Performing Symphony No. 1 *in the Time of Brahms*

Jonathan Andrew Govias

There's no shortage of material for an interpreter investigating the musical delineation of tempo in Brahms' *Symphony No. 1*. The composer left a plethora of quotes on the general subject of tempo in letters and anecdotes, but among other researchers Bernard Sherman devotes a number of articles to the general ideas of proportional tempo and metronome marks; David Epstein looks at the Brahmsian concept of motion from the macro right down to micro levels such as the placement of eighth rests; and conductors such as Erich Leinsdorf and Gunther Schuller document their insight in both literary and audio media. Yet for all of this knowledge, there's little consensus – appropriately and unsurprisingly. The academics have the luxury of illuminating without concretizing, while the few conductors who have both written and recorded reasonably use the literary exercise to cast a spotlight on selected choices in performance, leaving the remainder of interpretive points to be inferred. As for the conductors who have recorded but not written, Schuller's examination of the symphony's discography catalogued significant differences in the durations of the performances, illustrating how ambiguously Brahms' original tempo instructions continue to be perceived. The situation as a whole suggests that an opportunity still remains for a systematic examination of the score, not with the intent to conclude the discussion definitively, but to identify methods or develop tools by which tempos can be rationalized beyond purely subjective or emotive means. In this process, issues of musical structure, proportion and character will be considered, and the subsequent findings cross-referenced with first-person accounts or timings of performances under Brahms' direction or guidance. Further reference will be made to compositions known to Brahms, and finally, to the work of other musicologists.

In discussions of tempo in Brahms, two quotations come to mind. The first is by far the most famous, almost to the point of being cliché: "I shall never write a symphony! You have no idea what it feels like to one of us, always to hear such a giant as Beethoven marching behind one."[1] Aside from the literal meaning, the ramifications of this statement extend into the realms of psychology, musicology, and last but not least, performance practice. The second quotation is cited much less often: "What I do know is that I indicate my tempi, modestly to be sure, but with the greatest care and clearness."[2] This extremely interesting statement, found within Brahms' personal correspondence in a letter to the conductor George Henschel, has an even more telling larger context. At the time, Henschel was preparing a performance of *Ein deutsches Requiem,* and had written to solicit a clarification of a printed metronome mark. Brahms first prevaricated, stating that all his metronome indications should be observed "*Con discrezione*,"[3] before going on to suggest through the afore-mentioned quotation that the numbers were unnecessary, if not entirely redundant, while simultaneously refusing to commit to one. The publication history of the *Requiem*, the first edition of which constitutes Brahms' principal experiment with published metronome markings, corroborates this sentiment. The trial, such that it was, was short-lived: in the following editions of the work all such indications were entirely withdrawn.[4] The inferences that may be drawn here are important. Brahms was accomplished as both a conductor and composer; he was acquainted with the metronome, but chose not to employ it. In combination, these facts lead to the reasonable assumption that he understood what musical information beyond text indications were required to guide tempo decisions, and in his opinion, provided it. The tortured, two-plus decade gestation of the *Symphony No. 1* is worth considering as well. This

[1] Johannes Brahms, *Symphony No. 1*: Preface by Robert Pascall, (München: G. Henle, 1996), iv.
[2] George Henschel, *Personal Recollections of Johannes Brahms*, (Boston: Gorham Press, 1907), 79.
[3] Ibid., 79.
[4] The other most notable orchestral work with metronome indications is the *Piano Concerto No. 2*. The metronome markings have remained, perhaps as both concession and admonition to conductor and soloist.

was the work with which Brahms openly took up the gauntlet thrown down by Beethoven, and the compositional chronology alone suggests that every detail of the work was very carefully considered. The logical starting point for the study of any work is trust in the composer , but in the case of Brahms and this symphony, both the direct and circumstantial evidence encourage more confidence in such an approach.

Brahms left no doubt as to his opinion of the inflexibility of the metronome: "My blood and a mechanical instrument don't go well together."[5] Contemporary accounts of Brahms' own piano performances suggest that he was unusually flexible in his interpretations. Various acquaintances specifically mentioned his "elasticity of tempo" or "curiously free rhythms"[6] in his performances, characteristics that synchronize with the larger musical trends and performance practice cultures at the time. The musical *Zeitgeist* of the era was the philosophy of tempo modification as expressed by Richard Wagner, the modulation of pulse in relation to the distinct character or, in Wagner's term, the *melos* of the music. According to Wagner, every musical idea had a distinct nature, and inseparable from that nature was an inherent, organic tempo.[7] The practical consequence of this philosophy in relation to metronome markings would have meant numeric references on every system of every page, if not more. It's easy to see how such a practice, if ever implemented, would have grotesquely hindered the process of music making rather than facilitating it; rather, it is the spirit of the idea that Brahms clearly took to heart, as documented by those who heard him perform. That Brahms accepted a practice so strongly associated with Wagner should come as no surprise: the association is a later construct, one encouraged by Wagner himself. If there were a moment in which the idea of tempo modification

[5] Bernard Sherman, "How Authentic is Early Music Brahms?", *Early Music America*, Spring 1997: 33.
[6] Ibid., 34.
[7] Richard Wager, *On Conducting*, (New York, Dover Publications,, 1989), 18.

became formalized, it arrived out of artistic necessity concurrently with the metronome itself. Beethoven, the pioneer of the use of metronome marks in scores, dismissed a request for a clarification with the statement "No more metronome! Anyone who can feel the music right does not need it,"[8] a pronouncement that in many ways encapsulated the concept of *melos* long before Wagner claimed ownership by assigning the term.

Brahms' opinion on the metronome notwithstanding, had he decided to provide metronome marks for *Symphony No.* 1, he may still have done little or nothing to resolve the modern debate, as witnessed in the case of Beethoven. Furthermore, there exists a corresponding degree of disagreement concerning the value of the score in making tempo determinations. Raymond Knapp believes that the protracted origins and multiple revisions of the work "took [their] toll, leaving traces in the completed work of numerous adjustments that undermine unity, [...] referential integrity, formal coherence [...] and stylistic unity."[9] The ideas of unity, integrity and coherence speak largely to issues of form, internal logic and proportion, yet these are the same qualities within the work that the illustrious conductor Erich Leinsdorf cited as "compelling."[10] The most obvious manifestation of the scale of disagreement is found within the discography. In his analysis of the symphony in *The Compleat Conductor*, Gunther Schuller illustrates the extent of the problem simply and empirically through an examination and comparison of some sixty-six recordings of the work. Although the data specific to tempo are spread over the one hundred pages of the analysis, the ranges between the slowest and fastest performances for the individual sections of the movements have been collated and summarized in Figure 1.1 below.

---

[8] Anton Schindler, *Beethoven as I Knew Him.* (New York: Dover Publications, 1996). 425.
[9] Raymond Knapp, *Brahms and the Challenge of the Symphony,* (Stuyvesant: Pendragon Press, 1997), 207.
[10] Erich Leinsdorf, *The Composer's Advocate.* (New Haven, Yale University Press, 1981), 143.

Figure 1.1 - Tempo Ranges in recordings of Brahms' *Symphony No. 1*[11]

Mvt.	Text indication	Lowest	Highest	Spread (% faster)	Page ref. (Schuller)
I	Un poco sostenuto	♪= 70	♪= 114	44 bpm (62%)	317
I	Meno Allegro	♩. = 34	♩. = 50	16 bpm (47%)	315
II	Andante sostenuo	♩ = 28	♩ = 60	32 bpm (110%)	320
III	Poco Allegretto	♩ = 74	♩ = 94	20 bpm (27%)	336-337
IV	Adagio	♩ = 24	♩ = 46	22 bpm (92%)	347
IV	Allegro non troppo	♩ = 80	♩ = 138	58 bpm (72%)	354

As can readily be observed, the perceived ambiguity in the text-based instructions has led to significant variance in tempos. The problem is particularly acute for the second movement, for reasons that will be discussed, but Schuller's data raises difficult questions on the acceptable limits of artistic license by illustrating the fact that one performance of the movement could be literally twice as fast as another. Also interesting is the fact that the recordings of first and fourth movements, those with internal tempo changes and thus prime candidates for establishing tempo relations, still manifest a marked degree of divergence. As the first line within Figure 1.1 demonstrates, the challenges begin on page 1, measure 1.

