Chapter Three

About Conducting

Über das Dirigieren—About Conducting—was first published in nine install-
ments in the Neue Zeitschrift für Musik between late November 1869 and mid-
January 1870, then in book form in spring 1870 by Kahnt of Leipzig. Wagner
included it in the eighth volume of his collected writings, published by Fritzsch
of Leipzig in 1873. For a detailed account of its origins, publication, and impact,
see “Über das Dirigieren—Early Impact” in my essay below.

Flies’ noses and midges’ snouts,
And all of your relations,
Frogs in the bushes and crickets in the grass,
You shall be my musicians!\(^1\)

In what follows here, I shall offer up my experiences and observations in a
field of musical activity whose practice has hitherto been a matter of mere
routine, and in which a lack of knowledge has made critical appraisal impos-
sible. My assessment of things is not addressed to conductors themselves, but
to musicians and singers, for they alone can sense properly whether they are
being conducted either well or badly. To be sure, they can only judge this if
they have at some point actually experienced good conducting, and this is
something that happens extremely rarely. I do not intend to construct any

\(^{1}\) This is an amended quotation from the Walpurgisnacht scene in Goethe’s Faust
I. The last line in the original runs: “They are the musicians!” Wagner’s cryptic
motto is presumably intended to mock his opponents, though its use is some-
what ironic, given that he later complains of others appropriating Goethe for
their own, unjustified reasons. See p. 85 below.
system here, but shall instead offer a series of observations, and reserve the right to expand on them later.

How one’s works are performed before the public is indubitably a matter of concern to a composer. An audience can only get a correct impression of a work if it is performed well, whereas a bad performance will give an incorrect impression, perhaps even leaving it unrecognizable. If the reader can heed and understand my explanations of the different elements of performance given below, he will be in a position to realize the true state of most opera and concert performances in Germany today.

I shall reveal here how the weaknesses of German orchestras, both in their organization and in their actual performances, are primarily a result of the negative characteristics of their conductors, capellmeisters, and music directors etc. The managers of our artistic institutions appoint their conductors in a manner that demonstrates a degree of ignorance and carelessness that is directly proportional to the increasing difficulties faced by the orchestras themselves. Back when a score by Mozart constituted the highest demands made on an orchestra, the man in charge was typically a true German capellmeister: always a man of weighty reputation (at least at his place of work), secure and strict, though despotic and impolite. The last man of this type

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2 Regarding Wagner’s use of the word “system,” see the section “Über das Dirigieren—Structure, Context, and Meta-Text” in the critical essay below.

3 Wagner implies here that he might continue the topic of his essay at a later date, though he did not (with the exception of his essay on conducting Beethoven’s Ninth, published in 1873 and also given in translation in this volume). But this sentence already underlines the open-ended, essentially unstructured nature of this essay, as discussed in greater detail in the same section of the critical essay below.

4 “Composer” here presumably means Wagner, who was worried about his works being inadequately performed. He even spoke of this frustration at length when he first met Friedrich Nietzsche, on November 8, 1868, in Leipzig, and made an exception only for Hans von Bülow’s performances in Munich. Nietzsche wrote the next day, November 9, 1868, to his friend Erwin Rohde in Hamburg that Wagner “utters terrible curses about all the performances of his operas, with the exception of the famous [performances] in Munich.” See Nietzsche (2009–): www.nietzschesource.org/#eKGWB/BVN-1868,599.
whom I knew was Friedrich Schneider\(^5\) in Dessau; Guhr\(^6\) in Frankfurt was also one of them. These men, and others like them, were what one might call bewigged,\(^7\) hoary relics in their attitude to new music. I myself experienced the extent of their ability some eight years ago in a performance of my Lohengrin in Karlsruhe, under old capellmeister Strauss.\(^8\) This most worthy man clearly approached my score with timidity and a sense of alienation; but he also conveyed his concerns to his orchestra, which could not have performed my score more precisely or with greater vigor. One saw how all obeyed him: this was a man who brooked no nonsense and had his people fully in his grasp. Strangely, this old gentleman was also the only well-known conductor I came across who possessed true fire. His tempi did not drag and were often too fast, but his performances were always gritty and well executed. I got a similarly positive impression of H. Esser in Vienna,\(^9\) whose performances were of the same quality.

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5 Friedrich Schneider (1786–1853), a German composer, pianist, conductor, and teacher; organist at the Thomaskirche and music director at the city theater in Leipzig during Wagner’s youth. From 1822 to his death he was capellmeister in Dessau. His oratorio Das Weltgericht (1819) became popular all over Europe. His pupils included both Eduard Bernsdorf, whose relationship with Wagner was one of mutual dislike (see p. 70 below), and Theodor Uhlig, Wagner’s confidant in Dresden.

6 Carl Wilhelm Ferdinand Guhr (1787–1848), a German multi-instrumentalist, composer, and conductor; music director of the theater in Kassel from 1814 to 1821, then in Frankfurt am Main until his death. See Gollmick (1848).

7 Wagner writes “Zöpfe” (the plural of “Zopf”), which today generally means pigtails or braids; Ashton Ellis uses the former term in his translation of this essay (Wagner trans. Ellis (1895): 106), as had Dwight before him (Wagner trans. Dwight (1870): 257); Dannreuther paraphrases, using the phrase “old-fashioned” instead. Wagner uses “Zopf” (generally associated with Prussian military fashion in the 18th century) to signify the philistine, fuddy-duddy customs of the ancien régime, much as Berlioz mockingly used the word “perruques” (wigs/the bewigged); see Berlioz ed. Kolb (2015): 114.

8 Joseph Strauss (1793–1866), court capellmeister in Karlsruhe from 1824 to 1863. Wagner criticizes Strauss—albeit based on hearsay—in a letter to Eduard Devrient of April 30, 1856 from Zurich, specifically mentioning a performance that’s planned of Lohengrin (see SB 8: 49–50). Further criticism of Strauss ensues in Wagner’s subsequent correspondence with Devrient over the years.

9 Heinrich Esser (1818–72), capellmeister at the Vienna Court Opera from 1847 to 1869, who had impressed Wagner with his preparations for the
In cases where this old type of conductor was less talented than the two just mentioned, they ultimately and inevitably proved inadequate to the task of training an orchestra after the emergence of the more complicated, newer types of orchestral music. This was primarily because they had an ingrained habit of organizing their orchestral personnel only according to what they needed for the tasks before them. I know of no example anywhere in Germany where an orchestra has been fundamentally reorganized to make it fit for the demands of more modern orchestration. In the big orchestras, musicians are still promoted to leading positions according to the laws of seniority. Consequently, they only ever arrive at the front desks when their powers are waning. The younger, more industrious musicians have to take on subordinate positions, which is highly detrimental to the music, especially in the wind section. More recently, wise efforts have been made in this regard, which together with a modest degree of self-recognition on the part of the musicians themselves have led to constant improvements to this sorry state of affairs. However, another trend has resulted in a deterioration of the string section, namely a complete lack of attention both to the second violins, and to the violas in particular. The viola is overwhelmingly played by decrepit violinists, or even by the weaker wind players if these have ever played a little violin. At best, efforts are made to put a really good violist just on the first desk so that he can cope with the occasional solo passages. But I have also experienced how the leader of the violins has on occasion been drafted in to help out the violas in such cases. I was once told that only one out of the eight violists in a certain major orchestra\textsuperscript{10} was able to play the difficult passages that often occur in my newer scores. This old practice of assigning lesser players to these parts was excusable in terms of human charity. It was also made possible by the way composers scored their music in earlier times, when the viola was mostly employed to fill out the accompaniment. It can even be justified to a certain degree in our own times by the unworthy orchestration employed by those Italian opera composers whose works remain such a popular mainstay of the German operatic repertoire. These are the favorite operas of the major theater intendants, who are in turn merely mimicking the laudable tastes of the aristocratic courts they serve. When it comes to the works that those gentlemen dislike, it should not surprise us that the demands posed can only be met if their capellmeister is a man of

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\textsuperscript{10} Voss (2015): 4 remarks that Wagner’s autograph of this essay specifically names the Munich Court Orchestra here; he later removed this direct reference.
weight, possessed of a serious reputation, and properly aware of the needs of today’s orchestra. Most of our older capellmeisters did not possess any such awareness. Nor did they realize the necessity of increasing the number of string instruments in our orchestras to counterbalance the larger number and increased use of the wind instruments. They might take emergency measures if this mismatch in forces became too obvious, but this never sufficed to bring the famous German orchestras onto the same level as those of France. When it comes to the number and ability of the violinists, and especially of the cellos, the German orchestras still lag very much behind in comparison.

Those capellmeisters of the old school might have failed to move with the times, but it ought to be the first, proper task of the conductors of our own style and time to acknowledge that things have changed and to act accordingly. Yet our intendants have made sure that these newer conductors cannot pose a threat to them, and have prevented them from inheriting the powerful authority of the industrious, bewigged capellmeisters of earlier times.

It is both important and instructive to recognize how this newer generation has achieved its current status, because it now represents the whole German music scene. Since we owe the maintenance of our orchestras to the court theaters both big and small—indeed, to our theaters in general—we must acknowledge that it is our theater directors who have been responsible for appointing those musicians who have had to represent the dignity and spirit of German music (and who have then remained in their posts for up to half a century at a time). Most of the musicians thus promoted must surely know how they arrived at their elevated position, because it is not immediately obvious what achievements of theirs would merit it. These typical German musicians have attained these “good positions” (which are regarded thus only by their patrons) mostly by the laws of inertia, ascending one step at a time. I believe that the great Berlin Court Orchestra has acquired most of its conductors in this manner. On occasion, some “great man” or other might manage to jump a few rungs at a time, thanks to the protection of a lady-in-waiting of some princess or other. These men are devoid of authority, and we cannot begin to measure the negative impact that they have had on the maintenance and training of our greatest orchestras and opera houses. Being completely without merit, they have been able to remain in their

11 From 1820 to 1869, when Wagner wrote his essay, the main conductors of the Berlin Court Orchestra were, in chronological order: Gaspare Spontini, Giacomo Meyerbeer, Felix Mendelssohn, Otto Nicolai, Heinrich Dorn, and Wilhelm Taubert.
positions only by subservience to a boss who is himself ignorant, but usually assumes that he knows everything. At the same time, they have ingratiatingly endeared themselves to the sluggishly demands of their musicians, who are subservient to them in turn. By abandoning any notion of artistic discipline (which was in any case beyond their ability), and through acquiescence and obedience toward every senseless demand from above, these “masters” have even managed to attain general popularity. Every difficulty met in rehearsing a work has been overcome by unctuously referring to the “longstanding fame of the Court Orchestra of N.N.” and by giving a knowing smile on all sides. Was no one able to realize that the standards of these renowned institutions were sinking lower and lower every year? Where were the real masters who might have been in a position to judge this? Certainly none of the critics were capable of noticing it, for they only bark when their mouths aren’t muzzled, and everyone knew the importance of muzzling them.

In more recent times, these conducting posts have been filled by those with a special calling. According to the needs and mood of the director in charge, he will appoint some industrious veteran to come and inject a certain “active energy” to relieve the sluggishness of the typical capellmeister. These are conductors who can put on an opera in fourteen days, who know how to make heavy cuts in a work, and can compose new endings for the works of others to make them more effective for their lady singers. Such skills are found in one of the sprightliest conductors of the Dresden Court Orchestra.¹²

Sometimes there is a real call for “musical greats” to come and help out. The theaters have no such conductors, but the singing academies and concert organizations can apparently churn them out every two to three years, judging by the praise they get in the cultural pages of our great political newspapers. These are the “music bankers” of our time, such as have emerged from Mendelssohn’s school,¹³ or who have been recommended to the world as having been his protégés. They are a very different kind of person from

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¹² Presumably Julius Rietz (1812–77), German conductor, composer, and teacher, a friend of Mendelssohn (he was his successor as music director in Düsseldorf), a sometime teacher at the Leipzig Conservatory, and in 1860–77 court capellmeister in Dresden as successor to Carl Reissiger. Ashton Ellis was the first to suggest that Wagner here referred to Rietz (Wagner trans. Ellis (1895): 295). For further criticism of Rietz on Wagner’s part—again without naming him—see p. 102 below.

¹³ This is presumably a sarcastic reference to Mendelssohn’s father, who was a banker; see “Of ‘Elegance’ and Anti-Semitism” in my essay below.
the inept progeny of our old bewigged capellmeisters. They are musicians who haven’t grown up in the orchestra or in the theater, but have received a respectable education in the newly founded conservatories, composing oratorios and psalms and attending the rehearsals of subscription concerts. They have also been given tuition in conducting, and have been educated elegantly such as had never before been the case among musicians. There would be no more hint of uncouthness; the anxious modesty and lack of self-confidence among our poor, native-born capellmeisters was now replaced by good manners, which was also an expression of their somewhat bashful attitude towards our old-fashioned, German, societal structures. I think that these people have in some ways had a good influence on our orchestras. A lot of roughness and doltishness has now disappeared, and since their arrival many details have been better observed and made audible thanks to their elegant art of performance. They were already much more accustomed to the newer type of orchestra, because in many respects they owed to their master, Mendelssohn, a particularly delicate and refined training along those very same paths upon which Carl Maria von Weber’s brilliant genius had first embarked.

For the moment, however, these gentlemen lacked one thing that was necessary if they were going to help reorganize our orchestras and the institutions associated with them: energy, of a kind that can only emerge from the self-confidence possessed by those with truly innate strength. Regrettably, everything about them—their reputation, talent, education, and indeed their faith, love, and hope—was artificial. The difficulties that arose from

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14 Wagner’s obvious envy of those who have received a structured music training in an academic institution (such as the Leipzig Conservatory, founded by Mendelssohn in 1843) is discussed in the same section of my essay below. Jens Malte Fischer has noted how making disparaging references to Mendelssohn’s psalm settings and oratorios was a general feature of anti-Semitic music criticism in Germany, even before the publication of Wagner’s own anti-Semitic tract of 1850. See Fischer (2015): 22.

15 See my essay below regarding Wagner’s use of the word “elegant.”

16 In the first-ever French version of this essay, Wagner’s translator Guy de Charnacé adds the footnote: “We do not know whether Wagner is mocking or expressing approval, for there is so much confusion here in both style and spirit.” See Charnacé (1874): 276.

17 Supposed “artificiality” in art is one of Wagner’s favorite anti-Semitic tropes (as found, for example, on the very first page of his Jewishness in Music; see SSD 5: 66–85, here 66). It is coupled here with a reference to the three “Christian”
the artificiality of their position was one reason why they were unable to pay any attention to more general issues, such as bringing together what belonged together, doing what was logical, or renewing what ought to have been renewed. But none of this really concerned them anyway, and rightly so. They had moved up into the positions formerly held by the old-school, heavy-duty German masters, but only because the latter group had stooped too low and had become incapable of recognizing the needs of our own time and of our current style of music. It seems that these newer gentlemen regard their current positions as merely transitional in nature: they cannot properly come to terms with the German artistic ideals that are the only goal of everything noble, because those ideals are foreign to them in the deepest recesses of their nature. So when they are confronted with the most difficult demands of modern music, they too resort only to superficial remedies. Meyerbeer, for example, was very tactful. When he needed a good flautist to play a particular passage well for him in Paris, he paid for one out of his own pocket. Since Meyerbeer understood what it takes to play something properly, and was also rich and independent, he could have been extraordinarily useful to the Berlin orchestra when the king of Prussia appointed him as its general music director. Mendelssohn had also been appointed to the orchestra at the same time, and he truly did not lack the most unusual knowledge and talents. To be sure, they were both faced with the same obstacles that have hitherto hindered everything good in Berlin, but they were the very men who might have swept aside those obstacles, being so richly endowed with every means to do so; no one after them would ever have the same opportunity again. Why did their strength desert them? It seems because they had none. They let things remain as they were. As the “famous” Berlin orchestra now stands before us, even the last traces of Spontini’s former precision have faded. And that was virtues of faith, hope, and love, the mention of which is something of a non sequitur, being of no relevance to his argument. It seems that this passage is overall yet another of Wagner’s snide digs at Mendelssohn (the three virtues in question are listed in St. Paul’s first letter to the Corinthians, 13:13; since Mendelssohn wrote an oratorio about St. Paul, this might also explain the reference to “oratorios” in Wagner’s text). See, too, the insistence later in this paragraph on how “German artistic ideals” are “foreign” to Mendelssohn’s protégés. Heinz-Klaus Metzger sums up Wagner’s criticism of Mendelssohn’s Beethoven interpretations with characteristic bluntness: “The ‘affect’ that led Wagner to his ceremoniously incorrect tempo specifications in Beethoven’s symphonies was nothing other than murderous and anti-Semitic.” See Metzger (1985): 69.
Meyerbeer and Mendelssohn! So what could their dainty imitators possibly achieve elsewhere?

When we ponder the characteristics of the capellmeisters and music directors of the older generation and the newest of their species, it becomes evident that we cannot expect much of any of them when it comes to reforming our orchestras. In fact, any progress made in this up to now has come about on the initiative of the musicians themselves. This is very understandable, given the improved technical, virtuoso training they have enjoyed. Virtuosos on different instruments have indisputably brought much good to our orchestras, and their success would have been complete if their conductors had been up to the task too. Naturally, these virtuosos swiftly outgrew them all: the hoary remnants among our old capellmeisters, those who had climbed the greasy pole and were ever fearful of losing their authority, and those piano-teachers-turned-music-directors who owed their positions to the grace and favor of chambermaids. In our orchestras, these virtuosos have now assumed the role occupied by prima donnas in the theater. The elegant capellmeisters of the newest type have also aligned themselves with them, which in some respects has not been detrimental. This alignment could even have resulted in a successful collaborative venture, if those gentlemen had understood the heart and soul of true German music-making.

