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Furtwängler and Mackerras: Two approaches to Brahms's Fourth Symphony

In performing the music of any composer, a musician must formulate a philosophy toward the interpretation of a piece whose composer, more often than not, has departed from this world. Of particular interest these days is how a piece sounded to the composer. How big was his orchestra? What were the stylistic norms of his day? How good were his musicians? (Christopher Hogwood might be the only conductor to ask the last question.) A half-century ago, these questions were not asked for composers such as Brahms. The two recordings by Wilhelm Furtwängler and Sir Charles Mackerras come from different times: Furtwängler with the Berlin Philharmonic from the 1950s, and Mackerras with the Scottish Chamber Orchestra from the 1990s. The two conductors espouse different philosophies toward interpretation, which come across strongly in their renditions of Brahms's Fourth Symphony.

Neville Cardus of the *Manchester Guardian* described Furtwängler thusly: "He did not regard the printed notes of the score as a final statement, but rather as so many symbols of an imaginative conception, ever changing and always to be felt and realised subjectively"¹. This approach manifests most clearly in the dramatic tempo changes that pervade Furtwängler's Brahms. One gets the sense that Furtwängler is not just translating the ink into sound, but rather he hears and responds to the voice of the orchestra. At times, Furtwängler seems to be swept up

¹ Kettle, Martin. "Second coming". *The Guardian*. 26 November 2004.
<http://www.guardian.co.uk/music/2004/nov/26/classicalmusicandopera2>
(Accessed 2 May 2011)

by the music, conducting with abandon and without regard for the physical limits of his musicians. This is no more obvious than in the coda of the first movement. Within the span of about thirty measures, the tempo moves from approximately 80bpm to 110bpm! Nowhere in the score does Brahms indicate such a tempo change—except, perhaps, between the lines.

Furtwängler was born in 1886, before the premiere of the Fourth Symphony. The Symphony could thus be considered Furtwängler's contemporary music. Mackerras and the Scottish Chamber Orchestra take the opposite tack, giving Brahms the same treatment that we give early music. While most orchestras even today present the symphonic works of Brahms with about a hundred musicians, Mackerras and the Scottish Chamber Orchestra recorded Brahms's symphonies with a much smaller ensemble. It is noted in the CD liner notes that the Fourth Symphony was premiered not by the one hundred member Vienna Philharmonic, but by the forty-nine member Meiningen Court Orchestra. Brahms also explicitly declined an invitation by Hans von Bülow to augment the string section. The relatively small size of the Scottish Chamber Orchestra results in balances between the different instruments—especially the overall balance between the strings and the winds—that are closer to that of the premiere performance under the baton of Brahms. Mackerras also takes advantage of the agility of the leaner orchestra to employ a subtle rubato.

Though the differences between Furtwängler and Mackerras go much deeper than the size of the ensembles that they conduct, a comparative analysis would be remiss is not exploring in depth the effects of the differing balances between sections of the orchestra. From the start, Furtwängler's several dozen violins grab the ear. The subordinate voices in the winds and lower strings murmur beneath the violin melody, a pulsing wash of sound. While some of the lack of clarity can be attributed to the poor recording quality, the sound of the violins clearly dominates

an orchestration in which Brahms had labeled each voice equally *piano*. Mackerras is much more subtle in bringing out the violins. While the theme is still clearly the main voice, the syncopation in the winds is also in the foreground. In addition, the timbre of the horns is much more easily heard in Mackerras's orchestra. The prominence of the horns throughout the Symphony is refreshing to one who is used to having the horns blending beneath the large string section. But the Furtwängler recording isn't all mush beneath the melody. In measure 18, the oboe plays a very dissonance ninth against the B major harmony:

Brahms Symphony No. 4, mvt 1, mm. 17-18

Furtwängler recognized the powerful effect of this one note, and the sound of the oboe sustains for just a little longer than the rest of the orchestra. In the Mackerras recording, the dissonant oboe blends perfectly with the rest of the orchestra, moderating the effect of the pitch. The philosophies of the two conductors are clear. Furtwängler sees the musical effect behind the dissonance of the oboe. Mackerras doubtless recognizes the dissonance as well, but concludes that Brahms wanted exactly the effect called for in his score, no more, no less.

A second place in which the difference in balance figures prominently is at what Furtwängler might refer to as the cello theme in measure 57:

Brahms Symphony No. 4, mvt 1, mm. 57-64

The Berlin Philharmonic cellos play this lyrical theme beautifully, and the horns do not have a chance against this ocean of sound. The horns of the Scottish Chamber Orchestra, on the other hand, are the stars of the show at this moment. The distinctive horn timbre makes this the horn theme, with the cellos providing some support and color. The prominence of the horns here makes one wonder if Mackerras had a hand in altering the balance in favor of the winds, rather than leaving the natural balance of the smaller orchestra untouched. Regardless, this is a theme that sounds drastically different between the two recordings.

