

*Right-Hemisphere  
Conducting, Nr. 5*

“Time” is not of our World

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## “Time” is not of our World

Whosoever danceth not, knoweth not the way of life.

*Jesus Christ*<sup>1</sup>

Muscles were made for movement, and rhythm is movement.

It is impossible to conceive a rhythm without thinking of a body in motion.

To move, a body requires a quantum of space and a quantum of time.

The beginning and end of the movements determine the amount of time and space involved.

*Emile Jacques-Dalcroze*<sup>2</sup>

Time, as the word is used in ordinary conversation today, does not exist in the natural world. Time, as we use the word today, refers to an artificial man-made regimentation of our lives and is so foreign to our nature that we rebel against it every day, as, for example, is exemplified in our individual sleep requirements.

Society has had a very difficult struggle in regimenting Time. Even in so basic a problem as the definition of the calendar year, the regulators still, after centuries, have not got it right—on December 31, 2008, it became necessary for the world to add one second to its clocks.

“Time” with respect to man himself must be thought of as a natural part of his right-hemisphere, experiential world. Since the right-hemisphere also enables us to understand and deal with aspects of space, I would think that the earliest of men, as Dalcroze suggests above, were aware more of space than Time. To throw a spear at an animal required something to happen here and then there. It was the *space* between the here and there that early man would have understood, but not as a matter of Time. It is interesting in this regard that the fifth-century writer, Martianus Capella still defined a “tone” as something “stretched over a space.”

The earliest of men, of course, truly lived in the present tense and having no need to think of past or future they had no need for a concept of Time as we know it.

The history of musicians is a history of the rebellion against the regimentation of Time. This has so frustrated the linear, rational world of philosophy that critics have had to invent words to describe the unexplainable actions of musical artists. In the early twentieth century, for example, critics invented the term “elastic style” to label the free romantic interpretations of the late nineteenth century. Earlier critics adopted the Italian word, *rubato*, to account for musicians having the audacity to tamper with the rigid meter notation on paper. The literal definition of *rubato*, “stolen Time,” reflects the unbendable ethics of the critics.

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<sup>1</sup> Found in a Gnostic Hymn of the second century, quoted in Curt Sachs, *World History of the Dance* (New York: Norton, 1937), 3.

<sup>2</sup> Emile Jacques-Dalcroze, in *Rhythm Music & Education* (London: Dalcroze Society, 1980), 39.

Many who hoped to bring a left-hemisphere order to our experiences with Time have suggested that all matters of Time in music had their origin in the human pulse. But this makes no sense because no two people have the same pulse, they vary greatly.<sup>3</sup> No doctor will answer you if you ask, "What is the official standard pulse?" And as it turns out, in so far as I can determine from my own reading, that there was in fact only one early writer, Franchino Gaffurio (1451–1518), who mentioned the relationship of the pulse to tempo. But in the same treatise he confesses that singers were making "sounds which cannot be written down."<sup>4</sup>

There are innumerable examples of our great composers who have fought against the regimentation of Time and in particular the regimentation of pulse. Monteverdi pleaded with a singer to reflect the beat of the heart [a common metaphor for feeling] and not the beat of the hand. And then there is Beethoven's contention, which should be engraved above the doors of all music departments, "Feeling has its own tempo."

Similarly, there are many examples of early composers urging the performers to feel free to ignore their notation of Time and Tempo.

These pieces should not be played to a strict beat any more than modern madrigals which, though difficult, are made easier by taking the beat now slower, now faster, and by even pausing altogether in accordance with the expression and meaning of the texts.

Girolamo Frescobaldi, *Toccatas and Partitas* [1615], Book I.

In accordance with the feeling one must guide the beat, sensing it now fast, now slow, according to the occasion, now liveliness, and now languor, as indeed anyone will easily know immediately who possess the fine manner of singing.

Giovanni Bonachelli, *Corona di sacri gigli ...*, 1642.

During the sixteenth century Italian composers began using the familiar Italian words we find at the upper left-hand corner of a score. But whereas we have been taught to think of these words in terms of tempo, they thought of them in terms of character. And thus, since character is native to the right-hemisphere's emphasis on individual experience, we find no agreement among those early writers. The German, Johann Mattheson (1681–1764), thought *Andante* meant *hope*.<sup>5</sup> But the English critic, Roger North (1653–1734), thought *Andante* meant "walking about full of concern."<sup>6</sup>

And similarly in the Classical Period, Quantz gives the tempo of *Adagio* as quarter-note = 16 (!), whereas in Mozart's beautiful *Ave verum corpus*, a work written in *alla breve* which is usually performed about quarter-note = 140, we are astonished to see *Adagio*.

