


2006

Carl Maria von Weber's Overture to Oberon: A History of Recorded Performance

Stephen Planas
Colby College

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.colby.edu/ugrs>

 Part of the [Music Commons](#), and the [Other History Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Planas, Stephen, "Carl Maria von Weber's Overture to Oberon: A History of Recorded Performance" (2006).
Undergraduate Research Symposium (UGRS). 34.
<https://digitalcommons.colby.edu/ugrs/34>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Student Research at Digital Commons @ Colby. It has been accepted for inclusion in Undergraduate Research Symposium (UGRS) by an authorized administrator of Digital Commons @ Colby.

Carl Maria von Weber's Overture to *Oberon*:
A History of Recorded Performance

Stephen Planas

Table of Contents

Introduction	3
Past Research & Methodology	7
Timing & Duration	9
Portamento	17
Rhythmic Accuracy & Ensemble	20
Changes in Expressive Playing	24
Conclusions	40
Appendix A	43
Appendix B	44
Bibliography	54

Introduction

Historians have always been fascinated by the question of how music of the past was performed. When dealing with the distant past, precise answers concerning performance practice have often been elusive, however. Eyewitness accounts and musical treatises allow scholars to draw some conclusions about a specific period's performance practices, but written records have inherent limitations. We cannot say with any certainty how Bach, Mozart, or Beethoven performed their music. Written records fail to reveal details crucial to the analysis of a work's performance history.

Thanks to the development of audio recordings, performances from throughout the 20th century have been preserved, fundamentally changing the way historians can study performance practice. From the earliest recordings of Mengelberg and Walter to the modern discs of Levine and Barenboim, major conductors' interpretations of the core symphonic repertoire are now available. Using these valuable resources, scholars can now examine the performance history of specific pieces or eras more thoroughly, and draw more secure conclusions about the nature of performance practices and traditions.

Historians have commonly divided the history of classical music recording into two distinct periods, the first ending in the years following World War II and the second continuing to the present.¹ Many differences can be found

¹ Derived from Robert Philip, Performing Music in the Age of Recording (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2004), Robert Philip, Early Recordings and Musical Style (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), and Bernard D. Sherman, "Tempos and Proportions in Brahms: Period Evidence," Early Music, Vol. 25, No. 3 (Aug., 1997), pg. 462-477.

between performances from these two periods, but the most significant is the treatment of expression. To many listeners, recordings made during the second half of the 20th century lack the expressive and emotional qualities often found in earlier performances.

This view is articulated most persuasively by Robert Philip in Performing Music in the Age of Recording.² According to his analysis, modern conductors have lost the spontaneity typically present in earlier performances, favoring instead perfect orchestral execution. In this quest for greater precision, expressive qualities such as portamento, rhythmic flexibility, and rubato—all hallmarks of the so-called “early style”—are almost completely lost.³

Philip attributes this focus on flawless execution to the nature of the modern audience. During the first half of the century, many recordings were made during live concerts, so that the audience would only hear the piece once, making it vital for the conductor to create an emotional impact; performances had to be memorable on a single listening. Conversely, Philip argues, performances from the second half of the century must stand the test of both time and repeated listening, since consumers purchase recordings with the intention of listening to them repeatedly. Over time, even a small error in either tuning or accuracy can become both noticeable and bothersome.⁴

A special atmosphere exists in live concert recordings that can never be duplicated in the studio. As Philip notes, a relationship exists between the audience and the musicians, an element missing from studio recordings.

² Robert Philip, Performing Music in the Age of Recording (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2004).

³ Performing Music in the Age of Recording, pg. 232-33.

⁴ Performing Music in the Age of Recording, pg. 12-13.

Mistakes by the performers and risks taken during the concert are captured on tape, and while listening to such a recording fails to replicate a live performance exactly, Philip believes it comes close to achieving this goal.⁵

The precision heard on modern discs became possible as orchestras moved out of the concert hall and into the recording studio. Thanks to advances in editing technology, many takes can be spliced together, creating a single, seamless, and accurate “performance.”⁶ This method ensures a nearly perfect recording, one that will be aesthetically pleasing for many years.

Philip does not hold today’s style of recording in particularly high regard, however:

Modern performances are often exactly together, very well disciplined, and in tune, but often lack the corporate spirit of messier performances of the past. . . . One wonders what the point is. It is the difference between unanimity of purpose and unanimity of execution.⁷

While admitting that modern conductors achieve great accuracy, Philip believes that they sacrifice expression, greatly affecting the aesthetic success of modern performances. Earlier performances—in Philip’s eyes—may have had their technical faults, but they contain energy and emotion that is desperately lacking from today’s recordings.

⁵ Performing Music in the Age of Recording, pg. 47-48.

⁶ Performing Music in the Age of Recording, pg. 42-43.

⁷ Performing Music in the Age of Recording, pg. 87.

My research examines the recorded performance history of the Overture to Weber's *Oberon* in light of these aesthetic goals. I have charted changes in performance practice trends, including in timing, tempo fluctuation, rhythmic accuracy and ensemble, and the use of portamento. The twenty recordings studied that I surveyed span nearly seventy-five years, and include many of the 20th century's most prominent conductors and orchestras, including groups from Communist Russia, both pre-World War II and post-World War II continental Europe, the British Isles, and the United States.⁸ Though by no means comprehensive, my selections encompass a diverse sampling of surviving recordings, ensuring a large enough sample size to reflect general trends in the performance of Weber's masterpiece.

My research and analysis confirms the conventional view of a move toward more accurate—but also more cautious, uniform, and inexpressive—performances. Surprisingly, however, this analysis also suggests that we are on the cusp of a new era in orchestra performance practice, one that shares many of the values of the earlier recorded performances. While maintaining today's high standards of execution, modern performances now look to regain many of the past's expressive qualities, doing so in sometimes surprising ways.

⁸ For complete list of recordings studied, see Appendix A.

Past Research & Methodology

The most prominent scholar currently studying 20th-century performance practice via recordings is José Antonio Bowen. In 1995, he founded the Centre for the History and Analysis of Recorded Music in Southampton, England and is currently Dean of Miami University's School of Fine Arts. Bowen has used a variety of techniques to analyze a wide range of music, from Mozart symphonies to jazz standards such as "Round Midnight." My research often uses Bowen's methods as a model. From specific ideas about analyzing a piece to the graphic presentation of data, Bowen's work has provided the essential framework for my study.

In order for any study to be accurate, Bowen believes that it is essential to obtain a "relatively complete history in sound." He concedes that this is nearly impossible, but maintains that it is essential to study a large cross-section of recordings. If one analyzes only a limited number of the available performances, it will be difficult to distinguish "period style from individual innovation." Bowen observes that if one discovers a new trend in performance, but has too few recordings from a particular era, then one cannot determine whether it is the result of either the style of a specific conductor, national or period style, the orchestra's unique style, or an actual shift in performance tradition.⁹ Also, it is important to remember that a single recording is only a brief snapshot of history;

⁹ Jose A. Bowen, "Finding the Music in Musicology: Performance History and Musical Works," Rethinking Music, eds. Nicholas Cook & Mark Everist (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), pg. 433-34.

it captures a particular conductor's ideas in a specific period and does not represent the conductor's entire career. If enough recordings are collected, however, accurate conclusions about more general trends can be made.

Bowen also encourages the use of computers in the study of performance tradition. Computers can store huge quantities of numerical data, allowing researchers the opportunity to make very accurate statements about large-scale trends. The drawback to this technology is that much of the "human element" can be lost; as pieces are reduced to simply a collection of numbers, one can forget that music is a human art form. Bowen recognizes the danger of producing only "generic" results, but views the use of computers as essential, stating that, "ironically, numerical data often lead to extremely tangible, specific conclusions."¹⁰

In his article on performing practice for *The New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musician's*, 2nd ed., Benjamin Brinner makes several important observations about the history of 20th-century performance practice. First, he argues that portamento is used much more sparingly today. Early recordings show that string players frequently slid between notes, both out of convenience and because of the period's aesthetic preferences. Today, portamento is quite subtle, often only reserved for points of either particular emphasis or softening; sliding between notes is not longer acceptable in modern performances.¹¹

Brinner also finds that rhythms are now more accurately articulated. In the first half of the century, players frequently "over-dotted" rhythms, making

¹⁰ "Finding the Music in Musicology," pg. 433.

¹¹ Benjamin Brinner, "Performing Practice, I. 8: Western: The 20th century", *Grove Music Online* (Accessed 02 March 2006), <<http://www.grovemusic.com/shared/views/article.html?section=music.40272.1.8>>

short notes sound even shorter than written. In recent years, however, this practice has also become unacceptable; it came to be seen as “undisciplined and unclear.” Rhythms are now carefully subdivided, ensuring a clear and accurate performance of rhythms.¹²

The trend towards less rhythmic freedom is paralleled by a move towards less tempo flexibility within movements, according to Brinner. Early conductors frequently accelerated during “loud and vigorous passages, and slow[ed] down in quieter and more gentle ones.” In sonata form movements, this practice translates into very fast opening themes and much slower second themes. Much like the “over-dotting” of rhythms, this practice was frowned upon in the second half of the century; substantial acceleration and ritardando signified a lack of control, an important aesthetic goal of modern performers. Brinner acknowledges that tempo and rhythmic freedom is not completely lost, but that it is “more restrained than earlier in the century.”¹³

Timing & Duration

The first consideration when studying a work is total duration, and many different conclusions have been drawn on this issue. Some historians claim that tempos are getting faster,¹⁴ while others argue that performances are getting

¹² “Performing Practice, I. 8: Western: The 20th century”.

¹³ “Performing Practice, I. 8: Western: The 20th century”.

¹⁴ Richard Taruskin, “The Pastness of the Present and the Presence of the Past,” Text & Act: Essays on Music and Performance (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995).

slower.¹⁵ Bernard Sherman takes the latter position in his study of Brahms's orchestral works. By separating recordings into either pre-1946 or post-1946, he concludes that performances from the post-war period are "much slower," typically by an average of ten to fifteen percent.¹⁶ He attributes this to tempo fluctuation within the work, for initial tempos have remained very similar over time. His observations support Brinner's claim that modern conductors are more conservative with tempo changes, for Sherman's data demonstrates that "before 1946, conductors let their tempos accelerate more often and to a much greater degree than after the war. Such acceleration turns out to be the main reason why the pre-war recordings have quicker timings."¹⁷ Paul Banks also endorses this position, but his data is limited to the Adagietto from Mahler's Fifth Symphony. He observes that Mengelberg and Walter once performed this movement in 7'04" and 7'57", respectively; modern recordings take between ten and eleven minutes, with Scherchen clocking in at 13'07".¹⁸

Bowen takes a more nuanced view, believing that performances are neither speeding up nor slowing down, particularly in the "most heavily recorded repertoire."¹⁹ Rather than focusing on only one piece or composer, Bowen cites multiple examples that support his claim. According to his data, which examines the duration of various first movement expositions, Beethoven's

¹⁵ Robert Philip, Early Recordings and Musical Style (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992).

¹⁶ For complete collection of Sherman's data, see Table 2 in "Tempos and Proportions in Brahms: Period Evidence," pg. 466-67.

¹⁷ "Tempos and Proportions in Brahms: Period Evidence," pg. 464.

¹⁸ Paul Banks, "Aspects of Mahler's Fifth Symphony: Performance Practice and Interpretation," The Musical Times Vol. 130, No. 1755 (May, 1989), pg. 261.

¹⁹ Jose A. Bowen, "Tempo, Duration, and Flexibility: Techniques in the Analysis of Performance," Journal of Musicological Research, Vol. 16, No. 2 (July 1996) pg. 114.

Symphony No. 5 is speeding up; Mozart's Symphony No. 40 has remained fairly constant, and Tchaikovsky's Symphony No. 6 is slowing down. The lack of a general trend in tempo can be seen in other contexts as well. The second movement of Beethoven's Symphony No. 5 has changed little in duration; the first movement of Mahler's Symphony No. 4 is slightly faster, while Brahms's Piano Concerto No. 2 has slowed down significantly.²⁰ Such information leads Bowen to conclude that there is "*no* overall trend to faster or slower tempos."²¹

While general trends in tempo can be difficult to determine, trends in individual pieces are more easily uncovered. Performances of the *Oberon* Overture exhibit a clear tendency towards slower tempos. Figure 1 shows the total duration of all twenty recordings plotted against year of performance. The line in the graph is a linear regression of average tempos. It represents the computer's best attempt to determine the general trend for the given data. This trendline is useful when attempting to form conclusions about a work's performance history.

²⁰ For complete graphs of this data, see Figure 1 and Figure 2 in "Tempo, Duration, and Flexibility: Techniques in the Analysis of Performance," pg. 115-17.

²¹ "Tempo, Duration, and Flexibility: Techniques in the Analysis of Performance," pg. 114.