But for the moment, we must emphasize that these conductors owed their position to the theater—just as the orchestras too owed their very existence to it. And since most of their pursuits and achievements were in opera, their main task was to understand this same genre. This in turn meant that they had to learn something new in their music-making. Just as astronomy requires the application of mathematics, so they had to learn how to apply music to the dramatic arts. If they had properly understood dramatic singing and dramatic expression, this could also have enlightened them as to how an orchestra should play the newer German instrumental works. I received the best guidance with regard to the tempo and the performance of Beethoven’s music from the soulful, carefully accentuated singing of the great Schröder-Devrient,¹⁸ it has been impossible for me since then to let the inspiring oboe cadenza in the first movement of the C minor Symphony

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¹⁸ Wilhelmine Schröder-Devrient (1804–60), a German singer who was long Wagner’s ideal dramatic soprano. She created the roles of Senta in his Holländer and Venus in Tannhäuser. Sister-in-law to the actor and director Eduard Devrient.
be so embarrassingly blown in that same manner in which I have otherwise always heard it. Indeed, it was only when I realized the right way to perform this passage that I also understood, in retrospect, the significance and manner of expression that should be given to the first violins’ fermata in their earlier, corresponding passage:

Example 3.2. Beethoven, Symphony no. 5, 1st movement, m. 21

The touching, poignant impression that these two seemingly unremarkable passages made on me provided me with a fresh understanding of the whole

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19 As explained in the section “Über das Dirigieren—Structure, Context, and Meta-Text” below, this passage overlaps with one in Mein Leben—written roughly concurrently—in which Wagner specifically names Philipp Joseph Fries (1815–90), the first oboist in the semi-professional Zurich orchestra, as having played this “cadenza” to his full satisfaction. Fries was a German immigrant who had settled in Zurich in 1844. Wagner also writes something similar in a letter to Theodor Uhlig, undated but clearly from late February 1852, though he here refers not to Beethoven’s Fifth Symphony, which he had conducted just days before on February 17, 1852, but to the same composer’s Egmont music, which he had conducted complete a month earlier, on January 20, 1852 (see Walton (2007): 178): “I rehearsed the Egmont entr’acte with the oboist in my room as if with a female singer: the man was overjoyed at how he finally accomplished it” (SB 4: 297–302, here 298). Wagner presumably means the oboe cadenza at the start of the third entr’acte, no. 5 in the Egmont music. Perhaps Wagner confused the works in his autobiography, or perhaps (as seems more likely) he actually rehearsed several such oboe solo passages with Fries in private, including those of the Fifth Symphony and the Egmont entr’acte. Fries’s original oboe, as it happens, is held today by the Music Division of the Zentralbibliothek Zürich: see Walton (2002).
movement. — This is only by way of an aside. I merely wish to intimate that if a conductor could properly understand his function in the theater, this could complement the higher musical training he has received in the interpretive arts. After all, it is to the theater that he in fact owes his office and his rank. And yet he regards opera as an irksome day job, groaning as he does his tasks (though the miserable state of opera in the German theaters sadly makes this understandable). Instead, he sees his place of glory in the concert hall, which is where he started, and to which venue he felt called. As I have said above, as soon as a theater intendant wants to appoint a musician with a good reputation as a capellmeister, then he looks for him outside the theater.

In order to be able to assess what such a former concert-and-choral conductor might achieve in the theater, we first have to pay him a visit where he really feels at home, and where his reputation as a “solid” German musician is founded. We have to observe him at work in the concert hall.

From my earliest youth, I felt a pronounced sense of dissatisfaction whenever I heard our classical instrumental music performed in orchestral concerts. And this impression has only been confirmed again in more recent times, whenever I have heard such a performance. Whatever seemed so passionately spirited in expression when I read the score or played it at the piano was barely recognizable to me in the ephemeral, unappreciated way it usually passed over the listeners. I was astonished at the dullness of Mozart’s cantilenas, which had beforehand seemed to me so vital and full of emotion. The reasons for this only became clear to me later, and I have discussed them in greater depth in my Report on a German Music School to be founded in Munich, which is why I request those who seriously wish to follow my arguments to read the relevant passages there. To be sure, these reasons lie first

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20 This is the first paragraph in the second installment of Wagner’s essay as published on December 3, 1869 in the Neue Zeitschrift für Musik 65/49.

21 Bericht an Seine Majestät den König Ludwig II. von Bayern über eine in München zu errichtende deutsche Musikschule. Munich: Christian Kaiser, 1865, also SSD 8: 125–76. Wagner’s remarks on Mozart are as follows (see SSD 8: 145–46): “In order to stay with the simplest examples, namely Mozart’s instrumental works (which are really by no means that master’s main works—those are his operas), we can observe two things here: The significant necessity of performing them cantabile, and the sparse markings provided to this end in the extant scores. … When compared with Haydn, almost the only major difference in Mozart’s
and foremost in the complete absence of any truly German music conservatory in the strictest sense of the word: a place where the precise tradition of performing our classical music authentically, after the manner of the masters themselves, would be kept constantly, vibrantly alive and preserved. But this in turn would naturally presuppose that those masters had themselves managed to have their works performed in accordance with their original intentions. Regrettably, the German cultural world failed to provide them with any such opportunity. As a result, when we try to determine the spirit of a classical work of music today, we are dependent on the individual whims of our conductors with regard to its tempo and interpretation.

When I attended the famous concerts in the Leipzig Gewandhaus in my youth, those works were not conducted at all. Instead, they were simply played

_symphonies is the extraordinarily soulful, songlike character of his instrumental themes. Herein lies expressed what made Mozart so great and inventive in this branch of music. If there had existed in Germany an institution as authoritative as the Paris Conservatoire in France, if Mozart had performed his works there, and if he had been able to supervise the spirit in which they were performed, then a valid tradition for their performance might have come down to us, after the fashion of the Paris Conservatoire … In order to describe this more precisely with a specific example, one should play, for example, the first eight bars of the second movement of the famous E-flat major Symphony [K. 543] by Mozart, doing so in the glib manner that their expression marks seem to require, and then comparing this with how a sensitive musician would spontaneously play this wonderful theme. How would we experience Mozart if we only ever heard him performed in a manner so devoid of color and life? It would be a soulless, black-on-white music, nothing else.” The opening of the slow movement of Mozart’s K. 543 seems to have occupied Wagner time and again. On March 13, 1868, he wrote to Hans von Bülow from Tribschen about it, calling it (for what reason we know not) the “swan andante”: “I recall only that the main matter was to perform the principal theme correctly, and that it’s a matter of singing the motifs, as almost always with Mozart. Here, the difficulty is to find an overall tempo that doesn’t drag, while still allowing the first measure its due rights. Because if it’s simply brushed off at an unassuming tempo, just as it is, without any nuances (as every orchestra plays it), then all its magic is lost.” Wagner recommended playing the first measure _rallentando_, with _a crescendo_ to the last eighth-note in the measure, then with a _diminuendo_ to the second measure, which should be a _subito piano_. See SB 20: 81–82, here 82. Also regarding this movement, see fn 38 and 95 in this chapter, and p. 159 in the critical essay.
through under the auspices of Matthäi\textsuperscript{22} the concert master, as if they were overtures or entr’actes in the spoken theater. So there was no hint of any troubling individuality on the part of a conductor. The principal works of our classical instrumental repertoire in themselves offer no great technical difficulties, and were regularly played every winter. The orchestra knew these works very well, so they proceeded smoothly and precisely. You could see how pleased the musicians were about playing their favorite works again each year.

It was only with \textit{Beethoven’s Ninth Symphony} that this practice just wasn’t enough, though as a matter of honor they had to perform this work every year, too. — I copied out the score of this symphony myself, and made a piano solo arrangement of it. But when I heard this work in the Gewandhaus, I was astonished that its performance made only the most confused impression on me.\textsuperscript{23} In fact, I felt so completely disheartened by it that I began to doubt Beethoven utterly, and for a while turned away outright from studying him. As for Mozart’s instrumental works, it is highly instructive that I only found true delight in them when I later had the opportunity to conduct them myself, and so was able to obey my own feelings when interpreting his cantilenas. But I learnt the most fundamental lesson of all when I finally heard the so-called Conservatoire Orchestra in Paris in 1839\textsuperscript{24} play that same Ninth Symphony that I had come to doubt so much. Now it was as if scales fell from my eyes. I immediately understood the secret to performing it properly, for that orchestra had learnt to recognize Beethoven’s \textit{melody} in every measure—something that had clearly been completely missed by our dutiful Leipzig musicians—and the orchestra \textit{sang} this melody.

This was the secret. And they had by no means been taught it by a conductor of any especial brilliance. \textit{Habeneck}, to whom was due the great credit

\textsuperscript{22} Heinrich August Matthäi (1781–1835), concert master of the Leipzig Gewandhaus Orchestra, who was responsible for directing instrumental music from the first desk in its concerts; vocal works were directed by Christian August Pohlenz (see chapter 2, fn. 12). Matthäi was succeeded by Mendelssohn, who was at the same time appointed to conduct the orchestra’s vocal concerts, thus becoming its first music director in a modern sense.

\textsuperscript{23} As Egon Voss notes (2015): 11–12, Wagner’s chronology is inverted here; he heard the Ninth Symphony in the Gewandhaus on April 14, 1830, and in his enthusiasm he afterwards copied out the score and made a piano solo arrangement of it.

\textsuperscript{24} Voss writes that Wagner probably only heard Habeneck conduct this symphony on March 8, 1840, not already in 1839. See Voss (2015): 12. On Habeneck’s possible changes to the dynamics, see fn. 9 in chapter 2, and fn. 10 in chapter 4.
for this performance, had rehearsed this symphony throughout a whole winter, and had found it incomprehensible and ineffective—though it is difficult to say whether any German conductor would have taken the trouble to feel even that much. But he then had his musicians study the symphony in a second and a third year, and refused to give up until every musician had grasped the new Beethovenian melos.\(^{25}\) And since these musicians had meanwhile acquired the right feeling for these melodies, they also played them properly. Habeneck was in fact another one of those old-school music directors: he was the master, and everyone obeyed him.

The beauty of this performance of the Ninth Symphony to this day remains quite impossible for me to describe. But in order to offer an intimation of it, I shall here consider one particular passage (though any other passage would also suffice) to demonstrate both the difficulty of performing Beethoven, and the German orchestras’ lack of success in doing so. I have never been able to get even the best orchestras to play the following passage from the first movement as utterly smoothly as I heard it from the musicians of the Paris Conservatoire Orchestra thirty years ago:\(^{26}\)

Example 3.3. Beethoven, Symphony no. 9, 1st movement, mm. 116–22

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\(^{25}\) For extensive information on Wagner’s use of the word “melos,” see the section “Melos and the Body” in the essay below. I follow previous translators in retaining Wagner’s chosen term throughout.

\(^{26}\) This same music example from Beethoven’s Ninth Symphony hereafter threads its way through the literature on conducting for over a hundred years. In both his editions of his booklet Über das Dirigieren, Josef Pembaur gives the first four bars of this quotation as an example of an ascending figure to be performed without crescendo. He does not, however, mention Wagner as a source: Pembaur (1892): 32; Pembaur (1907): 57. The same example is given in Rovaart (1928?): 131 and Schuller (1997): 96, with Wagner each time named as the source; Hermann Scherchen gives the parallel passage from the recapitulation in his Lehrbuch des Dirigierens (Scherchen (1929): 48).
It is this passage that often reminded me so clearly in later life what it takes to achieve a good orchestral performance. This is because it combines movement with a *legato sound* at the same time as encompassing the laws of *dynamics*. The Parisians demonstrated their mastery by being able to play this passage *exactly* as the score stipulates. Neither in Dresden nor in London—two cities where I later performed this symphony—was I able to get the strings to play the changes of bow and string so imperceptibly in this rising, repeated figure. Much less still was I able to suppress their involuntary accentuation as this passage rises, because ordinary musicians always tend to increase their volume as they ascend, just as they get softer when a passage descends. By the fourth measure of the above passage, we inevitably entered into a *crescendo*, meaning that the sustained G-flat in the fifth measure was instinctively and inevitably given a harsh accent that is highly detrimental to the unusual, tonal significance of this note. It is difficult to get those of a coarse nature to both recognize and reject the type of expression that is accorded this passage when it is played in this common-or-garden fashion, though it is contrary to the express instructions of the Master, which he has made clear enough to us. To be sure, this passage expresses dissatisfaction, disquiet, and desire; but the manner of it is something we only experience when we hear this passage played as the Master had himself intended. Up to now, I have only ever heard it played thus by those Parisian musicians back in 1839 [*recte*: 1840]. I recall the impression of dynamic monotony (if I may be forgiven this seemingly absurd expression for a phenomenon that is very difficult to describe!) in the incredibly, even eccentrically varied intervallic movement of the rising figure, with its climax on the long G-flat. This note was sung with infinite tenderness, and the G-natural [two measures later] sang just as tenderly in answer to it. All this opened up to me the incomparable mysteries of the spirit—a spirit that now spoke to me directly, openly, clearly, and intelligibly.

But let us leave this sublime revelation for now without further comment. When I consider my other practical experiences, I can only ask: by what means were those Parisian musicians able to solve this difficult task so unerringly? It became evident to them through the most conscientious diligence, such as is characteristic only of musicians who do not content themselves with mutual compliments, who do not fancy that they know everything by themselves, but who feel shy and anxious about what they initially do not understand. They therefore approach difficult things from a perspective where they feel comfortable, namely from the aspect of technique. To start with, the French musician essentially belongs to the Italian school, and he has been so admirably influenced by it that he can comprehend music...
only through song. To him, playing an instrument well means being able to sing well on it. And—as I already mentioned at the outset—that marvelous orchestra sang this symphony. In order to be able to “sing” it properly, however, the correct tempo also has to be found everywhere, and this was the second thing that impressed me on that occasion. To be sure, old Habeneck had no abstract, aesthetic inspiration for this. He was devoid of all “genius,” but he found the right tempo by applying persistent hard work that led his orchestra to grasp the melos of the symphony.

Only by properly recognizing the melos can one achieve the correct tempo: these two are indivisible; the one determines the other. I shall not shy away here from expressing my opinion on the majority of our performances of classical instrumental works, for I regard them as insufficient to an alarming degree. And I believe I can prove it by pointing out that our conductors are incapable of setting the correct tempo because they understand nothing of singing. I have never yet come across any German capellmeister or conductor who has truly been able to sing a melody (regardless of whether his voice be good or bad). Instead, music is for them a peculiarly abstract thing, something hovering halfway between grammar, arithmetic, and gymnastics. A student of this music might well be good enough to become a decent teacher at a conservatory or a musical gymnastics association; but we cannot see how he might be able to breathe life and soul into a musical performance.

In this regard, I shall now offer further information about my own experiences.

If one wished to sum up everything that a conductor needs in order to perform a composition correctly, it is that he always has to choose the right tempo, because setting the tempo enables us to recognize immediately whether or not he has understood the piece of music before him. When they have become more precisely acquainted with a composition, good musicians will find the right interpretation of it almost of their own accord, as long as they are given the right tempo. When a conductor has understood the tempo, then the right interpretation is inherent in it. But conversely, it is also always true that you can find the right tempo only when you interpret a work correctly.

27 This is the first paragraph in the third installment of Wagner’s essay, as published on December 10, 1869 in the Neue Zeitschrift für Musik 65/50.

28 Among the later tracts to emphasize this is Schroeder (1921): 33, whose second chapter begins: “A prime necessity when conducting a work of music is gauging the tempi correctly.”
In this, the instincts of the old masters like Haydn and Mozart were quite right when they offered only very general tempo markings. Their Andante was an intermediate step between an Allegro and an Adagio, and this simplest of categorizations encompassed everything that they considered necessary. [Johann] S[ebastian] Bach usually gives no tempo markings at all, which in a truly musical sense is actually the best thing to do. For he said to himself: If someone doesn’t understand my theme or my figurations and can’t sense their character and expression, then what use would an Italian tempo marking be to them? — And if I may speak from my very own experience: I gave eloquent tempo markings to my early operas, even providing them with metronome markings that were unerringly exact (or so I believed). Whenever I heard a performance at a ludicrous tempo (of my Tannhäuser, for example), those in charge defended themselves every time against my objections by saying that they had followed my metronome markings in the most conscientious way possible. I then realized that applying math to music is an uncertain business. So from then on, I both omitted all metronome indications and also denoted the main tempo only by means of very general markings. I devoted my care instead to the modifications of these tempi, because our conductors know next to nothing of them.29 But lately, I hear, my general manner of indicating the tempo has annoyed and confused our conductors, especially because my markings are given in German. These gentlemen are accustomed to the old Italian manner and so are driven to distraction trying to determine what might be meant, for example, by “mässig” [moderate]. I recently heard this complaint from the entourage of a capellmeister who had expanded my Rheingold in performance to a length of three hours (thus the report printed in the Allgemeine Zeitung in Augsburg), whereas it had taken just two and a half hours in rehearsal with a conductor working according to my instructions.30 I was once told similar reports about a

29 Wagner here takes a different stance from Berlioz, who in his Le chef d’orchestre recommends following a composer’s metronome markings, and complains that composers who omit these often give tempo markings that are insufficient in their stead. See Berlioz (1855): 300. It is possible that Wagner’s rejection of metronome markings here was an intentional, if implicit, rejection of Berlioz’s approach.