There can be no doubt that Brahms intended a musical statement of unequivocal grandeur and strength with the opening notes of his *Symphony No. 1*: the orchestral unison on the first dotted quarter is almost immediately chromatically shattered by divergent musical lines in the winds and upper strings, while an underlying pedal pulses relentlessly. What tempo is chosen for that pulse can have a marked effect on the mood and character, yet Brahms writes the apparently ambiguous *un poco sostenuto*. At first glance, the words provide little or no assistance in determining the tempo. The simplest translation of several is "a little sustained," which could be

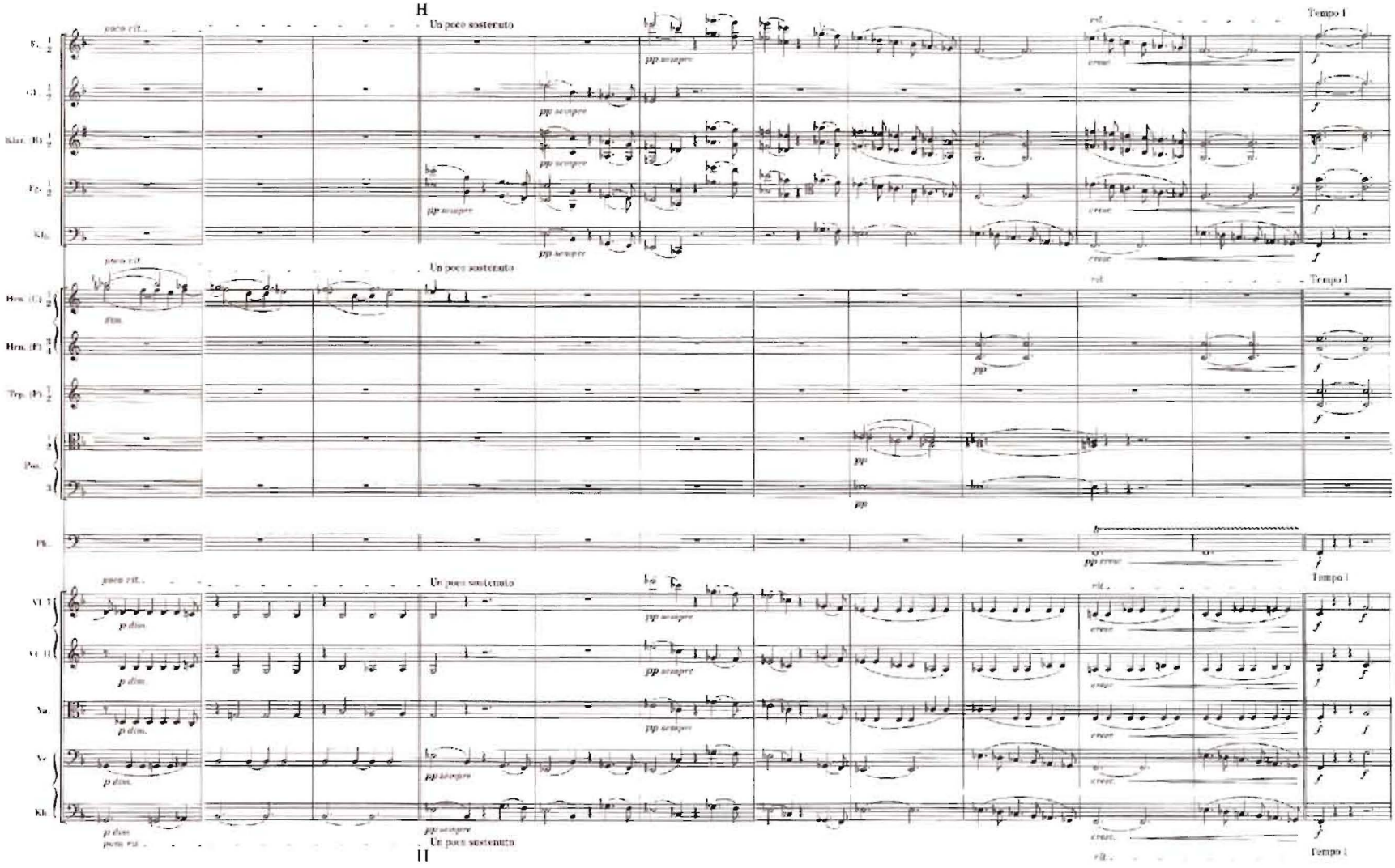
[11] Gunther Schuller, *The Compleat Conductor*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), 278-378.

interpreted as referring to the prevailing legato of the opening as much as the tempo. Some conductors such as Schuller suggest that Brahms, as "an ardent devotee of classical symmetry and purity of form"[12] intended a direct relation between the slow introduction and the main body of the first movement, with the eighth pulse of the former equaling exactly the dotted quarter pulse of the latter. Erich Leinsdorf takes the opposing viewpoint, stating that "relations of tempo are often sought between the first poco sostenuto and the main section, where none exist."[13]

As strange as it may sound, there is a logical synthesis of these disparate positions. Much of the confusion and disagreement stems from the use of the word *poco*. The indication *poco sostenuto* itself is very rare in the symphonic repertoire: it appears over the opening bars of Beethoven's *Symphony No. 7* but also makes two other appearances in Brahms' symphonies, in the first and last movements of his *Symphony No. 3*, as per Example 1.1. The usage in the context of the first movement is highly informative, coming at m.112, after three measures marked *poco rit.* The crucial factor here is what happens next. In m.118 the tempo is further modified by *rit.* for two measures, with a return to *Tempo I* in m. 120. The meaning of the directive becomes unmistakable in this linear framework: the word "*poco*" is comparative and signifies a relation, specifically in this case a point of organic stabilization between two *ritenutos*. If Schuller's position of "classical symmetry" is accepted as a reasonable starting point, then in the context of *Symphony No. 1*, this relation can then only refer to the *Allegro* of m. 38, with the simple meaning that whatever pulse is chosen for dotted quarter of the *Allegro*, that of the eighth in the introduction is somewhat slower. As backward as this relationship may sound, Leinsdorf notes that using a later point in the score to delineate an earlier tempo is quite consistent with Brahms'

[12] Ibid,, 281.
[13] Leinsdorf, *The Composer's Advocate*, 143.

Example 1.1 – Symphony No. 3, First mvt., m. 109-120



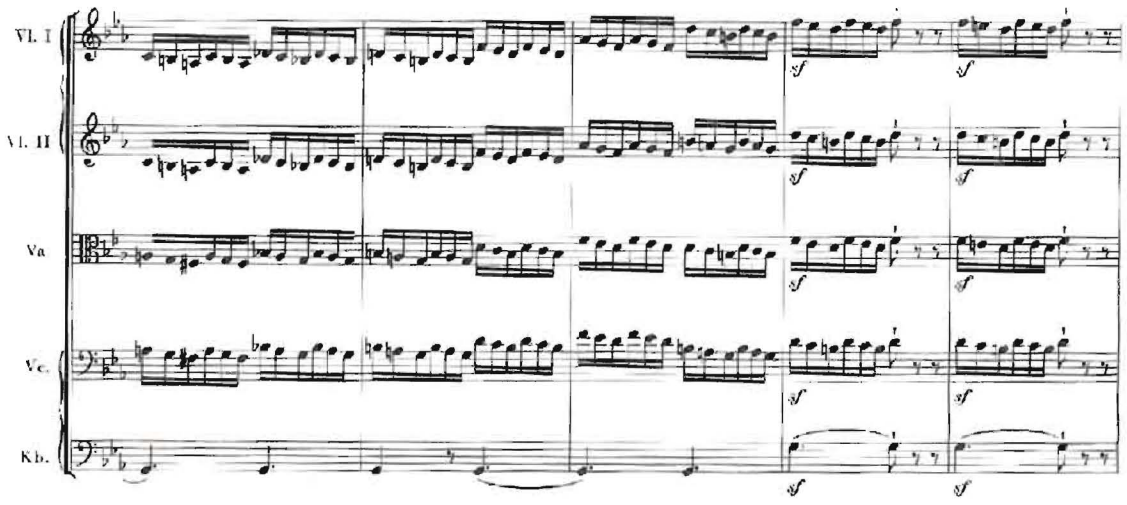
Composite image reproduced from Brahms *Symphony No. 3*. München: Henle

practice, stating that "three-fourths of [Brahms'] movements in orchestral works are, at the outset, deceptive as to speed."[14] In the case of this particular movement, the chronology of composition supports that position, since it is known that the introduction was a very late addition to the score. There are yet other examples of tempos requiring some retroactive deduction: in the third movement of *Symphony No. 1,* the relationship between the opening 2/4 and the 6/8 at m.71 is only made clear *after* the 2/4 resumes at m. 109, through the use of eighth triplets obviously equal in value to the eighths in the 6/8. Returning to the first movement, Schuller's assertion of some relationship can be maintained in conjunction Leinsdorf's remarks: mathematically, there is no exact ratio between the two tempos, although they are close in execution.