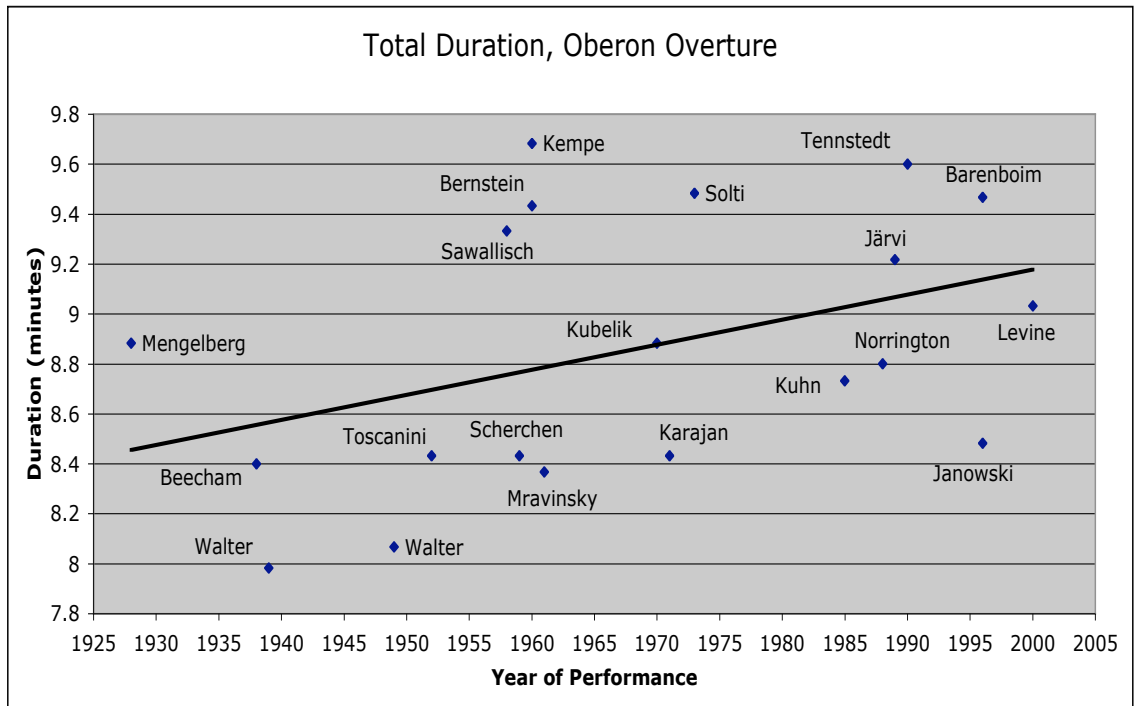


Figure 1.

Clearly, performances of the *Oberon* Overture are getting slower; since 1928, the average duration has increased by nearly 48 seconds. Naturally, not every recording conforms to this trend; Janowski's 1996 performance is much slower than the "average," and Mengelberg's 1928 recording is slightly faster. The overall trend is unmistakable, however: performances from the first half of the century generally fall below the trendline, and recordings from the second half of the century generally lie above or near the trendline.

Total durations provide only part of the picture, however. *Oberon* is written in classic sonata-allegro form, beginning with a slow introduction followed by a fast section with exposition, development, recapitulation, and coda. This structure creates two main tempo areas—the introduction and the

allegro—that could have developed different trends over time. If this is the case, one section could have a greater impact on total duration.

Figures 2a and 2b show the duration of both the introduction and allegro plotted against year of performance. The data points in figure 2a (the duration of the introduction) appear to be randomly spaced. Slow performances exist in both the early and more recent recordings. Likewise, fast introductions can be found in both periods. No clear trend appears to exist for the introduction, and the linear regression supports that conclusion, for it has very little slope. The average duration of the introduction has increased by only a few seconds over the course of the century, a small change that has little impact on the work's total duration.

A clear trend is found in the data points of figure 2b, however. Unlike the introduction, performances of the allegro are becoming noticeably slower. The average duration of the allegro is over 30 seconds longer than in 1928, accounting for the overall increase in duration seen in figure 1. Once again, however, outliers exist. Scherchen's recording features a very fast allegro while Kempe's is extremely slow, but most fast recordings are early and most slow recordings are more recent.

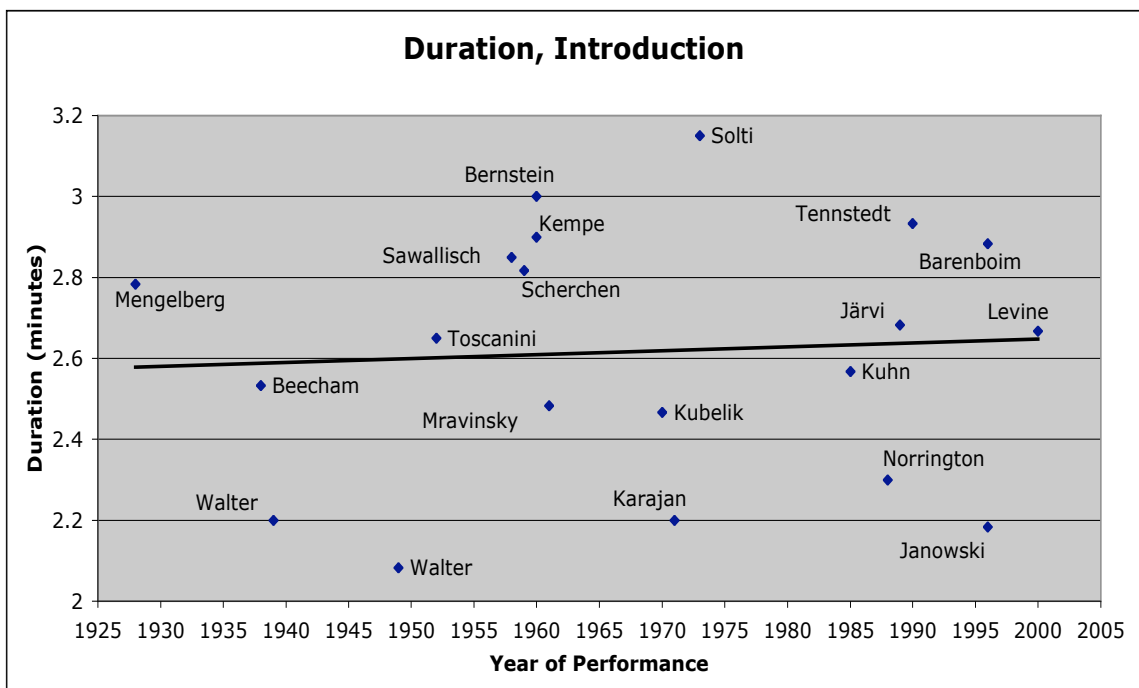


Figure 2a.

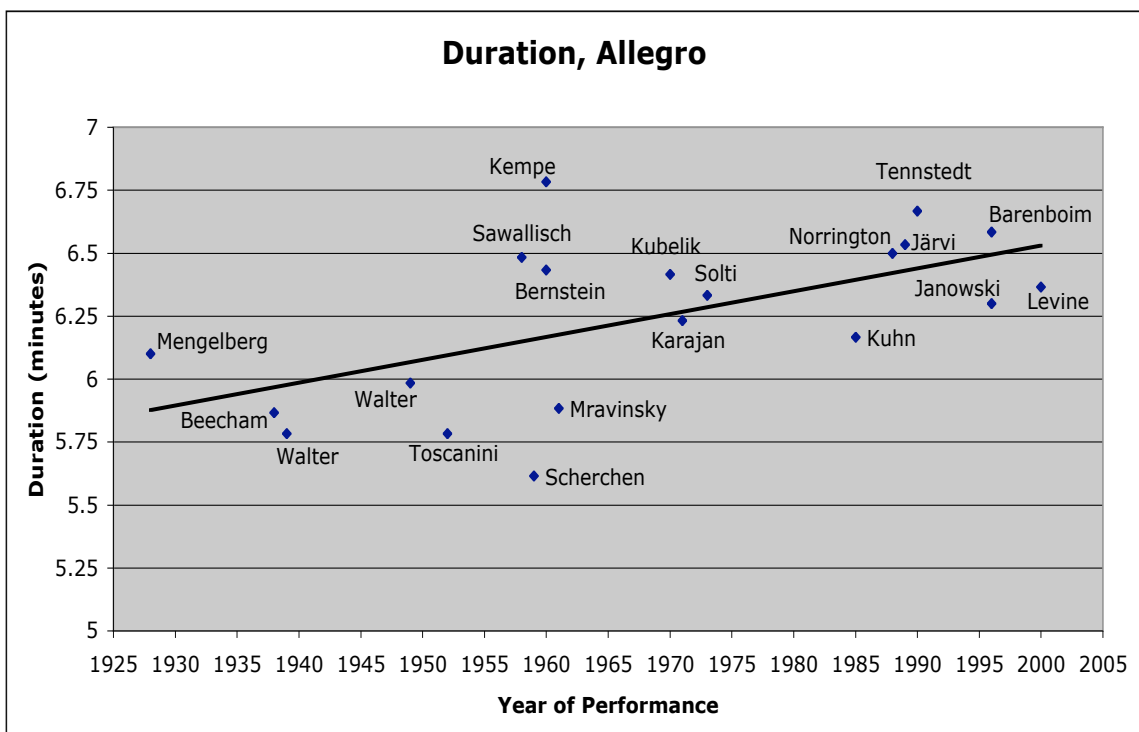


Figure 2b.

An analysis of the speeds of the first and second themes of the exposition reveals several other interesting trends. By using a timer sensitive to 0.01 second, I determined the duration of the first theme's opening eight bars. Then using simple arithmetic, I calculated the average tempo over that span. All conductors maintain a very steady pulse throughout the passage, so eight measures provides an accurate reflection of the overall tempo. Figure 3a shows the average tempo of these eight measures. Figure 3b shows the average tempo of the second theme. Unlike in the first theme, most recordings contain varying degrees of rubato in this section, but the same method described for figure 3a can easily be used to determine the general tempo area for the second theme.²²

Both graphs show a clear trend toward slower tempi, but the decrease is much more pronounced in the second theme. Based on the regression lines, the average tempo for the exposition's opening has decreased approximately 4.5%; the second theme's average tempo is now about 20% slower. Even though the second theme lasts for only sixteen measures, such a large reduction in tempo impacts the total duration of a performance. In Walter's 1949 performance, for example, this section is taken at quarter note = 113, creating a duration of about 34 seconds. Conversely, Järvi's 1989 recording features an average tempo of quarter note = 68, making the second theme's duration approximately 56 seconds.

²² Note that figures 1, 2a, and 2b chart duration while figures 3a and 3b chart tempo. An inverse relationship should exist between these two sets of charts; as tempo decreases, duration naturally increases.

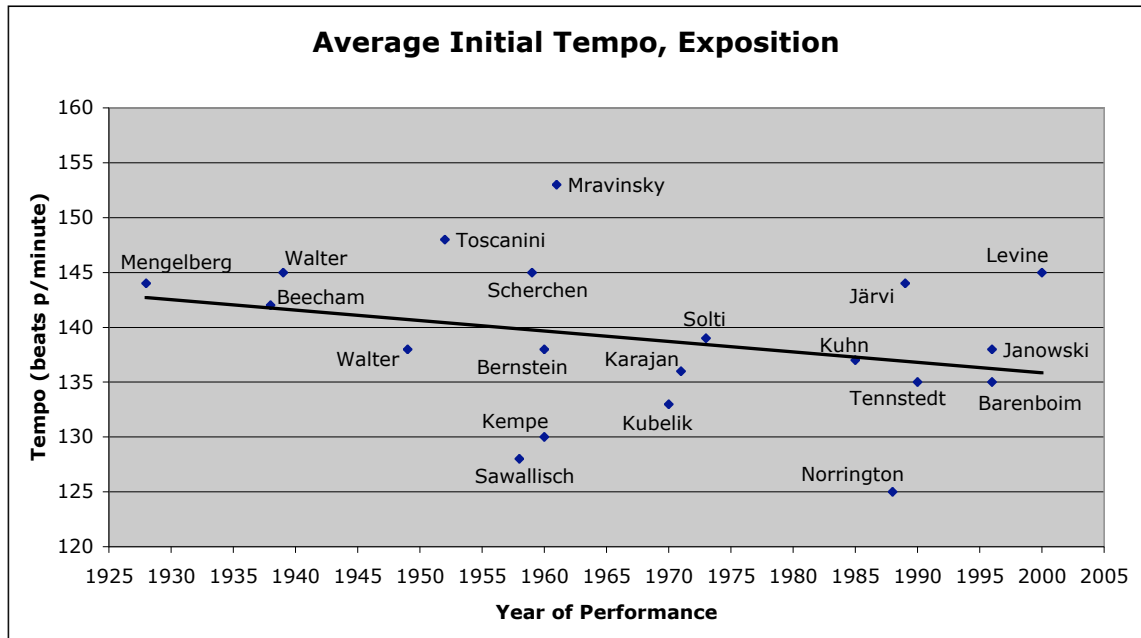


Figure 3a.

