have done just that. While technically challenging, it is aesthetically facile to attempt originality based on a deliberate challenge of interpretative parameters - should this version be faster than everybody else or slower than everybody else?) Indeed, in quantitative terms, the options of an interpreter seem especially small when compared to the immutable fact of perhaps 95% of the elements of the average musical "happening" having been already decided by the composer. How is it possible then that, among two interpretations which observe to a close degree the composer's text, one is perceived by many listeners as boring, while the other is perceived as being revealing, eloquent, captivating?

How unclear?

There are psychological imponderables such as the interpreter's "temperament"¹⁵⁷ - which I am not dismissing yet don't help us in a discussion unfocused on the psychological aspects of interpretation. Part of the answer must then consist in those elements of the performer's implicit baggage (and/or assets) which do not confirm or contradict, per se, the hegemony of the score. Main sonority, dynamic range, quality of legato, science of articulation, acuity of hearing expressed in balancing chords, etc. The interpreter brings such assets (or the relative lack thereof) to the stage or to the recording studio, regardless of the music to be performed. They will benefit -- or not -- the music to be performed.

¹⁵⁷ "There is no performance of genius possible without temperament." Felix von Weingartner, *The Conductor's Art*, p. 101

However, another part of the answer, I believe, consists in some interpreters' ability of making a conscious differentiation between various degrees of substantiality in a composer's text. The notes are "projected details" of a process of musical thinking which is *expressed through* notes, not *created by* notes. (The composer isn't stuck to a note-by-note reading process. He rather thinks melodic gestures, tonal contexts, modulations, rhythms, textures, registrations etc. - all part of a creative process in which reason, instinct, historical/stylistic context, and, often, that ineffable *je ne sais quoi* contribute to giving (musical, not literally literary) meaning to a succession of notes. Music could hardly be written down without notes, but the notes at most contain a kind of "frozen concentrate" of the real music, not the real music. The paper doesn't play. The little dots do not sing. The bar lines don't conduct.

"(The performer) has to work backwards, as it were, not forwards, like the composer; contrary to the direction in which life evolves, he has to move from the outside to the inside, not vice versa, like the composer. His path is not one of improvisation, i.e. of natural growth, but one characterized by the painstaking assembly and arrangement of component parts. And whereas for the composer these parts, as in any organic process, merge naturally into his vision of the work as a whole, which gives them their individual life and meaning, the performer, for his part, has to laboriously reconstruct such a vision for himself out of the separate parts at his disposal. It is from such distinctions, both of the factual situation and of the challenges that flow from it, that the problems of interpretation and performance emerge".¹⁵⁸

When the composer wrote down his work, he usually wrote in the last instance interpretative indications - tempi, dynamics, phrasing, etc. At that moment **the composer himself was only a virtual interpreter** of his own music. A privileged one, of course, because the newly-

¹⁵⁸ *Furtwängler on Music*, edited and translated by Ronald Taylor (Aldershot: Scolar Press, 1991), pp. 11-12

born music was, in a proprietary and creative sense, his. He tried to convey in limited, conventional signs his inner vision of his music. He does succeed to a certain extent, but to a certain extent only. (That depends a lot from composer to composer, with extremes on either side being composers such as Bach – limited interpretative indications – and some recent composers who, based on new sound and recorded sound technologies, exclude the interpretational element altogether.) The degree of success-in-explicitness depends so much on where the emphasis is being placed. Fundamentally changing, for instance, a modulation is not a license in the same category as changing some minor dynamics. The first would be a drastic change, potentially distorting the core of the composer's musical thinking, while the latter can, at best if not always, illuminate rather than distort the musical structures the composer had imagined and written down.

Even outside the afore-mentioned extremes, there are subtle differences between how detailed composers are in their scores. There are Stravinsky, Bartok, Puccini, Enescu, among those who tried to write down (almost) everything, then there are Beethoven, Brahms and Chopin as "central" examples - not too much, not too little in the score (Brahms and Chopin being quite more specific than Beethoven surely).

Interpretive indications are not as authoritative in a score as notes are. This is not a case of take it (all) or leave it (all). Taking a look at the score of Brahms' popular *Intermezzo opus 118 no. 2*. During the first section, there are four similar phrase initiations (c# b d, c# b a). Brahms writes *piano* for the first, *dolce* for the second, *pianissimo* for the third, *dolce* for the fourth. What does that mean, factually? Does he want a *dolce within a piano* for the second, and a *dolce within a pianissimo* for the fourth? Does he want the same *dolce* for the second and fourth? But then *piano* is a dynamic indication and *dolce* a color/mood indication. Perhaps *dolce* can be louder

rather obscure

X

than *piano*, who knows? How about when after a *pianissimo* or a *piano*, Beethoven writes (as he often does) a *crescendo* which ends in a *piano*? Should that *crescendo* be big and followed by a *piano subito*, or just a shade of a *crescendo* smoothly resulting in the (new) *piano*?