Synthesizing the perspectives is not merely an exercise in dialectics, but an extremely important step in the process of determining what the tempo should be. Knowing that the tempos are at least metronomically close in value implies that there is therefore a narrower range of possible solutions which could be employed with some validity. The upper limit for this range can be determined specifically through consideration of rhythmic evidence within the score. A conductor choosing a tempo must be conscious of the physical demands the music makes in order to allow the musicians to maintain technical accuracy as far as possible. The simplest method, notably documented by Leopold Mozart in his *Violinschule*, is to seek out the most technically difficult passage and from that extrapolate a maximum practical speed. The passage between m. 321 and 342 is frequently considered to be the most physically demanding for the strings, with extended runs of 16^{th} notes.

[14] Ibid., 129.

Example 1.2 – First mvt., m. 330-334



Reproduced from Brahms *Symphony No. 1*. München: Henle

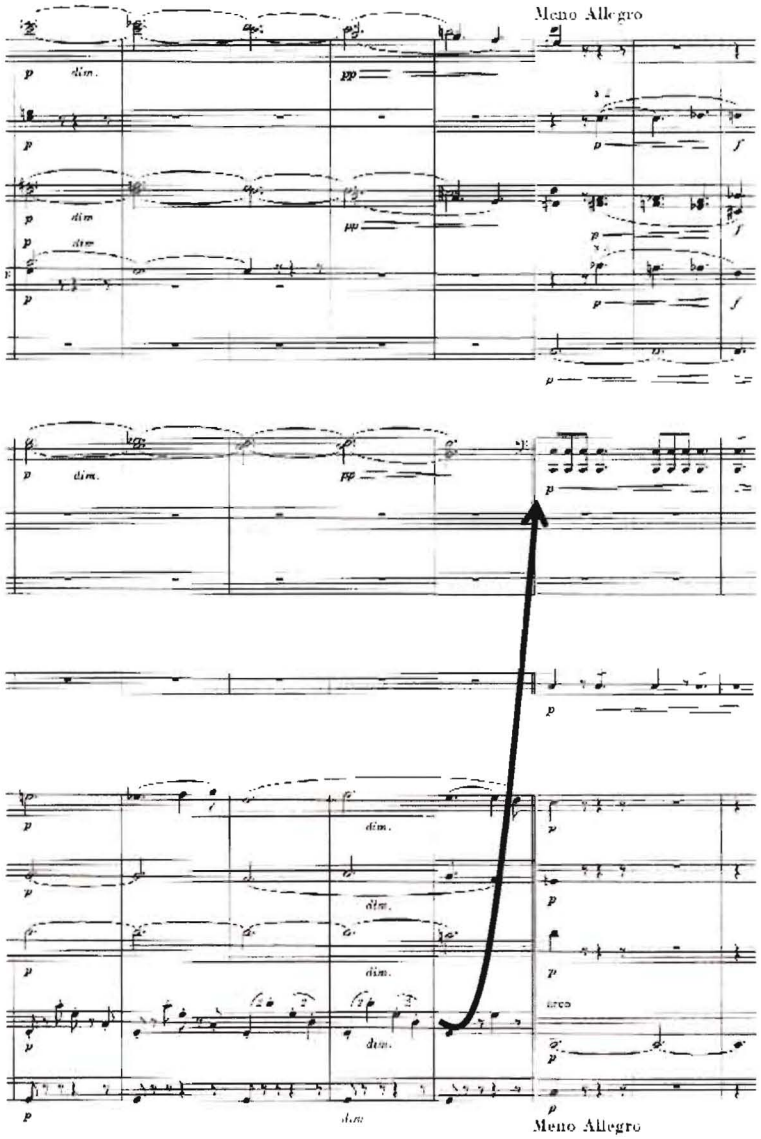
Upon closer examination, however, this passage is primarily an effect, akin to a sophisticated tremolo; the strings repeat three sixteenths in upwards stepwise motion, with shifting only ever required once per beat at most. Interestingly, the effect is both textural and temporal. Epstein describes this technique in general as creating "the sense of a new tempo by changing the amount of rhythmic activity that takes place within a beat which itself remains constant."[15] As for the beat itself, the articulation used here gives a fairly clear upper limit. Given that each note is to be bowed separately on the string, the clarity of this passage diminishes significantly after the tempo exceeds 112 beats per minute for the dotted quarter.

With an upper range delimited, and the idea of internal tempo relations accepted, determining the relative pulse of the final seventeen bars of the *Meno Allegro* is easier as Brahms, true to his word, provides what could be considered very clear indications to the final

[15] David Epstein, "Brahms and the Mechanisms of Motion," *Brahms Studies: Analytical and Historical Perspectives,* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1990), 205.

tempo. In measure 492 the violoncellos play duplets over the dotted quarters. These, when considered equal to the eighth notes at m. 495, elegantly and organically prepare the final tempo as mathematically equivalent to two-thirds of the tempo of the *Allegro.* There appears to be a

Example 1.3 – First mvt., m. 490-496



Reproduced from Brahms *Symphony No. 1.* München: Henle

temptation to relate the *Meno Allegro* to the tempo of the opening *Un poco sostenuto*, but there is strong evidence to refute this practice: the end of the first movement originally read *Più Sostenuto*, but according to Henschel,[16] Brahms felt that the wording of the instruction often misled conductors into relating it the opening of the movement, and made the change to connect it more obviously to the *Allegro.*

A rough context for the *Allegro* and *Meno Allegro* has now been established, leaving the relationship of the *poco sostenuto* still unresolved. Del Mar suggests that *poco sostenuto* in this instance is roughly 9/10s of the tempo of the *Allegro*[17], but provides no empirical or historic justification for his choice of ratio. Fortunately, it isn't necessary to be so speculative or arbitrary. Prior to Beethoven's time, composers had primarily two choices when scoring the transition between the slow and fast sections of a movement: either they established a clear tempo relationship, or much less often, provided a fermata or caesura in which a new, unrelated tempo could be prepared, with the latter to be determined by the character, choice of form, etcetera. The evidence in support of the first is found in the scores of Mozart, such as *Symphony no. 39* or the overtures to *Don* Giovanni or *Die Zauberflöte*, in which Mozart indicates cut time from the outset but gives a tempo instruction of "adagio." It would be utterly impractical to consider conducting these passages in a two-pattern, so it can be assumed Mozart used the time signature to draw attention to the relationship with the pulse of the ensuing allegros. In the case of the opera overtures it could be argued that the use of cut time was simply a convenience, since the allegros that follow remain in a quick two, but that would fail to explain Mozart's use of cut time in *Symphony no. 39* in which the allegro is in 3/4. Since cut time is an instruction to

[16]Henschel, *Personal Recollections of Johannes Brahms,* 43.
[17] Norman Del Mar, *Conducting Brahms,*(Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1993), 2-3.

consider music in larger metrical units, Mozart's use of it here could be construed as a request to use the next larger note value when determining the tempo relationship: in this example, to relate the quarter pulse at the beginning to the dotted half in the allegro. Mathematically unrelated tempos emerged symbiotically with the creation and refinement of a physical conducting technique, and the technological development of the metronome. Composers now had a practical method of defining tempos that were unrelated, and conductors had a practical means of executing these transitions regardless of the scoring. In understanding this phenomenon the symphonies of Beethoven are extremely important resources, particularly because the metronome markings were added years after the works were completed. Of the four symphonies by Beethoven to include a slow introduction, (*Nos. 1, 2, 4* and *7)*, the first three would normally suggest exact tempo relationships between introduction and exposition if metronome markings were absent. (The fourth, *Symphony No. 7,* is perhaps more debatable since Beethoven gives sufficient silence in which a new unrelated tempo could be effectively prepared, although a tempo relationship is actually presented here, albeit not a direct one, as closely as possible via the metronome markings.) Although Beethoven's use of the metronome and the validity or feasibility of his markings have been extensively challenged, in this particular line of investigation one fact about them is absolutely inarguable: in the afore-mentioned symphonies he chose unrelated values for slow introductions and expositions, thus deliberately negating the classical convention of having the pulse continuous irrespective of mood or musical material.