30 Wagner refers here to the world premiere of Das Rheingold in Munich on September 22, 1869, which took place without his permission. His acolyte Hans Richter had rehearsed the work (taking the two and a half hours to which Wagner refers here), but pulled out at Wagner’s insistence. The premiere was then conducted by Franz Wüllner (1832–1902), who had experience of the theater from his early years in Aachen, but who in the late 1860s was the
performance of my *Tannhäuser*. I had conducted its overture in Dresden in twelve minutes, but in the performance in question it took twenty. These bunglers are so incredibly timid about the *alla breve* meter that they always beat four quarter-notes to a measure, just to remind themselves that they are actually conducting, and that they are there for some purpose. God knows how many of these four-footed musicians have left their village church and erred into our opera houses.

Dragging, on the other hand, is not really characteristic of the truly elegant conductors of more recent times. Instead, they have a fatal attachment to rushing. There is a reason for this—and since it can help to explain almost all the newest musical trends that are so popular everywhere, I shall now go into greater detail about it.

*Robert Schumann* once complained to me in Dresden that Mendelssohn’s concerts in Leipzig had ruined all his pleasure in the Ninth Symphony on account of the tempo being too fast in the first movement. I myself only

conductor at the court church in Munich. He accordingly had to bear Wagner’s considerable wrath (the fact that Wüllner was a friend of Brahms probably did not endear him to Wagner either).

Voss here refers to the autograph of the essay to explain that Wagner is writing of a performance in Prague, presumably that of November 25, 1854: see Voss (2015): 17.

This mention of church conductors venturing into the opera house is probably another dig at Wüllner.

In his personal copy of this volume of Wagner’s writings, Arnold Schoenberg drew a single pencil line along the left-hand side of this paragraph, and underlined the second half of its first sentence (here split into two), also in pencil, from “truly” to “rushing” (held by the Arnold Schoenberg Center, Vienna, shelfmark W1v8, 276).

Wagner might be exaggerating here, as Hinrichsen (2016): 91 points out. Nevertheless, despite Wagner’s obviously polemical intent, it does seem—as Hinrichsen (1999): 277 has observed—that Wagner and his circle regarded fast tempi as characteristic of the Leipzig Gewandhaus orchestra. In a letter of February 12, 1865 to Wendelin Weissheimer (a former pupil of Liszt and an acquaintance of Wagner’s), Hans von Bülow added at the end, apparently in haste: written “at an oiled-up [geschmiert] Gewandhaus tempo.” See Weissheimer (1898): 337 (this letter is also given in facsimile between pp. 336 and 337). It is worth noting here, however, that when Wagner conducted Mendelssohn’s A major Symphony (the *Italian*) in London in 1855, one unnamed reviewer criticized him for displaying “contemptuous unconcern” by performing it too quickly, suggesting that Wagner’s motto here had been “Get
ever heard Mendelssohn perform a Beethoven symphony on one occasion, at a rehearsal in Berlin: it was of the Eighth Symphony (in F major). I noticed that he here and there honed in on a particular detail, almost as if on a whim, and would work at it obstinately so as to articulate it clearly in performance. The result was such excellence in playing this detail that I could not properly comprehend why he did not devote the same attention to other passages too. All the same, this incomparably cheerful symphony ran extraordinarily smoothly and entertainingly. Mendelssohn told me several times in person that the greatest damage was done by taking the tempo too slowly when conducting. That was why he always recommended taking things a little too quickly instead. A truly good performance is something rare at any time, he said, but you can hoodwink your listeners so that they don’t notice too much. The best way to do this is not to dawdle unduly, and to skim through everything quickly. Mendelssohn’s own students must have learned several tips about this, and in greater detail. It cannot have been a casual opinion expressed only to me, because I have since had ample opportunity to hear the consequences of his maxim. And I ultimately also learned the reasons behind it.

I had a vivid experience of those consequences with the orchestra of the Philharmonic Society in London. Mendelssohn had conducted that orchestra for a prolonged period, and they had thereafter doggedly kept to the Mendelssohnian tradition of performance. That tradition aligned so snugly with the habits and peculiarities of the society itself that it seemed quite plausible that it was in fact they who had imparted this style to Mendelssohn. My concerts ate up a tremendous amount of instrumental music, but they only allowed one rehearsal per performance, which meant I was often compelled to let the orchestra play according to its own traditions. In so doing, I was reminded vividly of Mendelssohn’s remarks to me. Everything flowed like

to the end of it as quick [sic] as possible.” See Anon.: “Philharmonic society,” The Musical World 33/16 (April 21, 1855), 251 (italics in the original).

35 In his review of this essay for the Neue Freie Presse after its publication in book form, Hanslick wrote of his disbelief that Mendelssohn would ever have expressed such an opinion. And if true, suggests Hanslick, then Mendelssohn probably said it in jest—perhaps even as a “malicious” means of putting an end to Wagner’s constant, didactic chattering; see Hanslick (1870).

36 By the time Wagner conducted the Philharmonic, eight years had elapsed since Mendelssohn had last worked with them, and over a decade since he had done so on a regular basis. Their “Mendelssohnian” tradition thus presumably existed more in Wagner’s imagination than in actual fact.

37 Wagner writes “verbrauchten,” literally to consume.
water out of a town fountain. There could be no thought of holding back, and every Allegro ended in an undeniable Presto. The effort needed to intervene in this was embarrassing enough, because only when the orchestra played at the correct, carefully modified tempo did the detrimental aspects of their performance emerge that had hitherto been hidden by the overall flow. For the orchestra only ever played mezzoforte. It never reached a real forte, nor ever any real piano. In the most important passages, I tried as much as possible to keep to the interpretation that seemed correct to me, including the appropriate tempo. My musicians were capable, did not object, and were sincerely happy about it. It clearly also pleased the audience. Only the critics were furious, and even managed to bully the men running the society into urging me to rush through the second movement of Mozart’s E-flat major Symphony [no. 39, K. 543] in the manner to which they had been accustomed, just as Mendelssohn had been wont to do it.\footnote{By “critics,” Wagner presumably means James Davison of The Times and Henry Chorley of The Athenaeum, who found his tempi in general erratic, and the Andante of this symphony far too slow. See the section “Wagner in Review” below. Mendelssohn had conducted the orchestra of the Philharmonic Society in this symphony on May 13, 1844. Since rehearsal time was meager back then too, and his program huge (it included his own Scottish Symphony, a piano concerto by Sterndale Bennett, a violin concerto by August Friedrich Pott, and assorted other pieces by Weber, Bellini, Meyerbeer etc.), the likelihood that Mendelssohn’s performance of Mozart’s Symphony in E-flat had been so notable as to imprint itself on the common mind of the orchestra in a manner still palpable eleven years later is absurd; Wagner is just being polemical again (see Eatock (2009): 84). Oddly, Wagner here draws on the same passage from his Report to His Majesty of 1865 to which he already referred his reader—see fn. 21 above—where he complained about those who play through this slow movement “glibly.” See also fn. 95 in this chapter and p. 159 below.}

This fatal maxim of haste was given precise verbal expression in a request made to me by a very jovial, elderly contrapuntist, Mr. Potter\footnote{Philip Cipriani Hambly Potter (1792–1871) was a noted British pianist and conductor who had studied with Thomas Attwood (Mozart’s former pupil). Potter had met Beethoven, performed with Mendelssohn, and was Principal of the Royal Academy of Music in London at the time of Wagner’s concerts.} (if I am not mistaken), whose symphony I had to conduct, and who sincerely asked me to take the Andante movement of it rather quickly, as he was very much afraid that it might bore people. I then proved to him that, however short it might be, his Andante would inevitably be boring if it were performed
glibly and devoid of expression. But if its truly pretty, naïve theme were played by the orchestra as I now sang it to him, then it could actually sound captivating. After all, I said, this was surely how he had intended it. Mr. Potter was noticeably touched, told me I was right, and apologized by saying that he was no longer accustomed to expect such a manner of orchestral performance. On the evening, after his *Andante*, he joyfully clasped my hands. —

I have been truly astonished at just how little our modern musicians can comprehend what I here describe as the correct interpretation and tempo of a work. Regrettably, I have had this same experience among the supposed luminaries of our music world today. For example, it was impossible for me to convince Mendelssohn of what I felt to be the right tempo for the *third movement* of Beethoven’s F major Symphony (no. 8), as opposed to the appallingly negligent tempo generally chosen. This is just one of many cases that I shall choose here in order to demonstrate a matter of terrible gravity.

We know how Haydn took the form of the *minuet* and turned it into a refreshing, transitional movement between the *Adagio* and the *Finale* of his last symphonies by noticeably accelerating its tempo in a manner contrary to the original character of the dance. He also obviously took the “Ländler” of his time to form the Trio of these movements. The designation “minuet” thus no longer applied to the tempo, but was retained as a title merely as an indication of its origins. This notwithstanding, I believe that even Haydn’s minuets are usually taken too quickly, and this is certainly the case in [the minuets in] Mozart’s symphonies. We can clearly recognize this if, for example, we play the minuet of his G minor Symphony [K. 550] or that of the C major Symphony [K. 551] in a more measured tempo. The latter movement is usually rushed through almost as if it were *Presto*. But if it is played as I suggest, then it acquires a very different, graceful, yet festive, hearty expression. At a faster tempo, the Trio’s pensive

Example 3.4. Mozart, Symphony no. 41, K. 551, 3rd movement, Trio, mm. 1–2

becomes a meaningless mumbling.⁴⁰

⁴⁰ In his recording of the *Jupiter*, Richard Strauss slows down the tempo for this dotted half-note chord each time, then resumes his normal tempo for the
But Beethoven, as elsewhere in his oeuvre, intended to write a real minuet for his F major Symphony [no. 8, op. 93]. He wanted it to complement the contrasting Allegretto scherzando movement that preceded it, and sandwiched these two movements between two larger-scale, main movements that are both Allegro.\(^{41}\) In order for there to be no doubt about his intentions for the tempo, he did not call this third movement a “menuetto,” but marked it “Tempo di menuetto.” The innovative character of these two middle movements has been almost completely overlooked. People have assumed that the Allegretto scherzando (the second movement) had to be the usual andante, while the Tempo di Menuetto (the third movement) similarly had to be the usual “scherzo.”\(^{42}\)

\(^{41}\) To be precise: Allegro vivace e con brio (1st movement) and Allegro vivace (4th movement).

\(^{42}\) In the list of metronome markings “determined by the composer himself” that were published in the *Allgemeine musikalische Zeitung* in Leipzig in 1817, the third movement of the Eighth Symphony is given as quarter-note = 126 (see Riehn (1985): 79); we also have Beethoven’s own metronome marking for another “tempo di menuetto,” namely that of the Septet, op. 20, which he gives as something similar, namely quarter-note = 120 (see Riehn (1985): 89). For a discussion of the problems surrounding Beethoven’s metronome markings, see Metzger and Riehn (1985). Wagner had clearly been performing this “Tempo di menuetto” for several years at his preferred slower tempo. James Davison of *The Times* wrote as follows about Wagner’s performance with the Philharmonic Society of June 11, 1855: “The only fault we could find was with the extreme slowness of the minuet—which, though ‘tempo di menuetto’ is indicated in the score, being in style entirely opposed to the stately old dance-minuet, should not be played with such a bag-wig [sic] gravity of measure.” See Davison: “Philharmonic concerts,” *The Times* (June 12, 1855). Wagner was not the only conductor of his day to insist on performing this movement at the tempo of a minuet, not a scherzo. In his discussion of Beethoven’s symphonies in *À travers chants* of 1862, Berlioz specifically states that this movement should be played at the tempo of a minuet by Haydn, not as a Beethovenian scherzo. See Berlioz (1862): 48. In his *Ratschläge für Aufführungen der Symphonien Beethovens*, Felix Weingartner (1906) mentions Wagner’s “justified polemic” against taking this movement too fast, adding that this is “so well known” that he doesn’t need to deal with it further. He warns, however, that there is now a tendency to play it too slowly, and recommends a tempo of roughly quarter-note = 108 (this is also the speed he takes it in his recording with the Vienna Philharmonic). In Richard Strauss’s annotated score of this symphony, he writes at the outset: “Tempo di Menuetto: see
But such an approach to these two movements was beneficial to neither of them. No one was able to perform them adequately when they were played in the customary andante/scherzo mold that we expect of a symphony's middle movements. As a result, our musicians came to regard this wonderful symphony overall as an incidental by-product of Beethoven's muse—a kind of one-off, lighter entertainment as recuperation from the exertions of the A major Symphony [no. 7, op. 92]. So the Allegretto scherzando is always slightly dragged, and then the Tempo di Menuetto is everywhere played with unwavering determination as if it were an invigorating Ländler. As a consequence, no one can really remember what they've just heard once it's over. Usually, people are simply relieved that the torture of the third movement's Trio is behind them. This is the most charming of all idylls, but when played at the quick tempo that is the norm, the triplet passages for the cello turn it into a true monstrosity. This accompanying figure is regarded as one of the most difficult

Rich. Wagner,” and to indicate the minuet tempo, he quotes the onstage minuet from the masked ball of Mozart’s Don Giovanni, m. 406 in Act I. Strauss changes the tempo marking printed in his Eulenburg score from a quarter-note = 126 to 92. No recording by Strauss has survived of this symphony. Klemperer’s recordings with the Berlin Staatskapelle of 1924 and 1926 both take this movement at about 112. Opinions seem to have differed no less wildly since then, as a perusal of the available recordings on YouTube and elsewhere can confirm. Furtwängler’s 88 with the Vienna Philharmonic after the Second World War was almost exactly contemporaneous with Toscanini’s 120 with the NBC Orchestra; then there is Karajan’s 92 in the 1960s, and, more recently, Norrington and Harnoncourt at about 118 and Thielemann at 108. In his booklet Über das Dirigieren, Josef Pembaur paraphrases Wagners’s argument about the middle movements of the Eighth Symphony; he does, however, mention his source (see Pembaur (1907): 68–69). We naturally do not have any recordings of Beethoven by Mahler, but his tempo marking for the second movement of his own Symphony no. 3 is instructive. It is not just marked “Tempo di Menuetto”—which surely refers back to Beethoven—but has the additions “Sehr mässig. Ja nicht eilen! Grazioso. Zart” (Very moderate. Do not hurry at all! Gracefully. Tender), which suggests a rather Wagnerian insistence on holding back the tempo of his minuet.

43 Wagner differentiated between the two. In 1875, when a string quartet played a Beethoven program for the Wagners at home, Cosima noted that “R recommends that the young musicians take note of the difference between ‘Tempo di Minuetto’ and ‘Minuetto’ [sic]; the first is slower, while the second was turned into the Ländler by Haydn.” CWT 1: 945, October 27, 1875.
passages for cellists, who struggle through the rushed staccato without being able to offer anything but a highly embarrassing scratching.  

Example 3.5. Beethoven, Symphony no. 8, 3rd movement, mm. 45–6

But even these problems disappear of their own accord as soon as one plays at the right tempo, taking one’s cue from the tender song of the horns and clarinets. This also removes all the difficulties for the clarinets themselves, for otherwise even the best clarinetist is here embarrassingly exposed to the “squeak” characteristic of the instrument. I recall the palpable relief of all the musicians when I had them play this piece at the correct, moderate tempo, at which even the humoristic impact of the sforzandi in the double basses and bassoons now became immediately comprehensible. The brief crescendi became distinct,

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44 This music example is not given by Wagner. In London in 1855, the critic James Davison praised Wagner for having the cello part for the Trio played solo. See Davison: “Philharmonic concerts,” The Times (June 12, 1855).

45 Wagner probably means mm. 72 and 74 in the third movement of this symphony, which could indeed provoke a nasty clarinet squeak if a fast tempo were imposed.

46 Wagner here gives only the first measure of the double bass/bassoon part in m. 68 as his music example, though he replaces the original cresc. with p.
the tender pp with which the Trio ends was properly effective, and the main section of the movement also achieved the leisurely gravitas that is its true character.

I once attended a performance of this symphony in Dresden that was conducted by the late capellmeister Reissiger. I was there with Mendelssohn, and spoke with him both about the tempo dilemma I have discussed here, and my solution to it. I further mentioned that I had come to an understanding with my colleague Reissiger (or rather, I thought I had), who had promised that he would play the third movement slower than usual. Mendelssohn agreed with me completely. So we listened to the performance. But when the third movement began, I was startled to hear the same old, [swift] Ländler tempo once again. Before I was able to express my displeasure, Mendelssohn smiled at me, swaying his head complacently, and said “It’s good like that! Bravo!,” at which my shock turned to astonishment. I afterwards realized that I should not complain unduly about Reissiger’s lapse into the old tempo (for reasons I shall discuss below). But Mendelssohn’s insensitivity to this peculiar artistic instance naturally awakened doubts in me as to whether he was able to distinguish any difference in tempo at all. I felt that I was gazing into a true abyss of superficiality—into complete emptiness.

With regard to that same third movement of the Eighth Symphony, I soon afterwards encountered a case identical to that of Reissiger in the person of another well-known conductor. He was one of Mendelssohn’s successors as director of the Leipzig concerts and he, too, had agreed with me about

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47 These passages about Reissiger, Mendelssohn and Beethoven’s Eighth Symphony were published in French in 1878; see Deldevez (1878): 101–2.
48 Grove (1896): 295 writes: “The necessity for keeping down the pace of this movement is strongly insisted on by Wagner, who makes it the subject of a highly characteristic passage in his interesting pamphlet, Ueber das Dirigiren. The remarks are all aimed at Mendelssohn, of whom, as is well-known, Wagner had a poor opinion, and their effect is greatly interfered with by the personal bias which they betray. We should like to know Mendelssohn’s reasons for the faster pace which he is said to have adopted and adhered to.”
49 This is the first paragraph in the fourth installment of Wagner’s essay, as published on December 17, 1869 in the Neue Zeitschrift für Musik, 65/51.
50 Both Ashton Ellis in Wagner trans. Ellis (1895): 310 and Voss (2015): 23 note that Wagner here means Ferdinand Hiller (1811–85), who conducted at the
this Tempo di Menuetto. He promised that he would perform this movement at the correct, slower tempo at a forthcoming concert, and invited me to attend. He, too, failed to keep his word, but his excuse afterwards was an odd one. He admitted to me, laughing, that he had been so distracted by all kinds of directorial matters that he had only remembered his promise to me after having begun the movement in question. Naturally, he couldn’t suddenly alter the tempo again, having already started at the old, familiar speed. By necessity, it had thereafter remained the same as ever. However awkward I found his explanation, I was nevertheless satisfied this time that I had at least found someone to confirm the difference I had grasped, and who at least did not think that the piece would be the same, regardless of the tempo at which it was played. I don’t believe I could accuse this conductor of flippancy or thoughtlessness in the same way that he blamed himself for his “forgetfulness.” Instead, I think that the reason he did not take the tempo slower was something of which he himself was unaware, but was in itself quite correct. To change a tempo so drastically on the off-chance, between the rehearsal and the concert, would have demonstrated an alarming recklessness, and in this case, the conductor’s fortunate “forgetfulness” saved him from the ill effects that would have been the result. The orchestra was accustomed to playing this piece at the quicker pace, and if it had suddenly been confronted with a more moderate tempo, it would have been utterly confused. After all, the slower tempo would also have required a very different manner of interpretation.

Here is the decisive, important point, which one has to grasp very clearly if we are going to be able to perform our classics properly. These works have often suffered neglect and have been corrupted through bad habits that were justified by the tempi adopted, which in turn were intended to conform to the prevalent style of interpretation. On the one hand, this congruity of tempo and interpretation served to hide the true root of the evil. But on the other hand, it actually prevented things from getting even worse, because if you change only the tempo without also changing the manner of interpretation, then the results are usually quite unbearable.

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51 Leipzig Gewandhaus from autumn 1842 to early 1844; see Wagner’s earlier criticism of him in this chapter.

51 Wagner implies here that Hiller had already rehearsed the work at the “old” tempo before agreeing (but then forgetting) to play it slower in the actual concert.
In order to demonstrate this with the simplest example possible, let us consider the opening of the C minor Symphony:  

Example 3.7. Beethoven, Symphony no. 5, 1st movement, mm. 1–2

![Example Music](image)

After briefly lingering here, our conductors rush away from the fermata in the second measure. They linger almost solely in order to concentrate the attention of their musicians on playing this opening motif precisely when it returns in the third measure. The E-flat on the half note is usually held no longer than a string player can play *forte* in a single bow. But let us imagine the voice of Beethoven, calling to a conductor from his grave: “Keep my fermatas long and terrible! I didn’t write them for my pleasure or out of embarrassment, as if wondering what to do next. In my adagios I employ a wholly compelling tone to achieve a luxuriance of expression, and I also use this same tone in the midst of the vehement, quick figurations of my allegros when I need it to depict a moment of bliss or a terrible, persistent convulsion. In such cases, the life of the note should be wrung out, down to its last drops of blood; I part the waves of my sea to let you gaze into its abyss; or I stop the clouds from scudding, I dissipate the hazy mists and all at once let you look into the pure azure sky and the brilliant eye of the sun. This is why I write my fermatas—those long, held notes that appear suddenly in my allegros. If you take note of my very specific thematic intent with this long-held E-flat after the three short, stormy notes, you will grasp what I want to say with all the later notes that have to be held for a similar length of time.”

Imagine if our conductor were to bear in mind this admonishment, and suddenly demand that his orchestra should hold onto that fermata, giving it weighty significance by prolonging it to the extent he deems necessary to comply with Beethoven’s intentions. What success would he have? None. He would fail miserably. After the initial force of the string instruments has

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52 On January 20, 1873, Cosima remarked after a rehearsal of this symphony in Dresden that “R. says he would like to beat the first movement in \( \frac{4}{4} \), because beating time [in \( \frac{3}{4} \)] is so ungainly, and also achieving any nuance is difficult in this meter—too many accents arise—Beethoven surely thought people would go mad if he wrote \( \frac{4}{4} \).” CWT 1: 630.
frittered away, holding the note for any longer would make it ever thinner, and it would end in an embarrassed piano. Here we come to one of the worst effects of today’s conducting habits. Nothing has become more foreign to our orchestras than holding a note at a constant dynamic level. I urge all conductors to demand a full, equally sustained forte from any instrument of the orchestra. His players will experience astonishment at such an unusual request, and only then will they comprehend how much persistent practice is needed to fulfil the task successfully.

Yet this consistent, powerfully sustained note is the basis of all dynamics—both in singing and in the orchestra. Only with this as a starting point can one achieve all those nuances whose diversity determines the character of an interpretation. Without this basis, an orchestra can make a lot of noise, but will have no strength. This is one of the reasons why most orchestral performances are weak. Today’s conductors haven’t grasped this fact, placing much emphasis instead on achieving an overly soft piano. That is something you can get quite effortlessly from the string instruments, but it takes a lot of effort with the wind instruments, especially the woodwind. It is barely possible to procure a tender, sustained piano from the woodwind, and the flautists are the worst of them. Their instruments used to be so gentle, but have today been transformed into veritable pipes of violence. An exception might be found among the French oboists (because they have always retained the pastoral character of their instrument), and among the clarinetists if you ask them to play an echo effect. This ill state of affairs in performances by our best orchestras prompts the following question: if the wind instruments are unable to play piano, shouldn’t we at least endeavor to compensate for it, and restore a balance by getting the string instruments to play more opulently? They otherwise tend to play so softly that the contrast is ridiculous. Obviously, however, our conductors completely fail to notice this imbalance. The real problem lies in large part elsewhere, namely in the character of the piano played by the string instruments. Just as they cannot give us a proper forte, so too they lack a proper piano. Both forte and piano lack fullness of tone. In this, our string players could learn something from our wind players. Whereas the strings find it very easy to move their bow lightly over the strings to make them whisper, a wind instrument requires great artistic mastery to be able to produce a pure, constant, yet soft note with only a moderate outflow of breath. For this reason, our violinists should let the wind players teach them how to play a truly full-bodied piano, just as wind players should emulate excellent singers.
The quiet note and the powerful, sustained tone mentioned above form the two poles of an orchestra’s dynamics, between which it must move in performance. But what can we expect of a performance if neither piano nor forte is cultivated properly? How can modifications of dynamics feature in a performance when neither of the two dynamic poles is distinct? The result will undoubtedly be so deficient that Mendelssohn’s maxim of rushing through a work becomes a serendipitous solution. This is why our conductors have raised this maxim to the status of a veritable dogma, one adopted by their whole “church” and their retinue. As a result, any attempt to perform classical music correctly is denounced by them as being well-nigh heretical.

If I may stay with these conductors for a moment, I shall return to the matter of the tempo, because as I said before, this is where a conductor shows himself to be right or wrong.

Obviously, getting the right tempo depends on the character of the interpretation required by a piece of music. In order to determine this, we have to be in agreement about whether an interpretation will tend more to sustained, legato tones (as in song) or to rhythmic movement (figurations). This makes a conductor decide what kind of tempo he should favor.

Here, the Adagio stands in contrast to the Allegro, just as the sustained tone stands in contrast to animated figurations. The sustained tone provides the rules for the tempo adagio; here the rhythm melts away into a realm of pure sound that is sufficient in itself. In a certain, subtle sense, one can say of the pure Adagio that it cannot be taken slowly enough. A rapturous trust in the persuasive security of pure tone must dominate. Here, a languorous sentiment becomes delight; what is expressed in an Allegro by shifts in figurations is expressed in an Adagio by the unending diversity of the inflected tone. The slightest change in harmony becomes surprising, though our sensibility becomes so heightened that even the most remote harmonic progressions feel inevitable and right.

None of our conductors dares to acknowledge this characteristic of the Adagio. When they’re at the beginning of an Adagio, they peer forwards to try and find some figurations in it whose motion might help them to determine the tempo. Perhaps I am the only conductor who has dared to adopt a tempo for the third movement of the Ninth Symphony that is in accordance with its character as a true adagio. In this movement, the $\frac{3}{4}$ Adagio alternates with an Andante in $\frac{3}{4}$, as if in order to draw attention to its strikingly individual character. But this never stops our conductors from blurring the contrast between Adagio and Andante here, with nothing remaining to
differentiate them except the shift between quadruple and triple time. This movement is surely one of the most instructive in this particular respect. Its richly figured section in $\frac{4}{5}$ meter also offers the clearest example of how a pure Adagio can be broken up by means of a more focused rhythmization of its accompanying figurations. These are made autonomous, though without the movement’s uninterrupted cantilena losing its characteristic breadth.

Example 3.8. Beethoven, Symphony no. 9, 3rd movement, mm. 99–101, with the $\frac{4}{4}$ Adagio theme in the woodwind, now in 12/8, accompanied by sixteenth-note figurations in the first violins

The delicately fluctuating motion of the Adagio hitherto longed for unending expansion, offering unlimited freedom to satisfy the musical expression. But here, it is as if its image were fixed, because the ornamented figurations in its accompaniment now require it to be played in a strict meter. This in turn provides us with a new law of musical motion whose consequences will ultimately enable us to determine the tempo of an Allegro.

53 Deldevez (1878): 185 here remarks that Wagner was not, as he maintains, “the only conductor” to interpret this passage correctly, as he was (thus Deldevez) merely following the tradition of Habeneck. Wagner later described the Andante to Cosima as “a dance, a minuet.” See CWT 2: 112 (June 8, 1878).

54 Wagner does not give this example.
Just as the sustained note, modified in its duration, is the basis of all musical performance, so does an *Adagio* such as this third movement of Beethoven’s Ninth Symphony offer us a basis from which we may determine all musical tempi. If we look at it carefully, the *Allegro* can be regarded as the ultimate outcome when the pure *Adagio* is refracted by means of more animated figurations. Even in an *Allegro*, if we observe its constituent motifs carefully, it is always the cantilena derived from the *Adagio* that predominates. The most important *Allegro* movements in Beethoven are usually governed by a basic melody that in a deeper sense belongs to the character of the *Adagio*. This is what affords them their sentimental significance that sets off these allegros so clearly from the earlier, naïve genre of *Allegro*. But even Mozart’s

Example 3.9. Mozart, Symphony no. 41, K. 551, 1st movement, mm. 244–47

and his

Example 3.10. Mozart, Symphony no. 41, K. 551, 4th movement, mm. 1–4

are already not far removed from Beethoven’s

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55 Deldevez (1878): 188–89 was one of the first commentators to highlight the importance of this passage in which Wagner posits a “basic melody” behind both *Allegro* and *Adagio*. Nicholas Cook (1993): 59 remarks perceptively: “If Wagner’s description of the song-like root melody underlying the figuration of the Allegro looks back to his account of Habeneck’s orchestra ‘singing’ the Ninth Symphony, then equally it looks forward to the *Urlinie* of mature Schenkerian theory. It is hard to avoid the impression that Schenker derived some of his most basic concepts from Wagner’s writings on the Ninth Symphony—even if he found the truth standing on its head in them, as Karl Marx did in Hegel.” See also the discussion on the *Urlinie* and melos in the section “Melos and the Body” in part II.
and the exclusive character of the *Allegro* also emerges in Mozart, as in Beethoven, only when the figurations completely gain the upper hand over the lyrical element—in other words, when the rhythmic motion utterly dominates the sustained tone. This is usually the case in rondo finale movements, of which Mozart’s E-flat major Symphony [no. 39] and Beethoven’s A major Symphony [no. 7] offer notable examples.\(^{56}\) Here, the rhythmic motion goes wild, as it were, which is why these *Allegro* movements cannot be performed precisely and quickly enough.\(^{57}\) But what lies between these two extremes is determined by the *law of mutual relationships*. This law must be comprehended in all its subtlety and variety, because in a deep sense it is the same law that applies when modifying the sustained tone itself in all its conceivable nuances. I shall now turn more extensively to this *modification of the tempo*. This is not merely unfamiliar to our conductors: In fact, they doltishly spurn it and denounce it, precisely because of this unfamiliarity. Whoever has followed me attentively thus far will understand that modifying the tempo is in fact a principle that determines the life of our music. —

In\(^ {58}\) my above considerations, I have differentiated between two genres of *Allegro*, attributing a *sentimental* character to the newer, truly Beethovenian type, in comparison with the older, primarily Mozartian type, which I described as being *naïve*. In using these designations, I had in mind the apt

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\(^{56}\) In his personal copy of this essay, Richard Strauss has here underlined the words “finale” and “A major Symphony,” drawn a pencil line in the right-hand margin alongside the next sentence (“Here, the rhythmic motion …”) and placed a question mark next to it.

\(^{57}\) Richard Strauss considered the last movement of the *Jupiter* Symphony to be “one of those pieces to which Wagner’s maxim ‘as quick as possible’ applies”: Strauss ed. Schuh (1989): 58. His recording of it is very fast indeed.

\(^{58}\) This is the first paragraph in the fifth installment of Wagner’s essay, as published on December 24, 1869 in the *Neue Zeitschrift für Musik* 65/52.
terminology that Schiller uses in his famous essay about sentimental and naïve poetry.59

I want to keep to my main purpose here, so I won’t engage any further with the aesthetic matters that I have just touched upon. I would merely like to mention that the naïve Allegro to which I refer is to be found in its fullest form in most of Mozart’s quick alla breve movements. The most perfect of this type are the allegros of his opera overtures, especially those of Figaro and Don Giovanni. We know that they couldn’t be played quickly enough for Mozart. When he had finally driven his musicians to such desperation that to their own surprise they were able to achieve the Presto he wanted in his Figaro Overture, he called out to them in encouragement: “That was nice! This evening, let’s play it just a little faster!” — He was quite right! I have said of the pure Adagio that it ideally could not be performed too slowly. Similarly, this true, completely unalloyed, pure Allegro cannot be played quickly enough. Just as the voluptuousness of sound in the former provides the only limit to how slow one may play, in the latter it is the rapid figurations that provide the upper boundary for the tempo. The tempo that is actually attainable is determined solely by the laws of beauty. These laws provide the outer limits for the extreme opposites of an utterly inhibited, slow tempo on the one hand, and an utterly uninhibited, fast tempo on the other. Once we reach the limits of the one, we naturally feel a yearning to experience the other. — Thus there is a deeper meaning in how the movements

59 Wagner means Friedrich Schiller’s essay Über naïve und sentimentalische Dichtung of 1795 (On Naïve and Sentimental Poetry), in which the poet differentiates between “ naïve” writers who “imitate nature” and “sentimental” writers who “reflect upon the impression” that events and objects have made upon them. Wagner here uses these terms roughly as we would “Classical” and “Romantic,” though with certain important differences; see the discussion of his aesthetic terminology in “Finding a Vocabulary for Conducting” below.

60 The source of this anecdote is unclear. It is possible that Wagner heard something along these lines from Dionys Weber (also Bedřich Diviš Weber, 1766–1842), the Bohemian composer and theorist and founding director of the Prague Conservatory. Weber met Mozart in Prague and became a lifelong devotee. In November 1832, Weber gave the first performance of Wagner’s early Symphony in C in Prague, in the presence of the composer—though this did not stop Wagner from criticizing him later; see p. 64 below.

61 This passage seems oddly prescient of the Devil’s description of hell in Thomas Mann’s Doktor Faustus, where the damned veer from extreme heat to extreme cold and back. See Mann (1975): 247.
of a symphony by our masters progress from an *Allegro* to an *Adagio*, and thence—through the intermediary of a stricter dance form (the minuet or scherzo) to the quickest *Allegro* in the finale. It is also a sign of a deterioration in sensibility when composers today believe they can compensate for the tediousness of their inspiration by stuffing their music into the older form of the suite, with its thoughtless juxtaposition of dances that have actually long since evolved into other forms that are far more varied and richly mingled.\(^6^2\)

We can recognize the Mozartian, *absolute Allegro* as belonging especially to the “naïve” genre in two ways: first, on account of its dynamics, in its simple shifts between *forte* and *piano*; and secondly, because of its formal structure—in the way it indiscriminately juxtaposes stable, rhythmic-melodic formulae, which are suitable for playing either *forte* or *piano*, and which the Master employs with a surprising degree of indifference (the same applies to his incessantly recurring, identical, bustling half-cadences).\(^6^3\) However, all this can be explained by the character of this type of *Allegro* (even the heedless manner in which utterly banal forms are employed in it). This *Allegro* does not aim to captivate us with its cantilenas. Instead, its restless motion aims to intoxicate us. The *Allegro* of the *Don Giovanni* Overture ultimately takes an unmistakable turn to the sentimental. When it reaches the upper limit of its tempo as outlined above, the music desires to move away from this extreme, necessitating a modification of the tempo. The tempo slows down imperceptibly, reaching the more moderate tempo at which the opening of the opera proper is to be taken (this imperceptibility is extremely important when performing these transitional measures). This tempo is similarly *alla breve*, though it has to be taken less quickly than the main tempo of the overture.