Does that mean that those indications are to be disregarded or considered completely futile? Not at all. It is a fundamental - if potentially trite - truth that the score has to be examined with utmost attention. Brahms does suggest at a minimum that he wants at least three different dynamic-color shadings, and the interpreter should oblige. Wouldn't a good performer avoid monotony in enunciating potentially repetitive material without the composer's prompting? (This seems to have been the optimist expectation J. S. Bach gambled upon.)

Interpretative suggestions contained in the score, in the more or less traditional range of music I am referring to, are supposed to emphasize elements of musical language already existent in the concrete musical phenomenon itself. A conductor can emphasize an important modulation by a brusque accent as written, or by a sudden *pianissimo*, or by a caesura - it doesn't always matter, as the modulation pertains to the deeper layer of the music, not to the verbalized layer of the score. It is written in the score in an *immediate* way, without the word "modulation" spelled out in the score. Small changes could be acceptable, as long as the modulation doesn't pass unnoticed (as it often happens with, alas, interpreters who try their best to observe every word in a score yet disregard the subtleties of the musical language itself). Different, even opposite interpretative gestures (*crescendo* and *decrescendo*, *accelerando* and *rallentando*) can serve equally well sometimes (not at all times, by all means) the musical purpose, the compositional gesture, as long as the reasoned interpretative motivation and, even more, the undefinable incandescence of rendition render one or the other interpretative options valid *in context*. All has to be considered in context, of course, as long as any individual effect in a given passage should

rather obscure

be also judged in terms of appropriateness within *the great form*. Shorter than expected fermatas in the exposition of the first movement of Beethoven's Sonata opus 31 no. 3 would *become* justified in retrospect when the gradually longer fermatas in the development and the recapitulation become a reality. The form, again, is encapsulated in the score, but playing the notes "as close to what's written as possible," detail by detail, will not guarantee the clarity of the grand form. At times the inner logic of the form could even succumb under indiscriminating literalism.

The interpreter who invariably goes for "the score knows always better" - in translation "I feel inhabited by an unbounded confidence in my score-reading abilities" - may be sincerely humble, but sometimes he may ~~be~~ stop himself from projecting the *evolving* ("becoming") musical form satisfactorily. The performer should ideally judge every interpretative indication for himself, even when he ends by agreeing with most or, on the happy occasion, with all of them. He needs to recreate mentally that "first interpretation" stage, when the composer himself tried to project in performance his new work as well as he could - be that performance on an actual stage (as many composers did and do), or in his own imagination.

We mentioned that sometimes observing the interpretative indications in a score as scrupulously as possible goes against the tendency of the musical material itself. One shudders thinking of all the performers who played Tchaikovsky's Sonata opus 37 observing monotonously the huge (about 2/3 of the entire first movement) amount of prescribed *ff* and *fff*. Cutting in half Tchaikovsky's *fortissimo*, in the appropriate places, and substituting smaller dynamics, except for the real climaxes, are actions which go against the indications inscribed in the score but, paradoxically or not, serve the musical structure the score is bearing. More so than a "democratic" approach in which all *fortissimos* are born equal. In the same vein, if the pianist

X

will only use one level of *fortissimo* in the first movement of Beethoven's *opus 57*, using up all his dynamic resources by bar 17, the complex sonata form of this symphony-among-sonatas will be ruined, despite the pianist's best intentions.

I am also thinking of Enescu's *Third Violin Sonata* (recorded by the composer, with Lipatti on the piano). Compared to the score, the interpretation reveals hundreds of small differences but stands out as one of the best *in toto*. In his own *Prelude in Unison* (from the *First Orchestral Suite*), Enescu indicated quarter note=50, but he conducted it at quarter note=80. No wonder most recorded performances are slower than Enescu's and sound somewhat disjointed. Not so Constantin Silvestri's own rendition of the music, which follows Enescu's living example rather than his written indications. Is it possible that Enescu, after decades of conducting his own work, changed his mind? It is surely a notion Mengelberg would have been delighted with.