Figure 1.2 Tempo indications in the first movements of Beethoven symphonies

Symphony	Introduction	MM (i)	Exposition	MM(e)	i/e
No. 1 in C	Adagio Molto	♪= 88	Allegro con brio	𝅗𝅥=112	79%
No. 2 in D	Adagio	♪= 84	Allegro con brio	𝅗𝅥=100	84%
No. 4 in Bb	Adagio	♩= 66	Allegro Vivace	𝅝 =80	83%
No. 7 in A	Poco sostenuto	♩= 69	Vivace	♩=104	66%

Two interesting conclusions can be drawn from Figure 1.2. First, it is clearly unwise, if not illogical, to make blanket or generalized associations between the alphabetic tempo indications, or else the result is the nonsensical proposition that an *Adagio Molto* is in fact faster than an *Adagio,* and that an *Adagio* is virtually indistinguishable from a *Poco sostenuto.* (In the first instance the *Molto* clearly refers only to the fact that the pulse is an eighth note, not a quarter.) Therefore it has to be understood that the terminology as used was applied to each work independently, in a manner perhaps more indicative of mood, musical character, and inner relations, than as a uniform rubric of tempo gradations. The other conclusion that emerges is that, barring the anomalous example of *Symphony No. 7,* there appears to be some uniformity in the extent to which the pulse of the introduction is slower than that of the exposition, around the figure of 80% (Technically speaking, the average is 78% including *Symphony No. 7,* 82% excluding it, although the size of the sample group renders that kind of analysis meaningless.) It should also be noted that there are no instances above in which the pulse of the slow section is faster than that of the exposition, regardless of the associated note value, so Brahms' use of the words *Un poco sostenuto* then indicates absolutely nothing original or unusual, perhaps only slightly less than the "usual" degree of *sostenuto* observed in works he studied and respected. What is odd is that the one occasion on which Beethoven uses the same phrase, he actually indicates a near exact tempo relationship of an exposition 50% faster (two triplet eighths of the introduction become the duration of the dotted quarter of the *Vivace*). The only barrier to the

relationship being expressed as an integer is the actual physical settings traditionally available on mechanical metronomes.

If, in the spirit of academic inquiry, this one anomaly is ignored and a wider net of scrutiny is cast over other major symphonic works of the era with metronome indications, the following results emerge.

Figure 1.3

Composer	Work	Introduction	MM	Exposition	MM	i/e (%)
Berlioz	Symphonie Fantastique	Largo	♩ = 56	Allegro Agitato	♩=132	42%
Mendelssohn	Symphony No. 3	Andante con moto	♩ = 72	Assai Animato	♩=120	60%
Schumann	Symphony No. 1	Andante un poco maestoso	♩ = 66	Allegro molto vivace	♩=120	55%
	Symphony No. 2	Sostenuto Assai	♩ = 76	Allegro ma non troppo	♩=144	53%
	Symphony No. 4	Ziemlich Langsam	♩ = 52	Lebhaft	♩ = 92	57%

In every single instance, the numbers above don't tell the whole story. Berlioz provided unrelated metronome markings, but then added the footnote "Une mesure de ce movement équivaut au quart de la précédente."[18] - "One measure of this section is equal to the quarter of the preceding,"[19] or in other words, a very clear mathematical relationship not at all represented in the actual metronome numbers, which actually are a further 20 bpm apart. This option may have been for the benefit of conductors who did not yet have access to the relatively new metronome or the skill to execute a subtle change in tempo, but once again, when given the tools to disavow explicitly the relationship, Berlioz places the pulse of the introduction slower than that of the exposition. In the case of Schumann, in every example noted above he also integrates a tempo modulation or transition. In *Symphony No. 1* he writes *accelerando*; in *Symphony No. 2* he indicates *stringendo assai*; and in the final work simply writes *stringendo.* Mendelssohn also

[18] Hector Berlioz, *Symphonie Fantastique*, (Kassel: Bärenreiter Verlag, 1971), 13.
[19] Translation by author.

obscures the sense of tempo relationship through the use of an intervening tempo terrace, having the first expositional subject of the relevant movement stated at the dotted quarter equaling 100, before continuing at the faster tempo of the dotted quarter equaling 120. In all of the above examples, a further degree of uniformity can be observed: the starting tempos have a pulse at or close to half that of the body of the expositions (an average of 53% based on the numbers above). This may again reflect the realities of contemporary conducting ability and low metronome proliferation, rather than the retention of classical conventions; all three composers listed above made important contributions to the then-embryonic field of conducting, so they were certainly aware of the physical challenges involved in executing certain tempo relationships. Whatever the justification, this maintaining of simple or exact tempo relationships remains a conservative hold-over in comparison to the tempos seen both before and after the addition of metronome marks in the works of Beethoven. It could be argued then that from a point of view of tempo, the post-Beethoven symphonies, while masterpieces in their own right, either sidestepped Beethoven's challenge, or unhesitatingly acknowledged his continuing supremacy.

Having established two models for balancing slow introductions against expositions, it now becomes necessary to make a choice, but there are some further issues for consideration. Twenty five years separate the premiere of Schumann's last symphony from Brahms' first. During this quarter century there were major shifts in musical perspectives and objectives, most notably the emergence of the "Neudeutsche Schule" into a discernable movement, first identified in 1859 by K.F. Brendel in the *Neue Zeitschrift für Musik*. The lynchpin of this group's musical philosophy was the view of Beethoven's *Symphony No. 9* as a definitive, closing statement that left no room for further discourse within the genre. This position, a fairly reasonable one at the

time given the failure of any composer to write a symphony that met or surpassed the standard Beethoven had set, was further supported in the new forms propagated by composers such as Franz Liszt, forms that diminished or discouraged contrasts with the late master. Brahms' choice to include a slow introduction within the confines of a standard classical form then represented a further deliberate invocation of a regressive, if not archaic, musical ethos. In fact, the symphonies by Beethoven that have slow introductions are generally those most classical in conception and execution, featuring smaller orchestrations and more conventional formal structures. The slow introduction, in the contemporary context and specifically in combination with the genre and form, identifies Brahms firmly as a classicist, diverging or regressing from the musical directions taken by Liszt and Wagner, and serves notice that his symphony would be rooted in classical formal conventions. More importantly, Brahms conceived his *Symphony No. 1* to stand as a direct response to the challenge left by Beethoven. Although the thematic similarities of the fourth movement (and Brahms' reactions to related commentary) are well documented, Brodbeck notes that of all the movements of the symphony, "The stormy Allegro (of the first movement) that breaks out is [...] the one that is most indebted to Beethoven,"[20] and goes on to cite the structural and "plot-archetypal" similarities. Bonds explained the relation from a psychological perspective, noting that Brahms "could not escape the legacy of his pre-cursor. He could overcome it only by confronting directly those works that were the principal source of his anxiety."[21] The roots of *Symphony No. 1* are thus undeniably Beethovenian, prompting Hans von Bülow's famous renumbering of the work as the "Tenth Symphony."[22] It requires no stretch of the imagination to accept that in addition to invoking Beethoven through

[20] David Brodbeck, *Brahms: Symphony No. 1*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997,) 32.
[21] Mark Evans Bonds, *After Beethoven: Imperatives of Originality in the Symphony*, (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1996,) 2.
[22] Ibid., 84.

thematic allusion or motivic similarities, Brahms also mirrored Beethoven's practice for tempo relations.

Based on the Beethovenian approach to tempo relations described above, the approximate metronome mark of the slow introduction to *Symphony No. 1* could reasonably be argued to stand at roughly 80% of that of the Allegro. However, it should be remembered that Brahms qualifies his written instructions with the words *un poco*, a fact that subsequently suggests that 80% may be excessive. Del Mar's initial number of 90%, despite its abstract or emotive origins, then gains some musicological validity and empirical justification, the latter in the context of the Weber-Fechner law of noticeable differences. With these relationships roughly determined, they can be then be cross-referenced to the extant timings of the first movement at the premiere under Otto Dessoff, as noted by Richard Pohl and reported in a subsequent edition of *Musikaliches Wochenblatt*. Pohl cites the duration of the movement, including repeat, rounded to fourteen minutes even, although Bernard Sherman discounts this data as "too imprecise [...] to help evaluate the issue of proportional tempo."[23] Sherman's assessment is both hasty and premature, for reasons that will shortly be made clearer.

Figure 1.4 –Proportions of First Movement, *Symphony No. 1.*

Section	Bars	Beats	Tempo	Comments
Poco Sostenuto	37	225	9/10s x	inc. a 9/8 bar
Allegro	607	1214	x	inc. repeat
Meno Allegro	17	34	2/3s x	

[23] Bernard Sherman, "Tempos and Proportions in Brahms: Period Evidence," *Early Music*, Vol. 25, No. 3 (Aug 1997), 463.

Given a baseline time of 14 minutes, and assuming that the maximum variance from the exact time to that reported by Pohl is no more than 30 seconds on either side of that number, the following tempos can be derived.