This peculiarity of the *Don Giovanni* Overture is ignored by most of our conductors in their usual rough-and-ready fashion. But I won’t dwell on this here. I just wish to establish one thing, namely that the character of this

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62 Dannreuther (1887): 40 here adds a footnote, referring the reader to [Franz] Lachner’s suites for orchestra. Voss (2015): 31 does likewise, remarking on the personal antipathy between Wagner and Lachner—the latter having been the General Music Director at the Munich Court Theater until 1868. On March 28, 1869, Cosima’s diary has a pejorative remark about a suite by Lachner that Hans von Bülow had been unwilling to conduct in Munich (CWT 1: 77).

63 As early as his essay *Zukunftsmusik* from the year 1860, Wagner complains about Mozart’s “banal phrase construction” and his “stable, recurring … half-cadences” in his symphonies, which he finds reminiscent of *Tafelmusik* and to him conjure up the noises of serving and clearing away the dishes at a princely table. See SSD 7: 126–27.
older, classical, or—as I call it—naïve Allegro is vastly different from that of the newer, sentimental, truly Beethovenian Allegro. Mozart learned crescendo and diminuendo in orchestral playing from the Mannheim orchestra, whose innovation it was. Up to then, the way the old masters scored their works proves that there was no expressive intent behind their differentiation between forte and piano in an Allegro movement.

But how does the true Beethovenian Allegro relate to this? Let us consider his incredible innovation by looking at his most audacious inspiration, namely the first movement of his Heroic Symphony [no. 3]. How would it fare if it were played in the strict tempo of a Mozart overture? Would it ever occur to one of our conductors to take this movement at anything but the same tempo from the first to the last measure? If we can even speak of them actually “understanding” the tempo at all, then we can be sure that they will primarily follow Mendelssohn’s motto, “chi va presto, va sano,” assuming that they belong among our elegant capellmeisters. If the orchestral musicians themselves possess any musicality, then they are left by themselves to cope as best they can with:

Example 3.12. Beethoven, Symphony no. 3, 1st movement, mm. 83–86

or with the following lamentation:

Example 3.13. Beethoven, Symphony no. 3, 1st movement, mm. 284–87

64 Italian for “whoever goes quickly, goes healthily.” As Voss (2015): 32 points out, this is presumably an intentional parody of the Italian saying “Chi va piano, va sano e va lontano,” namely “Whoever goes slowly goes healthily and goes far.” See Wagner’s similar corruption of an English saying below.

65 This is the same example that is given by Anton Schindler on p. 239 of his Beethoven biography of 1840, to illustrate how Beethoven supposedly wanted his second subject to be taken at a slower pace. In recordings of the Eroica by Mengelberg, Furtwängler and others, this theme is taken at a noticeably slower tempo, as recommended by Wagner.
These conductors aren’t bothered about any of this, because they’re on “classical” ground. So off they go at grande vitesse, elegant and lucrative at the same time. In English, they say: Time is music. —

We have here reached a decisive point in our assessment of the whole of today’s music-making scene. As the reader will be aware, I have approached it in a somewhat careful, circuitous manner. It has been my intention here to lay bare the problem, making clear to everyone how, since Beethoven, a quite fundamental shift has occurred in the treatment of musical material and its performance when compared with earlier times. Elements that were once kept apart to lead their own separate lives in isolated, closed forms now have their principal motifs placed together in contrasting, all-encompassing forms and are then developed with and against each other. Of course, the performance of the work should also do justice to this fact. Above all, the

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66 “Grande vitesse,” French for “high speed.” Wagner’s subsequent English quotation is presumably an intentional corruption of “time is money,” which ties in with his use of “einbringlich” (lucrative, profitable) in the previous sentence. This paragraph is unusually packed with non sequiturs, enabling Wagner to proceed from Beethoven’s Eroica to Mendelssohn and money within just a few lines. Assorted concepts and languages are here juxtaposed without any coherent sense of causality, which suggests that we are here dealing with yet another instance of Wagner’s animosity towards his predecessor, one in which his negative emotions get the better of his intellect. In his own essay entitled Über das Dirigieren, Felix Weingartner took up Wagner’s criticism of these swift, “elegant” conductors, contrasted it with the tempo modifications advocated by Wagner, and turned Wagner’s argument somewhat on its head: “Wagner speaks of ‘elegant’ conductors … whom he accuses of taking the tempo as fast as possible in order to skim over difficult passages that at first glance seem unclear. The ‘tempo rubato conductors’ are the exact opposite; they seem to make the simplest passages unclear by emphasizing unimportant details.” See Weingartner (1913): 24–25.

67 As is frequently the case with Wagner, he here writes ostensibly about Beethoven, but seems instead to be describing his own compositional technique. In his later essay On the Application of Music to Drama of 1879, he specifically discusses how a music drama must possess the same “unity as a symphonic movement.” See SSD 10: 185.
tempo should be no less flexible\textsuperscript{68} than the thematic web,\textsuperscript{69} which reveals its nature through the very fluidity of its motion.

When it comes to applying the principle of \textit{tempo modification} to classical works of the newer style, we have to acknowledge finding ourselves confronted with difficulties equal to those faced by anyone endeavoring to promote a general understanding of the manifestations of the true German genius. If I were to list all the minor cases that I have experienced, my descriptions would descend into chaotic detail. This is why, in what I have written above, I have instead paid particular attention to my experiences of several of the foremost musical luminaries of our time. I have not hesitated to use my examples to prove that the true Beethoven is a mere chimera today because of how he is performed in public. However, I now intend to substantiate this serious claim by contrasting these negative aspects with the positive proof of what I believe is the correct manner of performing both Beethoven and those composers related to him.

Because the object of my interest seems inexhaustible, I will endeavor once more to concentrate on a few drastic instances drawn from my own experiences. —

One of the principal means of musical form-building is to write a series of \textit{variations} on a given theme. This inherently loose form of simply juxtaposing a succession of variants of a theme was raised to artistic significance

\textsuperscript{68} Wagner writes here “Zartlebigkeit” (possessed of fleeting life), a noun it seems he himself created from the adjective “zartlebig” that is found in assorted scientific tracts of the time, such as in Maximilian Perty’s 1852 tract about microscopic organisms (Perty (1852): 150), where the author uses the word “zartlebig” to describe their fragility and brief lifespan. Wagner means flexible tempi or \textit{rubato}. See the discussion of Wagner’s vocabulary in the section “Freedom, Control, and the ‘Two Cultures’” below.

\textsuperscript{69} Dannreuther and Ashton Ellis both use “tissue” for Wagner’s “Gewebe”; see Wagner, trans. Dannreuther (1887): 43 and Wagner, trans. Ellis (1895): 320. In Wagner’s day, as today, the word could mean a whole host of things from woven fabric to human tissue to the membrane of a leaf. I have chosen “web” instead, as it more directly conveys the notion of something woven, which seems Wagner’s intention, and to speak of Wagner’s “thematic web” has in any case achieved currency in the literature. It also happens that “Gewebe” was the word used to translate “web” in the German edition of Darwin’s \textit{Origin of Species} that we know Wagner owned, and which I posit below had an impact on his choice of vocabulary at this time; see Darwin (1860): 83, Darwin, trans. Bronn/Carus (1867): 95, and “Freedom, Control, and the ‘Two Cultures’” below.
first by Haydn, then ultimately by Beethoven, thanks to both the brilliance of their musical invention and the manner in which they established relationships between these variants. This is most successful when they develop out of each other, with one type of variation leading into the next, by it by developing further what was only hinted at in the preceding variation, or by complementing it with what it had lacked. The real structural weakness of variation form is revealed when starkly contrasting sections are juxtaposed without any connection or transition between them. Yet Beethoven also knew how to turn this weakness to his advantage, and did so in a manner that completely avoided anything awkward or accidental. He acknowledges the limits described above, so that either the unending expansiveness of his adagios or the boundless motion of his allegros suddenly awakens in us an intense yearning for the redemption offered by its opposite, with this contrasting tempo seeming the only possible option. We can learn this from the Master’s greatest works, of which the last movement of the *Eroica* Symphony offers one of the most superb, instructive examples. This is a variation movement of infinite expansion, employing the most multifarious motifs. In order to master this multifariousness and evade its adverse impact on our emotions (here and in all similar movements), we have to be all the more aware of the abovementioned weakness of variation form. Too often, individual variations are composed only in and for themselves, and are then lined up according to some utterly arbitrary convention. These thoughtless juxtapositions are at their worst when a calm, solemn theme is followed by a first variation that is incomprehensibly merry. The theme of the second movement of Beethoven’s great A major Sonata for piano and violin [op. 47, *Kreutzer* Sonata] is incomparably beautiful, but I have never heard the first variation played by any virtuoso except as a typical “first variation” whose purpose is to provide a springboard for instrumental gymnastics. My indignation at this always made me unwilling to listen any further. Whenever I complained to anyone about it, they admitted that I was right “on the whole,” but they still did not comprehend in detail what I wanted (just like my experience with the *Tempo di menuetto* of [Beethoven’s] Eighth Symphony).

But let us remain with the abovementioned example of the *Kreutzer* Sonata. To be sure, the first variation on this wonderful, sustained theme is already strikingly animated in character. When the composer wrote it, he will not have intended it to follow immediately after the theme, directly connected to it. He will have been led, at least subconsciously, by the formal insularity that is typical of the individual sections of variation form. But these individual sections are of course still played one after the other. Other movements by the Master are also modeled after variation form, though they
are conceived as a unified, continuous whole (such as the second movement of the Symphony in C Minor [no. 5], the *Adagio* of the great E-flat major Quartet [op. 127] and, above all, the wonderful second movement of the great C minor Piano Sonata op. 111). We also know how sensitively and delicately he composed the transitions between the individual variations in these works. So in a case such as the aforementioned *Kreutzer* Sonata, it is at the very least the duty of the performers to vindicate the Master completely by playing the opening of the first variation in a manner that can establish a gentle relation to the mood of the preceding theme. One can do this by holding back the tempo so as just to hint at the new character of this first variation, instead of plunging headlong into it as is the inevitable practice among our pianists and violinists. If this is done with the appropriate artistry, then the first section of this variation can itself offer a gradual, increasingly animated transition to the new, swifter mood. As a result, quite apart from the interest offered by this variation in itself, it would acquire the charm of an affably mellifluous, though fundamentally not insignificant transition away from the primary mood in which the theme itself was conceived. —

A similarly significant case, but more striking, is the entrance of the $\frac{3}{8}$ meter in the *Allegro* [second movement] after the long introductory *Adagio* of the C-sharp minor Quartet [op. 131] by Beethoven. This is marked “molto vivace,” which is apt for the character of the movement as a whole. Quite exceptionally, however, Beethoven has the individual movements of this quartet follow on one after the other without the usual break between them in performance. In fact, if we take a closer, judicious look, we can see that they develop out of each other according to certain subtle principles. This *Allegro* movement thus follows directly on from an *Adagio* that is possessed of a dreamy melancholy such as we find in hardly any other movement by the Master. It is like a delightful memory, which upon coming back to mind is embraced and nurtured with an increasing intensity of emotion. Here, the issue at hand is clearly how the *Allegro* should emerge from the melancholy languor with which the preceding *Adagio* closes. It has to arise out of it if it is to draw us in, instead of wounding our sensibility by the brusqueness of its entrance. It is appropriate that this new theme should also begin in an uninterrupted *pp*, as if it were a tender, barely recognizable dream image, and it disappears at once, melting away in a *ritardando*, after which it gradually gains strength and manifests itself, entering into its true, animated sphere by means of a *crescendo*.\(^70\) It is here the subtle duty

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\(^70\) Wagner returns to his dream-image similes when he discusses this quartet, op. 131, at greater length in his essay *Beethoven*, written just a few months after *Über das Dirigieren*. See SSD 9: 96–97.
of the performer to modify his first entrance by means of the tempo, in accordance with the character of this *Allegro* as elucidated above. In other words, he should pay attention to the close of the *Adagio*:

Example 3.14. Beethoven, String Quartet in C-sharp minor, op. 131, 1st movement, mm. 120–21

in order to initiate the following

Example 3.15. Beethoven, String Quartet in C-sharp minor, op. 131, 2nd movement, m. 1

so imperceptibly in the ensuing *Allegro molto vivace* that no one will notice any tempo change at all at first:  

Example 3.16. Beethoven, String Quartet in C-sharp minor, op. 131, 1st movement, mm. 120–21, 2nd movement, mm. 1–10

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71 This music example in score is not in Wagner’s essay, but is given here to aid comprehension on the part of the reader.
And then, after the *ritardando*, the next measure’s *crescendo* should coincide with an increasing vigor in performance so that the swifter tempo specified by the Master emerges as a rhythmic correlation to the dynamic intensification. — However, without exception, no one ever makes this tempo modification in performance. Instead, performers simply tumble into the cheeky *[Allegro molto] vivace* as if everything were a matter of fun, and things ought to proceed merrily. This is a great offence to our sense of artistic decency! And yet the gentlemen in question call this “classical.”

I have offered these few examples to prove at some length the necessity of these tempo modifications. Since they are immeasurably important for performing our classical music, I now intend to move on to take a closer look at what is needed for a correct performance of such music. In so doing, I shall have to state several tough home truths to our musicians and capellmeisters who claim to be so concerned about our classical music, and are venerated for it.

I hope that I have now succeeded in explaining the difficulties involved in modifying the tempo in works of the newer, intrinsically German style. These difficulties can only be recognized and solved by initiates possessed of a discerning spirit. In what I call the *sentimental* genre of recent music, which was raised up to eternal validity by Beethoven, we find co-mingled all the characteristics of the earlier, primarily naïve genres, resulting in a body of material that the Master’s creativity always had at its disposal. No longer do legato and staccato or the sustained cantilena and rapid figurations exist independently as contrasting, formal aspects; no longer are diverse variations simply strung together alongside each other. No, they touch each other directly and move imperceptibly, one into the other. To be sure, however (as I have shown extensively by means of individual cases), this new, multifariously structured musical material can only be employed in a symphonic movement if it is also performed in the manner it requires, otherwise it risks appearing as a monstrosity. I remember in my youth hearing older musicians

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72 This is the first paragraph in the sixth installment of Wagner’s essay, as published on January 1, 1870 in the *Neue Zeitschrift für Musik* 66/1.

73 In his copy of this essay, Richard Strauss has drawn a pencil line in the right margin next to the passage beginning at “all the characteristics” down to “legato”; he further underlined the words “stets bereit liegenden” (always had at its disposal).
speak critically about the *Eroica* Symphony. *Dionys Weber* in Prague treated it point-blank as an absurdity. And quite rightly so—this man only knew what I referred to above as the Mozartian *Allegro*, and he had the students of his conservatory play me the *Allegro* of the *Eroica* in just such a strict, Mozartian tempo.\(^\text{74}\) Anyone who heard such a performance would have agreed with Dionys about the work. But in fact, no one played it any differently anywhere, nor do they today, despite which this symphony is usually applauded by everyone. And while we might feel that this is ridiculous, the symphony’s success has come about only because people have been studying its music at the piano for the past decades, outside the concert hall. This has enabled it to exert its compelling power in its own, irresistible manner, albeit in a roundabout way. If fate had not mapped out this escape route for it, but had left us instead dependent solely on our gentlemen capellmeisters and their ilk, then our noblest music would inevitably have perished.

In order to substantiate these bold allegations with examples from experience, I shall offer one from a work that is far more popular in Germany than any other.

How often haven’t we heard the Overture to *Der Freischütz* performed by our orchestras?

There are only a few people today who are aware of how humdrum performances of this wonderful music have trivialized it, and who recoil in horror when they contemplate the innumerable times they have heard it thus before realizing the truth. What’s more, they were only able to come to this realization because they were in my audience when I performed the *Freischütz* Overture at a concert I was kindly invited to conduct in Vienna in 1864 \([\text{recte:} \text{on December 27, 1863}].\)\(^\text{75}\) In our rehearsal, the orchestra of the Vienna Court Opera—indisputably one of the finest in the world—completely lost its composure because of how I insisted on performing this work. Right at the outset it transpired that they had hitherto played the *Adagio* introduction as a staid *Andante*, in the tempo of the “Alphorn” or some other homely piece.\(^\text{76}\) This was not a purely Viennese tradition, but the general

\(^{74}\) Wagner and Weber met in Prague in November 1832, when Weber conducted Wagner’s early Symphony in C. See also fn. 60 above.

\(^{75}\) Wagner here refers to a concert in Vienna on December 27, 1863, organized by Carl Tausig, in which he conducted the *Freischütz* Overture along with excerpts from *Tristan und Isolde* and *Die Meistersinger von Nürnberg*.

