

With Beethoven at the Piano

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Q. What are the determinants of tempo?

KUERTI. Choosing tempo involves taking into consideration a multitude of factors, including the composer's written designation, one's own instinctive reaction to the music, the need for it to be comprehensible to the listener (the hand is not only faster than the eye, but also faster than the ear), the changing context and character within the movement, even the particular acoustics and instrument at hand, and one's own mood.

Q. How are we to respond to Beethoven's metronome markings, especially in the Hammerklavier?

KUERTI. It's worth remembering, I think, that the metronome didn't surface until Beethoven was quite deaf, and as you suggest, the mute, abstract, internal perception of tempo is bound to distort one's judgement. He made metronome markings for the symphonies as well, and sent them to his publisher. These were lost, and he redid them – as it now turns out, with significant differences from the first list. But in the case of the *Hammerklavier* it's not just in the first movement that the problems arise. As Bernard Robert says, to play the fugue at 144 to the crotchet, for instance, is in absolute contradiction to the *Allegro risoluto* marking, and turns the agonizingly expressive chromatic semi-quaver counterpoint into a meaningless, headache-provoking blur. Why, in an art where precise measurement is impossible and undesirable, let a two or three digit number overwhelm all other criteria?

My teacher Arthur Loesser told me that he argued this matter with Schnabel, who said, "But I have seen Beethoven's manuscript with the metronome markings", to which Loesser replied, "But I have seen Beethoven's metronome!" Schindler claims there were two metronomes, a large and a small one, which didn't match each other's tempi, but Nottebohm denies that.

Q. What about fluctuations within the chosen tempo?

KUERTI. Schindler's famous play-by-play description of how Beethoven played the Op. 14, No. 1 Sonata has been questioned by some writers, who allege that he was a braggart and a fantasizer who thrived by exploiting his association with Beethoven. Nottebohm, the earliest important scholar, is constantly pointing out mistakes in Schindler's writings about the master. However, while his account may be somewhat exaggerated, if you try it out it rings so true and is so profoundly musical that I believe in its basic validity. Of course such extreme flexibility of tempo as he describes cannot be applied everywhere. There are movements such as 7 I, 10/2 III, 26 IV, 27/2 I, 31/2 III, 31/3 IV, 54 II, 57 III, 101 II, and 110 II, to name just a few from the Piano Sonatas alone, in which it would be an atrocity to indulge in noticeable tempo fluctuations, because these movements derive their power from their ineluctable, relentless rhythmic drive,

whether it be the ominous, slow flow of the opening of 27/2 (the *Moonlight*) or the obsessive canter of the finale of 31/2.

Q. *What about pedaling?*

KUERTI. Thankfully, Beethoven only marks very special effects, unlike Chopin, for example, who was unable to refrain from setting down pedal marks in almost every bar. What is of course most interesting, is that Beethoven often asks us to sustain the pedal right through rests and staccato marks, which shows us that some of these marks are more symbolic than literal, and related more to gesture and character than explicit space between the notes. Take for instance the first melody note in the last movement of the *Waldstein*, which, on every appearance throughout the movement, has a 'stroke' over it, and a very long pedal marking underneath it. Here, as in many other places, Beethoven also asks us to pedal right through harmony changes. While the much smaller sustaining power of his pianos might have mitigated this washing together of tonic and dominant (or even more exotic combinations, as in the opening of the slow movement of the Third Concerto), it could hardly have eliminated them. So indeed, I apply this tactic to many spots where it is not marked by the composer, such as the coda of the first movement of *Les Adieux*, where the fading echoes of the posthorn echoing from the distance are particularly touching when tonic and dominant are allowed to mingle together.

Q. One thing that has troubled me for many years is the fact that so many performers, even very great ones, appear to disregard Beethoven's phrasing and articulation marks, which are often very precise indeed, as in the opening of the G Major Concerto and the two *Adagios* in the first movement of Op. 109. Why should this be so?

KUERTI. One's feeling for the character, however, must not be overruled by some contentious articulation marks. The G Major Concerto's first movement is overwhelmingly lyrical and poetic, and to play the chords in the opening statement short would completely destroy its magic. I prefer to use aesthetic criteria to reinforce my conclusions on what Beethoven meant by his articulation marks, rather than allow an *a priori* concept of the articulation marks to entirely determine the character of a work. The manuscript to the Fourth Concerto was lost already during Beethoven's lifetime, so it is impossible to know whether he wrote strokes or dots here. It is interesting to note that the new Beethovenhaus/Henle complete works edition gives no articulation marks at all over the first three quavers in the piano opening. The autograph for the cadenza is available, and has few articulations marks – but those few are strokes, not dots.

Q. *And what about editions?*

KUERTI. Like most performers of today, I want to get my instructions straight from the composer without the help of intermediaries. Unfortunately, there is no ideal choice available, despite the extraordinary improvement and good intentions of publishers like Henle and Universal Wiener Urtext. The problem with

Henle is that they make too many decisions in ambiguous places without even a footnote to explain their choice, and they fail entirely to distinguish between dots and strokes, using exclusively the former.

Q. Is Beethoven's sense of humour a potential banana skin for the interpreter?

KUERTI. Beethoven's overwhelming ingrained image as a highly serious, usually scowling, profound composer of impassioned, often tragic music makes one, perhaps, look for these qualities and possibly miss the humour. Take for example the first movement of Op. 31, No. 3, which is played so often as two sighs, followed by a solemn, heroic *ritardando*. I am convinced they are tickles, not sighs, and that the *ritardando* is supposed to mock its own pomposity.

Q. When Beethoven gives alternative cadenzas, as he does for the first concerto, what determines your choice?

KUERTI. Yes indeed, although I do supplement the short cadenza in the last movement of the first concerto with a preface of my own. I have sometimes played the short cadenza to the first movement, but generally I prefer the last, very long one, though it is certainly out of proportion for the concerto. However, its extraordinary virtuosity, wonderful humour (especially where the trill on the dominant decides it is not over after all, and suddenly returns to further cadenza cavorting), and its stunning harmonic adventures make it too attractive to forego.