

### ***Beethoven Revisited: tempo, rhythm, character, and rhetoric in the violin sonatas***

Despite vital research concerning 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> century performing practices (ie Brown, Frisch, Milsom, Noorduin)<sup>1</sup>, the performing/recording of Beethoven violin sonatas rarely reflects the divergent expressive possibilities.

Recent editing focuses on two goals: 1) critical research towards establishing a reliable *urtext*; and 2) greater understanding of historical performing practices, offering invaluable insights into informed execution.

Early editions reveal performers' artistic opinions based on personal experience, offering a variety of conclusions, enhancing our understanding of earlier interpretation.

Current practices, however, generally follow Beethoven's notation literally in tempo, rhythm, dynamics and articulation, excluding individual freedom, variety of character, and spontaneity evident in Beethoven's own performance approach.

I intend to search beyond historically informed performance, exploring musical parameters as route to artistic decision-making. My goal is not to re-create historically sound performances, but rather to be guided by artistic musical considerations, informed by historical practices.

A multi-disciplinary approach, examining contemporary literature and treatises, will offer a wider overview. While investigating the following parameters, asking the artistic questions: *why*, *where*, and *how much*, will radically alter performances.

#### **Tempo flexibility and *Playing with Time*:**

Although tempo flexibility was clearly expected,<sup>2</sup> there is currently little use of *rubato* or varying speeds within movements. I intend to consult contemporaries (such as Czerny,<sup>3</sup> who also offers character descriptions). Although an early proponent of the metronome, Beethoven clearly did not intend rigid

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<sup>1</sup> C. Brown: *Classical & Romantic Performing Practice 1750-1900* (Oxford, 1999); W. Frisch: *Music in the Nineteenth Century* (W.W.Norton and Company, 2013); D. Milsom: *Romantic Violin Performing Practices* (The Boydell Press, 2020); M.Noorduin: *Beethoven's Tempo Indications* (University of Manchester, 2016).

<sup>2</sup> Brown: *Reading Between the Lines of Beethoven's Notation* (Baerenreiter BA09036, 2020), 1b. "Tempo Flexibility"

<sup>3</sup> Carl Czerny, *On the Proper Performance of all Beethoven's Works for the Pianoforte with Accompaniments for other Instruments, or for the Orchestra, Chapter III* (1846), I. "Sonatas for the Pianoforte and Violin".

adherence, and his own use of timing suggests a flexible approach,<sup>4</sup> the boundaries of which I will explore.

### **Rhythmic freedom:**

Rhythmic notation describing precise divisions of beats, was not viewed mathematically in Beethoven's time.<sup>5</sup> However, performers have increasingly relied on metronomic representation, ignoring implications of musical contexts. For example: does the notation signify *exact* rhythm, or does it describe an ornament, which would be played with freer timing and dynamic shaping? The answer to this is fundamental in communicating musical meaning and reveals significant ensemble implications (i.e., freedom from exact vertical alignment of voices).

### **Character, Rhetoric, and *Cantabile*:**

Czerny describes characters such as "playful", "declamatory" and "melodious"<sup>6</sup>; Ries recounts Beethoven's attention to expressive character<sup>7</sup>; and Baillot includes a whole chapter on "Musical Character". To reveal these often-neglected aspects, I will inquire into rhetorical techniques of "dialogue and comment" and examine *where* and *how* to employ *cantabile* (often cited historically by violinists).

### **Articulation**

Bow articulation is fundamental to note lengths, dynamics, and character. Recent research reveals traditional assumptions as contrary to historical practices<sup>8</sup>: i.e., off-string bowing where dotted – used routinely since the early 20<sup>th</sup> century – was reserved for very particular passages. Investigating questions of *where* and *how* to use various bowings will impact on character, dynamics and ensemble.

### **Left-hand Techniques:**

These techniques have changed dramatically: *vibrato* becoming a default method for lyricism and often used continuously, affecting hierarchy in phrasing and obscuring harmonic highlights. Contemporary sources reveal that *vibrato* was considered ornamental, not fundamental<sup>9</sup>. *Portamento*, which was used

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<sup>4</sup> W. Frisch: *Music in the Nineteenth Century*, Chapter Three "Virtuosity, Virtuosos" p.47

<sup>5</sup> For a thorough discussion on tempo and rhythm modifications, see Brown: *Classical & Romantic Performing Practices*, chapters 11-13

<sup>6</sup> Czerny, *On the Proper Performance*, III, I

<sup>7</sup> Wegeler and F. Ries: *Remembering Beethoven* (1838), translated by Frederick Noonan (Andrei Deutsch Limited, 1988), pp. 81-83

<sup>8</sup> Brown: *Reading Between the Lines*, 4. "Articulation".

<sup>9</sup> L. Spohr: *Violinschule* (original, 1833), in *Violin School*, edited by U.C. Hill (Oliver Ditson, 1852) pp. 98, 136

extensively for *cantabile*<sup>10</sup>, is now seldom employed. I will explore tonal approach in relation to context (*why, where and how much to use vibrato or portamento*).

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<sup>10</sup> See, for example: Beethoven op 96, *Adagio espressivo*, edited by Ferdinand David (Peters, 1868), bar 19, 20