\(^{76}\) Dannreuther (1887): 51 adds a footnote here: “A sentimental song by Proch,” presumably referring to “Das Alpenhorn,” op. 18, a song for voice and piano
rule, as I had already discovered in Dresden when I stood on the very same podium where Weber had once conducted his work. When I first conducted the *Freischütz* in Dresden, eighteen years after the Master’s death, I took the Overture’s introduction at my own tempo, without any concern for the habits that had become ingrained under my older colleague Reissiger. At this, a veteran from Weber’s time, the old cellist Dotzauer, turned to me and said earnestly: “Yes, that’s how Weber took it; this is the first time since then that I’ve heard it done properly.” Weber’s widow still lived in Dresden, and she confirmed that I had the right feeling for her long-deceased husband’s music. She spoke to me with true affection, saying she hoped I would remain in Dresden and thrive in my position as capellmeister. She had long given up any thought of ever hearing her husband’s music played correctly in Dresden again. But after all the distress she had endured, she now had reason to hope once again, she said. I mention her lovely, satisfying testimony about me because it has remained a comforting memory in the face of many contrary appraisals of my artistic activities, also as a conductor. — It was also her noble encouragement that made me so bold as to insist on thoroughly cleaning up the orchestra’s interpretation of the *Freischütz* Overture for the abovementioned Viennese concert. This piece is well known to the point of satiety, but the orchestra now studied it with me as if it were completely new. The horns were undaunted and completely altered their approach under the

by Heinrich Proch (1809–78), a violinist, composer, and conductor who played in the Vienna Court Orchestra from 1834 to 1867. See also Harten (1983). Proch’s composition is in the same key as Weber’s overture (C major), and has an undulating accompaniment figure almost identical to that in measure 9ff. in Weber’s overture. Proch’s song, first published by Diabelli in Vienna in 1836, enjoyed numerous editions over the ensuing decades, appearing in assorted vocal anthologies and albums of piano arrangements (one of which, for piano duet, was by Franz Abt, one of Wagner’s numerous *bêtes noires*; see “Fantaisie sur l’Air favori: Das Alpenhorn de H. Proch” in Abt’s *Album musicale des jeunes Pianistes*, op. 33, no. 1, Leipzig: Hofmeister, 1841). Voss (2015): 39 alternatively suggests that Wagner might in fact be referring to Otto Thiesen’s “Ein Alphorn hör’ ich schallen,” op. 23, for three women’s voices and piano.

77 Justus Johann Friedrich Dotzauer (1783–1860), German cellist and composer, who played in the Meiningen Court Orchestra, then in the Gewandhaus Orchestra, and finally from 1811 to his retirement in 1850 in the Dresden Court Orchestra, where he worked under Carl Maria von Weber and, later, under Wagner.
sensitive artistic leadership of R[ichard] Lewy. They had hitherto played the introduction’s gentle woodland fantasy as a brilliant, ostentatious showpiece, but now they obeyed the score instead, pouring a magical scent into their cantilena above the pianissimo accompaniment of the strings. Just once—also in accordance with the score—did they rise to a mezzoforte to offer a tender inflection instead of the usual sforzando:

Example 3.17. Carl Maria von Weber, Overture to Der Freischütz, horn, m. 24

\[ \text{Example 3.17. Carl Maria von Weber, Overture to Der Freischütz, horn, m. 24} \]

only to melt away smoothly thereafter. The celli, too, tempered what was usually played as a hard accent above the violins’ tremolo:

Example 3.18. Weber, Overture to Der Freischütz, cello, m. 27

\[ \text{Example 3.18. Weber, Overture to Der Freischütz, cello, m. 27} \]

Instead, they offered the gentle sigh that the composer had wanted. This meant that the subsequent crescendo culminated in a fortissimo that was able to express its true sense of terror and despair. — After I had restored the introductory Adagio to its unearthly grandeur, I gave free rein to the wild motion of the passionate Allegro. I did not yet have to take into account the gentler, mellow nature of the subsequent, second theme, because I was fully confident of moderating the tempo again in good time and would be able to reach its true tempo imperceptibly.

Most Allegro movements of the newer, heterogeneous type obviously comprise two fundamentally different components. In comparison to the earlier, more naïve, homogeneous Allegro structure, they have been enriched by combining the pure Allegro type with the thematic characteristics of the songful Adagio in all its nuances. The second theme of the Allegro in Weber’s Overture to Oberon:

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78 Richard Lewy (1827–83), Viennese horn player, opera director, and singing teacher, for many years a member of the Vienna Court Orchestra. Among his singing students were Mathilde Mallinger and Emil Scaria (Wagner’s first Eva in Die Meistersinger in 1868 and his first Gurnemanz in Parsifal in 1882 respectively).
demonstrates this contrary character at its most explicit, for it is in no way associated with the manner of a “true” Allegro. In formal terms, its contrasting character is conveyed naturally by interweaving it with the primary character of the piece in question. In fact, this theme had already been conceived with just such a union in mind. In other words, on the surface, this song-like theme seems to be wholly in line with the overall formal scheme of this Allegro movement. But as soon as it needs to let its true character speak, that same formal structure must be capable of [tempo] modification so that it serves equally well for both the primary and secondary characters of a movement.

I shall now continue the tale of my performance of the Freischütz Overture with the Viennese orchestra. After urging the tempo on to the height of excitement, I utilized the long, expansive song of the clarinet, which is Adagio in derivation,\(^79\)

Example 3.20. Weber, Overture to Der Freischütz, clarinet, mm. 96–104

to rein in the tempo imperceptibly. Here, all rapid figurations are dissolved into a sustained, tremulous tone. As a result, despite the subsequent, rapid intermediary figure:

Example 3.21. Weber, Overture to Der Freischütz, m. 109

we were able to ease back into what was a very slightly modified version of the main tempo for the ensuing E-flat cantilena:\(^80\)

\(^79\) This is a rare case of Wagner using an example already featured in Berlioz’s treatise on orchestration. See Berlioz (1855): 140–41.

\(^80\) This same example—though with the slur stretching to the final B-flat, and with an accent on the penultimate note, C—is given in Mikorey (1917): 49.
Example 3.22. Weber, Overture to *Der Freischütz*, mm. 123–26

I insisted on this being played piano throughout, with uniform slurring—thus without the vulgar accentuation as it ascends that is otherwise customary. In other words, not

Example 3.23. Weber, Overture to *Der Freischütz*, mm. 123–26

I first had to discuss all this with my excellent musicians. But the success of this interpretation was so immediately striking that when it came to the imperceptible reinvigoration of the tempo with the pulsating figure

Example 3.24. Weber, Overture to *Der Freischütz*, mm. 145–46

I could rely on the sympathetic zeal of the whole orchestra, and only had to give the slightest indication of forward motion in order to reach the main tempo again (though this time a more energetically nuanced version of it). It was not so easy to interpret the more condensed return of the movement’s two highly contrasting themes without losing the right feeling for the main tempo, because up to the moment when the desperate energy of the Allegro finds its culmination:

Example 3.25. Weber, Overture to *Der Freischütz*, mm. 249–53
the conflict between the two themes becomes concentrated in ever shorter periods. It was here that my constant modifications of the tempo proved most successful. After the magnificent, sustained C major triads and the long, significant rests between them, the second theme is played as an exalted song of joy; here, the musicians were very surprised when, contrary to their usual custom, I did not choose the more agitated tempo of the first Allegro theme, but the gentler, modified version of the tempo.

When our orchestras play this work, it is highly common for them to rush the main theme at the close. Often, we’d only need to hear the crack of a horse whip to complete the aural effect of a circus ring. The acceleration of tempo at the close of an overture is something composers often desire, and it comes of its own accord when a swift Allegro theme leads the field, as it were, to celebrate its ultimate apotheosis. One famous example of this is the great Leonore Overture by Beethoven. In the Freischütz Overture, however, the impact of the heightened Allegro is utterly demolished because conductors have not understood how to modify the main tempo in order to meet the differing demands of the thematic combinations elsewhere in the work (including where to hold back the tempo at the right time). As a result, the main tempo is by this point usually so quick that it precludes the possibility of any further intensification through acceleration, unless the string instruments embark on an inordinately virtuoso assault. I had even had occasion to hear the Viennese orchestra do precisely this. It had astonished me, and gave me no pleasure, because this eccentric exertion was caused by a serious mistake—the fact that they had already attained a rampant tempo by this point. The result was an exaggeration to which no work of art should be subjected, even if it might be able to tolerate it in a crude sense.

If we can admit at least some sensitivity on the part of German conductors, then it remains utterly incomprehensible how the close of the Freischütz Overture can be rushed in this manner. But it becomes explicable when one considers how, even at its first occurrence, the second, song-like theme is carried away as booty at the pace of the main Allegro; it is like a feisty young girl captured with the spoils of war and tied to the tail of a soldier’s horse as he wildly gallops off. At the close, that second theme is raised up as a

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81 Presumably Leonore no. 3.

82 Wagner commonly used gendered and sexualized metaphors and similes in his theoretical writings—see the section below, “Charles Darwin and the Imperceptible Art of Transition,” and Walton (2020)—though a violent sexual simile such as this is unusual for him. He did, however, make use of such sexual imagery in connection with Berlioz in a letter to Liszt of September 1852. See p. 196 below.
song of jubilation; and now, in a kind of poetic justice, it is as if that maiden is placed upon the horse herself—presumably after its wicked rider has fallen off—and it’s the capellmeister who charges off at a merry pace. This motif is in fact suffused with the fervent gratitude of a pious, loving girl’s heart, but every public performance we hear of the Freischütz Overture—year in, year out—offers this extreme trivialization of it (to put it mildly), leaving an impression of indescribable repugnance. If anyone can still find such a performance good, and can write of our supposedly vibrant orchestral culture while adding his own special thoughts about the art of music—as does old, fun-loving Mr. Lobe—well, then he truly does well to warn us elsewhere of the “absurdities of wrongly understood idealism by pointing out what is aesthetically genuine, true and of eternal validity in the face of all kinds of dubious, semi-certifiable doctrines and maxims.” As I have said, however, my performance of this overture in Vienna meant a number of local music lovers were able to hear this poor, much-defiled overture played differently—though of course I more or less had to force it upon them. They are still talking of my success in this, and claimed never to have known the Overture properly before. They asked me what I had done to get my results, but could not grasp the means I had employed to achieve a rapturous, new effect in the final section. Hardly any of them wanted to believe that the cause was merely to be found in the more moderate tempo. The gentlemen in the orchestra, however, could have revealed more—something that was a true secret. It was this: in the fourth measure of the splendid, broadly played introduction to the return of the cantabile theme,

83 Wagner gives a footnote here: “See Eduard Bernsdorf, Signale für die musikalische Welt no. 67, 1869.” He is referring to Eduard Bernsdorf’s review of Johann Christian Lobe’s book *Consonanzen und Dissonanzen. Gesammelte Schriften aus älterer und neuerer Zeit*, published in *Signale für die musikalische Welt* 27/67 (December 6, 1869), 1057–58, in which Bernsdorf praises Lobe, in particular his ironic treatment of Wagner’s pamphlet *Jewishness in Music*. The first installments of Wagner’s *Über das Dirigieren* had already been published in the *Neue Zeitschrift für Musik* when Wagner read Bernsdorf’s implicit criticism of him in the *Signale*, a rival Leipzig journal. Wagner’s reaction is unusually extreme and incoherent, given the mildness of Bernsdorf’s remarks, which suggests that he is avenging himself for some more significant slight. Perhaps he had not forgotten that the initial, anonymous publication of his anti-Semitic article in 1850 had at the time prompted a scathing, public response from Bernsdorf himself (“K. Freigedank und das Judenthum in der Musik,” in the *Neue Zeitschrift für Musik* 33/31, October 15, 1850).
the sign > stands embarrassed and pointless in the score, seeming to signify an accent. But instead, I followed the composer’s intention and interpreted it as a diminuendo sign, → thereby achieving a more moderate dynamic and a gentler inflection in the performance of the ensuing thematic idea [in m. 292].

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84 This diminuendo in m. 291 was disputed in the press at the time. In his review of Wagner’s Über das Dirigieren, Heinrich Dorn called Wagner’s idea “arbitrary” and pointed out that Weber’s expansive orchestration at this point should preclude any notion of reducing the dynamic below the fortissimo already given (Dorn (1870b): 57). Nevertheless, this diminuendo was adopted by numerous conductors after Wagner. We can hear it on recordings by Nikisch with the London Symphony Orchestra in 1914 (he also slows down the tempo at the diminuendo), by Weingartner (in his 1932 film with the Paris Orchestra), by Furtwängler (e.g., in his 1944 Berlin recording, where he combines the diminuendo with a decelerando like Nikisch), and by Mengelberg (in his 1931 recording, though he does only a slight diminuendo). Nikisch, Furtwängler and Mengelberg do a rapid accelerando soon after the theme returns in m. 292, whereas Weingartner only picks up speed a little later (Nikisch’s recording, by contrast, rushes toward the close at a pace beyond the ability of his musicians to keep up). Even Toscanini, in an NBC recording of 1945, does a slight decrescendo in m. 291. A hairpin diminuendo has also been added in m. 291 in a score of the Overture held by the archives of the New York Philharmonic that appears to contain markings in the hand of Gustav Mahler, who conducted it there on November 13, 1910 (see Martner (2010): 282–83); however, it is unclear just who added it, and when. Richard Strauss felt differently, however, writing “I am not of Richard Wagner’s opinion that the great final C major of jubilant innocence should be played really piano; that is too contrary to Weber’s intention! But Wagner is quite right that the fortissimo brass is too brutal for the beautiful poetic melody. So I have the strings play the melody forte, with all the wind accompanying them piano, and only towards the high A do I have the strings increase to fortissimo, the wind to forte” (Strauss (1989): 62). Today, it is generally accepted that Weber’s marking indicated an accent, not a diminuendo; in Weber’s manuscript, the sign given in m. 291 is identical in size and shape to many placed elsewhere by the composer in his score that clearly signify accents. See Brown (1999): 111–13.
Example 3.27. Weber, Overture to Der Freischütz, mm. 288–95

I was able to let this swell up quite naturally into the return of the *fortissimo*, which meant that the whole, supple motif was given an expression of bliss, supported as it was by its grandiose accompaniment.  

Our gentlemen capellmeisters don’t like hearing of things like this, nor of the success that such ideas achieve. Mr. *Dessoff*, who was soon due to conduct the *Freischütz* again in the [Vienna] Court Opera House, was nevertheless of the opinion that he should let his orchestra play the overture in the new manner that I had taught them. He said to them, smiling: “Well, let’s take the overture à la Wagner.”

Indeed: *à la Wagner*! – I believe quite a few things could be taken *à la Wagner* without doing them any harm, gentlemen!

Nevertheless, this did seem to be a *great* concession on the part of this Viennese capellmeister. My former colleague Reissiger (since deceased) once made only *half* a concession in a similar case. Back in Dresden, I performed Beethoven’s A major Symphony after it had been played several times under Reissiger. In the final movement, I came upon a *piano* written into the orchestral parts that he had added solely at his own discretion, just where the conclusion of this finale is so wonderfully prepared. After the repeated, hammering, dominant-seventh chords on A in m. 345ff.:  

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85 This example is not given in full by Wagner; I expand it here, to better explain what he wants.  
86 Felix Otto Dessoff (1835–92), German conductor and composer, studied at the Leipzig Conservatory, later a close friend of Brahms, active as conductor in Vienna from 1860 to 1875.  
87 Anton Seidl recounts this same tale in his own essay “About Conducting,” though without giving his source (Seidl (1895b): 208–9).  
88 Wagner gives only the 3-measure excerpt from the violins, beginning in m. 349; for greater comprehensibility, I here quote the full texture in Liszt’s piano
Example 3.28. Beethoven, Symphony no. 7, 4th movement, mm. 345–51

Example 3.29. Beethoven, Symphony no. 7, 4th movement, mm. 349–51

continues always forte, leading later on into an even more impetuous “sempre più forte.” This irritated Reissiger, so in measure 349 he had the orchestra suddenly play piano, only to embark on a noticeable crescendo thereafter. Of course I deleted this piano, restoring the forte most energetically, and thereby infringed Lobe/Bernsdorf’s “eternal laws” of the genuine and the true, which were presumably also guarded over by Reissiger back then. After I had left Dresden, Reissiger once again performed this A major Symphony, but had meanwhile become doubtful about this passage. So he stopped here and recommended that his orchestra should now play mezzoforte.

Another time, not long ago in Munich, I happened to hear a public performance of the Overture to *Egmont* that was no less instructive to me than the *Freischütz* Overture had been before, and for a similar reason. In the Allegro of this overture, the tremendous, heavy, sostenuto in the introduction:

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89 Wagner apparently conducted this overture just three times, in 1852, 1853, and 1854 in Zurich; see Walton (2007): 178.
is taken up again as the first section of the second theme, with its rhythm in diminution, and it is then answered by a mellow, cozy counter-motif:

Example 3.31. Beethoven, *Egmont* Overture, op. 84, mm. 82–85

Here, as elsewhere, this incredibly tightly knit motif—which combines a terrible seriousness with amiable self-assurance—was played in the usual, “classical” manner and was swept away like a withered leaf in the unhindered plunge of the *Allegro*. If one were able to follow it at all, then one could at best have perceived it as a dance step, with the first two measures serving to prepare the dancing couple for a brief twirl in Ländler fashion in the ensuing measures. On one occasion, the celebrated older conductor was absent, at which [Hans von] Bülow took his place. I had him conduct this passage the right way, and it immediately had the impact intended by our laconic composer. The tempo up to here is passionate and agitated, but if it is firmly reined in—be it only slightly—then the orchestra will gain the space necessary to accentuate the thematic combination correctly, alternating swiftly as it does between great energy and tender felicity. Towards the end of the

90 Wagner combines a German and a French noun here, “Tanz-Pas.” His use of the latter is presumably intended to be pejorative, signifying a supposed trivialization of Beethoven’s Germanic seriousness. See fn. 120 on his other, more obviously pejorative, use of “pas” later in this essay.