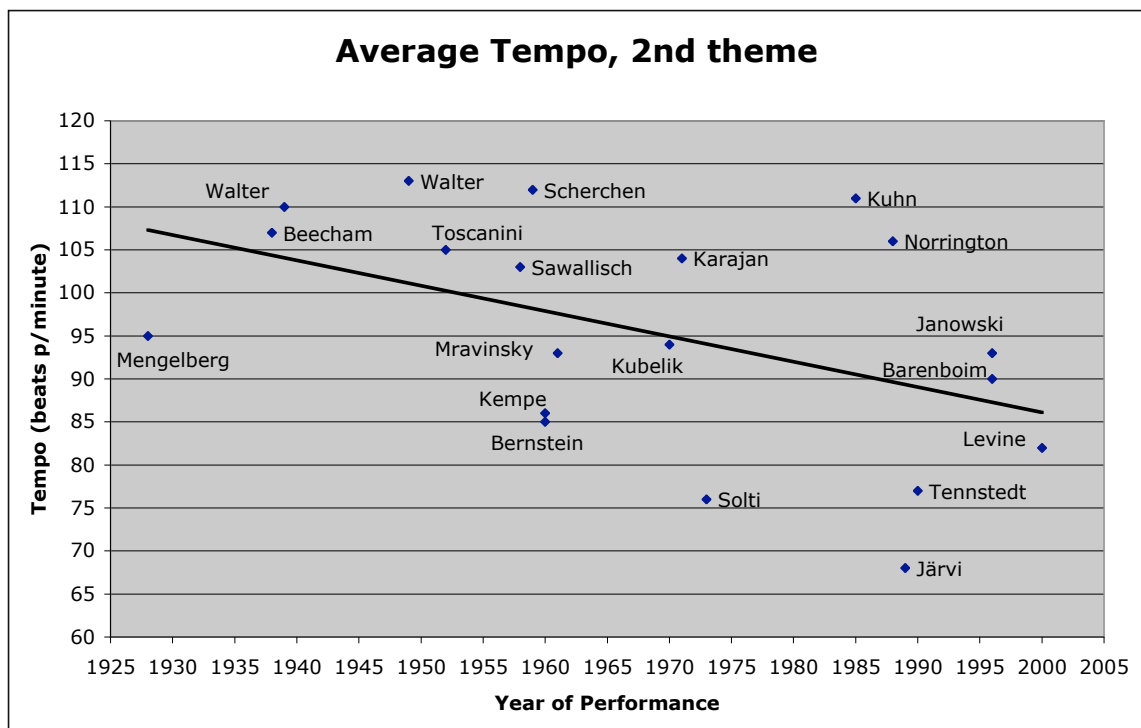


Figure 3b.

Clearly, performances of the *Oberon* Overture are slowing down. Every section—to varying degrees—now has a slower average tempo than in earlier performances. This conforms to the view of many scholars, who claim that performances are gradually increasing in duration.

Portamento

Over the course of the 20th century, the use of portamento in performance has dramatically changed. Early recordings generally feature significant sliding between notes. This practice began to diminish during the 1940s, and by the 1950s, portamento was used “very discreetly.” Today, many orchestras perform with little or no sliding.²³ These statements are generalizations, and exceptions exist, but they provide a foundation for examining the use of portamento in the *Oberon* Overture.

Opportunities to slide between notes are limited in this piece, for much of the string writing involves rapid sixteenth-note scales and arpeggios. Slow, lyrical music occurs in only two sections: the introduction and the second theme. Even in the introduction, however, melodic passages in the strings are frequently interrupted either by the horn, woodwinds, or brass. Only in the first violins’ performance of the second theme is a lyrical string melody sustained for a significant period of time. Therefore, I have focused my study of portamento on the representative measures 73 to 80.

²³ Performing Music in the Age of Recording, pg. 97.

Mengelberg's performances with the Concertgebouw Orchestra of Amsterdam (1928) often feature very prominent use of portamento,²⁴ and his recording of *Oberon* is no exception. Figure 4 shows measures 73 to 80; lines between two notes indicate sliding. In the first three bars, Mengelberg utilizes portamento five times, including every wide melodic skip. The chromaticism in the passage's second bar—the D-sharp passing tone—is also emphasized by through portamento. Within the disjunct motion of the first three bars, the D-sharp is an unexpected tone, and sliding down to it from the E heightens the effect of the falling half-step melody.



Figure 4.

Beecham's performance with the London Philharmonic (1938) features much less portamento than Mengelberg's. Rather than sliding between every large jump in the first three bars, Beecham only slides between the first and second notes of bars 73 and 75, as shown in figure 5. Additionally, Beecham's portamento is very discreet when compared to Mengelberg's immediately evident sliding. For Beecham, portamento is a subtle means of expression, not an important stylistic feature.

²⁴ Performing Music in the Age of Recording, pg. 100.



²⁶ Early Recordings and Musical Style, pg. 93.

admits “the way people play together is also a matter of style.”²⁷ This style changed dramatically over the course of the century, for modern performances strive to play together. Ensemble is one of the most important aesthetic goals of today’s recordings, and “the best amateur orchestras today are, in standard of ensemble, far better than many professional orchestras in the 1920s and early 1930s.”²⁸

The *Oberon* Overture is an ideal piece to study the progression of rhythmic accuracy and ensemble. Throughout the allegro, dotted rhythms and rapid scalar passages occur in both the strings and winds, making it easy to determine the overall accuracy and ensemble with which the orchestra is performing. Relying on only one passage for this information could be dangerous, for a single mistake could alter one’s conclusions, but *Oberon* contains many sections where these factors can be considered.

Mengelberg’s recording, in fact, does not conform to Philip’s conclusions, for his performance generally features good ensemble and accurately realized rhythms. One of Philip’s main observations concerned the over-dotting of rhythms in early recordings, but Mengelberg performs these rhythms—most notably beginning in measure 123—very faithfully; the 16th notes are given their proper value. In addition, the orchestra typically plays together. Throughout the piece, the strings play the demanding scales and arpeggios very precisely. Only on a few occasions is ensemble temporarily lost. In measures 115-116, for example, the strings do not play exactly together. This problem only persists for several beats, however, for the strings quickly regain their lost precision.

²⁷ Performing Music in the Age of Recording, pg. 63.

²⁸ Performing Music in the Age of Recording, pg. 90.

The good ensemble in Mengelberg's performance is impressive for several reasons. First, it is somewhat unexpected in this period, for recordings often feature very poor accuracy. One is surprised to hear such an old recording include strong ensemble playing. Second, Mengelberg utilizes a fair amount of rubato in the allegro, for significant tempo changes occur in many places, notably in measures 61-64 and measure 182. In both cases, these difficult passages are performed very accurately. Mengelberg's Concertgebouw Orchestra had a reputation as the most "rigorously disciplined" group in Europe,²⁹ and this performance fully supports that assertion.

Beecham's performance also features generally strong ensemble throughout. This is no surprise, for much like the Concertgebouw, Beecham's London Philharmonic was renowned in the 1930s for its high standard of ensemble.³⁰ His performance does lack some of Mengelberg's rhythmic accuracy, however. In the passage beginning in bar 123, the dotted-8th-16th note pattern is significantly over-dotted, especially in the winds. The 16th is shortened to the point where it is often difficult to separate from the note to which it proceeds. As Philip notes, the effect sounds casual, for the 16th note is almost completely nonexistent within the music. Rather than a full-length note, it sounds like a small grace to the next beat.

Walter's 1940 recording is very similar to Beecham's: ensemble is mostly good while rhythmic accuracy in the dotted passages is—by modern standards—poor. Walter's 1949 recording shows a significant improvement in rhythmic accuracy, particularly in the oboe and flute in measures 129-131. The nine-year

²⁹ Performing Music in the Age of Recording, pg. 75.

³⁰ Performing Music in the Age of Recording, pg. 69.

interim between performances must have been significant for Walter, for not only is his performance slightly slower, but it is more accurate as well.

Several factors could have led to these important changes. First, Walter may have been working with a better orchestra in his latter recording, but this seems unlikely. The NBC Symphony Orchestra—the ensemble in this 1940 performance—was a group clearly capable of playing with a very high level of precision; when originally formed in 1937, it was generally considered the “finest orchestra yet formed.”³¹ Second, Walter’s interpretation of the piece may have changed. Yet this does not seem to be the case, either. Many of the elements of his 1940 recording—total timing, duration of the introduction, and tempo for the second theme—are preserved in his 1949 version, showing that Walter’s view of the piece had changed very little over the decade. A third possibility is that it was no longer acceptable to perform dotted rhythms in such a manner. This is the view Philip would support and seems to be the most plausible.

In the 1950s, an increased emphasis was placed on ensemble and rhythmic accuracy. Overall, the early *Oberon* recordings I studied do feature good, though hardly flawless ensemble playing. Even in the overall strong performances of Beecham and Walter, moments exist when the orchestra is not together. While they only last for a beat or two at the most, their presence is undeniable. Predictably, Toscanini’s 1952 performance contains great precision of ensemble, one of the hallmarks of his style.³² All sections of the orchestra play with great

³¹ Performing Music in the Age of Recording, pg. 77.

³² Elliot W. Galkin, A History of Orchestra Conducting in Theory and Practice (New York: Pendragon Press, 1988), pg. 658.

accuracy throughout the piece. Continuing this practice, Mravinsky, Scherchen, and others perform even the most frenetic passages with perfect unity.

Modern recordings all feature nearly flawless orchestra execution. This fact is hardly worth mentioning, for today's listener takes it for granted that he will hear a perfect performance. One demands excellence from his modern recordings, and the recent *Oberon* performances fulfill that need. The recordings of Levine and others include thoroughly rehearsed orchestras consisting of the world's finest musicians. This is a stark contrast to the earlier recordings in which orchestras had little rehearsal time and did not employ the most talented musicians.

Changes in Expressive Playing

All performances strive to be expressive, but the means through which expression is achieved has varied throughout the 20th century. Philip believes that recordings from the early part of the century utilize many expressive elements while modern performances are accurate but inexpressive. Throughout my research, I have analyzed how different conductors create expressive performances, and how each performance compares to those from other periods. The most significant aspect of expressive performance in the *Oberon* Overture is tempo flexibility.

Tempo fluctuation can be studied on two levels: global tempo changes and local rubato. Both are essential to determining the expressive tools of a performance. Generalizations have often been made about tempo flexibility. Philip suggests that a "greater range of tempo within movements was generally

used in the 1920s and 1930s than in modern performances.”³³ He acknowledges that today’s conductors sometimes slow down for melodic passages, but asserts, “accelerations at energetic passages are generally very restrained.”³⁴ Philip’s views seem logical, but my study of *Oberon* performances suggests they may not be entirely accurate.

Figures 7a-d show the tempo changes of all twenty performances. I have separated them into four different graphs based not on chronology, but on the decrease of tempo between the first and second themes; performances in figures 7a and 7b do not slow down as much as those in figured 7c and 7d. Dotted lines connect each data point to show that the music does not take a direct path from one point to another; it is important to remember that these graphs only capture the overall shape of the performance, not the smaller tempo fluctuations. However, one can still learn a great deal about the history of *Oberon* recordings from these four graphs.

³³ Early Recordings and Musical Style, pg. 35.

³⁴ Early Recordings and Musical Style, pg. 35.

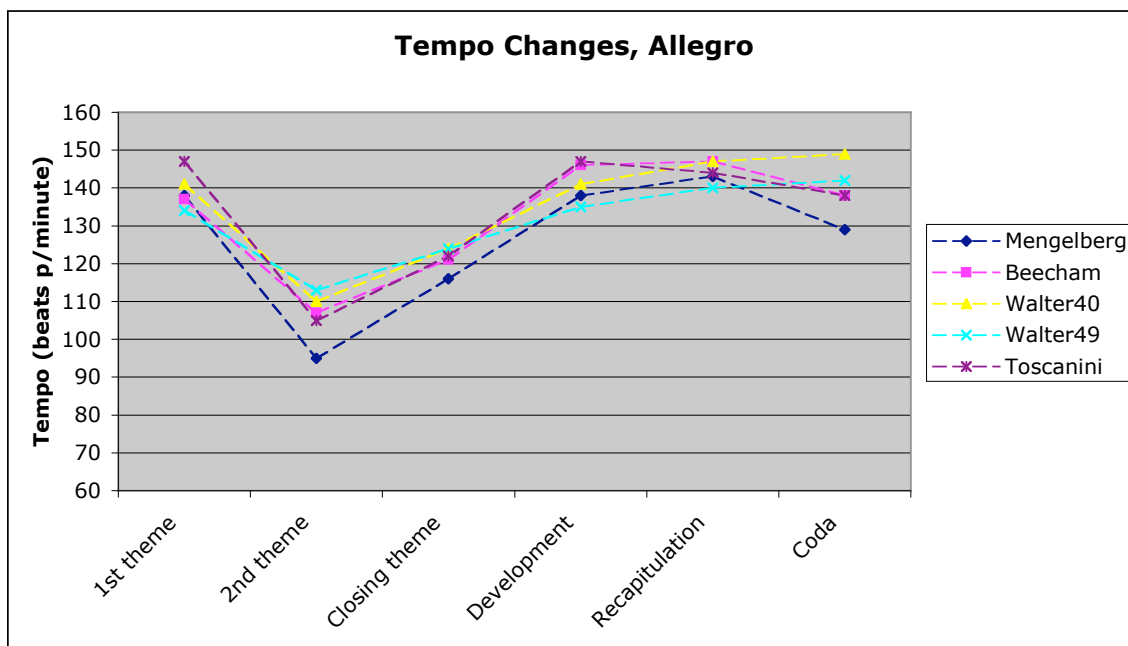


Figure 7a.