This theme also reveals a difference in stylistic approach between the string sections, especially the violins. In terms of portamento, there is not a large difference. Furtwängler's musicians were used to much more portamento than we use nowadays. Mackerras's musicians are a little more self-conscious about sliding, but they do so out of the belief that Brahms's musicians often employed portamento. When it comes to slurs, the two are miles apart. The violins of the Berlin Philharmonic clearly see the theme as sustained and connected, interpreting the slurs as bowings rather than phrasings. The violins of the Scottish Chamber Orchestra take an early music approach to the slurs, studiously separating the unslurred notes from their neighbors. The result is arguably more academic than effective, more correct than musical.

To get back to the issues of balance: even at a dynamic of *pianissimo*, it is easy for the large string section to cover up motives in the winds. In measure 110, a three-note motive

appears prominently in the winds and lower strings. Listening to the Furtwängler recording, one could easily miss the first appearance of this motive in the trumpets, three measures earlier.

Brahms Symphony No. 4, mvt 1, mm. 107-111

The sparse strings of the Mackerras recording hide nothing, however, and the trumpets come through with ease, even at their softest. The arpeggiated passage in the violin recurs several times throughout the movement, and in the Furtwängler recording, it often obscures or distracts from an important motive in another voice. In measure 192, the violin arpeggiation is in danger of distracting from the main motive in the winds. In measure 249, the violins could very easily obscure the beginning of the recapitulation, as they pull attention away from the augmented first theme. In order for measure 259 not to come across as jarring, the augmentation of the first theme must be heard as the first theme, and therefore the violins should play as softly as possible. This is the approach Mackerras takes; Furtwängler elects to treat measure 259 as a beginning, rather than a middle.

Throughout the movement in the Mackerras recording, the winds and especially the horns come to the foreground without a struggle. Though Furtwängler has much to offer musically, I find the balance of the Scottish Chamber Orchestra more revealing. Not just the moments I have pointed out, but the entire piece has a different and raw color. Whether one prefers the relatively brassy timbre of the Scottish Chamber Orchestra or the lush string sound of the Berlin

Philharmonic, it would certainly be edifying to hear a smaller orchestra perform the work, as Brahms preferred.

[My paper could very easily end here. However, I also wanted to mention tempo. Thus the rest of the paper is optional reading.]

The differences between the two recordings so far discussed have mainly concerned the balance, which has more to do with the orchestras than the conductors. The next issue has nothing to do with the orchestra, and everything to do with the conductors: tempo.

Tempo is one of the most subjective factors of a musical performance. *Allegro non troppo*, directs Brahms. On its own, this tells us next to nothing. Much more meaningful is the musical content, and it is this musical content that leads Furtwängler to noticeably move the tempo forward, starting in measure 19. He may have been spurred on by the increased activity of the eighth notes, or he may have interpreted *leggiero* as an increase in tempo. Either way, Furtwängler speeds up from about 60bpm to 84bpm in a place where Brahms gives no explicit direction to play faster. Mackerras, while certainly not metronomic in his approach, keeps a much more consistent tempo, around 68bpm. Mackerras employs rubato, giving and taking small amounts of time here and there. Furtwängler's tempo changes tend to be more on the large scale, as though his choice of tempi is influenced by the structure of the piece rather than small points.

It is easy to pigeonhole the two conductors: Mackerras with restraint, and Furtwängler with abandon. Mackerras is diligent about following Brahms's instructions to the letter, and Furtwängler often comes across as impulsive and possibly irrational. Yet the two conductors had the same goal in mind. For both, and for all musicians, the goal is to provide the best

performance for the audience. We will now look at a moment that contradicts our assessment so far of Furtwängler. One may recall his out-of-control coda to the first movement. One might expect Furtwängler to do the same at the *Piu Allegro* coda to the last movement. However, Furtwängler is remarkably steady with his tempo, even more so than Mackerras, who slows considerably in the closing few measures. This can be explained by the metric ambiguity of some measures of the coda. While composed in 3/4, extended hemiolas could be interpreted as sections in 3/2. At measure 297, there is no discernable meter at all. A wild tempo would only detract from the composed chaos of the rapid meter changes. At this moment, Furtwängler reveals the preparation that goes into his interpretations. He does not simply react to the energy of the piece; he works *with* the score to create a performance that moves and thrills the audience.

In so many ways, the Furtwängler and Mackerras recordings are polar opposites. Old versus new, flexible versus restrained, strings versus winds—and both are more than valid. With different interpretative philosophies, Furtwängler and Mackerras pursue the same goal. In their own ways, they have both succeeded.