

**ON THE PERFORMANCE
OF BEETHOVEN'S
SYMPHONIES**

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On the performance of Beethoven's symphonies by Felix Weingartner

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BY

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TRANSLATED BY

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1856

INTRODUCTION.

THE secret of the artistic rendering of musical compositions, and hence the secret of the conductor's art, lies in the style. The reproducing artist, in this case the conductor, must have absorbed into himself, so to speak, the peculiarity of each master and each masterpiece, and his rendering must be subordinate to this peculiarity even in the smallest details. As regards the time, the phrasing, the treatment of the sounds in the orchestra and even the technical manipulation, the conductor must assume a different personality according as he is conducting the *Eroica* or the *Pastorale*, *Tristan* or the *Meistersinger*, according as he is trying to reproduce Haydn or Beethoven, Berlioz or Wagner. I believe I am not going too far when I say that a conductor of genius unites in himself just as many personalities as he reproduces masterpieces.

One of the essential conditions of the style of an execution must be *clearness*, and this is the quality which will occupy us here with regard to Beethoven's Symphonies. This is precisely the point in which these greatest of all orchestral compositions offer the greatest difficulty, for even a perfectly correct rendering does not always make the intentions of the master as clear as they become by the reading of the score, or even by the playing of the pianoforte extracts. Indeed it must be confessed that many passages awaken a feeling of confusion rather than of pleasure. And yet we should be renouncing at once all idea of a true re-

production if we passed these problems by, and took refuge behind the mere correctness of our rendering. Wagner, in his valuable work "On the Execution of Beethoven's Ninth Symphony" (Zum Vortrag der neunten Symphonie Beethoven's), to which I shall often have occasion to refer, says: — "Just as we should never leave a difficult passage in a philosopher until we clearly understand it — as otherwise, on reading further with increasing carelessness, we end by misunderstanding the teacher altogether — so we should never glide over a single note in a symphony such as this of Beethoven's without having a clear consciousness of what it means." He also points out that Beethoven's intentions were far in advance of the means at his disposal, and that he devoted his chief attention to the management of horns and trumpets, which, in his day, included only the natural scale



and one or two more or less questionable stopped notes. With his penetrating mind and fine understanding, Wagner also felt and frankly admitted "that after the period of his deafness had begun, Beethoven's mental conception of the orchestra grew fainter in proportion as the dynamic conditions of the orchestra became less familiar to him; and these conditions lost their distinctness just when they were becoming most indispensable, namely, at a time when his conceptions needed a constantly changing manipulation of the orchestra"

A conscientious study of Beethoven's orchestral works shews us, in fact, that the horns and trumpets often come to a stand-still simply because it was impossible to obtain a suitable sound for a given chord on the instruments of

that time, and that for the same reason they often break off the melodial design entrusted to them, and either proceed merely with harmonic notes, or pause altogether. We see that these instruments are often obliged to make dangerous and apparently aimless leaps because they could follow the progress of the musical representation in no other way. Finally we see that sometimes the most important part becomes quite inaudible, because it is entrusted to instruments which are drowned by others with a louder sound playing a much less important part.

It is true that this state of things may be improved by instrumental changes; but unless those changes are conducted with the utmost prudence and good taste, there is great danger lest the most important thing of all, Beethoven's own peculiar style, may suffer; for, in spite of the indisputable imperfections mentioned above, Beethoven's handling of the orchestra is so entirely peculiar to himself, that the greatest caution is necessary if it is to be in any way interfered with.

The present work has undertaken the task, among other things, of marking as definitely as possible the limit within which such interference is artistically justifiable. Since the later years of Bülow's activity, in which he fell more and more a prey to unwholesome sensation, all kinds of distortions as regards time and phrasing have unfortunately become the fashion in the rendering of Beethoven's works. We have also — though not through any fault of Bülow's, for his perceptions were too fine for this — witnessed instrumental encroachments which do violence to Beethoven's spirit. It is well known that I have not only avoided such distortions when conducting myself, but have waged war against them in speech and in writing. And I have no hesitation now in condemning as inexcusable frivolity the addition of instruments which Beethoven never employed, and the inclusion of trombones in passages for which no trombones were prescribed. Beethoven's works were written at a time

prior to the reform of brass instruments through the introduction of valves, which has been in many respects beneficial. And I believe I am not mistaken in feeling in his manner of writing an anticipatory longing for this reform. But on the other hand it must not be forgotten that, at any rate with respect to the horns and natural instruments, a far richer and more varied application was possible than that which Beethoven gave to them. We can learn this from a glance at the scores of his contemporary, Weber, the greatest master of horn-writing. We are justified therefore in sometimes helping to render some of Beethoven's intentions clearer by the application of our more extensive means, but on no account are we justified in a re-instrumentation of his works according to the principles of the modern orchestra.

Since I have conducted in the concert hall, I have honestly endeavoured to seize and to reproduce faithfully the style of Beethoven's works. Numerous recitals which I have conducted have given me constantly recurring opportunities of working at this ambitious task, of perfecting myself in it, of quickening my appreciation, and of striving with all my might to come nearer to my ideal, viz., to reproduce faithfully in my interpretation the characteristic features of Beethoven's orchestral work, while at the same time combining them with the utmost clearness. The following proposals have the advantage of being based throughout, not on theoretical considerations, but on practical and, in many cases, oft-repeated experience.

I tried first of all to animate the execution by means of careful notation, and endeavoured to render obscure passages clearer by this means, without altering the instrumentation. By careful notation I made the more important parts more prominent and put the less important parts more in the background; not with the idea of producing arbitrary shades of expression, but simply to preserve the unbroken melodic

progress of the symphony, a clear understanding of which is the only safeguard against obscurity in execution. In many cases where I had originally thought an instrumental alteration to be indispensable, I found to my joy that a carefully executed notation not only amply met my own requirements, but also corresponded much more to Beethoven's intention than the alteration contemplated.

Passages do occur, however, where notation alone would not suffice, and in such cases I was obliged to have recourse to instrumental interference. This book, in which everyone of these cases is examined and justified in detail, is sufficient proof of the careful consideration with which I proceeded in the matter.

Such alterations are of different kinds. In some cases I made the second voice of a wood-wind instrument, which had just come to a pause, resume in unison with the first voice in order to strengthen it. In several symphonies I not only doubled the number of the wood-wind instruments for a strong string-quartet — this other conductors had done before me — but also marked with the utmost care every passage in each individual part where this doubling was to come in and where it was to stop. This is treated in detail in the introductory remarks to the *Eroica*, and taken up later in connexion with each particular symphony.

Other alterations are necessary in those passages in which both horns or both trumpets are playing in octaves, but where Beethoven has been obliged through lack of a natural note to allow the second voice to make a disproportionate leap. Wagner, as he tells us himself, used "generally" to recommend his second wind-players, in such passages as the following:

