

**DLA doctoral thesis - a summary**

**Attila Falvay**

**The metronome markings of the String Quartets of  
Ludwig van Beethoven and their playability**

**Supervisor: Dr. András Batta**

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## **I. Background to the research**

I have long been fascinated by the issue of the metronome markings in Beethoven quartets. I have now been playing these works for nearly forty years as a member of the Kodály Quartet. Earlier editions gave no metronome marking whatsoever, thus we approached the works on the basis of the traditions handed down to us. Critical editions gave the metronome indications written in by Beethoven himself, but these featured only as an annotation to the score.

The daily use of a metronome is an interesting circumstance in the life of a performing musician. I realized this when it was pointed out to me by Zoltán Kocsis. The use of a metronome to practise of internal rhythmical accuracy requires great discipline and concentration from instrumentalists. It is the simplest way of practising to smooth out rhythmic liberties and the inaccurate playing of rhythmic motifs.

In this thesis I have made an attempt to compare the approaches of different performers, primarily in respect of tempo. The basic idea was given by the approach towards, or the ignoring of, Beethoven's values. The thesis contains an analysis of 11 quartets, because these are the works for which Beethoven wrote metronome markings – albeit it retrospect. For the other quartets, known as the late quartets, Karl Holz published his own recommendations for metronome markings as a result of his work with Beethoven, and I supply these for their interest value.

## **II. Sources**

In determining the direction my research should take and the structure of the thesis, I have followed the advice of my supervisor Dr. András Batta. Many questions and suggestions took shape during the workshop discussion, which I incorporated into the thesis while developing the topic. However, the most important document, a letter written by Beethoven which contains the metronome indications determined by him, is lost. The list published by

the publisher Steiner is the only document we know of that matches Beethoven's intentions.

Music historian Máté Mesterházi, scholar on the staff of the Library of the Liszt Academy of Music, was of assistance to me in locating some studies. It was no easy task to obtain Peter Stadlen's article "Beethoven and the Metronome II", published in the journal *Soundings*, though it is a most important piece of writing on the topic. As well as the available earlier sources (works by Gustav Nottebohn and Wilhelm von Lenz) and the home page of the Beethoven Haus Bonn, the following works were important during my research: Joseph Kerman: *The Beethoven Quartets*, Joseph de Malriave: *Beethoven's Quartets*, Peter Stadlen: "Beethoven and the Metronome I., II.", Marten Noorduyn: "Beethoven's Tempo Indications", Lari Dianne Young: "Problems Regarding the Metronome Markings in the Music of Beethoven". Kenneth Drake: "The Sonatas of Beethoven". Rudolf Kolisch and Alfred Brendel's studies raised valuable ideas, since they approached Beethoven's works primarily as performers. There is a whole library of data about Carl Czerny's relationship with Beethoven,

mainly discussing the piano literature, so in this thesis I have dealt with this only in passing.

### **III. Method**

The quintessence of the thesis is given by the comparative table shown after every work. I have studied recordings by six string quartets of the op. 18 series. The ensembles I selected were: the Amadeus, Artemis, Emerson, Guarneri, Magyar, and Mosaïques quartets. To sum up: the Mosaïques Quartet represents historically authentic playing, the Amadeus and the Guarneri the traditional, and the Emerson and Artemis Quartets pursue new paths in modern quartet playing.

On the basis of the examined recordings, the Magyar Quartet approaches Beethoven's markings, and also preserves tradition. The op. 59, op. 74, and op. 95 quartets were not available in a historically authentic performance, so I examined these works based on recordings by only five quartets. My work also covers the question of whether the given metronome marking relates to the beginning of the

work, an important part of the movement, or perhaps even to the entire movement, as an average tempo. The general classification of the quartets is reflected in their interpretation, which can be seen, which can be read from the graph.

The measurements were conducted using a digital metronome.

#### **IV. Conclusion**

During my research I found that there are performances which make a stated aim of sticking as far as possible to the composer's tempo indications. Some of Beethoven's metronome indications are impossible to implement, or can at most only be approximated. Listening to the recordings, two different principles were strikingly recognisable: to follow Beethoven's indications to the utmost extreme, or to continue the customary practice of earlier periods to create a convincing performance that leaves the audience enriched by the illusion of an authentic interpretation. These two

approaches are far from being mutually exclusive. A written piece of music is never heard without a performer. Hence it follows that even if the performers are equally prepared, have the same musical intelligence and set the same goals, their characters and personality traits will certainly differ. Consequently, their musical interpretations will always be different. This fact must be accepted, as a human factor of a performance in sound.

By way of example I mention the fourth, variation, movement of the Quartet in E flat major op. 74, as an example characterising the whole tempo question. With one exception (88) all of the ensembles start the theme of the movement using Beethoven's indication (100), namely (100, 100, 100, 94)

From the first variation, there are no further metronome markings provided by the composer, so performers handled the material freely according to their own ideas, which showed great divergence.

In conclusion, my own experience is that tempo is only one element of interpretation. Technical and musical skill, a

sure knowledge of style, the quality of the instruments, and the acoustic circumstances can all influence the tempo, the correct choice of which is only one important element of a good performance. This thesis provides an insight into questions of tempo in Beethoven quartets on the basis of the difference between the metronome marking desired by the composer and the interpretations of great ensembles.