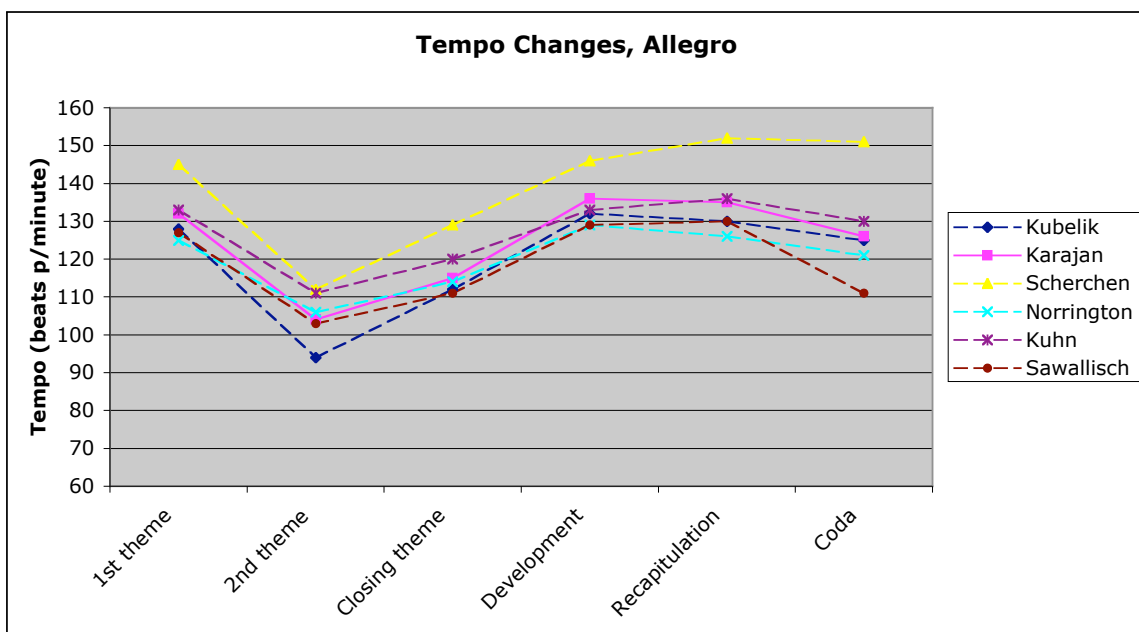


Figure 7b.

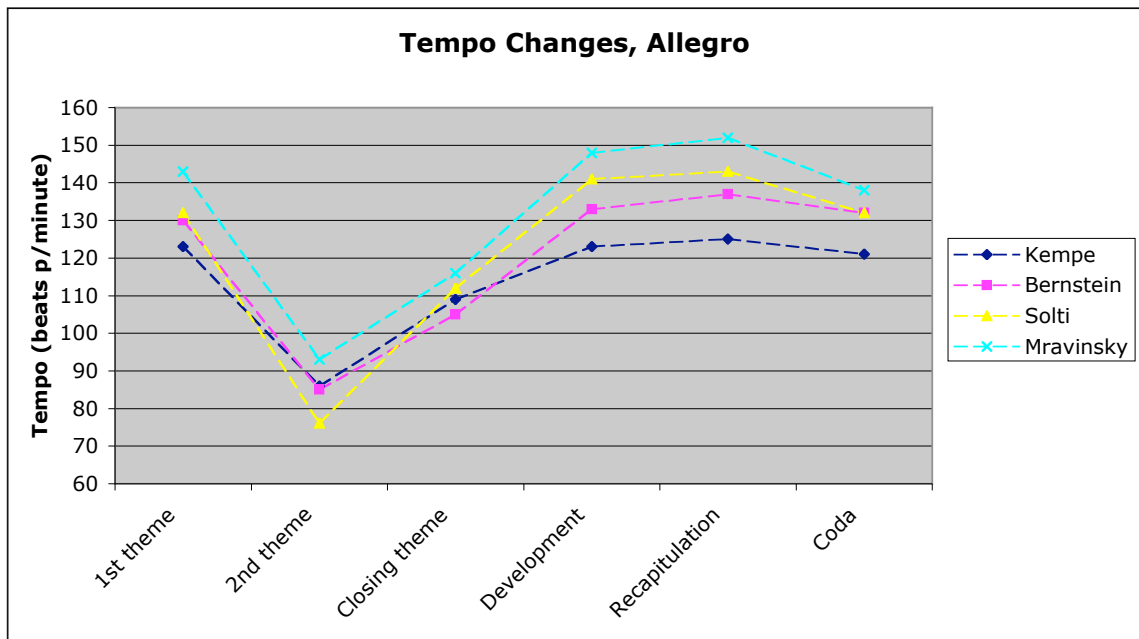


Figure 7c.

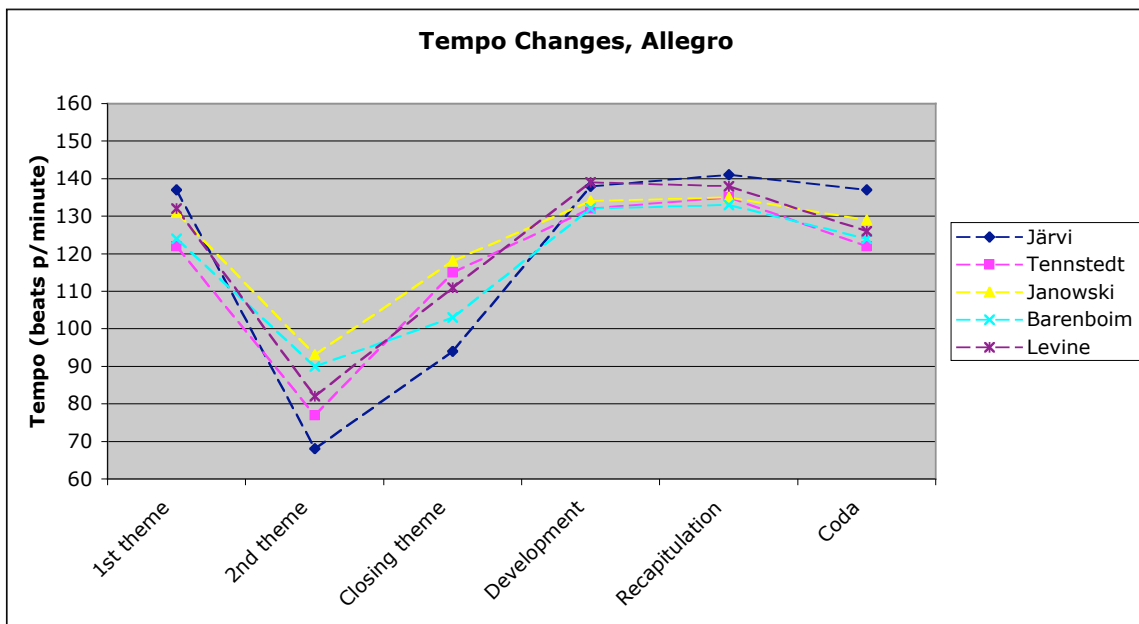


Figure 7d.

Each graph is unique, and some are more similar than others, but they all have one element in common: a significant decrease in tempo between the first and second themes. In sonata-allegro form, conductors frequently slow down for a lyrical second theme. *Oberon* is no different in this regard; the first theme has short notes and is full of energy while the second theme has longer note values and stresses long-breathed melodies. The degree to which conductors slow down is unusual, however. In other pieces, the decrease of tempo between these two sections is slight, but in *Oberon*, the difference can be enormous despite the fact that no tempo change is indicated in the score. One reason for this may be the origin of the second theme, a direct quotation from one of the opera's tenor arias. Conductors may perform this section of the Overture slowly because of the aria's tempo within the context of the opera.

As previously mentioned, the performances in figures 7a-d are separated based on the decrease in tempo between the first and second themes. Remarkably, this standard also accurately divides the performances chronologically; figure 7a contains the five earliest recordings and figure 7d contains the five most recent ones. Figures 7b and 7c consist of performances from the late 1950s through the 1980s.

According to Philip's views, recordings from this period should feature a wide range of tempos within a movement, but these five performances do not. Average tempos for the first theme are quite fast—Walter's 1949 performance is the slowest at 134 bpm—but the second theme is fast as well. Only Mengelberg's recording drops below 100 beats per minute (bpm) for the second theme. The other four recordings all have second themes with an average tempo of at least 107 bpm. If Philip's conclusions were true for these performances, one would

expect a very slow second theme to contrast with a very fast first theme. Instead, all five recordings have relatively little tempo divergence from the first theme to the second theme.

The recordings in figures 7b and 7c seem to be part of a transitional period in performance practice. These recordings cover three decades of recorded history and can be divided into two distinct groups. The first group, represented in figure 7b, follows in the tradition of the early conductors; tempo fluctuations within the piece are kept to a minimum. As in figure 7a, the decrease in tempo for the second theme is not that great; only Kubelik's performance drops below 100 bpm.

The performances in figure 7c set off in a new direction, however. Rather than slowing down only slightly for the second theme and maintaining fairly constant tempi within the piece, these four conductors slow down significantly for the second theme, creating a huge "valley" in the performance's graph. These interpretations exaggerate the practice of slowing down in lyrical passages, with Solti decreasing his initial tempo by over 42% for the second theme. Such a performance could be explained as the eccentric tendencies of a single conductor and not the signal of a new trend in performance practice, but that is not the case with *Oberon*. Not only have multiple conductors from the same era adopted this interpretation, but also great diversity exists among the performers. In these four recordings, there is a German conducting an Austrian orchestra, an American conducting an American orchestra, an eastern European conducting an American orchestra, and a Russian conducting a Russian orchestra. Clearly, this new trend took hold all across the musical world, suggesting its currency as a new interpretive device.

The five recordings shown in figure 7d are the most recent that I studied. Based on Philip's conclusions about tempo flexibility, they should show little fluctuation. This is clearly not the case, however. While the more energetic passages are slower, as Philip predicts, the lyrical passage, which Philip says modern performers only "sometimes" slow down, actually slows down the most dramatically.

I believe these performances continue the tradition of Bernstein and others shown in figure 7c. In fact, these five recordings have the most pronounced tempo fluctuation. All five drop below 100 bpm in the second theme, but Järvi's performance is the most dramatic; his initial tempo of 137 bpm is the fastest of the group while his tempo for the second theme of 68 bpm is by far the slowest of the five. The 50% decrease in tempo is shocking, even within the context of the other performances with significant tempo drops.

Based on these data, Philip's ideas about tempo flexibility do not hold true for the *Oberon* Overture. In the early era, where Philip predicts great differences in tempo, the range is quite small. Conversely, the period when he suggests performances all have little tempo fluctuation actually shows the greatest differences. This brings into question Philip's claim that, because of their emphasis on technical accuracy and lack of tempo flexibility, modern performances are no longer expressive. In fact, recent conductors show willingness—at least in performance of *Oberon*—to change tempo dramatically. Perhaps these recordings contain more expressive traits than Philip acknowledges, confirming that music today is not mechanical and emotionless. Based on my study, I believe that performances are entering a new period, for

modern *Oberon* recordings are not inexpressive compared to early performances; they are expressive in a different, yet related way.

While a wide range of tempo throughout the piece is not found in early performances, the use of local rubato is significant. Local rubato is much more difficult to analyze, but thanks to the computer software Digital Performer, I could accurately gather this data. I imported each recording into the program and played them back through the software's interface. Through Digital Performer's "Tap Tempo" feature, I could obtain tempo readouts on a beat-by-beat level. Using a MIDI keyboard connected to the computer, I tapped along to the recording on a predetermined key. Digital Performer records the time between each tap and automatically creates a chart showing both beat and tempo. "Tap Tempo" can be altered to fit the piece's meter and subdivision. This is important when considering *Oberon*, for the introduction is a subdivided 4/4 while the allegro maintains a steady quarter note pulse. Unfortunately, Digital Performer cannot produce graphs of this information, so the data must be transferred to by hand to a spreadsheet in a graphing program.

