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19th-Century Conducting

Mendelssohn, Berlioz, and Wagner as Conductors: the Origins of the Ideal of "Fidelity to the Composer"

José A. Bowen

As conductors of other composers' music, Mendelssohn, Berlioz, and Wagner each professed the desire to be "faithful" in some sense to the conducted work, but each understood this fidelity differently. Mendelssohn and Berlioz saw performance as essentially recreative, while Wagner was the first to regard it as a creative or interpretive act.

Mendelssohn as Conductor

Mendelssohn did not pen an explicit theory of interpretation or conducting, yet an implicit theory may be extracted from his letters and from his actions as a composer, editor, and performer. Whether conducting or at the keyboard, he had a consistent view as to the obligations of the executant. Due in part to his suspicion of virtuosi and of all external effect (remember his classical, aristocratic-style education), he reacted negatively to the performing style of his predecessors. He began to conduct and perform in a new way that seems oddly modern in its avoidance of all added affect or mannerism. Mendelssohn was successful in "depersonalizing" his performances, and virtually all of the contemporary critics remarked upon his avoidance of surface effects, associating this with his fidelity to the composer. Here are but two examples among many.

Of mere effects of performance he knew nothing...in hearing him one forgot the player and only reveled in the full enjoyment of the music.¹

... it was his absolute and unqualified devotion to the master whose work he was executing that imparted to his playing a character of perfection . . . *In rendering the creation of others, he introduced nothing of himself*; he was entirely absorbed in the soul and spirit of the composer. At such moments he was in fact *only the receptacle* of precious foreign wine, but of the purest and most transparent crystal.²

Mendelssohn also had surprisingly modern ideas about editing. When he was commissioned to edit *Israel in Egypt* for the English Handel Society, a dispute arose after he examined the autographs. Mendelssohn wrote in a letter:

I regret the difficulty with the Handel Society, but . . . I cannot possibly introduce my marks of expression into a score of Handel's, not my tempi, nor anything else unless it is to be made perfectly clear what is mine and what is Handel's; . . . My opinion is so intimately connected with what I have held to be right, all my life, that I could not possibly alter it.³

A compromise was finally reached and *Israel in Egypt* was published in 1846.

The editor is alone responsible for the directions of *piano* and *forte*, and other marks of expression; for all such descriptions of the movements as stand within brackets (those which are not so placed being the only indications for which the original manuscripts furnish authority); for the suggestion of the tempi according to Maelzel's metronome; and for the figuring of the organ part. The adaptation of the instrumental parts for

¹Clara Schumann: *ein Künstlerleben nach Tagebüchern und Briefen*, ed. Berthold Litzmann (Leipzig: Breitkopf & Härtel, 1902-8), vol. 1, 423. Also, George R. Marek, *Gentle Genius: the Story of Felix Mendelssohn* (New York: Funk & Wagnalls, 1972), 221.

²Elise Polko, *Erinnerungen an Felix Mendelssohn-Bartholdy* (Leipzig, 1868), 88, trans. Lady Wallace, *Reminiscences of Felix Mendelssohn-Bartholdy* (London: Longman

the pianoforte, intended as an accompaniment to the voices in the absence of the orchestra, is by the editor; for this, also, he alone is responsible..⁴

Mendelssohn's "fidelity" looks remarkably like that of modern authenticity. He is concerned about preserving the text, and if he has no concept of historical accuracy, he is committed to a performance style which is both transparent and depersonalized.⁵

But even Mendelssohn gave in to the practice of modernization of older scores, and his transgressions are revealing. More important than loyalty to the letter of the text was a loyalty to the inner spirit or character of a work. And to his own day, his spiritual fidelity did set apart his alterations of a score from those of the mere dazzlers and virtuosi who sought only to beautify an exterior. Wilhelm Lampadius wrote of Mendelssohn,

