

Schuller and Sibelius

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One of these days I'm going to write an epic diatribe on why Gunther Schuller's book *The Compleat Conductor* is the most destructively terrible book about conducting ever written, but until the time to do so presents itself, perhaps this post can tide me over. Schuller's thesis is simple: composers know their music better than anyone else, and they know how to notate accurately. Therefore, if you deviate from the composer's notation, you are conducting badly – who are you to say you know better than the composer how the music should go?

There are about a dozen immediately-apparent problems with Schuller's thesis, but the easiest part to refute is that notation equals intent. Some of you may know Sibelius's *Andante festivo*, originally for string quartet, generally more familiar in its string orchestra version. Sibelius doesn't provide a lot of performance indications in the score regarding tempo, but there are two important pieces of information: the title and the meter.

The title gives a tempo indication right away: andante. Often this is described as "walking tempo;" Roger Norrington will tell you it literally means "going." Either way, it suggests a sense of motion and certainly does not mean slow. (The "festivo" is more ambiguous: yes, it translates to "festive," but in this case, it might be more accurate to say "ceremonial," akin to the German *feierlich*.) The time signature is cut time, half note to the beat. If we combine those two indications, we may not be able to put a precise metronome marking on it, but we can surmise that the intended tempo should be a "moving 2" of some sort. And in fact, some performances do exactly that:

<https://youtu.be/tbLRKJZPHCO>

Which is fine – nothing wrong with it, sounds lovely. (Though some of the YouTube commenters aren't fans.) And it's a Finnish conductor with a Finnish orchestra, so if you're the sort of person who thinks that kind of thing provides some kind of authenticity, you're safe there too. Now let's listen to a different version:

<https://youtu.be/vgXl8tnibml>

Yes, that's Sibelius himself conducting the same piece. We may not agree on exactly the best way to describe this tempo, but it's difficult to imagine anyone hearing this and calling it "Andante in 2." I'd probably choose "Adagio molto in 4." There's enough rubato (unmarked, incidentally) in the performance that a few of the faster passages *might* work in 2, but most of this has a quarter-note feel, and even the quarters feel slower than andante (averaging around 56 bpm), to say nothing of the halves.

Absurdly, by Schuller's logic, the first performance is superior because, by more closely adhering to the notation, Saraste has done a better job of capturing Sibelius's intent. Sibelius himself, on the other hand, has somehow managed to subvert his own intentions by deviating from the score. If Schuller were to listen to both without knowing who was conducting, he'd insist that the first was closer to Sibelius's ideal.

To be fair, we shouldn't automatically consider the composer's recording more authoritative than the page. There are a variety of reasons the two could deviate: editing mistakes in the score, bad conducting (inexperienced conductors don't always get the tempos they want), being in a strange mood the day of the recording session (though they may have been in a strange mood the day the ink dried too), and, for older recordings, inaccurate recording speed. In the interest of full disclosure, I have not scoured Sibelius's manuscripts (Was the original title "Adagio festivo?") or letters ("My stupid publisher accidentally put cut time when I meant 4/4") to verify the score's accuracy.

And even if my score is "correct" in this case, we shouldn't extrapolate a general trend from one example – which is why we need to point out that this case is far from isolated. If you sit down with Copland's LSO recording of *Appalachian Spring*, you'll find he's within 4-5 bpm of his metronome mark *maybe* half the time, and sometimes off by more than 30 bpm. Stravinsky was notorious both for insisting that performers follow his notation and for failing to do so himself. (The last Stravinsky MM I checked was the first movement of *Dumbarton Oaks*: the score says eighth=152, while his recording is at least 180.) If we're to believe Schuller's claim that the vast majority of the time composers' notation accurately reflects intent, then we have to find excuses for the perhaps 30-50% of the time that composers' own recordings deviate from the score. That's an awful lot of editing errors and slowed-down recordings.

Schuller half-heartedly acknowledges this phenomenon in *The Compleat Conductor*, but his response is a bunch of slippery-slope straw-man nonsense [pg. 43]: "Such occasional anomalies do not automatically invalidate all metronome markings." For one thing, as I've said, such anomalies are hardly "occasional." And for another, these anomalies may not "invalidate" a MM, but they do mean that we can't assume uncritically that they reflect intent. The composers themselves have proved over and over again that they often don't. Instead, we're going to have to choose tempos based on some other criterion – what sounds the best, perhaps?