Figure 1.5 – Comparison of Possible Tempos, First Movement

Section	Ratio	MM High	MM Middle	MM Low
Poco Sostenuto	9/10s	104	100	96
Allegro		112	108	104
Meno Allegro	2/3s	74	72	69
Total Duration		*13'30"*	*14"*	*14'30"*

This calculation surprisingly establishes a range of tempo within just two notches on a metronome's dial. Of course, some immediate caveats come to mind. This chart does not account for any flexibility in tempo, such as a *rit.* that many conductors deem desirable in the measures before 495, or the length of the final fermata, but unless the variance was extreme, most organic tempo modulations would not materially affect the above, again due to the length of the movement. The calculation also assumes that *poco sostenuto* is the rather clinical 90% of the tempo of the *Allegro.* This is a point indisputably open to debate, since *poco sostenuto* is a matter of feel and not exact measurement. Once again, the intention of the exercise is to establish a range of possible tempos based on historical boundaries and musical data, rather than attempting a final determination.

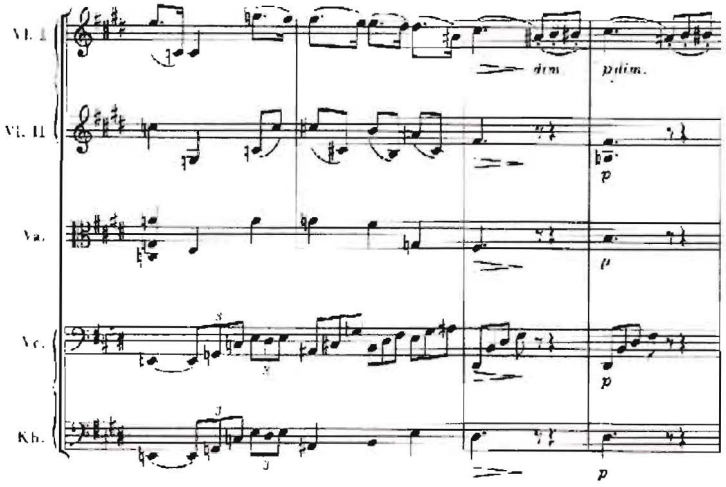
Before continuing to the second movement, it's necessary to acknowledge and address what may be a further interpretive clue, that of bowings. Schuller suggests that the ligatures Brahms placed over the strings provide critical insight into the choice of tempos, since specific bowings become simply impossible at certain tempi. The example most commonly cited in

reference to this is the first measure of the first movement, and the bar-long slur placed under the eighths in the basses. To execute this bowing as written requires a very brisk tempo, given the *forte* dynamic, otherwise the bassist will simply run out of bow. However, the primary function of bowing is to manipulate the sound, via the attack and release of notes. The character of this passage in the symphony is explicitly one of *sostenuto*, and the bowing as written has two specific consequences, both musically desirable. The bar-long slur engenders a throbbing, sustained line from the string, but also hinders the accentuation of the fourth eighth note in the bar, an effect that would likely result if the slurs were only groups of three eighths. The purpose of the bowing, beyond all tempo considerations, could be said to draw attention to the desired musical characteristics of the bass part, since there was really no other way Brahms could illustrate this. Extrapolating a tempo from this, or other similar examples, then becomes a very contentious issue, hinging on speculation as to the exact degree of Brahms' familiarity with string instruments, and thus one not prone to resolution.

The remarkably close tempo calculation for the first movement was achieved primarily by the identification and rationalization of the tempo relations. The second movement, *Andante sostenuto*, has no such obvious benchmarks, which may account for the extraordinary variance in tempos observed by Schuller, but in other ways it is far less problematic. First to consider, of course, is the written instruction from Brahms. The term *Andante* is actually one of the more specific and literal in the musical lexicon, meaning "walking," so from the outset there should be less confusion than with the first movement. An *Andante sostenuto* should in practice be slightly slower than a walking pace. Admittedly, there is still considerably leeway for interpretation in that, but as with the first movement, further data is forthcoming later in the movement. The

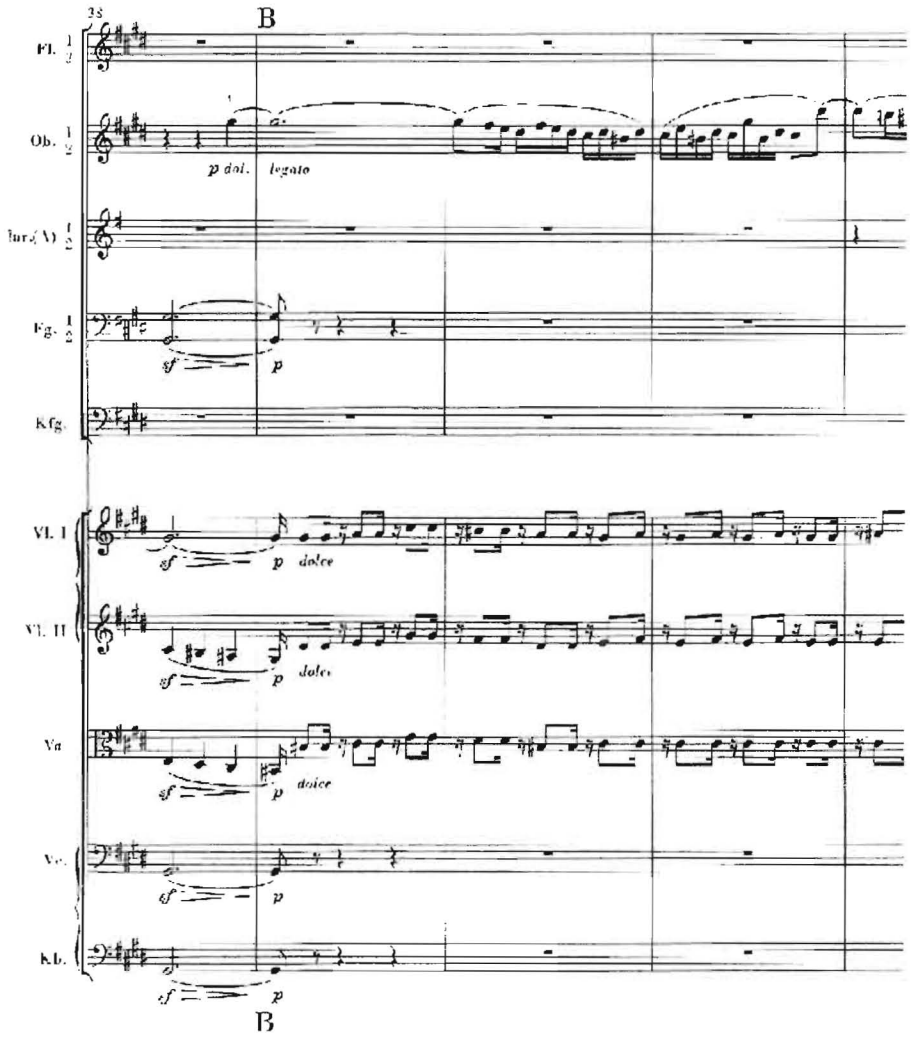
section starting at m.6 (Example 1.4) and similarly at m. 91 is particularly suggestive: Brahms here indulges in his trademark fascination with the rhythmic idea of two against three. This immediately assists in establishing a low end for a reference metronome mark. If the tempo here is taken too slowly, with the pulse of an eighth note as opposed to a quarter, not only is the feeling of *andante* lost but the relationship between eighths and triplet eighths changes and the impact is significantly diminished. An opposing argument, however, is that the syncopated accompaniment to the oboe and clarinet solos starting in m. 39 (Example 1.5) is considerably more precise and energetic if the quarter is subdivided. Far from complicating the issue, this actually helps clarify it considerably: a reasonable tempo could then be deduced to sit in the fairly narrow zone in which the pulse can alternate comfortably between the eighth and the quarter. In practical conducting terms, given the note values of the movement, this would be in the range of 40-50 beats per minute for the quarter.

Example 1.4 – Second mvt., m. 7-10



Reproduced from Brahms *Symphony No. 1*. München: Henle

Example 1.5 – Second mvt., m. 38-41



Reproduced from Brahms *Symphony No. 1*. München: Henle

Approaching the problem from another angle, some interesting considerations come to the fore if the concept of *melos*, as conceived by Wagner, is referenced. There are elements in this movement that distinctly evoke lieder, foremost among them the musical idea that emerges in m. 18. This motif is conspicuously song-like, and one can easily imagine words being sung over what is a very pianistic, homorhythmic accompaniment of quarter notes. Attributing vocal characteristics to this melodic line isn't a fanciful leap of the imagination: Johannes Brahms in his day was most famous as a writer for voice, having written over two hundred lied as well as

numerous other works for voices or chorus. When the thematic material of the oboe solo is viewed through this lens, it becomes easier to identify a tempo range below which the pulse is too slow for the line to be sung. Although in practice much would depend on the skill and control of the singer, at the previously stated low-end of 40 beats per minute the line ceases to sound vocal.