His chief excellence lay, as Goethe said, in his giving every piece, from the Bach epoch down, its own distinctive character; and yet with all his loyalty to old masters, he knew just how to conceal their obsolete forms by adding new graces in the very manner of his playing.⁶

For the most part, though, Mendelssohn did exercise restraint. Only when working for Zelter as a child did he add parts to a Handel score, an act of which he later felt ashamed and went to some lengths to cover up.⁷

Mendelssohn's most important and most controversial alterations were to the St. Matthew Passion. Before the 1829 performance, Devrient and Mendelssohn

had frequent meetings to consider how the work could be shortened for performance. Giving it in its entirety was out of the question. It necessarily contained much that belonged to a former age, and what we had at heart was to convince people of its intrinsic greatness.

⁴Preface from Handel's *Israel in Egypt* for the English Handel Society (London, 1846).

⁵Within 20 years, even Mendelssohn's "fidelity" was found not radical enough and his edition was replaced by Chrysander's.

⁶Trans. W. L. Gage, *The Life of Felix Mendelssohn-Bartholdy* (Boston, 1888), 330.

⁷See Mendelssohn's letter to Devrient, 30 September 1833. Eduard Devrient, *Meine Erinnerungen an FMB und seine Briefe an mich* (Leipzig, 1869), trans. Natalie Macfarren, *My Recollections of FMB and His Letters to Me* (London, 1869).

[Therefore, for the good of the work] most of the songs would have to be omitted; of others only the symphonies [ritornels] could be given; . . . We often differed, for to us it was a matter of conscience . . .⁸

Despite Mendelssohn's good intentions, the "fidelity" of his performance might be hotly contested. Still, while he was not at all concerned with the original performing conditions (he used a chorus of 400 and an augmented orchestra) he nevertheless did try to respect the text and added only dynamics and one isolated instrumental effect.⁹ What is new for his day, is that he considered the work to be Bach's and he sought to allow its spirit to speak without any interference from himself. Had Bach been faced with the same performance problems, Mendelssohn believes that Bach would have made the same cuts. We can see the origin of the fidelity of intentions and of its abuse here. While Mendelssohn believed that the spirit of the work would remain stable, as a practical musician he also knew that different situations would require different performance decisions.

The similarities of this theory to modern authenticity also translated into similar performance practices; to take only the most tangible example, Mendelssohn liked his tempos quick and steady. Schumann called his rapidity in the Beethoven Ninth "unprecedented."¹⁰ And while Wagner's repeated assurances that Mendelssohn's tempi were too fast may be suspect, there is enough confirmation from Berlioz, Bülow, Joachim, and numerous other reviewers to accept this opinion as true.¹¹

He also considered tempo changes within a movement to be unwarranted. Writing of Dorothea Ertmann, whom he heard in Milan he wrote:

⁸Devrient, *Erinnerungen*, 56.

⁹In *Und der Vorhang im Tempel zerriß*, the only orchestrated recitative, wherein he added an effect of thunder.

¹⁰*On Music and Musicians*, ed. Konrad Wolff, trans. Paul Rosenfeld (New York: Pantheon Books, 1946), 223.

¹¹Richard Wagner, *Über das Dirigieren* (Leipzig: Breitkopf und Härtel, 1869). Hector Berlioz, *Mémoires* (Paris, 1870), trans. David Cairns (New York: Norton, 1975), 276, 292. Hans von Bülow, *Vorwort zur revidirten Ausgabe des Rondo Capriccioso von Felix Mendelssohn* (1880), cited by Aibl (Munich, *Ausgewählte Schriften*, 1896), 406. Joseph Joachim, quoted in Ernst Wolff, *Felix Mendelssohn-Bartholdy* (Berlin, 1906), 124. See also "Reviews" of Mendelssohn's conducting in the *Spectator* (London), June 1, 1844, *Musical World* (London), May 30, 1844, *Times* (London), June 11, 1844, and *Athenæum* (London), July 13, 1844.