B. Enescu
Lipatti
Silvestri
Mengelberg
K

Beethoven himself grew disenchanted with the metronome's purely mechanical quality. We know that he metronomized his Ninth Symphony twice (one copy has been lost and he had to metronomize another one); the two sets of figures for the same music are different! In 1826, Beethoven wrote to his publisher, Schott and Schöne, in Mainz: "The metronome figures (the devil take all mechanization) will follow." (...) And he hit the nail on the head when he wrote on the manuscript of his song "So oder So": "100, according to Mälzel. But this must be understood only for the first measures, for feeling also has its tempo and this cannot be entirely expressed by this figure."¹⁵⁹

Mengelberg had rather charming, sometimes apocryphal (read: occasionally disingenuous) ways of explaining why he knew what to do "better" than the score itself and we discussed them. Yet,

¹⁵⁹ Kurt Adler, *The Art of Accompanying and Coaching*, Da Capo Press, New York, 1971, p. 121

Mengelberg wasn't wrong when he suggested that the composer usually spends a limited time, most often months, rarely years or decades, with a work-in-progress, while the interpreter may spend decades with the same completed creation, and earn insights regarding the potential interpretations of a given work which the composer himself didn't envisage.

The only mention of Mengelberg in Georg Solti's *Memoirs* is one of these recurring anecdotes about Mengelberg appearing as over-talkative, and insisting on his long-reaching-in-the-past credentials.

*The Dutch conductor Willem Mengelberg once interrupted a rehearsal to give an oboist a long, profound lecture on the phrasing of that oboe cadenza. He said that he had learned the phrasing from a pupil of Liszt, who had in turn learned it from Schindler's, Beethoven's friend, who had learned it from the Master himself. When Mengelberg had finished talking, the oboist asked him, "Dr. Mengelberg, should I play it forte or piano?" There could not be a better lesson for a conductor: Do not talk too much.*¹⁶⁰

While it is documented that Mengelberg could liberally engage in digressions, noticing nothing else about his complex artistry would be just as superficial as quoting a couple of anecdotes regarding the ample verbal and behavioral eccentricities of the legendary pianist Vladimir de Pachmann (1848-1933), while completely disregarding the unique stylistic bridge to the past which represents Pachmann's place in history (as documented, rather shabbily, in Mark Mitchell's *A Piano Virtuoso's Life and Art*, and much better in the already mentioned de Pachmann biography *Chopin's Prophet*.¹⁶¹) As for music being all about *forte* or *piano*, as in

¹⁶⁰ Georg Solti, *Memoirs*, Alfred A. Knopf, 1997, pp. 215-216

¹⁶¹ Edward Blickstein and Gregor Benko, *Chopin's Prophet – The Life of Pianist Vladimir de Pachmann*, The Scarecrow Press, 2013

practical decisions with little or no search for meaning, the kindest thing that can be said is that many contemporary conductors live up to such aesthetics. Perhaps we should rather follow Bruno Walter's passionate words of wisdom, not distant at all from Furtwängler's or Mengelberg's:

We realize that music is, in itself, spiritual. Is therefore, unspiritual music-making ever permissible, or must not every musical utterance be accorded expressiveness? Above all, let us not underrate the importance of personality in musical execution! Its life gives life to a musical performance, its fire glows in it; surely a performance will be blunted by a dull interpreter, chilled by his coolness? Even though music, by virtue of its inborn warmth, may not entirely freeze to death under the breath of a frosty interpretation, there is such thing as a virtually soulless performance, a virtually expressionless execution - as well as intentional, but misguided, objectivity in interpretation - particularly with regard to compositions of earlier periods. The plain truth is that a style of objectivity, a style of interpretation that is intentionally or unintentionally soulless, or even merely impersonal, must do an injustice to every piece of music, for there is none that has not sprung from some elevated state of the soul.¹⁶²

Absorbing critically the composer's interpretative indications is as far from a gratuitously rebellious act as it is from burning scores in effigy. It is the *duty* of the interpreter to attempt to distill, through intuition, research, analysis, and integrated thoughtfulness, the likely motivation behind the words instilled in the score. To follow that elusive motivation more than

¹⁶² Bruno Walter, *Of Music and Music-Making*, Faber & Faber Ltd., 1961, p. 78

the words themselves, to make the score his own. A word of homage to amateurs and what professionals can learn from them: at times, amateurs have the advantage of their limits: not (at least not usually) following recordings or concerts with a score, they are both "ignorant" of certain aspects of them, but also unprejudiced, at best, in judging the non-mediated aesthetic/emotional effect of a piece of music or of a performance. (Ignacy Jan Paderewski, asked once why he played something loudly instead of the *pp* in the sheet music, answered somewhat disarmingly that it's not about what it's written but about what is heard.¹⁶³) Professionals can do that too, when they try to also be "music lovers", for a change. So it happens that some of the freest imaginable (within reasoned, traditional interpretation¹⁶⁴) score-readings are among the ones that have the most to offer.