In calculating the accuracy of this range against the times noted at the premiere, similar to the manner employed for the first movement, a further small detail must be considered: the revision of the second movement after the initial performance. Although the changes were principally to the form, they affected the overall length of the movement as well. Fortunately some of the orchestral parts from the premiere survived, and were used by Robert Pascall to reconstruct the movement for the Henle urtext edition. For the purposes of calculating tempo the change is nominal, with the final edition at 128 measures exceeding the original by three bars only. This entails a very modest correction in calculating the total number of beats in relation to the overall duration. With Pohl's timing rounded to 9 minutes, the following tempi can be extrapolated based on the same 30 seconds variance above and below.

Figure 1.6 – Second Movement, Andante Sostenuto

	MM High	MM Middle	MM Low
Second Movement	44	42	40
Total duration	*8'31"*	*8'56"*	*9'23"*

The same caveats as mentioned above for the first movement apply to in this instance too. Additionally, the fewer measures generally mean that the overall timing of the movement is more sensitive to shifts in tempo: the calculation above is again an extrapolation within a

reasonable degree of certainty, related to the dial of a metronome. The source of greatest concern in considering the above figures is the fact that the movement is labeled *Andante sostenuto*; a metronome marking of 42 to the quarter is a very, very sustained *Andante*, if not an *Adagio.* Although Sherman suggests that Brahms' concept of *Andante* may have been slower than would be traditionally assumed[24] there may be another, simpler, explanation. Given the fact that the tempo sits comfortably between the quarter and the eighth, Brahms might in fact be referencing the pulse of the eighth note in this case, qualifying his use of the term slightly by adding *sostenuto.* In fact, a pulse of 84 to the eighth represents a very comfortable, conventional andante, particularly in relation to the literal meaning of the word. The terminology may therefore reflect a subtle way of unifying the different musical ideas within the movement under one tempo heading. As for the *sostenuto,* many of Brahms' tempo indications in the symphony, such as *Poco sostenuto, Meno Allegro, Allegro non troppo ma con brio, Più Andante, Più Allegro*, imply subtle relations and distinctions by virtues of the qualifiers employed. *Sostenuto,* when used by Brahms, had specific implications, as noted in the discussion of the *Meno Allegro* of the first movement.

The third movement has certainly fared the best in terms of interpretive consistency, based on Schuller's discography. With the relationship between the 2/4 and the 6/8 in m. 109 already described, and assuming the repeat is taken, the correlation of the tempo with Pohl's timings is as follows:

[24]Sherman, "Tempo and Proportion in Brahms," 469.

Figure 1.7 – Third Movement, Un poco Allegretto e grazioso

	MM High	MM Middle	MM Low
Third Movement	108	92	84
Total duration	*3'35"*	*4'*	*4'26"*

This is roughly 10 bpm higher at both ends than the range established by the discography, leading to the conclusion that the movement is generally performed too slowly, a finding corroborated by Sherman.[25] Granted, the music has a gentle, pastoral quality to it but in the larger context of the symphony, the movement holds the place of the scherzo, and a certain "scherzando" topos can be invoked. The instruction *Un poco Allegretto* should therefore imply a tempo slower in relation to what might normally be expected in the context of a fast symphonic middle movement. Of course, the most famous symphonic *Allegretto* of the time was the second movement of Beethoven *Symphony No. 7*, and Beethoven assigned the quarter note a value of 76 beats per minute. Although the context in this instance is a slow movement, it's still interesting to note how often this metronome mark is considered to be too fast and thus disregarded. Schuller doesn't provide specifics, but in his examination of the discography of *Symphony No. 7* makes the generalization that ninety percent of conductors are at least twenty points below the printed metronome mark.[26] It's tempting to speculate then that Brahms was deliberately referencing the Beethoven, thus suggesting the movement would have to be at least somewhat faster than that. This establishes a low-end of a minimum 80 beats per minute, a calculation roughly based on the Weber-Fechner law concerning perception of differences. Brahms also delimits the upper end through the addition of the instruction *grazioso*, as it is musically

[25] Bernard Sherman, *Performing Brahms,* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993,) 115.
[26] Gunther Schuller, *The Compleat Conductor*, 265.

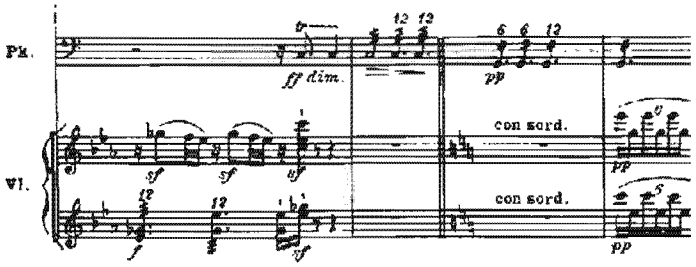
impossible to render the movement "gracefully" if it is unduly hurried at a standard scherzo speed.

One further important consideration is the eleven or thirteen bars marked *poco a poco più tranquillo* at the end of the movement, with the disparity in length a result of some disagreement as to exactly where the transition is intended to begin. In the context of the above process, to quantify this deceleration precisely would involve a calculus computation incorporating rates of change, and would be a singularly pointless and unmusical exercise given the many different ways in which this coda can be approached. Suffice to say that some extension of time should be incorporated in to the final calculation, but the difference between staying in a tempo of 92 to the quarter and taking a very moderate approach is only about 13 seconds, practically speaking, so there is plenty of room for reasonable interpretive flexibility without exceeding the limits set by Pohl. For that matter, this idea of "sensitivity" is generally an important one in reconciling Brahms' view of tempo with Pohl's timings. In all the short instances of tempo modulation throughout the symphony, the overall effect mathematically on the timing is much less significant than might be expected.

The fourth movement presents the most complex picture of all, with four distinct sections, each with internal tempo modulations. (See Figure 1.8 for a proportional mapping of the movement.) An opening *Adagio* of 29 measures is followed by *Più Andante* for 32 bars. 329 measures of *Allegro non troppo, ma con brio* ensue, with 67 final measures of *Più Allegro*. As with the modulation of tempo in the third movement, the multiple examples in the fourth movement, such as the *stringendos* in the *Adagio*, are not possible to calculate with any practical accuracy, so a lesser degree of precision can be expected. The best starting point for an

examination is measures 29 to 30, two which represent a rare point of consensus in the analyses of Leinsdorf, Del Mar and Schuller. All agree that the scoring of the timpani demonstrates

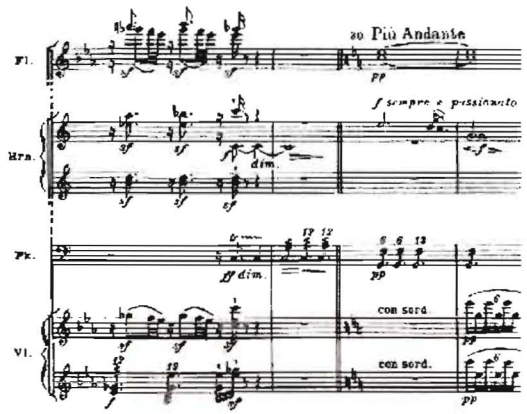
Example 1.6 – Fourth mvt., m. 28-31

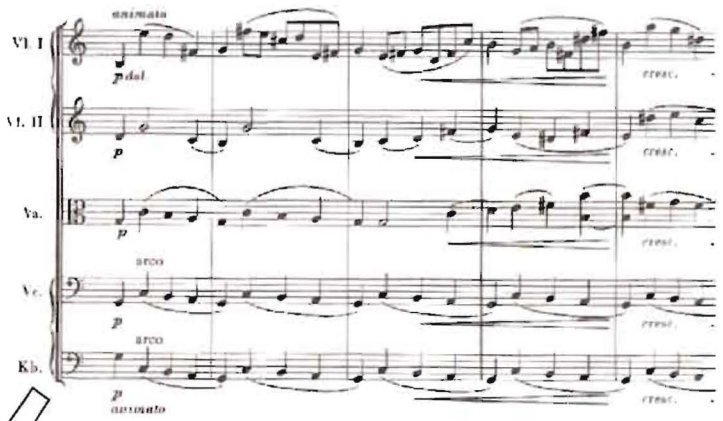


Reproduced from Leinsdorf, p. 144

unequivocally a very simple relationship in which the eighth note of the *Adagio* is equal to the quarter of the *Più Andante*. This transition is frequently complicated in practice by the tradition of initiating an unmarked *stringendo* in measure 22, requiring an artificial accommodation in measures 28 or 29 to establish the next relationship precisely. This is one interpretive practice that is without real substance or justification: Brahms had twice before in the same movement used the word *stringendo* when desired, and the rhythmic intensification in the strings is simply another example of the combined textural/temporal effect previously described by Epstein. There is also an interpretive challenge involved, in that this transition seems to be aurally uncomfortable across the spectrum of analyses, with Epstein, Del Mar and Schuller all suggesting ways to rationalize its circumvention, if not completely ignore it.