she sometimes rather exaggerates the expression, dwelling too long on one passage, and then hurrying the next.¹²

He also criticized Chopin and Hiller, seemingly for the same flaw:

They both labour a little under the Parisian love for effect and strong contrasts, and often sadly lose sight of time and calmness and real musical feeling.¹³

While there is a difference between the technical abilities of a soloist and a conductor, there is no philosophical one, and although Mendelssohn is criticizing soloists here, the criticism is an ideological one: gross changes of tempo distract from the work as a whole. Part of being a transparent performer, is the avoidance of such tempo changes. The reviews of Mendelssohn as a conductor corroborate this:

The work [Beethoven's *Eroica*] was performed in more rigorous time, [under Mendelssohn] and less like an instrumental fantasia, than we have been accustomed to hear.¹⁴

The next review of Mendelssohn, conducting Beethoven's Fifth Symphony, summarizes how his attempt to let the music "speak for itself" led to an ideal of performance which seems remarkably modern.

The peculiarities under Mendelssohn were a shorter time than usual given to the pauses in the first allegro, . . . and a quicker movement than went to the finale. . . . we hold with traditions respecting longer pauses in the colossal debut of the symphony, and have heard the finale "created vastest" with its solemn pealing trombones rendered in a larger and more magnificent style, but slower.¹⁵

Berlioz as Conductor

¹²Letter from Milan, July 14, 1831. Mendelssohn, *Reisebriefe*, 203. *Letters*, vol. 1, 203.

¹³Letter from Düsseldorf, May 23, 1834. Ferdinand Hiller, *Felix Mendelssohn-Bartholdy, Briefe und Erinnerungen* (Köln, 1878), 31. *Mendelssohn, Letters and Recollections*, trans. M.E. von Glehn (London, 1874), 35.

¹⁴*Spectator*, July 13, 1844.

¹⁵*Spectator*, June 15, 1844.

Berlioz also developed a concept of the musical work and of an intermediary who was merely a recreative executant. Berlioz specifies exactly what this role should be.

One of our most illustrious virtuosi has expressed himself upon this subject: "We are not the mere staple by which the picture is suspended; we are the sun by which it is illuminated."

To this, it may be replied: in the first place, we admit this modest comparison. But the sun, in lighting up a picture, reveals its exact *design and colour*. It does not cause either trees or weeds to grow; or birds or serpents to appear, where the painter has not placed them.¹⁶

Berlioz postulates a fixed musical work (analogous to an unalterable painting), which the performer merely illuminates. The performer contributes nothing but the power whereby we may see the work. The performer remains transparent, allowing only the composer's music to become apparent. Note how the role of the performer and the status of the musical work are inversely proportional; in seeking to reduce the importance of the performer, Berlioz increases the authority of the musical work.

Like Mendelssohn, Berlioz also makes a distinction between the technical and spiritual obligations of the conductor. First the conductor must attempt to understand the author's intentions and then transmit these intentions clearly to the orchestra. But this initial "understanding" really only refers to the technical aspects. Berlioz recommends

working until he [the conductor] has achieved the accuracy, ensemble and expression . . . and once these technical problems are mastered, identifying the orchestra with himself and animating and infusing it with his own enthusiasm and inspiration.¹⁷

Once technical fidelity has been achieved, however, the conductor is responsible for also transmitting "inspiration." Both are essential, but the practical considerations come first.

¹⁶"Address to the Members of the Academy of Fine Arts of the Institute" in *A travers chants* (1862), cited in *Mozart, Weber, and Wagner, with Various Essays on Musical Subjects*, trans. Edwin Evans (London: Wm. Reeves, 1918), 101-2.

¹⁷*Mémoires*, 406.

When a new work is studied for the first time, the conductor and his musicians should, first of all, try to understand it; and afterwards to perform it with scrupulous fidelity united to inspiration.¹⁸

Note that inspiration is not "interpretation," a word which Berlioz never uses in its modern sense. Instead he writes about enthusiasm, inspiration, or expression.¹⁹ Expression, albeit "correct" expression, is necessary for the integrity of the musical work.