91 Ashton Ellis (Wagner, trans. Ellis (1895): 333) adds a footnote here identifying the conductor as Franz Lachner; Voss (2015): 47 is of the same opinion, as am I.

92 We do not know to which performance Wagner refers. Von Bülow conducted the *Egmont* music in November 1868, after Lachner’s retirement, though Wagner too had left Munich by this time (see von Bülow’s letter to Josef Rheinberger of November 8, 1868 in the Rheinberger Archive, Vaduz, https://www.e-archiv.li/textDetail.aspx?backurl=auto&etID=42867&cID=5, accessed September 2020).

93 Weingartner remarks that when he heard von Bülow conduct this work, he did not merely rein in the tempo here, but jumped “from the allegro directly into an ‘andante grave.’” He suggests that the effect Wagner desires can be achieved without any tempo modification; the strings just have to play their rests and their upbeat eighth-note precisely, he says, instead of shortening the latter into a sixteenth-note as is so often the case (Weingartner (1896): 18–19). In his recording
triple-time section, this combination of motifs is accorded a broader treatment and assumes immense significance. Making this tempo modification enables us to achieve a new, legitimate reading for the whole Overture. As for the impact made by this correct performance, I learned only that the management of the Court Theater felt that the work had been “capsized”!

No such notions occurred to the audience of the famous Munich Odeon Concerts when I once attended a performance of Mozart’s G minor Symphony [no. 40], conducted by the aforementioned, comfortably classical conductor [Franz Lachner]. The manner in which he performed that symphony’s Andante was a success with the public, and this taught me something that I had hitherto regarded as impossible. Who has not in his youth heard this apprehensively94 floating piece of music and in his rapturous pleasure wanted in some way to make it his own? But how? No matter. Where the expression marks do not suffice, the feelings inspired by the wonderful course of this piece do their work instead, and our imagination tells us how we might give expression to these feelings in our actual interpretation.95 It seems as if the Master wished to leave this completely to us, for he offers only the scantest of binding expression marks. Thus we are free to luxuriate in the ominous shudderings of its gently swelling eighth-note motion, and we can rhapsodize with the rising violin that is like the light of the moon,96

94 Voss (2015): 48 notes that the printed editions give “schwungvoll” (spirited) here, though this is a misreading of Wagner’s autograph “ahnungsvoll” (apprehensively); I follow Voss and the autograph here.
95 This passage in Über das Dirigieren is a paraphrase of Wagner’s description of the opening of the slow movement to Mozart’s Symphony no. 39, K. 543 in the Report to His Majesty of 1865, where he postulates what the “wonderful” theme would sound like if played in the “glib” manner that its lack of expression markings suggests (SSD 8: 146). Since that symphony is in E-flat major, like the slow movement of K. 550, did Wagner perhaps get his slow movements mixed up? See fn. 21, fn. 38 and also p. 159 in the critical essay below.
96 Pembaur (1892): 32 gives this same music example (though marked sempre pp) and uses the same simile, describing it as “a dream pianissimo like the moon
Example 3.32. Mozart, Symphony no. 40, K. 550, 2nd movement, m. 9

whose notes should be gently slurred together; the gentle whisperings of

Example 3.33. Mozart, Symphony no. 40, K. 550, 2nd movement, m. 32

let us waft upwards as if on the wings of angels, and we die away at the fate-

ful admonitions of the questioning passage

Example 3.34. Mozart, Symphony no. 40, K. 550, 2nd movement, mm. 53–55

(which we imagine played in a beautifully legato crescendo). In this man-

ner, we would ultimately reach the promise of a blissful death through love,

which then embraces us kindly in the closing measures. — But any such

fantasies were swept aside in the face of a truly classical, strict performance

of this movement by the famous old master in the Odeon in Munich. This

was such serious stuff that we shuddered in our skin, as if we were about
to experience eternal damnation. The light, floating Andante in particular
became a brazen Largo, and each eighth-note was given its full value with
not a hundredth of it left out. 97 Stiff and dreadful, like iron pigtails, this

rising in the night sky.” As Voss points out, however (2015): 48, this passage is
already marked with a long slur by Mozart, and he suggests that Wagner might
have been using a faulty edition without a slur, or that he had forgotten the slur
while writing out the passage from memory.

97 Weingartner refers to this passage in his booklet on conducting Mozart’s last
three symphonies. He says that Wagner’s criticism of a slow tempo in this
movement has led younger conductors to assume they were meant to beat it
in two, to which Weingartner says “this is naturally out of the question, for
technical reasons alone”; he goes on to say that he beats this movement slightly
slower than the A major Trio for the boys in the Zauberflöte (“Seid uns zum
zweiten Mal willkommen”), which itself should be beaten in six, not in two,
strictly beaten *Andante* went over our heads, and even the feathers of its angels’ wings turned to brightly polished wire curls, like something from the time of the Seven Years’ War.\(^98\) I imagined myself transported back to 1740, being measured up as a recruit for the Prussian Guard and fearfully trying to buy my freedom.\(^99\) Who can imagine my horror when the old master turned back his pages to play the first half of this larghettoized *Andante* once more, merely because he assumed the two dots before the double bar in the score couldn’t have been engraved there without good reason. I looked around for aid—and experienced a second miracle. Everyone was listening patiently, believing that it was all perfectly in order. They were convinced that they had experienced a pure, innocent delight: a truly Mozartian feast for the ears. So I bowed my head and held my peace.

Just once, at a later date, did my patience desert me a little. In a rehearsal\(^100\) for my *Tannhäuser* [under the same conductor, i.e., Franz Lachner again], I had already acquiesced in all kinds of things, including taking the chivalrous march of the second act\(^101\) at a clerical tempo. But our indubitable old master could not even understand how to resolve the \(\frac{1}{4}\) meter into the corresponding \(\frac{3}{4}\), in other words, where two quarter-notes \(\frac{3}{4}\) become a triplet.

\(^98\) Wagner presumably means the Seven Years’ War of 1756–63 between Britain, Prussia, and Portugal on the one side, and France, Austria, Spain, Russia etc. on the other.

\(^99\) Wagner writes of being placed under the recruits’ measuring stick (the “Rekrutenmaß”), used to enforce the height requirements of different regiments—more specifically, for the “lange Kerls” (literally: long fellows), the “Potsdam Giants” of the King of Prussia’s personal regiment of grenadiers. Given that Wagner was diminutive in stature—apparently about one foot smaller than required for those grenadiers—it is not impossible that this is an instance of self-mockery (a trait not uncommon in Wagner in private, as seen in Köhler (2012), but rare in his published essays). This reference to 1740 is a double *non sequitur*. As Voss remarks, the regiment was formed by Friedrich I and was dissolved when he died in 1740; in any case, they have no connection to the Seven Years’ War under his son Friedrich II. Either Wagner got all his dates wrong, or simply liked his metaphors too much to be concerned with historical exactitude.

\(^100\) Voss identifies this as being presumably the rehearsal of March 4, 1865. See Voss (2015): 50.

\(^101\) Wagner here means the march in *Tannhäuser*, Act 2, Scene 4.
as was revealed in Tannhäuser’s Narration in the third act, where instead of $\frac{4}{4}$

Example 3.35. Wagner, Tannhäuser, Act 3, Scene 3, Tannhäuser’s Narration

we have the following in $\frac{4}{4}$:

Example 3.36. Wagner: Tannhäuser, Act 3, Scene 3, Tannhäuser’s Narration

The old master found it difficult to beat this shift. He was seriously accustomed to beating the four parts of a $\frac{4}{4}$ measure solemnly in right angles, but $\frac{4}{4}$ is always treated by this type of conductor after the manner of a $\frac{6}{8}$ measure, thus alla breve, as “one — two” (only in the Andante of [Mozart’s] G-minor symphony did I experience him beating each part of the measure in a serious 1, 2, 3 — 4, 5, 6). But for my poor Narration of the visit to the Roman Pope, the conductor made do with a hesitant alla breve as if he wanted to leave it up to the orchestral musicians to figure out how to cope with the quarter-notes. The result was that the tempo was twice as fast as it should have been. Instead of the relationship between $\frac{4}{4}$ and $\frac{4}{4}$ being as given above, it turned out thus:

Example 3.37. [Wagner, Tannhäuser, Act 3, Scene 3, Tannhäuser’s Narration, the lower staff is given as supposedly conducted by Franz Lachner]

This was in musical terms rather interesting, but it compelled the poor singer in the role of Tannhäuser to offer his painful memories of Rome in a highly

102 Wagner gives the next two examples in C; I follow Jacobs in giving them in the original, as in the accompaniment to Tannhäuser’s Narration in the third act of that opera.
frivolous waltzing rhythm that skipped along merrily. This reminded me of Lohengrin’s Narration of the Grail as I had heard it once in Wiesbaden, where it was performed scherzando (as if it were for Queen Mab). Since on this occasion in Munich I had the wonderful singer L[udwig] Schnorr for the role of Tannhäuser, in order to do him justice I had to intervene most respectfully with our old master and get him to beat the right tempo. This caused some offence. I believe that over time it even led to acts of martyrdom that a cold-blooded critic of the Gospels felt compelled to extol in two sonnets. These days, our pure classical music has its martyrs, and I shall allow myself to take a closer look at them in what follows here. —

103 It is difficult to believe that a conductor as experienced as Franz Lachner would really conduct this passage at twice the proper speed, not least because the tenor would be unable to spit out his words at such a tempo (see the eighth-note passage “da läuteten die Glocken,” at which the music would surely have broken down). So Wagner is probably exaggerating, though we have no proof either way.

104 Lohengrin, Act 3, Scene 3.

105 Wagner presumably has the “Queen Mab Scherzo” in mind, from Berlioz’s Roméo et Juliette, op. 17. The Wiesbaden performance in question was conducted by Johann Baptist Hagen (1818–70) in the summer of 1862; Wagner claimed in Mein Leben to have left early in a rage (ML: 708).

106 Ludwig Schnorr von Carolsfeld (1836–65), Wagner’s favorite tenor, who died just six weeks after singing in the world premiere of Tristan und Isolde.

107 Wagner here refers to two sonnets by the theologian David Strauss (1808–74) in which the latter defended his friend Franz Lachner against Wagner’s attacks (though without naming Wagner directly). Wagner reacted in turn by writing three sonnets attacking Strauss. See SSD 12: 371f., Janz (1997) and Voss (2015): 51–52. David Strauss had come across Wagner’s music when he mixed with Liszt and others in Weimar in the early 1850s. He had already developed an antipathy towards things Wagnerian by the time he published Der Christus des Glaubens und der Jesus der Geschichte in 1865, for in a footnote there he mentions the enthusiasts for St. Mark’s Gospel as being a “waste of time, like the music of the future [Zukunftsmusik] or the agitators against cowpox vaccinations”: Strauss (1865): 54. Wagner will probably also have known that Strauss had criticized Beethoven’s introduction of voices in the last movement of his Ninth Symphony, because Hanslick specifically refers to this in the 1865 edition of his Vom Musikalisch-Schönen (see Hanslick (1865), 69–71); this will have been another reason for Wagner to dislike Strauss. Wagner’s antipathy towards him was later taken up by Nietzsche. See Ziegler (1908): 714–15.
As I have already often touched upon above, attempts to modify the tempo in performances of classical works, i.e., in music by Beethoven, have always been met with reluctance by the conductors’ caucus of our time. I have shown here extensively that a one-sided modification of the tempo, without a corresponding modification of the dynamics of performance, would seem to justify such objections, though I have also revealed the deeper, underlying problem, for these objections are solely a result of the general incompetence and lack of vocation on the part of our conductors. While I regard my methods as essential in the abovementioned cases, there is nevertheless a perfectly valid reason for warning against them. Nothing could be more damaging to those pieces of music than to subject them to arbitrary modifications (also of tempo), because it could open them up to the fantastical discretion of any and every vain time-beater keen to achieve a mere effect. Over time, this would merely disfigure our classical repertoire to the point of complete unrecognizability. There is nothing one can say here except that we have reached a sad state of affairs if such fears can arise at all. It means that people in our world no longer have faith in that true artistic awareness that can swiftly dispel any such arbitrariness. As a result, those objections (which, although well founded, are rarely raised honestly) serve to confirm the general incompetence of our conductors. But if we are to prevent the bunglers from subjecting our music to their whims, why haven’t our own excellent, highly esteemed musicians seen fit to put things right? Why have they, of all people, led the performance of classical music onto the paths of triviality and disfigurement to an extent that ought to dissatisfy any feeling musician, or even sicken them?

Their seemingly justified objections [to my suggestions] are mostly just a pretext for opposing every endeavor along the paths that I have laid out here. The reasons lie, as always, in incompetence and mental lethargy—a lethargy that sometimes intensifies to the point of aggression. This is because incompetent and lethargic men are in the majority by far.

Most classical works were without exception introduced to us only in the most imperfect manner (just think of the reports on the circumstances in
which Beethoven’s most difficult symphonies were first performed!). Many of them were initially brought before the German public in completely disfigured form (in this regard, see my essay on Gluck’s Overture to Iphigenie in Aulis in the fifth volume of these collected writings). These examples can help us to comprehend the incompetence and idleness with which these works have been most assiduously performed—we only have to consider how even a master such as Mendelssohn went about conducting them! To be sure, we cannot expect far more minor musicians to reach a state of comprehension of their own accord, when even their true master was unable to attain it. This is because there is only one way to help the less gifted to grasp the right manner of doing things: we have to provide them with an example. But they won’t find any such example on the paths they have chosen. It is depressing that this leaderless path is so well trodden that there is no more space left on it for him who might indeed provide such an example. This is why I shall now take a keener, more in-depth look at the devout opposition to performing our great works of music correctly. My aim is to reveal the true wretchedness of these intractable men, and above all to deprive them of the halo with which they adorn themselves as the supposed “chaste spirits of German art.” Because it is they who hold back our music life where it would otherwise soar up; it is they who deprive its ambiance of any draught of fresh air; and it is they who, with time, will turn the glories of German music into a bland, laughable wraith.

It seems important to me to look them straight in the eye and to tell them to their face where they really come from—and they quite certainly do not originate in the spirit of German music, which in itself we do not need to investigate further here. It is not so easy to weigh up the positive aspects of our newer, i.e., Beethovenian music, precisely because it is so weighty, and we shall wait for a better moment than today before embarking on such an undertaking. For now, let us suffice by proving the worthlessness of

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109 Wagner is here presumably relying again on the testimony of Anton Schindler; see the discussion of his possible influence on Wagner in the section “Tempo Modification” below.

110 Wagner means his essay “Gluck’s Ouvertüre zu ‘Iphigenia in Aulis.’ Eine Mitteilung an den Redakteur der ‘Neuen Zeitschrift für Musik,’” first published in that journal in 1854 and then reprinted, as he states here, in the fifth volume of the first edition of his writings that he was busy editing and publishing with Fritzsch of Leipzig. That article includes expression markings that are also found in orchestral parts and a score held today by the Zentralbibliothek Zürich. See Figures 5.13–5.15 below.
that type of music-making that currently pretends to be truly classical and Beethovenian.

The opposition of which I speak is supported by utterly uneducated hacks who are extremely loud and vociferous when they write in the press; but when you actually come across them, they in fact express themselves in a manner that is merely obstinate and timid. (“See, he can’t express himself properly,” a lady once said to me with a meaningful glance, referring to one of those prim-and-proper musicians.) Through their utter carelessness, the administrative bodies of German art have placed the leadership of our higher organs of music life into their hands, and thus the fate of German music rests with them too. They consequently feel secure in their rank and office. As I observed right at the start here, this Areopagus comprises two fundamentally different tribes: that of the German musicians of the old style that is today falling into decline, and which has retained its prestige especially in the more naïve climes of southern Germany, and that of the up-and-coming, elegant musicians of the newer style who have emerged primarily in northern Germany from the school of Mendelssohn. These two species once thought little of each other, though certain recent disruptions to their smooth-running operations have resulted in their uniting in mutual recognition. Thus Mendelssohn’s school—and all that goes with it—now enjoys just as much appreciation and support in southern Germany as prototypical southern German unproductivity is now greeted with welcome respect in the north. A pity that Lindpaintner of blessed memory was no longer able to experience this. Both trends have been united in a metaphorical handshake to ensure mutual peace. Perhaps the former, southern type of musician had to overcome a certain inner resistance to this alliance, but any

111 In his copy of this essay, Richard Strauss has underlined “Through their utter carelessness, the administrative bodies of German art” and placed an exclamation mark in the right-hand margin.

112 The Areopagus (literally the “rock of Ares”) is a hill near the Acropolis and was the name given to the council of city elders in ancient Athens.

113 As Voss points out, Wagner’s contemporaries also believed that there were considerable north–south differences among German musicians of their day. See Voss (2015): 54. In his own conducting treatise, Zopff (1881): 100 writes specifically of different attitudes to tempo among conductors from north and south Germany.