Figure 1.8 - Schematic of Brahms *Symphony No. 1* - 4th mvt.





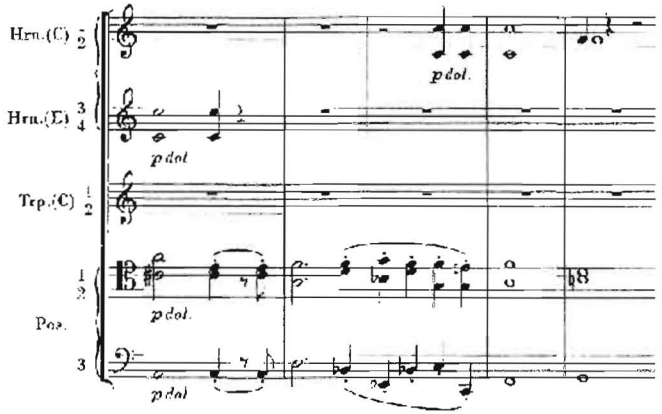
mm. 118

TEMPO RELATIONS

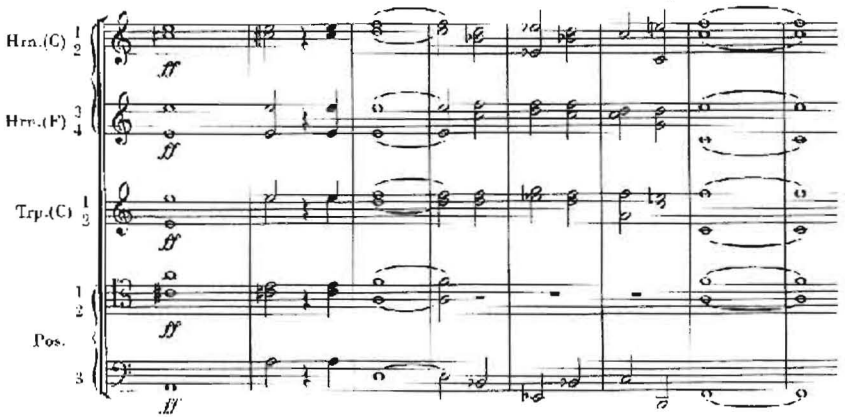
Section	Bars	Beats	Tempo
Adagio	29	115	1/2 of x
Piu Andante	32	128	x
Allegro non troppo	329	1316	x+
Piu Allegro	67	268	2x

Adagio	Più Andante	Allegro non troppo	Animato	Allegro non troppo	Animato	Più Allegro
29	32	34	91	34	170	67

mm. 47



mm. 407



The *Più Andante* also provides one other indication of importance, from measures 47 to 51, as shown in Figure 1.8. The chorale-like figure here in the bassoons and trombones is duplicated in augmentation in the *Più Allegro*, specifically m. 407 to 416, with the note values exactly doubled. Leinsdorf believes this suggests that the pulse of the final tempo of the movement is exactly double that of the *Più Andante*, which has already been determined to be twice that of the opening *Adagio.*[27] Del Mar, Schuller and Epstein differ, stating that the *Più Allegro* is roughly or exactly twice the tempo of the *Allegro non troppo*, but Del Mar qualifies his remarks by advocating a return to a pulse of the *Più Andante* at the second iteration of the chorale, thus rendering it twice as long. The saving grace of this dispute, in relation to the methodology employed on the previous movements, is that there are only 67 measures in the final section, therefore the impact on the calculation is minimized to less than 25 seconds greater in Leinsdorf's approach. Although that fact makes resolution less important mathematically, it fails to diminish the philosophical or interpretational significance.

In this case, the chorale-like nature of the music seems to support Leinsdorf's position very strongly. The idea of using a chorale or like material in a symphony finale was not original to Brahms: the fourth movement of Mendelssohn's *Reformation* symphony is constructed around the Lutheran hymn *Ein feste Burg is unser Gott.* Like Brahms' finale, Mendelssohn's is divided into four distinct tempo sections, but in this instance the chorale theme is present in all, not just two. This proves a very strong unifying element both thematically and rhythmically: the movement can reasonably be executed with the theme having the exact same duration whether in the opening *Andante con moto* in common time, the Allegro Vivace in 6/8 (m. 31) the Allegro Maestoso in common time (m. 229), or the final iteration in whole notes (m. 306) after a *piu*

[27] Leinsdorf, *The Composer's Advocate*, 144.

animato poco a poco. Since the symphony was published for the first time in 1868, Brahms certainly could have at least seen the score, if not heard performances of it, and incorporated this very effective idea. (There is one further shared characteristic between the two symphonies worth noting: both have single measure changes of time-signature, an extremely unusual feature for music of the time. In three places in the finale Mendelssohn inserts single 2/4 measures into 4/4 sections, although it should mentioned he does not write in the new time signature but simply omits two beats from the bar. The example in Brahms is a little more glaring: the unabashed 9/8 measure in the slow introduction to the first movement.) With the Mendelssohn finale as a prototype, the idea of maintaining the duration of the chorale theme in Brahms is perfectly justified and enhances the unity of the work significantly.

The only remaining relation to be resolved then is the *Allegro non troppo ma con brio*, which, by Leinsdorf's reasoning, "falls between the più andante and più allegro,"[28] a statement that in fact is more blatantly obvious than particularly helpful. Del Mar suggests 112 to the quarter, Schuller 100, and Epstein between 96 and 104. These numbers are not only relatively close, but they also align philosophically with Leinsdorf's rationalization of the movement as a whole. The reason for the surprising degree of consensus can be found within the character of the music: it could reasonably be described as a march, thus validating all of the suggested tempos, depending on which relations are chosen to bracket them.

There is one particular argument for presenting this music towards the faster end of that scale: the infamous thematic similarity that even an "ass" would notice. This material is the most overt homage to Beethoven within the symphony, and the musical similarity may carry

[28] Ibid., 144.

over into matters of tempo. The *Allegro Assai* of the finale of Beethoven's *Symphony No. 9* carries the metronome marking equating a half note to 80, and although this is certainly too fast a tempo for the Brahms given the rhythmic values the latter employs, the composer further qualified his tempo by amending downward the original *Allegro con brio* to *Allegro moderato ma con brio* to its final *Allegro non troppo ma con brio* in pre-publication revisions. [29] With this frame of reference in mind, it's quite possible Brahms originally considered a tempo close to that of "Ode to Joy" and then moved back from it several steps after further thought. Just as consideration of the tempo of the third movement should take the conventions of a scherzo as a starting point, Brahms' undisguised tribute to Beethoven's music strongly suggests the latter should inform performance of the former.