It is easy to imagine the concept of pulse with regard to dancing by an individual, but getting a group of dancers to dance on the same pulse is another matter. Now they may all be forced to dance to a pulse which is natural to none of them. This is why in European palaces you will sometimes see affixed to a wall a huge club, with which the dancing master pounded the floor to enforce the pulse. Lully died from infection after accidentally hitting his toe with one of these clubs in rehearsal.

In a similar example, the English audiences were very excited in seeing and hearing for the first time the new seventeenth-century Italian custom of coordinated bowings. But this is also a form of regimentation and in the twentieth century Leopold Stokowski engaged in

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<sup>3</sup>One of my personal doctors told me he has had a patient with a pulse rate of 200 and he was unconcerned about this.

<sup>4</sup>*Practica musicae*.

<sup>5</sup>*Der vollkommene Capelmeister* [1739]

<sup>6</sup>Quoted in John Wilson, *Roger North on Music* (London: Novello, 1959), 119ff.

serious experiments by having the Philadelphia Orchestra string players return to bowing of their choice as he believed there was a loss of individual musicianship in coordinated bowings. Needless to say, the thoroughly regimented Philadelphia critics would not let him get away with this.

For band conductors of the present day I believe there is no greater obstacle to musicianship than the fear of breaking the barriers inferred by the measure bar lines. Gunther Schuller once expressed the same concern as follows:

How is it that the rubato style adopted by most pianists is generally regarded as a favorable proof of sensibility, whereas it would not be tolerated for a moment in an orchestral performance?<sup>7</sup>

My advice for the conductor who wants to be more musical is to first remember that the composer began with feelings he wished to communicate but in order to communicate them he was required to force them into our very strict and regimented arithmetic metrical notation. Therefore you help him by removing the chains which hold his music in place; you do not insult him by setting him free. On the contrary, if you perform exactly what is on paper you will only join him in chains.

Always hold dear Beethoven's advice that feeling has its own tempo. And follow Leopold Mozart's advice in his book on violin playing that you should ignore those Italian words in the upper left-hand corner and let the music itself tell you the proper tempo. The danger in those Italian words is that when you see "allegro," for example, you are immediately prejudiced with the thought that here is a fast piece. Better to follow Leopold's advice, which is based on an old etiquette of court life: never speak to a noble unless spoken to. Give the music a chance to speak to you first before you impose your will upon it.

Regarding the application of the right-hemisphere to melodic and rhythm elements, let me cite two illustrations from a repertoire work everyone knows, the Wagner *Trauermusik*.

The notes in bars 45–46 are melodic in character. When you see a melody, go to a piano to find the pitches and sing it. In singing it you will quickly discover the natural shape of the melody, the ways some notes lead to others. You discover the right-hemisphere version as opposed to the left-hemisphere data form. Only one of these is musical, so conduct it the way you sing it. In bars 45–46 there is absolutely no reason on earth why every quarter-note must be the same length. There are no rules whatsoever which determine how long these measures must take.

Now look at the last two bars of the final cadence of this same score. Here the woodwinds have a tie making both bars become one very long uninterrupted sound, although this tie is missing in almost all editions. The brass chords in the last two bars represent large church bells. In order to communicate this to the audience, while your right baton hand stays unmoving to reflect the woodwinds holding their very long pitch, use your left hand to bring in the first brass/bell and let it sound for a time, then cut the sound off. After a pause, while the woodwinds continue sounding, whatever length of pause feels right to you, you bring in the brass/bell again and let it ring. Then cut it off, then pause again and then finally with the left hand bring in the brass/bell to join the ongoing woodwind chord. When I conduct these two bars they can sometimes last twenty or more seconds. And longer if in a resonant hall.

In both of these two places nothing could be more unmusical than an on-going steady beating of quarter-notes. And suppose someone criticizes you for your rubato. Before you answer, remember you never have to apologize for your own *feelings*.

Finally, cadences in slow compositions generally need more time than the notated music allows, time to allow the listeners to pull back and relax from the tensions of the music. The

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<sup>7</sup>*The Compleat Conductor* (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1997), 71.

most common error I hear is to fail to allow an appropriate taper to the final note, regardless of written duration. I have heard many performances where the final note is violently cut off by the conductor (is he afraid not everyone will stop?). It results in a terrible jolt for the listener. I am often quoted for something I said in a rehearsal many years ago, "cadences and kisses should never be abrupt!"