Human error plays an important role when using "Tap Tempo." The accuracy of the graphs depends directly on the accuracy of the tapping; if I did not tap exactly with the beat, my data would not correctly reflect the nuances of the performance. Thankfully, if I made a mistake, I could simply stop and "record" over the passage in which the error had occurred. Under such circumstances, human error cannot be totally eliminated, for my tapping will never be perfectly synchronized with each beat, but by going through several "takes" for each performance, I can ensure that the information gathered closely resembles the subtle tempo changes of the recording.

Gathering such data is only one portion of the task; clearly displaying it is also very important. In his research, Bowen uses DeltaGraph Professional 3.5, an advanced graphing program for Macintosh, but he concedes that Excel—a program not capable of handling enormous quantities of data—would perform many of the same functions.³⁵ Based on the amount of data I collected, Excel was perfectly acceptable. Using Bowen’s styles of presentation as a model, I was able to produce a variety of different graphs for my project, all using Excel’s basic operating functions.

The performances of Mengelberg, Beecham, and Walter all show significant rubato in the introduction, a feature that is traditionally considered to be expressive. Figure 8 contains a “tempo map” that accurately reflects the rubato of all of these recordings.³⁶ Walter 1940 performance shows that conductors in this period took many liberties with the score. After the initial indication of *Adagio sostenuto*, the introduction contains no further tempo markings; Walter’s decisions are personal and based on his conception of the music.³⁷

³⁵ For more information, see footnote 52 in “Tempo, Duration, and Flexibility: Techniques in the Analysis of Performance,” pg. 130.

³⁶ For a collection of all 20 “tempo maps,” see Appendix B.

³⁷ The introduction’s five fermatas are labeled in each “tempo map.” The size of the valley at each of these points is a reflection on how long each conductor observes the fermata.

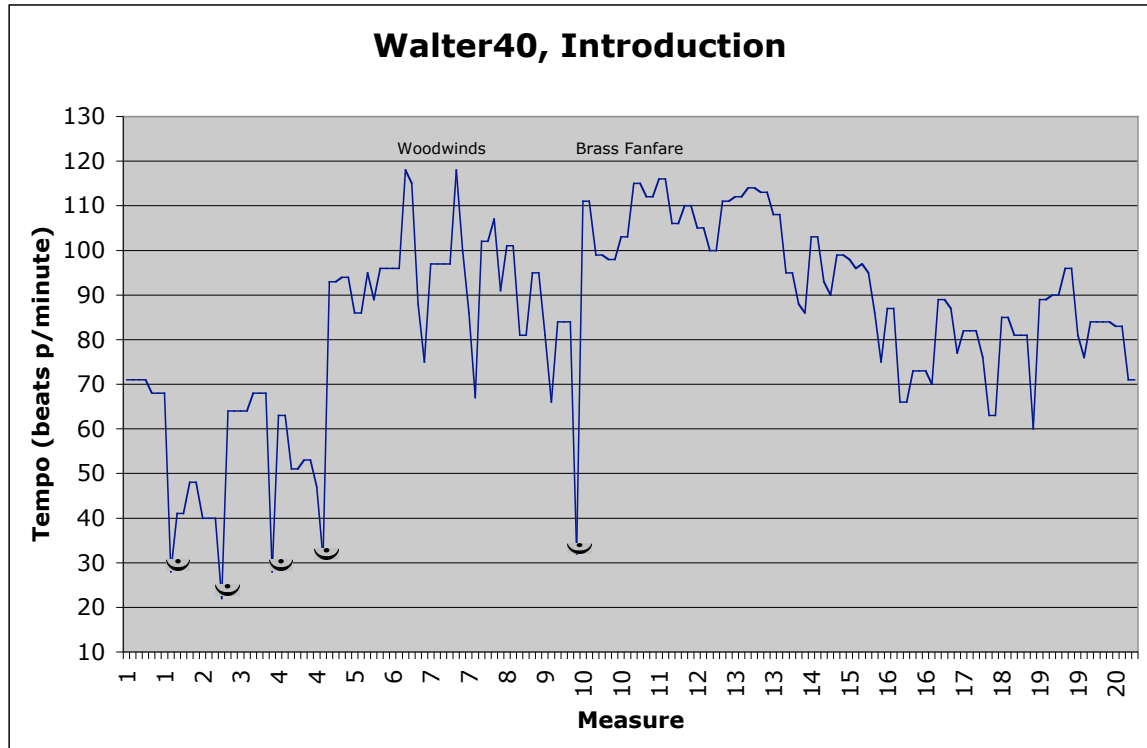


Figure 8.

Despite being separated by two decades, Bernstein's style, unsurprisingly, is very similar to Walter's, for many elements of Bernstein's "tempo map"—shown in figure 9—are also found in Walter's performance: wide range of tempo, sudden tempo changes, and significant rubato. Bernstein uses rubato most notably in measures 6 and 7, where the end of each bar is greatly extended. Additionally, the string melody beginning in measure 16 has a constantly changing pulse, for the graph of this phrase contains many peaks and valleys. This is not meant to suggest that Bernstein consciously strove to replicate Walter's style of performance. Rather, it appears that both conductors conceive of performance in a similar way, that many of the characteristics that were important to Walter were also important to Bernstein.

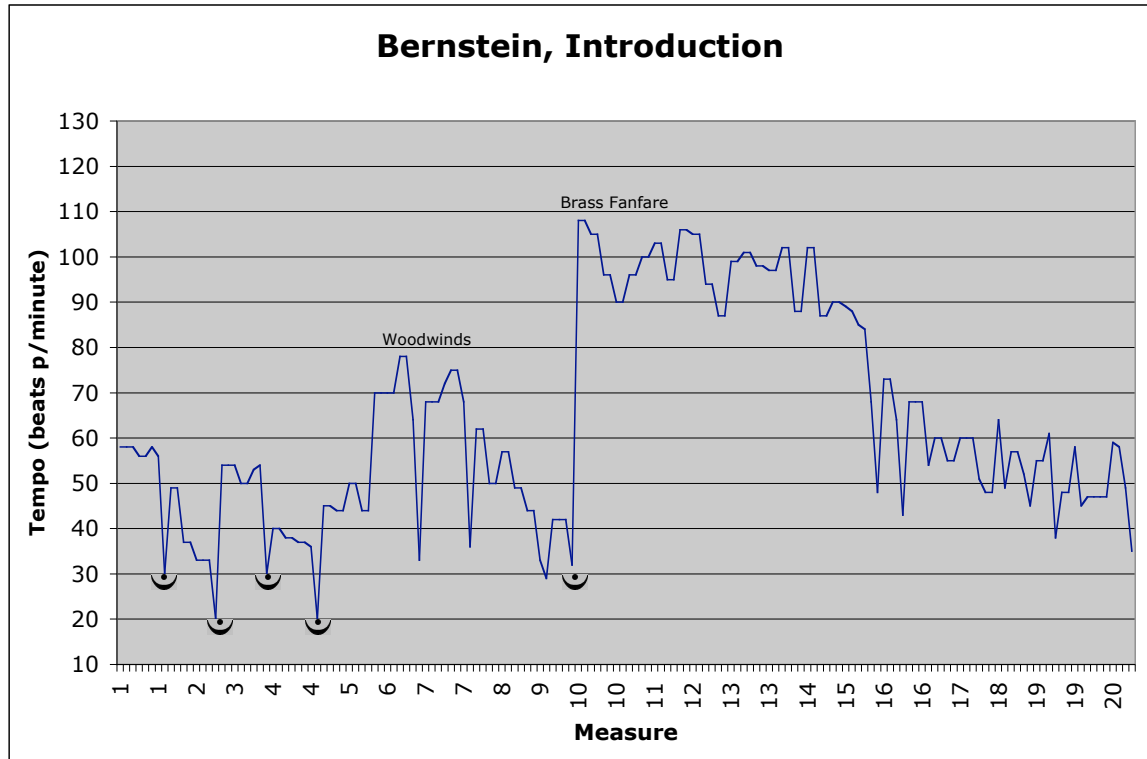


Figure 9.

Toscanini and Walter seemingly agree on the interpretation of the allegro, as shown in figure 7a, but Toscanini's approach to the introduction—seen in figure 10—is very different from Walter's. As figure 8 shows, Walter takes many liberties with the tempo. Toscanini was more of a "literalist," however, saying, "the notes were the notes, nothing more..."³⁸ This is a simplification, for Toscanini did not always follow the score precisely, but the distinction it creates between him and Walter is important. Aside from two brief moments where he speeds up—at both of the woodwind flourishes in measures 6 and 7—Toscanini's tempo is very steady; it fluctuates between 50 and 60 bpm for the first nine measures then jumps to around 80 bpm in measure ten. While peaks

³⁸ The History of Orchestra Conducting, pg. 659.

and valleys do exist in figure 10, they are not as pronounced as Walter's in figure 8.

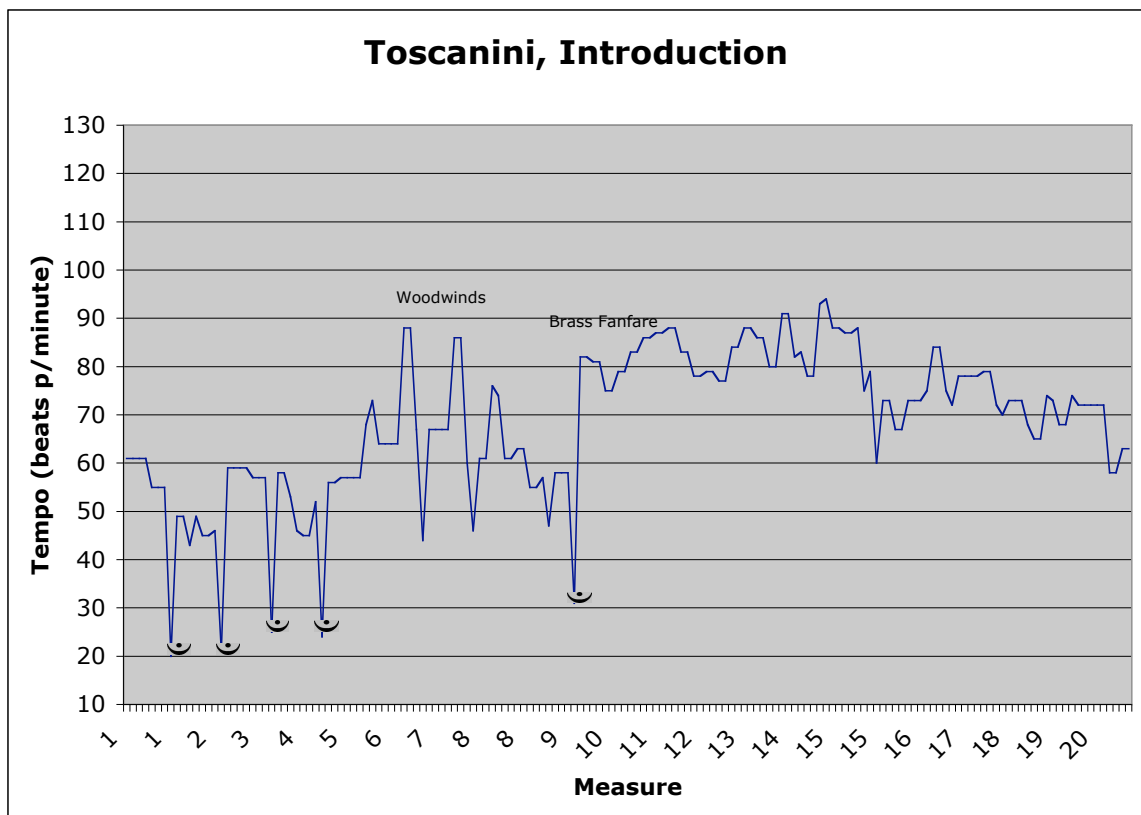


Figure 10.

Kubelik, Karajan, and others shown in figure 7b—primarily from the 1950s and 1960s—continue in Toscanini's tradition. Their performances feature little tempo change in the allegro and limited rubato in the introduction. For example, a "tempo map" of Kubelik's introduction is shown in figure 11. As in Toscanini's performance, the tempo increases dramatically at the woodwind's entrance, but immediately returns to the original speed. In fact, this recording's tempo is even steadier than Toscanini's, particularly in the fanfare section beginning in measure 10. Some flexibility exists, but this is to be expected, even

in a period when the aesthetic goals seem to have shifted away from the use of rubato. No performance can have a completely stable pulse; scientists have shown that human beings are unable to perform in an “absolutely strict rhythm,” making a completely flat “tempo map” impossible.³⁹ Overall, Kubelik’s recording shows the most rhythmic stability of any performance.