When I say passionate expression, I mean an expression bent on reproducing the inner meaning of its subject.²⁰

The terms are different, but just as with Mendelssohn, expression does not involve creating but only "reproducing" the composer's feelings or intentions. This attitude was accompanied by an extreme regard for the score, which was an especially radical proposition for 19th-century Paris. Berlioz insisted upon repeats²¹ and on the exact instruments requested in the score. He protests, for instance, against the substitution of B-flat for A or D clarinets or valved for natural horns, and claims that the resulting difference in timbre violates the integrity of the musical work.²²

If this was true for a Beethoven symphony, then how much the more so for a Berlioz symphony. Berlioz's musical ideas are more fragile than those of most composers', and Berlioz's own scores demonstrate most aptly his theory that timbre, instrumentation, dynamics, and tempi are integral to his music.

¹⁸Berlioz, "Address," 99.

¹⁹*Mémoires*, 400.

²⁰*Ibid.*

²¹Berlioz, "Address," 100-101. Oddly, Berlioz himself seems not to have always abided by his own admonition and was caught leaving out the repeats in Mozart's *Jupiter* Symphony in the first concert of the London New Philharmonic Society, *Times* (London, March 25, 1852).

²²*Grand traité d'instrumentation et d'orchestration modernes* (Paris, 1844), 256. Given this extreme position on the *type* of instrument, it is odd that Berlioz does not consider the *number* of instruments and therefore the total volume of sound essential. He performed Beethoven with a thousand piece orchestra, and he once performed a Gluck aria and *recit* with an entire male chorus. The only possible explanation is his principle of proportion. He opposed, for example, the current practice of adding brass without increasing the number of strings (*Traité*, 294).

Not surprisingly, tempo is also an essential element of the musical work. The wrong tempo "amounts, however unwittingly, to a serious distortion of the music."²³ As we would expect, it is the tempo "desired by the composer" which is the correct one and Berlioz has a hierarchy for ascertaining this "true time." The best comes directly from the composer. Second best is the tempo that tradition has passed along. If neither of these is available then we "must have recourse to the indications of the metronome."²⁴ Only as a last resort can a conductor turn to "his own instinct."²⁵

As with Mendelssohn, the evidence supports the conclusion that Berlioz's personal preference was for fast and steady tempi.²⁶ Despite the frequency of references to his "enthusiasm" and "energy" and the "enormous rapidity" of his tempi,²⁷ several critics complain of an "executive tameness"²⁸ and deficiencies in "brilliance and fire," while others contrarily praise his "judgment" and "perfect steadiness."²⁹

These attitudes and practices of Mendelssohn and Berlioz offer strong evidence that our picture of a romantic century that made over everything in its own image is incorrect. With the establishment of Mendelssohn's conservatory in Leipzig, the doctrine of the transparent performer spread throughout Europe. The British critic Henry Chorley, for instance, provides

²³*Mémoires*, 276.

²⁴*Traité*, 300.

²⁵*Ibid.* Berlioz encourages composers "not to neglect placing metronome indications in their works."

²⁶The evidence for Berlioz's use of relatively fast and steady tempos comes from at least three sources: hundreds of reviews of his conducting and reports from contemporary musicians; his evaluation of Wagner and vice-versa when they met in London; and Berlioz's opinion that even Chopin used too much rubato.

²⁷*Musical World* (May 15, 1852), 307, and (same review) *Times* (May 13, 1852). Concerning Berlioz's conducting of Beethoven's Ninth Symphony in London, Davison writes, "The scherzo was equally well timed, and ... for the first time in our remembrance, played as fast as it should be...The enormous rapidity with which the concluding movements were taken did not once endanger the steadiness and precision of the execution." See also *Spectator* (May 15, 1852).