114 Peter Joseph von Lindpaintner (1791–1856), German conductor and composer, born in Koblenz but active mostly in southern Germany, whom Mendelssohn regarded highly.
embarrassment was mitigated by a mixture of envy and helplessness—which together constitute an uncommendable characteristic of the Germans that has already ruined one of the most important musicians of modern times\textsuperscript{115} (as I have already explained elsewhere). That man went so far as to deny his own nature, even making himself subservient to the new laws of the elegant type of musician—laws that are so ruinous to what is truly German. As to the opposition from the more subordinate men whose nature was more that of craftsmen, they had little to say except: “we can’t make any progress, we don’t want anyone else to make any progress either, and we’d be annoyed if anyone else did.” All this was honest narrow-mindedness, and it only turns dishonest out of resentment.

But things are different in the more modern camp, where the strangest ramifications of personal, social, and even national interests mean that all kinds of different attitudes have come together. Without going into further detail about these manifold interests, I shall here highlight only their principal maxim, namely that these men endeavor to hide much, and try to ensure that much goes unnoticed. In a certain sense, they are keen that people should not even notice that they are “musicians.” And they have good reason to want this.

It used to be difficult to associate with true German musicians, back in the day. Just as in France and England, musicians in Germany had always been very neglected in society, even despised. Here, the princes and aristocrats almost only ever regarded musicians as human beings if they came from Italy. As we can see in Mozart’s treatment by the Emperor’s court in Vienna, Italian musicians were preferred to Germans in a humiliating manner. In our country, a musician remained ever a peculiar, half-wild, half-childish being, and he was treated thus by those who paid him his wages. Our greatest musical geniuses bore the marks of this exclusion from finer, more stimulating society—just think of Beethoven when he met Goethe in Teplitz.\textsuperscript{116} Musicians were regarded as inherently incapable of any higher education. When H[einrich] Marschner saw my intense efforts to raise standards in the Dresden orchestra in 1848, he warned me against it in my own interest,

\textsuperscript{115} Wagner means Robert Schumann. In his copy of this essay, Richard Strauss has also written the name “R. Schumann” in the left-hand margin here.

\textsuperscript{116} Wagner is referring to the often told tale of Beethoven encountering Goethe at the spa resort of Teplitz in 1812, when Goethe supposedly bowed to passing aristocrats, while Beethoven refused to do so. See, for example, Schindler (1840): 82–83.
saying I should remember that musicians were simply incapable of understanding me. — To be sure, as I stated at the outset, even our highest musical posts are in most cases held by “musicians” who have moved up from below, though their sheer good craftsmanship means they have also brought with them many admirable qualities. A kind of family feeling accordingly emerged within this orchestral patriarchy. It did not lack a sense of familiarity, though it lacked that fresh breath of genius that can spark a fire in the intelligent heart of an orchestra, and be it only a fire that warms more than it illumines.

But just as our world of craftsmanship has remained foreign to the Jews, so did our newer music conductors fail to emerge from the ranks of our musical craftsmen. That world is anathema to our conductors, not least because they are averse to the real hard work it entails. Instead, this new type of conductor has planted himself straight at the top of our musical guild system, just like the banker sits atop our craftsmen’s guilds. To this end he had to bring one thing with him from the outset that those musicians who had risen from below did not possess, or at least found it very difficult to acquire on those rare occasions when they succeeded in it. Just as the banker has his capital, so the new conductor brings learnedness with him. But this is mere superficial learnedness, not real culture, because whoever truly possesses the latter is not to be mocked. He is superior to everyone. But let us consider instead the possessor of that superficial kind.

Those who possess true culture enjoy real freedom of mind—true freedom altogether, in fact. But I know of no case in which even the happiest cultivation of superficial learning has resulted in that kind of freedom. Mendelssohn possessed many talents, and cultivated them with earnest diligence, but it was still obvious that he never achieved real freedom. He was never able to overcome those peculiar inhibitions that the serious observer realized kept him outside our German artistic life, despite all his well-earned successes. Perhaps this even became a nagging source of anguish to him, and was what consumed his life at such an unfathomably early age. There is nothing unselfconscious about this kind of desire to become cultured. It originates not in any urge to express oneself freely, but in a compulsion to hide something from one’s own nature. The culture that emerges from this can thus only be a mendacious, pseudo-culture.117 It can enable one to hone

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117 Wagner uses the word “Afterbildung,” literally “anal culture,” which is a not uncommon intensification of “half-” or “pseudo”-culture, and does not have the same vulgar connotation as in English.
one’s intellect along certain paths—but the place where all these paths come
together can never be a place of true, clear-sighted intelligence. — While
it is almost deeply distressing to observe this inner process at work in an
especially talented, finely developed individual, it soon becomes nauseating
to us when we observe the same process and its effects in less talented, more
trivial natures. In them, everything grins at us in a trite, trifling manner. If
we are unable to follow most of the superficial representatives of our cultural
institutions by simply smiling back at the smirking sham that is their under-
standing of culture, then we become truly resentful at the sight of them. The
true German musician has serious reason to feel resentful, because he has had
to realize that these trivial pseudo-artists have the temerity to sit in judge-
ment on the spirit and significance of our magnificent music.

In general, it is a prime characteristic of the representatives of this pseudo-
culture that they linger long on nothing, they delve deeply into nothing, and—to put it another way—they make much of nothing. They regard the
greatest, most sublime, and most profound thing as perfectly natural and self-evident, as something that is at the disposal of everyone at all times,
available for them to learn and, no doubt, to mimic. They do not dwell on
what is immense, divine or daemonic because they will not find anything there that they might copy successfully. This is why these pseudo-artists cus-
tomarily speak of excrescences, exaggerations, and the like. Out of this, they
have formulated a new aesthetic that pretends to model itself primarily on
Goethe, because he is supposed to have been averse to all such monstrosities
and instead upheld a beautiful, calm clarity. Then they praise the “harmless-
ness” of art, while they treat Schiller somewhat scornfully for having been occasionally too intense. And thus, in clever unanimity with the Philistines
of our day, they create a whole new concept of classicism. To bolster their
arguments in the broader regions of art, they also inevitably drag in the
Greeks because they were home to a clear, transparent serenity. This shal-
low reconciliation with all that is serious and awe-inspiring in our existence
is then raised up to the status of a completely new, ideological system in
which even our new musical heroes of pseudo-culture ultimately find an
uncontested, comfortable place of honor.

I have already demonstrated in a few eloquent examples just how these
pseudo-artists have dealt with our great German works of music. All that
remains is for me to explain the supposedly serene, Greek meaning of

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118 See my discussion of Wagner’s use of the word “system” in the section “Über das Dirigieren—Structure, Context, and Meta-Text” below.
Mendelssohn’s urgent exhortation to just “skim through” a work. We can see this most clearly in his adherents and successors. For Mendelssohn, it was about hiding the unavoidable weaknesses of a performance, perhaps in certain cases also the weakness of the performers themselves. In his followers, however, their pseudo-culture comes into play because their aim is to hide as much as possible, and thereby avoid any and all fuss. There is a reason for this that is almost wholly physiological, as became clear to me in a case that is not as far removed from my topic as it might seem. When my Tannhäuser was performed in Paris, I reworked the first scene in the Venusberg, making more of what before had been only fleetingly alluded to. I pointed out to the ballet master how the pitiful, skipping little dance steps of his Maenads and Bacchantes contrasted ridiculously to my music. I insisted that he should instead invent something more appropriate here—something bold, wild, and sublime, based on the processions of Bacchantes as depicted on famous Classical reliefs. That was what his corps de ballet should be dancing. The man whistled through his fingers and said to me: “Ah, I understand you very well, but for that I’d need a corps just of principal dancers. If I said a word of this to my people here and tried to demonstrate the kind of gestures you want, they’d promptly do a ‘can-can’ and we’d be lost.” The same attitude that led my Parisian ballet master to retain the utterly vacuous dance steps of his Maenads and Bacchantes is what prevents the elegant leaders of our new music life from giving free rein to their sense of pseudo-culture—they know that it can only lead to a scandal à la Offenbach. Meyerbeer was a cautionary example for them. His work at the Paris Opera had already enticed him to

119 This was Lucien Petipa (1815–98), maître de ballet at the Opera in Paris at the time. When Cosima Wagner decided to perform Tannhäuser at Bayreuth, she liaised with Petipa (whom she consistently called “Petit-Pas”) in 1887 through Wagner’s friend and translator Charles Nuiit, to try and get details of the choreography and staging of the Paris production of 1861. When Tannhäuser was finally presented in Bayreuth in 1891, Cosima engaged the renowned Italian dancer Virginia Zucchi to do the choreography; Zucchi, as it happens, was a favorite of Petipa’s brother Marius, who was the ballet master at the Mariinsky Ballet in St. Petersburg for three decades. See Wagner and Nuitter (2002): 157–58 and 162.

120 Wagner writes the French word “pas” here; see fn. 90 above on the other, also seemingly pejorative use of this French word. It is also possible that he intends a blunt play on the name of his ballet master Petipa (whom he calls “Petitpas”—literally, little step—in ML: 644).
adopt certain Semitic accents in his music that made even the representatives of “pseudo-culture” take fright.

Much of their learning has always comprised keeping a careful check on their behavior, just as someone with a natural speech impediment, like a stammer or lisp, has to avoid all ardent in his speech so that he does not lapse into an unseemly stuttering or spluttering. This custom of always keeping themselves in check has undoubtedly been pleasantly successful in that it has prevented much that is repugnant from seeing the glaring light of day, while the general mix of mankind has gone about its business far more unobtrusively. This has had a positive effect on us all, because it has loosened up much in our own nature that had developed in a pretty poor, stiff fashion. I have already mentioned above that the coarseness of our musicians was moderated, and a gracefulness in the execution of certain details in performance came to the fore. But it’s a very different thing when this compulsive reticence and suppression of questionable personal traits is then turned into a principle for the performance of our art. The German is angular and awkward when he tries to be genteel. But he is noble and superior to everything when he is inflamed with passion. Should we then hold back in this, just out of consideration for Them? 

But in truth, that’s how it seems to be these days. Whenever I used to meet a young musician who had been in Mendelssohn’s proximity, he would mention only how the master would admonish him never to think of creating any “impact” or “effect” when composing, but to avoid everything

121 Wagner capitalizes this word (“Jenen”).
123 Wagner writes here “Wirkung oder Effekt,” which is superficially tautological, as they are generally used as synonyms, the former of German origin, the latter being derived from the Latin. But in Opera and Drama (SSD 3: 301), Wagner had already set up these two words in opposition, choosing the latter “as a foreign word removed from our natural feeling” to signify the “secret” of Meyerbeer’s music; Wagner’s own “translation” of this was “Wirkung ohne Ursache,” effect without cause. “Effekt” thus seems to have signified for Wagner—at least in his Zurich writings—something foreign/French/Jewish and not “German.” In Über das Dirigieren he clearly remembers using “Wirkung” and “Effekt” to mean opposite things, but seems unable or unwilling to pursue this binary opposition with any real consistency. Thus he later on here reverts to “Wirkung” (see fn. 133 in this chapter), but then returns to “Effekt” without keeping the two words and their newly assigned meanings
that could cause it. That sounded perfectly reasonable. And indeed, those students who have remained faithful to their master have never yet achieved any effect in their music at all. But this seemed to me to be far too negative a doctrine, and rather precluded exploiting the positive aspects of what they had learned. I believe that all the teachings of the Leipzig Conservatory are founded on this negative maxim. I have discovered that the young people there are utterly tortured by its warnings, while even their finest talents cannot win themselves any favor with their teachers until they have expunged everything from their music that isn’t suited for setting psalms.\(^{124}\)

With regard to our present topic, these negative maxims had their biggest impact on the art of performing our classical music, which has become dominated by a fear of lapsing into anything radical. I have never yet heard of adherents of their teachings being able to learn and perform the piano works of Beethoven in a manner that presents his style at its most characteristic and recognizable. For a long time it was my fervent desire to find someone who could let me hear the great B-flat major Sonata [op. 106, the *Hammerklavier*]. This wish was ultimately fulfilled, though by someone with a background very different from those men who had been drilled in the war camps where Mendelssohn’s maxims were upheld. It was the great Franz Liszt, who also stilled my yearning to hear *Bach* performed properly. They liked to cultivate Bach over there too; since no one could claim that his music harbored any modern effects or the radicalism of a Beethoven, they found it all the easier to play it in their beatifically smooth, utterly flavorless manner.

In connection with the *Tempo di Menuetto* of [Beethoven’s] Eighth Symphony, I have already mentioned a colleague of Mendelssohn’s who was one of the most renowned musicians of the older generation.\(^{125}\) I once asked him to play to me the eighth Prelude and Fugue from the first book of the *Well-Tempered Clavier* (in E-flat minor), because this piece had always magically attracted me. I have to confess that I have rarely experienced such a

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\(^{124}\) This is presumably another snide reference to Mendelssohn and his psalm settings.

\(^{125}\) Wagner clearly means Ferdinand Hiller.
fright as when he kindly honored my request. There was no more hint of
any gloomy German Gothic or any such supposed nonsense—in instead, the
piece flowed across the piano under the hands of my friend with a “Greek
serenity,” such that I didn’t know where to turn any more in the face of
so much innocuousness. 126 I involuntarily felt as if transported into some
neo-Hellenic synagogue from whose musical rites all Old Testament accents
had been eradicated 127 so as to make everything sound as genteel as pos-
sible. That peculiar performance was still tingling in my ears when I finally
asked Liszt to purify my musical soul from that embarrassing experience. He
played the fourth Prelude and Fugue for me (in C-sharp minor). I already
knew what I might expect from Liszt at the piano, but what I now heard
was something I would never have anticipated from Bach, regardless of how
well I had studied him. Here I learnt the difference between any amount of
studying and an act of revelation. For Liszt revealed Bach to me by playing
just this one fugue. As a result, I now know unmistakably what he is, and can
from this standpoint appreciate him in all his aspects. If ever I might feel in
danger of going astray and doubting him, I can dispel all doubts through the
strength of my robust faith. 128 But I also know that Those 129 who guard him
as if he belonged to them in fact know nothing of him. And if anyone should
doubt this, I shall say unto him: have them play Bach to you!

I also call on the best of that Pietistic musical temperance society (which
I shall consider in greater detail below) to confess whether they have really
known and understood Beethoven’s great B-flat major Sonata before hav-
ing heard it played by Liszt. I can at least name one man who heard that

126 As explained in the essay below, Wagner himself had only modest skills at the
piano.

127 Wagner writes “ausgemerzt,” a word whose origins were in animal husbandry.
While we must beware of inverting history, the anti-Semitic context in which
Wagner employs this verb is striking. It later became a favorite word of the
National Socialists when describing their policies for exterminating those fel-
low human beings whom they regarded as unworthy of life. See, e.g., Schmitz-

128 These sentences seem to play intentionally with (Christian) religious terminol-
ogy, though with anti-Semitic intent: “Offenbarung” (revelation); “Irrewerden”
(to go astray); and the opposition of “Zweifel” (doubt) and “gläubig” (faithful).
This is presumably intended to underlie Wagner’s supposed distance from
those who would purportedly play Bach as if—thus Wagner—they were par-
taking of a musical rite in a “genteel” synagogue.

129 Again, Wagner capitalizes “Jenen.”
wonderful event and was so moved that he felt compelled to make just such a confession.\footnote{130} But there is another man who today plays Bach and the true Beethoven in public and so enraptures every audience that they, too, confess to having never understood this music properly before. Is he a student of that school of abstinence? No! It is the man most qualified to be Liszt’s successor, \textit{Hans von Bülow}.\footnote{131}

This will suffice for now on this topic.

Now we must consider how these fine revelations further apply to those gentlemen with whom we are dealing here.\footnote{132}

Their political successes, inasmuch as their aversion to “effect” enables them to assert themselves “effectively”\footnote{133} in the German musical community, should not bother us further. But the religious developments in their community are certainly of concern to us. In this regard, their maxim “avoid all effect,” which used to be more a result of anxious inhibition and selfish apprehension, has been raised from being a subtle, prudent rule into a truly aggressive dogma. Its adherents turn away their eyes with peevish timidity when they come across a real man in music, almost as if they perceived him to be something unchaste. This timidity originally served to conceal their own impotence, but it is now used to defame the potent, and their accusations gain active strength from suspicion and slander. The nourishing soil in which all this thrives is poor German Philistinism, whose squalid spirit we find in the pettiest of men, and which envelops our music life too, as we have already seen.

The main ingredient, however, remains a certain judicious wariness towards those things that they cannot themselves achieve, while slandering everything that they would like to achieve. It is beyond sad that a man as able as \textit{Robert Schumann} should have become entangled in this dreadful state of affairs—and indeed, his name became posthumously inscribed on the church banner of this new community. It was unfortunate that Schumann

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\footnote{130}{It is unclear to whom Wagner is referring here.}

\footnote{131}{While contemporary reports leave no doubt that Wagner’s praise for von Bülow was justified, it is also worth noting that Wagner needed von Bülow to agree to divorce Cosima so that she and Wagner might be married. The divorce came through in July 1870, thus half year after \textit{Über das Dirigieren} was published. Cosima married Wagner just over a month later.}

\footnote{132}{This is the first paragraph in the eighth installment of Wagner’s essay, as published on January 14, 1870 in the \textit{Neue Zeitschrift für Musik} 66/3.}

\footnote{133}{In this sentence, Wagner writes “Wirkung” and “Wirksamkeit,” not “Effekt”; but afterwards, it’s “Effekt” again. See fn. 123 in this chapter.}