Difficult as it may be to quantify such options, idiomatic freedom should be the result of a genuine interpretative need, not of a gratuitous appetite for eccentricity. Neither rigor nor freedom are values in themselves. They are more likely assumed and complementary boundaries which make meaningful choices and structured decisions possible. A gifted artist transcends his own assumed principles, no matter what they are. (It is the same with societal configurations, in which conceptual extremes such as "perfect" order or "complete" freedom lead to either anarchy or totalitarianism.) It is within the flexibility of always-evolving concepts that any interpreter can

¹⁶³ No wonder Paderewski was occasionally accused of being an "advanced amateur," making up in stage presence and charisma for what was, by all accounts, a less than immaculate technical mechanism. "He's good but he's no Paderewski" – quipped coetaneous Moriz Rosenthal, arguably Liszt's most technically advanced disciple (after the pre-record era, prematurely deceased Karl Tausig). Carl Flesch, in his memoirs, delights in mentioning how he called Wilhelm Furtwängler an amateur to his face. See *The memoirs of Carl Flesch* (London: 1957)

¹⁶⁴ A note has to be made here about phenomena which are simply not encapsulated in traditional concepts, either compositional or interpretative. The composer Frederic Rzewski for instance has been known to "perform" (re-compose?) Beethoven's Sonata opus 57 using Beethoven's original text, while interpolating gigantic through-composed "parentheses" (cadenzas? developments?) of his own device, abruptly transitioning to his own compositional language, in the middle of each movement. A Calvinist judgment cannot be made on such attempts, having more to do with the post-modern art of collage than with either composition or interpretation in the traditional Western understanding of the terms. However, they remain literally marginal in our musical life.

find an organically satisfying and meaningful niche in understanding and further transmitting his own understanding of a musical work.

It is this where Mengelberg's ultimate lesson in interpretation resides. Concrete instances of "licenses" adopted by Mengelberg in his recordings, together with attempted motivational explanations, appear discussed throughout this thesis but they are not everything that can be learned from his recorded heritage. Many of these licenses are ingenious, clarifying, inspiring. Classical and unorthodox. Conservative and creative. Sometimes, rarely, bordering on unintelligible, which is a good thing because, when concerned with infallibility, when avoiding any risks, an interpreter becomes predictable to his audience.¹⁶⁵

With one eye in the past and the other into a world in which their vital force seems to take a life of their own, Mengelberg's convincing interpretations show an infinite suppleness, variety, and depth. I am enjoying his interpretations, to say the least, more than the standardized approaches which became the norm by the late 1950s. Nevertheless, little danger as there would be of that, I would not want to live in a world in which Mengelberg's dicta would be taken as the unchangeable, authoritative canon. A world in which the distinctive, sometimes idiosyncratic details of his interpretations would be endlessly imitated, to the small extent that were possible. I see Mengelberg as an august, creative, yet not infallible figure of the past. More than that I see him as an older, greater colleague who, eternally young at heart, blissfully stirs our own settled expectations, our petrified certitudes.

¹⁶⁵ ... This is what made possible that a made-up mega-pianist such as Joyce Hatto, arguably part of the greatest classical music hoax of the 20th century, could publish under her own name recordings from dozens of excellent pianists, without anybody noticing right away. Ironically, it was a piece of technology, some software which gave the first alarm signal regarding the hoax. Could we even imagine something like this being possible in the era of Hofmann, Friedman, Hambourg, Moiseiwitsch, Sofronitsky, Levy, Yudina, Rachmaninoff, Edwin Fischer, Schnabel, and Cortot? How possible would have been to mistake a Koussevitzky recording for a Toscanini one, or a Mengelberg recording for a Barbirolli one?

His challenge to the modern interpreters seems to be to find their own, personal yet thoroughly considered ways to interpret “old” music in new, revelatory ways, and to convey “new” music as clearly and significantly to contemporary audiences as he strived to convey the music which was new in his time, to him and to his audiences.

To conclude:

The interpreter must lead his fellow-men, his public, to a higher level and make their spiritual and emotional life deeper and richer thereby.

Willem Mengelberg