²⁸*Morning Chronicle* (London, March 25, 1852).

²⁹*Morning Chronicle* (June 10, 1852), and *Sunday Times* (London, June 13, 1852).

evidence that the performance practice of the 1850's was not that far from our own.

The pedantic taste of the day, which is to discourage individuality in the executant—tying him down to a close and *submissive self-effacement* in favour of his author—has a tendency to foster the disproportionate cultivation of certain stereotyped qualities . . ."(italics mine)³⁰

Wagner as Conductor

Wagner did not at all adhere to the temperate approach of Mendelssohn and Berlioz. Transmitting to conducting what Liszt had to the piano, he introduced a new style of performing which many reacted to as "romantic excess." The emphasis in Wagner's thought is that performance is a creative and not just a recreative act. He details this position in a letter to Marie Wittgenstein about Liszt:

Whoever has had the opportunity of hearing Liszt play Beethoven (for example) in a small, intimate gathering must have been struck by the fact that this was no mere matter of recreation, but of [original] creation. The dividing line between these two processes is much harder to define than most people would think. But I am convinced that to interpret (recreate) Beethoven properly, one must be able to create anew with him.³¹

But despite over a century of misinterpretation, Wagner was not granting a free license to alter musical texts as conductors like Costa and Jullien did. Like Mendelssohn and Berlioz, Wagner wanted a performer who would not dare to change the score, but unlike them, he wanted to open up a new and specific place for a different skill called interpretation.³²

³⁰*Athenæum* (London, May 1, 1852). Chorley also raved against "this false notion of classicality," in *Modern German Music* (London, 1854; reprint New York: DaCapo Press, 1973), vol. 2, 367, 375-77, and argued that this new edict "in command of an utter and servile plainness" received contradiction from the music of Mozart itself.

³¹Letter to M[arie] W[ittgenstein], 1857. Richard Wagner, *Sämtliche Schriften*, vol. 5, 185, trans. Tom Grey in *Richard Wagner and the Aesthetics of Musical Form in the mid-19th Century: 1840-1860*, "Appendix 2" (Ph. D. dissertation, Univ. of California, Berkeley, 1988).

³²Criticism only reluctantly began to evaluate "interpretation" after the middle of the century. Almost all of the early criticism deals with the musical work and not with the performance of that work.

Tempo became "the touchstone of the quality of a performance."³³ But contrary to Berlioz, recognition of this true tempo for Wagner is based upon a stylistic understanding and a certain intuitive feel for the essence of the melody, which Wagner called *melos*. Wagner wrote that "only a correct understanding of the *melos* sets the right tempo; the two are indivisible."³⁴ The key to Wagner's interrelationship between tempo and *melos* is the idea that instrumental music is inherently dramatic and therefore involves not only the same kind of "singing" but the same kind of expression. The key to *melos* is to perceive melody as expressive song.

Haydn and Mozart, in Wagner's opinion, used only the general Italian tempo indication, because that was all that was really necessary. If you understand the spirit of the piece you will instinctively pick the correct tempo. Wagner is explicit that this correct tempo is also the historically accurate one.³⁵ Wagner asserts that if we understand the spirit of the work, our performance, at least the tempo, will take care of itself.

Bach hardly ever gave any tempo indication at all, and in a purely musical sense this is the ideal course. It is as though he were asking "how else can one who does not understand these figures and feel their character and expression be helped by an Italian tempo indication?"³⁶

Wagner complains that modern conductors (especially Mendelssohn) are always rushing.³⁷ Most critics report that Wagner's tempos were indeed slower, but many also report that his fast tempos were often faster than the norm. His theory corroborates why this might have been the case.

Wagner divides music into two categories:

³³Wagner, *Über das Dirigieren* (Leipzig, 1869). *Gesammelte Schriften*, vol. 17, 177.