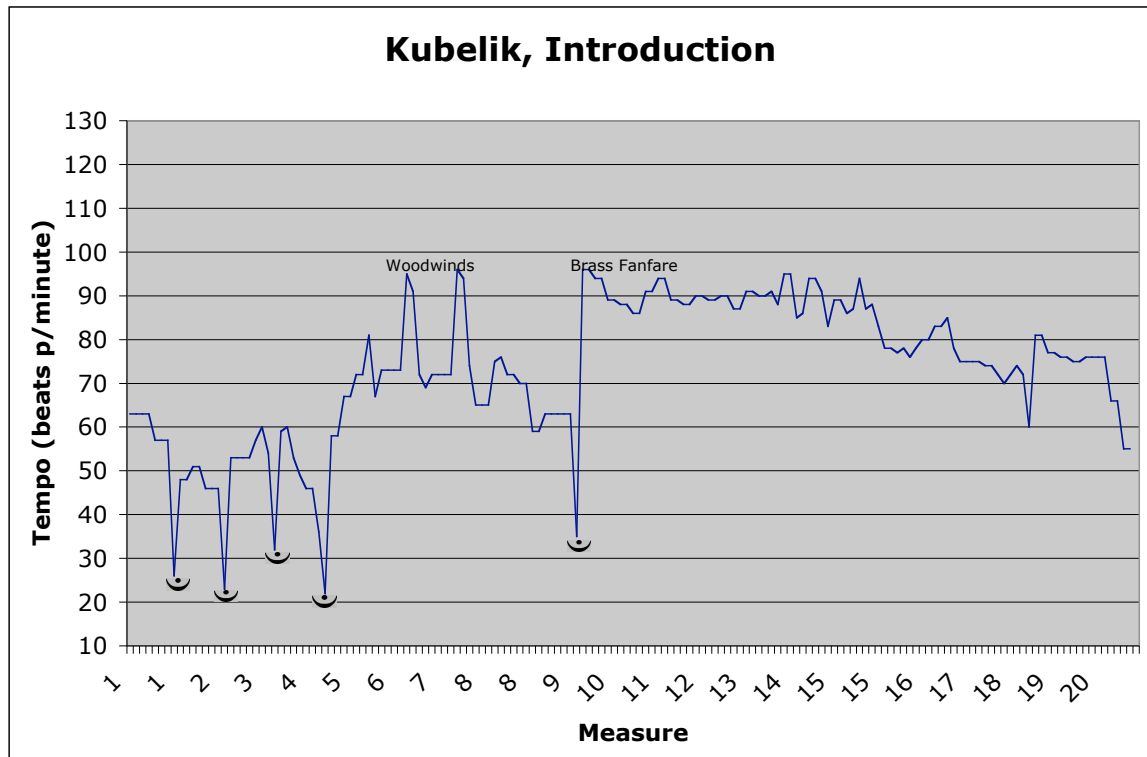


Figure 11.

Karajan’s style—shown in figure 12—is similar to Toscanini’s; both are characterized by subtle tempo modifications (see figure 10).⁴⁰ Karajan uses rubato, but in a limited way; modifications take time and do not take place

³⁹ Richard Hudson, *Stolen Time: A History of Tempo Rubato*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994) pg. 11.

⁴⁰ *The History of Orchestral Conducting*, pg. 747.

abruptly. Karajan's graph is also similar to Kubelik's, but one key difference exists. While Kubelik maintains a very steady pulse from measure 10 to the end, Karajan divides this passage into sections, with each section requiring a different tempo. The brass fanfares of bars 10 and 12 are faster than string passages in measures 11 and 13. Measures 14 and 15—two transitional bars—are slightly slower, and the string melody beginning in bar 16 is slower still. This may seem like a lot of tempo variation in a short passage, something more likely to be found in an earlier performance, but the differences between each section are small, and the pulse within each section is very steady. Therefore, Karajan surely belongs to the same group as Kubelik and others.

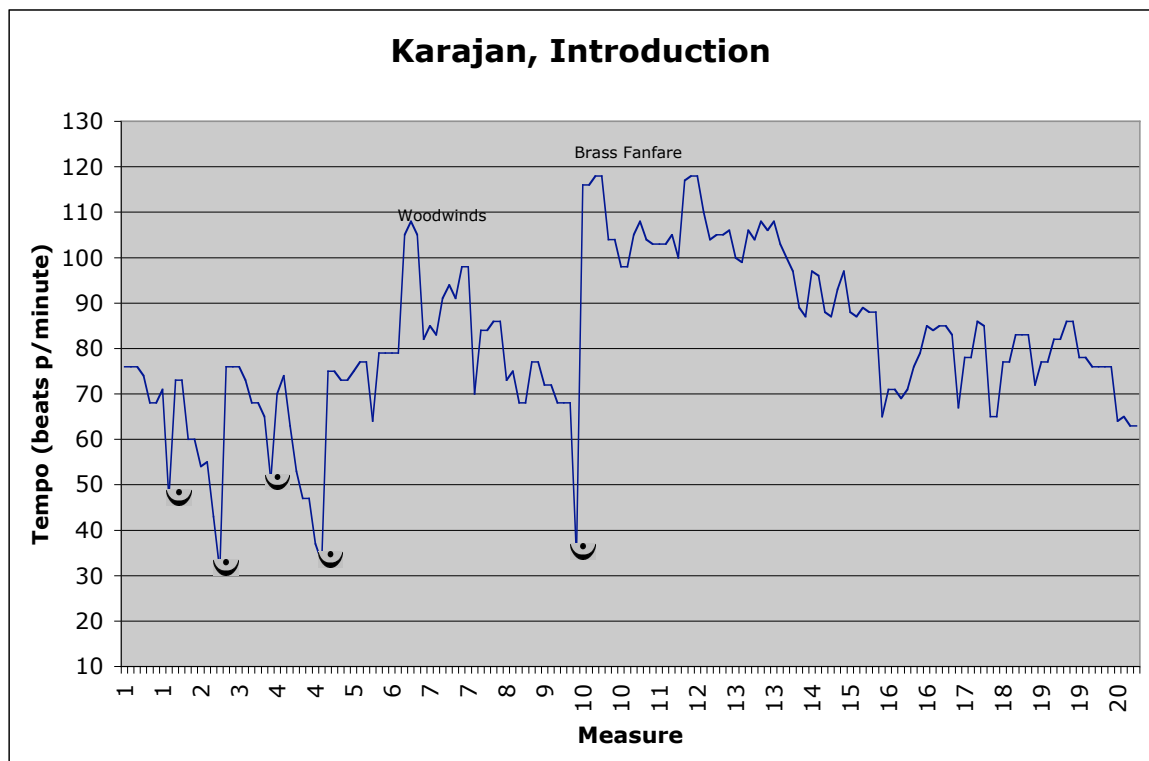


Figure 12.

The conductors shown in figure 7d seem to be a mix of styles, for each performance contains significant features from both the Walter-influenced tradition and the Toscanini-influenced tradition. Janowski's performance—shown in figure 13—is a perfect example of this combination of styles. The range of tempos is very large, spanning from 50 to nearly 130 bpm. Conversely, rubato is limited, particularly from measure 16 to the end where all tempo changes are very gradual. At the opposite end of the spectrum is Järvi's recording, shown in figure 14. The tempo range is very narrow, for most of the music takes place between 50 and 90 bpm. Rubato, on the other hand, is significant. While the brass fanfare beginning in bar 10 is quite steady, the string melody beginning in bar 16 has a constantly varying beat. Much like Bernstein, Järvi often changes tempo twice per measure.

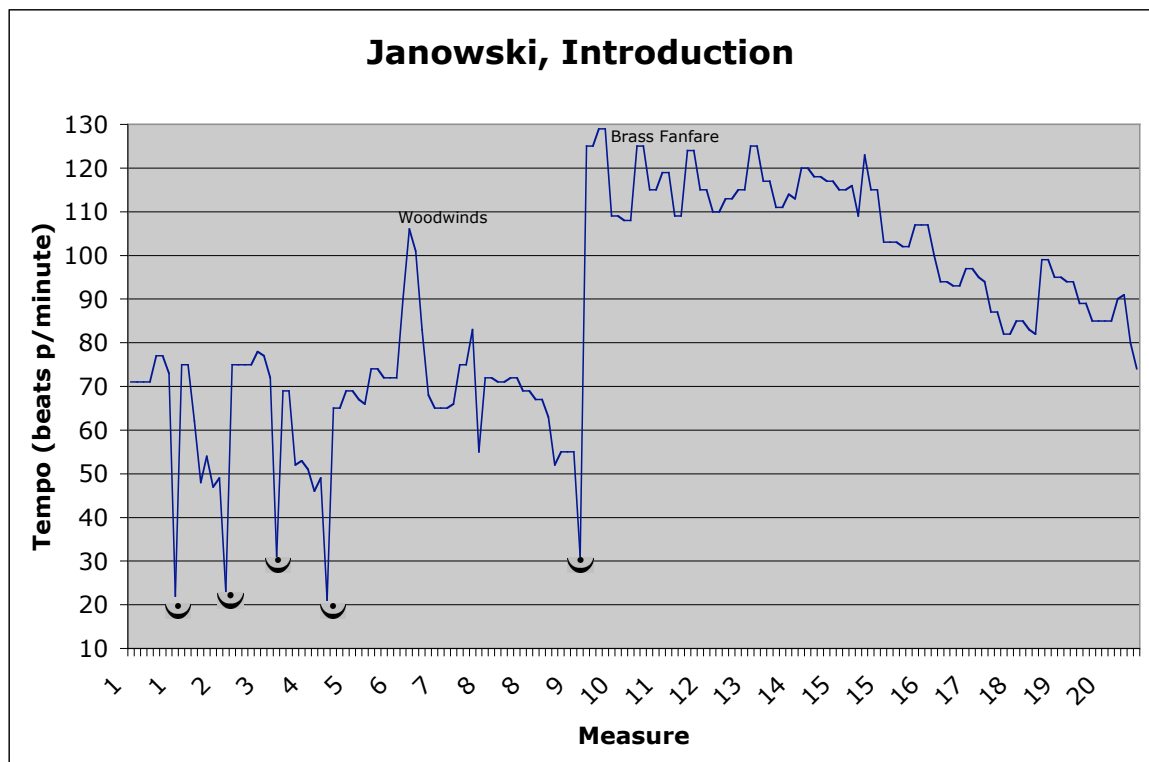


Figure 13.

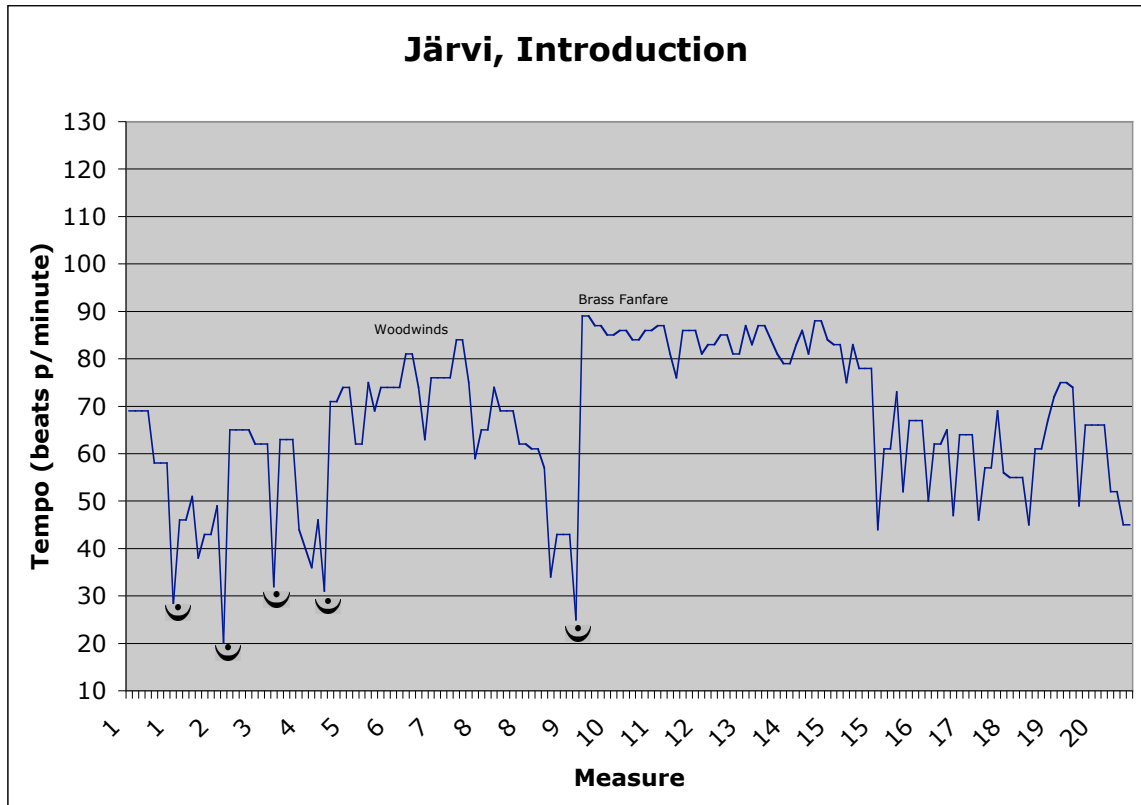


Figure 14.