Figure 1.9 – Fourth Movement

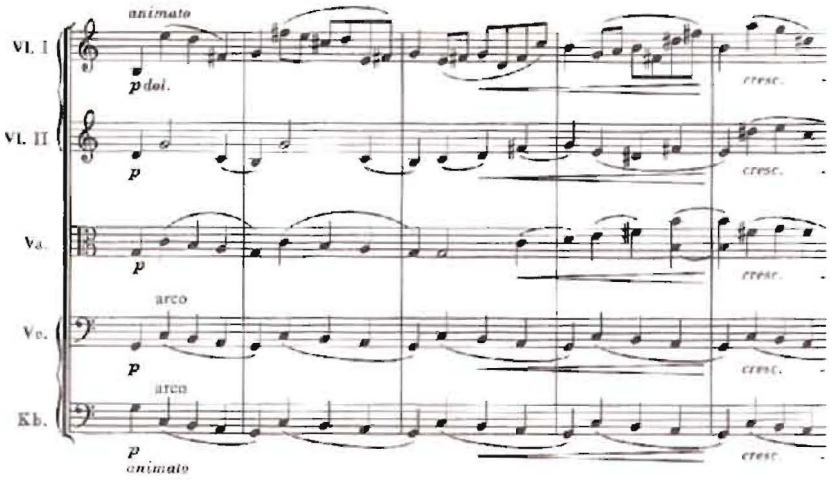
Section	Bars	Beats	Tempo	Comments
Adagio	29	115	1/2 x	Inc. first bar of 3 beats
Piu Andante	32	128	x	
Allegro non troppo	329	1316	x+	New independent tempo, faster than x
Piu Allegro	67	268	2x	

In the fastest possible interpretation of the Piu Allegro, the twofold doubling of tempo over the course of the movement means a very large difference between the starting and end tempos, but this is in fact helpful in narrowing the range in which this structure is practical. Without accounting for any *stringendos*, a starting tempo of 46 to the quarter, moving to 92 at the *Andante*, 112 at the *Allegro* and the coda at twice that pace, the duration is 16'50", 50 seconds ahead of Pohl's count. Since the real effect overall of the three marked *stringendos* on the timing is in fact minimal, the extended duration compared to the timing may be justification for making

[29] Brodbeck, *Brahms: Symphony No. 1*, 29.

more of the *animatos* in measures 220, and, after a four measure *calando,* in 301. The *animatos* have been the subject of much debate, principally for reasons of typography and placement. In the autograph the word is written in parentheses, above only the first violin part at 94 and 220, above and below the strings in 118-122, and again above woodwinds, brass, and above and below the strings in 301. (In engraved editions the parentheses are omitted and the text printed in italics) All other tempo indications in the movement are placed above the woodwinds and below the strings, in bold regular font with capitalization in the printed version.

Example 1.7 – Fourth mvt., m. 118-122



Reproduced from Brahms *Symphony No. 1.* München: Henle

The use of parentheses may indicate a delineation of hierarchy, with the change in tempo thus presented to be considered more subtle, more in relation to character, than an "official" tempo indication. Conductor Roger Norrington suggests that these markings were intended for the score alone, but not the individual instrumental parts.[30] There are other similar examples with the Brahms symphonies, particularly *Symphony No. 2*, at measure 281 of the fourth movement, where only the violins and violas are marked *largamente*. A modest quickening then in the

[30] Michael Musgrave, *The Cambridge Companion to Brahms,* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 246.

animatos of the fourth movement of *Symphony No. 1* would bring the duration closer in line with the timings of the premiere. One point of conflict arises, however, if we accept 46 to the quarter as the starting tempo of the movement. If any relationship between the movements is considered, it is surprising to find that the *Adagio* of the fourth movement is in fact essentially equal in tempo to the *Andante sostenuto* of the second, and that the *Andante* of the fourth movement is close to the *Allegretto* of the second, creating a host of ontological inconsistencies. But if the words are temporarily put aside in favour of the proposed metronome markings, interesting possibilities emerge. Epstein postulates in his analysis that these parallel tempos are a deliberate structural element of the symphony, and goes so far as to suggest that the pulses of the first and third movements, as well as the *Allegro ma non troppo* of the fourth, should all fall within the same range of 96 to 104, twice the value of the tempos for the second movement and the start of the fourth.[31] Upon review of the tempos calculated above for the individual movements, this hypothesis gains some additional credibility, with interesting implications: "it shows Brahms casting and maintaining a time structure of some forty minutes' duration, all based upon the primacy of a basic pulse which modulates by the most careful yet subtle means, so that changes occur through measured, controlled gradations or acceleration or ritard, all of them built into the music."[32] Epstein rationalizes this as "the principal of the *tactus* [sic] found in Renaissance music. [...] Brahms, with his interest in and knowledge of Renaissance music, may well have been impressed by the coherence and unity this system provided."[33] It is an intriguing argument, but it may also be a coincidence, hence the reluctance on the part of Epstein to commit fully to his hypothesis.

[31] Epstein, "Brahms and the Mechanisms of Motion," 212-213.
[32] Ibid., 211.
[33] Ibid., 205.

The conclusions that have been drawn above provide only a starting point for interpretation. Metronome ranges can supply useful parameters for coming closer to Brahms' symphonic vision, but it is the very nature of interpretation that much will remain subjective at best, speculative at worst. Certainly, absolute adherence to any number, no matter how well justified, would be contrary to the nature of a man who walked out of a performance of the second movement of *Symphony No. 1* when he felt the beat was too rigid.[34] Pulse, for Brahms, is a function of *melos*, a combination of character, proportion and structure, and it is through careful attention to these details that he fulfills his pledge to Henschel. In his capacity as conductor he places the evidence where he himself would search for it; the summation of all the evidence integral to the score presents a compelling picture as to the spectrum of tempos that could reasonably be considered viable, and the external evidence is strongly corroborative. As much as these tempos and their articulation tell us about the symphony, they also speak volumes to Brahms' consummate understanding of musical architecture. His concept of tempo is more than a performance practice detail, it is the foundation of the monumental.

[34] Michael Musgrave, *A Brahms Reader*, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1999), 145.

SOURCES

Aldrich, Richard. "The Opinions of Wagner and Brahms as Applied to Each Other." *New York Times*, 31 March 1912, X7.

Beethoven, Ludwig. *Symphony No. 1 in C Major, Op. 21.* Kassel: Bärenreiter Verlag, 1997.

_____. *Symphony No. 2 in D Major, Op. 36.* Kassel: Bärenreiter Verlag, 1998.

_____. *Symphony No. 4 in Bb Major, Op. 60.* Kassel: Bärenreiter Verlag, 1999.

_____. *Symphony No. 7 in A Major, Op. 92.* Kassel: Bärenreiter Verlag, 2000.

_____. *Symphony No. 9 in D Minor, Op. 125.* Kassel: Bärenreiter Verlag, 1996.

Berlioz, Hector. *Symphonie Fantastique.* Kassel: Bärenreiter Verlag, 1971.

Bonds, Mark Evans. *After Beethoven: Imperatives of Originality in the Symphony.* Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1996.

Bowen, José Antonio, ed. *The Cambridge Companion to Conducting.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003.

Bozart, George, ed. *Brahms Studies: Analytical and Historical Perspectives.* Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1990.

Brahms, Johannes. *Symphony No. 1, Opus 68.* München: G. Henle Verlag, 1996.

_____. *Symphony No. 2, Opus 73.* München: G. Henle Verlag, 1998.

_____. *Symphony No. 3, Opus 96.* München: G. Henle Verlag, 2006.

_____. *Complete Symphonies in Full Score.* New York: Dover Publications, 1974.

Brodbeck, David. *Brahms: Symphony No. 1.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997.

Del Mar, Norman. *Conducting Brahms.* Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1993.

Henschel, George. *Personal Recollections of Johannes Brahms.* Boston: Gorham Press, 1907.

Knapp, Raymond. *Brahms and the Challenge of the Symphony.* Stuyvesant: Pendragon Press, 1997.

Leinsdorf, Erich. *The Composer's Advocate.* New Haven: Yale University Press, 1981.

Mendelssohn, Felix. *Major Orchestral Works in Full Score.* New York: Dover Publications, 1975.

_____. *Symphony No. 5 "Reformation" in Full Score.* New York: Dover Publications, 1997.

Mozart, Leopold. *Gründliche Violinschule.* Wiesbaden: Breikopf & Härtel, 1983.

Musgrave, Michael. "Brahms's First Symphony: Thematic Coherence and Its Secret Origin." *Music Analysis,* Vol. 2, No. 2. (Jul., 1983), 117-33.

_____. *A Brahms Reader.* New Haven: Yale University Press, 1999.

_____. *The Cambridge Companion to Brahms.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999.

Pascall, Robert. "Brahms's First Symphony Slow Movement: The Initial Performing Version." *The Musical Times*, Vol. 122, No. 1664. (Oct., 1981), 664-7.

Schindler, Anton. *Beethoven As I Knew Him.* New York: Dover Publications, 1996.

Schuller, Gunther. *The Compleat Conductor.* New York: Oxford University Press, 1997.

Schumann, Robert. *Complete Symphonies in Full Score.* New York: Dover Publications, 1980.

Sherman, Bernard and Musgrave, Michael. *Performing Brahms.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003.

Sherman, Bernard. "Tempo and Proportion in Brahms: Period Evidence." *Early Music*, Vol. 25, No. 3. (Aug.,1997), 642-77.

_____. "How Authentic is Early Music Brahms?" *Early Music America*, 3:1 (Spring 1997), 33-8.

Wagner, Richard. *On Conducting*. New York: Dover Publications, 1989.