

Gábor Csalog

**CRESCENDO MARKINGS AND THE
PERFORMER
(in the works of Brahms)**

Doctoral Thesis

2017

I. The Case History of the Research

My original intention was to write about the crescendo markings found in *musical works of different styles*. I was interested in considering and examining the possible tasks for the performer. My intention was to survey these tasks, which are independent of different styles, though not from certain mechanisms of reading and understanding the written music, which performers often neglect to carry out.

After embarking on the research I realized the topic would be disconcertingly broad, unless I were to focus on works in *a particular* style, or by a single composer. My choice thus fell on a composer whose oeuvre is by and large a familiar part of the average repertoire of a musician today. I consider Brahms's works to be ideal ground for harvesting examples for my train of thought, because compared to his nineteenth-century predecessors, his notation is extremely deliberate and organized. As a composer he forms in his works an organic link with the legacy of the Baroque, the Classical, and even Schubert and Schumann. He was both a performer and conductor of many older works he considered important, and we might be justified in dubbing him one of the first "authentic" performers in music history. For these reasons his notation can be considered as a bridge between the manners of writing of the 19th and 20th centuries.

In taking examples from Brahms's music, I have not ruled out the possibility of drawing valid conclusions about his music. However, even though specific places in specific works are dealt with, the main thrust of my approach focuses *not* on Brahms's music, but on the general tasks of the performer. We encounter them every day as performers in all manner of music – but through the examples taken from Brahms's works these can perhaps be made visible with the necessary clarity, and thus be rendered susceptible to analysis.

II. Sources

Though I do cite some of the literature in my thesis, I have drawn rather from my own practice as a performer, listener, and teacher of music. I am attempting to map an area that lies across the border between musicology and the performing arts. Since this field is closely related to the practical and perceptual problems that affect performers, I considered it worthwhile approaching.

III. Methodology

The purpose of my thesis is to help us understand how much we performers fail to discover in the score and "between the lines". How could we better read and understand what is written – and perhaps even what is not written? (The last chapter of the dissertation deals with this latter question.)

Though, due to the thematic groupings of the chapters and the musical examples, my writing has acquired something of an encyclopedic character, it was *not* my intention to collect all the possible types of occurrence of Brahms's crescendos. (In my thesis, I always started out from a musical situation, and developed the possible categories as I went; I did not look for examples to match predefined categories.)

In forming the chapters and themes of the thesis, it seemed a necessary task to set out the categories, but also a necessary evil. My recurrent experience is that a crescendo marking, just as the other indications written by the composer into the written music, can be interpreted only in the multi-layered context of that particular point in the work. It is difficult to disentangle the various musical factors that are entwined and interact with one another – *yet I had to try – to see how these factors operate in the vicinity of crescendo markings.*

The excerpts of the works I have selected derive from the complete piano works, chamber works, and symphonies of Brahms, the *German Requiem*, and his choral works.

IV. Findings

- a) One of the basic types of crescendo markings in the works of Brahms, similarly to earlier proponents of various styles, is closely linked to the idea of broadening space. I have listed the different types. The way in which the performer creates loudness should basically be influenced by this sense of space.
- b) Since the *crescendo* is not the cause, but the consequence of the *changing harmonies*, and of the tension of modulation, the crescendos cannot be understood without "keeping track" of these things.

- c) In the region of a *crescendo* marking in Brahms's music increasing rhythmic density can be observed, similarly to previous composers. (It is important for the performer that the rhythmic gesture proceed in tandem with the volume.) In addition to this, I have listed examples of many other different types of changes in rhythmic tension. These must all influence the volume curve.
- d) In the performer's mind, volume should exist in a close relationship with the shaping of the piece, and the determination of time. All this includes *timing* of surprises, and the preparation of "unexpected" events. In special cases, the *crescendo* may play a role in showing a *re-interpretation* of form.
The *crescendo* never happens evenly – not even in Brahms's music. So much so, in fact that we might say that within larger-scale *crescendos* we can almost always find smaller *diminuendo* passages too.
- e) The markings of the various degrees of loudness often relate to the *various gestures* in the works. The performer must recognize these and involve this domain in the execution of the dynamics.
- f) The performance indications written in Brahms's music are just the tip of the iceberg. The borders between the compositional approaches of “writing every indication” and “writing no indications” are fluid. This requires thinking through time and time again. *How much of the possible information is directly written down?* And how much must the performer deduce for him- or herself to supplement the indications, from the context of the work or perhaps other works by the composer?

V. Documentation of activities related to the topic of the dissertation

A large number of Brahms's piano works form part of my repertoire.

From time to time I play the op. 3. F minor Sonata, and most of the Intermezzi and shorter pieces in opp. 76, 116, 117, 118, and 119.

Ever since I was young child I have listened to very much of Brahms's music, particularly non-piano works. These too have left a lasting influence on me. In teaching piano and chamber music the works of Brahms are given special emphasis. But more important than working with pieces by the composer, I feel is the gradual acquisition of *general* experience in reading music – both when learning the works, and when teaching them.