Looking at the period covered by these graphs, the overall trends seem to contradict Philip's conclusions about expression. While he believes that recordings are becoming progressively inexpressive, the information I collected suggests that modern performances actually contain many expressive features; the performances of conductors like Bernstein, Janowski, and others all have sudden shifts in tempo, significant use of rubato, and wide tempo ranges. These are elements that Philip considers the hallmark of expressive playing in early recordings, but they are clearly present in modern performances. While differences between the eras clearly exist, they have more in common than Philip acknowledges. Modern performances are not inexpressive, but instead, they

both share expressive characteristics with the early performers and create a new set of standards by which expression is measured.

Modern performances show a wide range of tempo in both the introduction and the allegro. This element is clearly an expressive device in the introduction, for the slow tempo makes every change in tempo significant. By the same token, I believe a wide tempo range is also a means of achieving expression in the allegro. The huge contrasts between sections—seen in figure 7d—are essentially the same technique used in the introduction, but the changes take place over a longer period of time. The expressive tempo changes found at the local level in early recordings have been augmented to span an entire work.

Conclusions

Studying performance practice is a vital part of music history, for it enables us to understand—to some extent—how music was performed by previous generations. As recordings began to replace musical treatises as the primary means of analyzing performance, an invaluable resource was gained. Instead of making educated guesses based on centuries-old texts, historians could examine the actual performance. A recording captures small details that can be studied in no other way. While the study of recordings will never be complete or conclusive, research into pieces like Weber's *Oberon* Overture will undoubtedly shed light on important issues surrounding this history of musical performance.

The work of both Bowen and Philip has provided the foundation for my study. Bowen's essays supplied the basic methodology while Philip's work

offered a specific set of conclusions about the evolution of performance practice that I set out to test. By comparing my results to Philip's, I could determine how closely *Oberon* performances have conformed to the trends that he outlines.

The majority of my conclusions about the history of *Oberon* performances are similar to the general trends that Philip outlines. Total timing has gradually increased; portamento—once used heavily—has been eliminated, and both rhythmic accuracy and ensemble has become progressively more important. These results, while important, are not surprising and are likely present in the performance history of most works.

The most interesting discovery in my research revolves around the shift in the manipulation of tempo for expressive effect. While most research has suggested that modern performances lacked many of the expressive rhythmic alterations found in early recordings, my analysis of *Oberon* performances suggest that such expressive effects not only still exist, but are enjoying a resurgence today. Expressive techniques such as local rubato and sudden shifts in tempo are present in the performances of Järvi, Janowski, and others, showing that today's conductors have not ignored the style of Mengelberg and Walter. Rather, they seem to have combined some of the expressive features of the older tradition with the precision demanded by modern listeners. Additionally, the concept of local rubato has been expanded to encompass an entire piece, for expressive tempo changes no longer take place primarily over short durations. Contrary to Philip's claim, modern performances actually contain great disparity between the tempi of different sections. These long-range tempo changes can be seen as augmentations of local rubato, making them expressive in much the same way. Philip is unsure "what the point is" in today's performances. There is a

point, however, and its importance must not be ignored. Modern performances have not become mechanical and inexpressive; they are unique and passionate. Today's performances are undoubtedly expressive, and I hope my study of Weber's Overture to *Oberon* has shown a variety of ways in which this is true.

Appendix A—Discography

Concertgebouw Orchestra, Amsterdam, Wilhelm Mengelberg (rec. 1928) Naxos Historical 8110853

London Philharmonic Orchestra, Sir Thomas Beecham (rec. 1938)

NBC Symphony Orchestra, Bruno Walter (rec. 1940)

Los Angeles Philharmonic Orchestra, Bruno Walter (rec. 1949) EKRC D 1402

NBC Symphony Orchestra, Arturo Toscanini (rec. 1952)

Philharmonia Orchestra, Wolfgang Sawallisch (rec. 1958) CDC 75645

Theater Orchestra of National Opera, Paris, Hermann Scherchen (rec. 1959)

Vienna Philharmonic Orchestra, Rudolf Kempe (rec. 1960)

New York Philharmonic Orchestra, Leonard Bernstein (rec. 1960)

Leningrad Philharmonic Orchestra, Evgeni Mravinsky (rec. 1961)

Bavarian Radio Symphony Orchestra, Rafael Kubelik (rec. 1970) DG 4190382

Berlin Philharmonic Orchestra, Herbert von Karajan (rec. 1971) DG B0000201

Chicago Symphony Orchestra, Sir Georg Solti (rec. 1973) 2DF2460982

Staatskapelle Dresden, Gustav Kuhn (rec. 1985) Capriccio Records 10052

London Classical Players, Roger Norrington (rec. 1988) EMI 7498892

Philharmonia Orchestra, Neeme Järvi (rec. 1989) CHAN9066

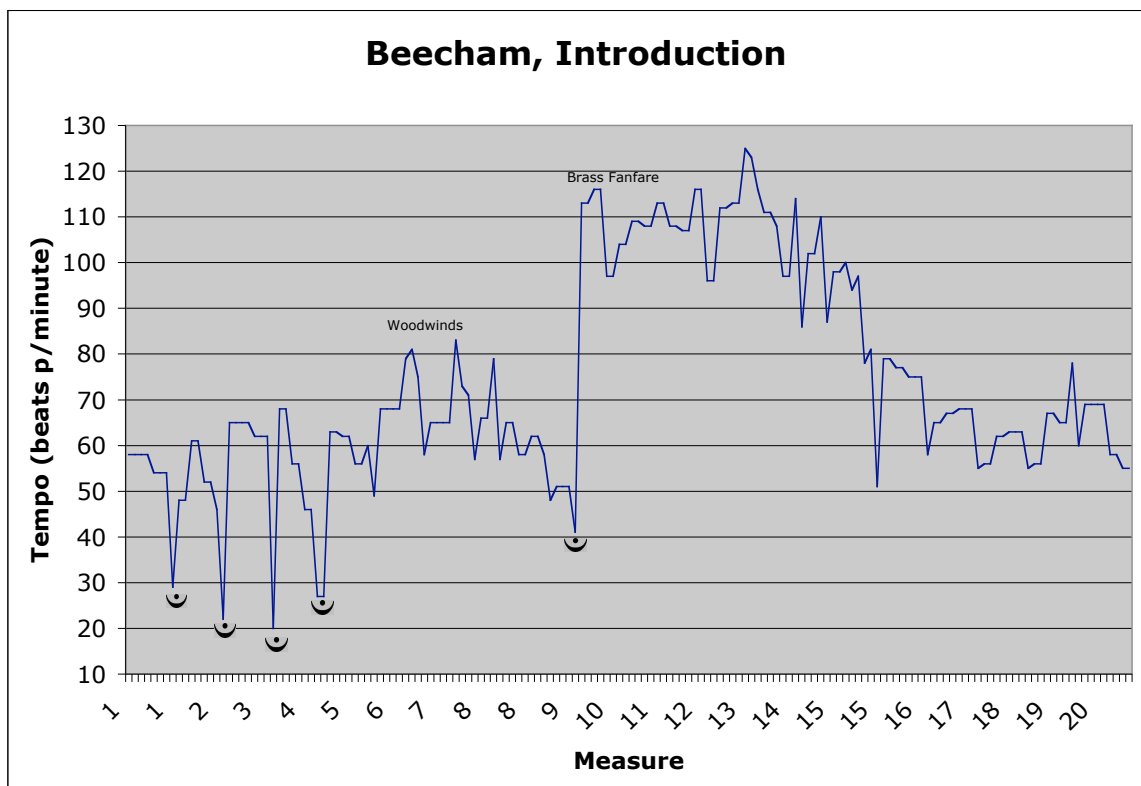
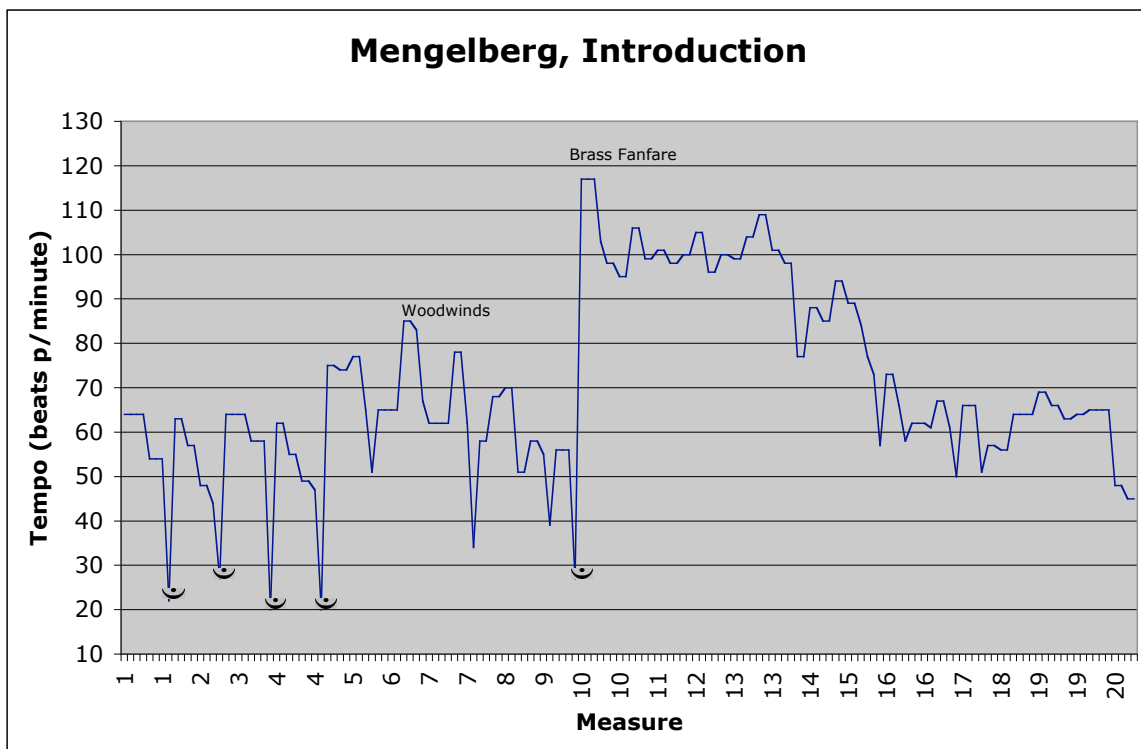
London Philharmonic Orchestra, Klaus Tennstedt (rec. 1990) BBC4158