³⁴Wagner, *Dirigieren*, 167, trans. Robert L Jacobs, "On Conducting" in *Three Wagner Essays* (London: Ernst Eulenburg, 1979), 57.

³⁵Wagner, *Dirigieren*, 167 and 182. *On Conducting*, J 57, 68, and footnote 46.

³⁶Wagner, *Dirigieren*, 167. Wagner intuitively distrusted the metronome both because tempo is more closely tied to *melos* and expression than to speed and because of his quest for modification, of which the metronome is incapable.

³⁷"Dragging, on the other hand, is definitely not the feature that stamps the elegant conductors of recent times: their fatal tendency is to hurry," Wagner, *Dirigieren*, 168 (Jacobs, 58).

The decisive factor [in tempo] is whether sustained tone (song) or rhythmic motion (figuration) should predominate.

Here adagio stands to allegro as sustained tone does to figured motion. The time signature Adagio makes sustained tone the lawgiver; rhythm is dissolved in the self-sufficient flow of pure tone. In a certain subtle sense, one could say of an adagio [a true pure song] that it can never be taken slowly enough.³⁸

Wagner stresses that the character changes through the course of a movement and that the tempo should respond to these changes. This leads to his fundamental principle of tempo modulation, which Wagner called "the very life of music," and which became the new space which Wagner opened for the creativity of the performer. Wagner raises tempo modulation to a central concern, granting the performer creative jurisdiction over this key element of music. Although the performer may be introducing elements not specifically in the score, his guide is the unalterable spirit of the passage.

Wagner suggests that this "continuous modification" of the tempo be "imperceptible."³⁹ Apparently the critics didn't find these changes so imperceptible and Wagner was ravaged for both his extreme tempos and his extreme modifications. Henry Smart (critic for the *Sunday Times* of London) says this of Wagner's conducting:

Firstly, he takes all quick movements faster than anybody else; secondly he takes all slow movements slower than anybody else; thirdly he prefaces the entry of an important point, or the return of a theme—especially in a slow movement—by an exaggerated *ritardando*; and fourthly, he reduces the speed of an allegro—say in an overture or the first movement—fully one third on the entrance of its cantabile phrases.⁴⁰

Hanslick wrote of an 1872 performance of the *Eroica*,

The whole performance was extremely interesting, full of stimulating devices and effects; at the same time, hardly anyone will doubt that the

³⁸Wagner, *Dirigieren*, 177 (Jacobs, 64).

³⁹Wagner, *Dirigieren*, 181 and 191.

⁴⁰*Sunday Times* (June 17, 1855).

origin of these "modifications" is traceable rather to Wagner than to Beethoven.⁴¹

It was Wagner, then, who first laid out the expressive possibilities for the *interpretation* of a score as opposed to the 18th century musicians *use* of a score. It is he who first advocated that the composer's intentions and the spirit of the work should be preserved. Although Hanslick disputes this, as I would, Wagner claims to be restoring Beethoven's own performance. He writes that a conservatory should be just that, "an institution in which the traditions of performance established by the masters themselves are conserved."⁴²

While Mendelssohn was oblivious to the original external sound of the work, he demonstrated a loyalty to both the score and the internal spirit of the work, which resulted in a performance style that attempted to be transparent by not adding external dynamic or tempo changes. Berlioz was even more specific and in addition to tempo, dynamics, and form he also considered timbre and orchestration to be essential to the integrity of the work. He called for a recreative performer, who would merely illuminate the composer's masterpiece. Wagner was in the forefront of a new attitude, whereby the performer could create, and at the same time maintain that he was returning to both the original spirit of the work and the original performance practice of the composer. Wagner, in effect, turned Mendelssohn's and Berlioz's *recreative* executant into the modern *creative* interpreter.

⁴¹Eduard Hanslick, *Hanslick's Music Criticism*, trans. and ed. Henry Pleasants (New York: Dover Publications, 1988), 106.

⁴²Wagner, *Dirigieren*, 162 (Jacobs, 54).