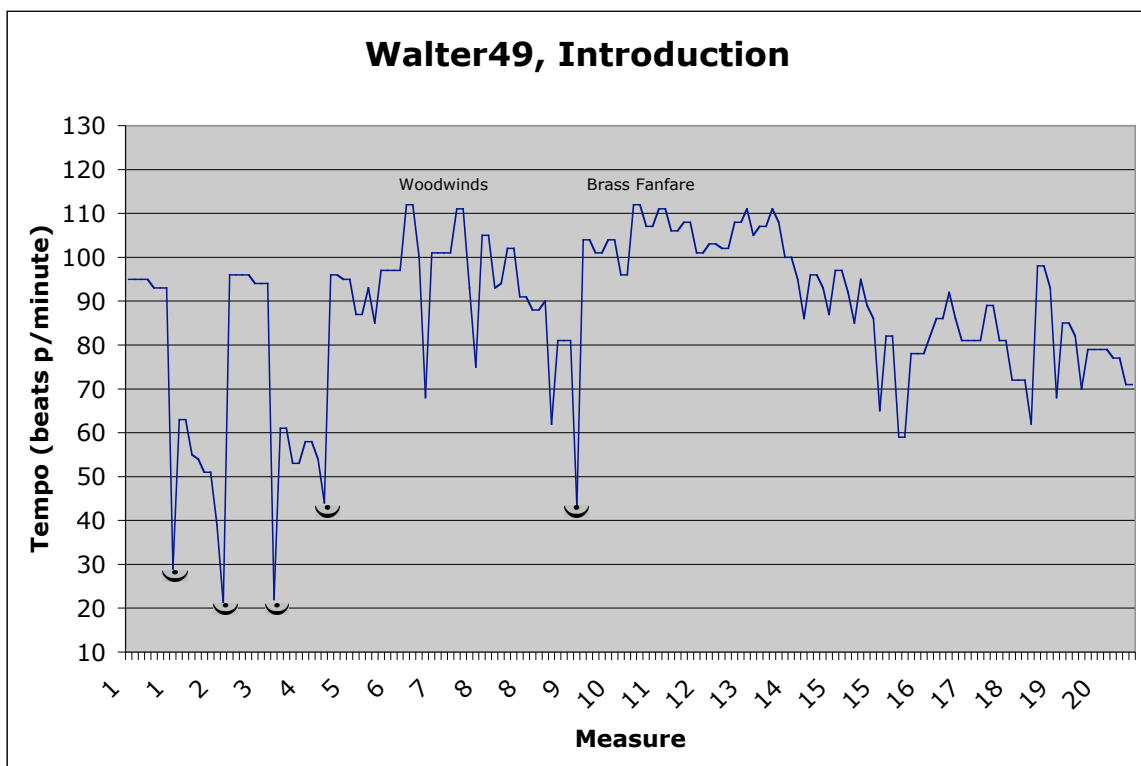
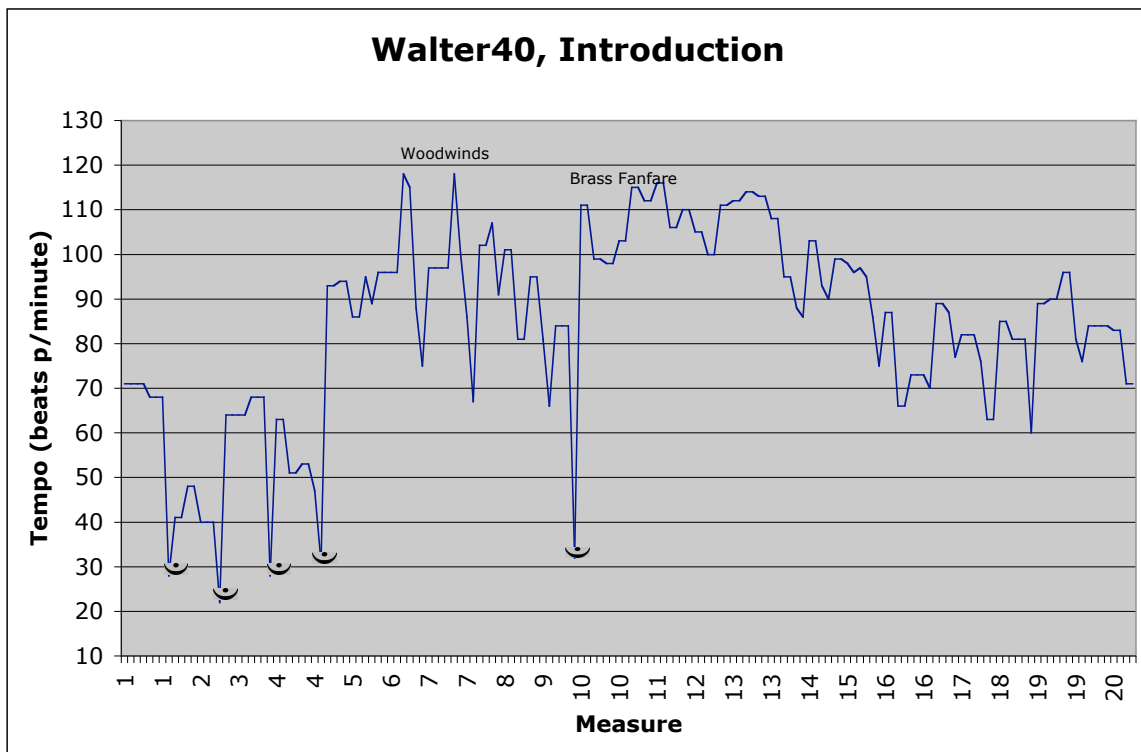
German Symphony Orchestra of Berlin, Marek Janowski (rec. 1996) RCA 68505

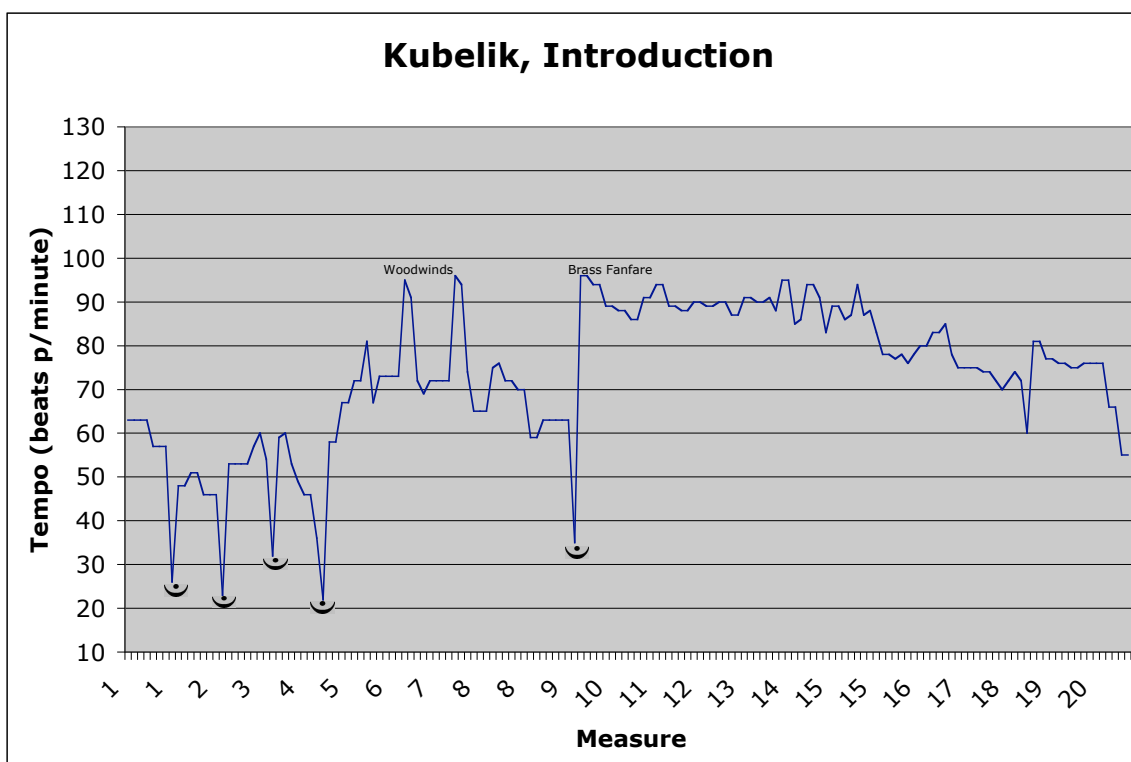
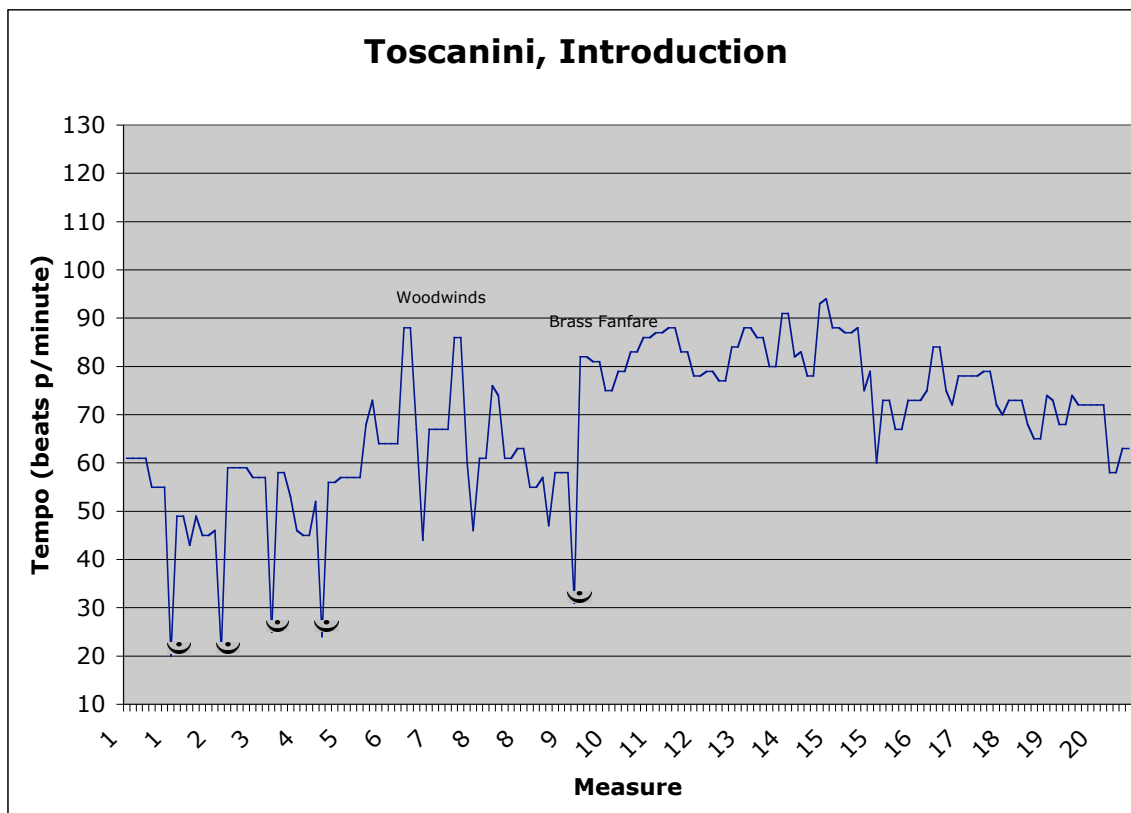
Israel Philharmonic Orchestra, Daniel Barenboim (rec. 1996) RCA 68768

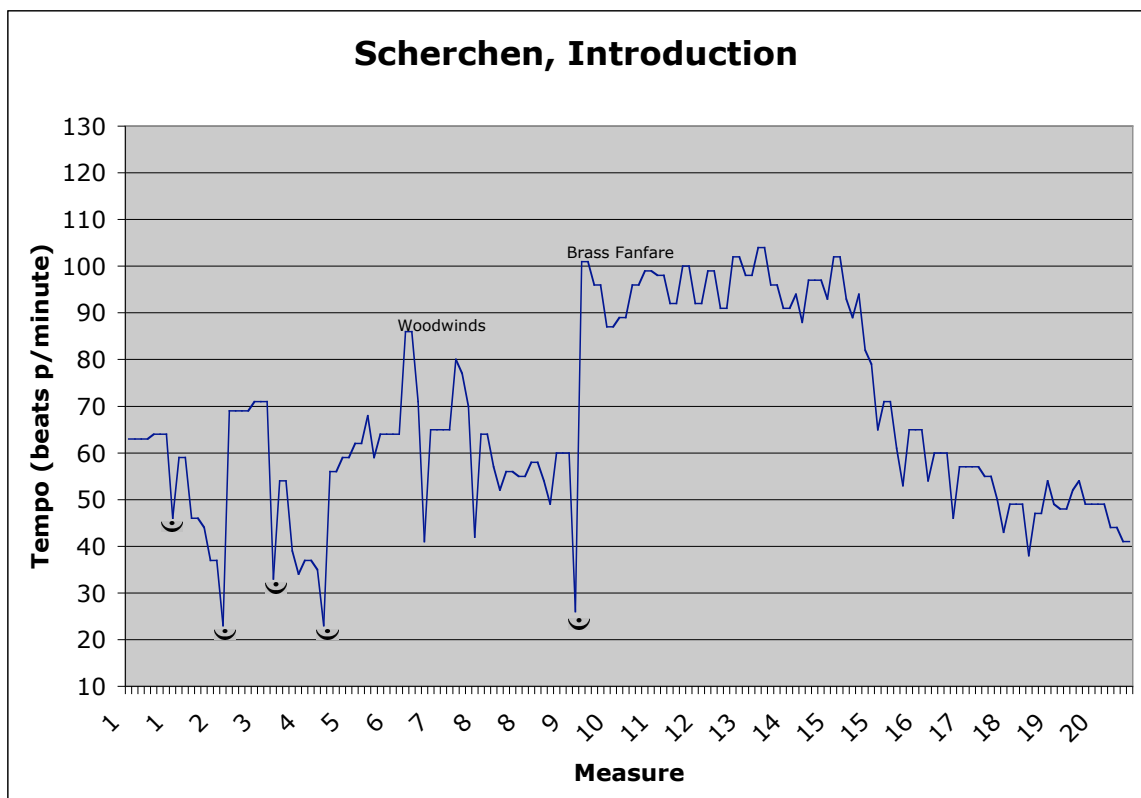
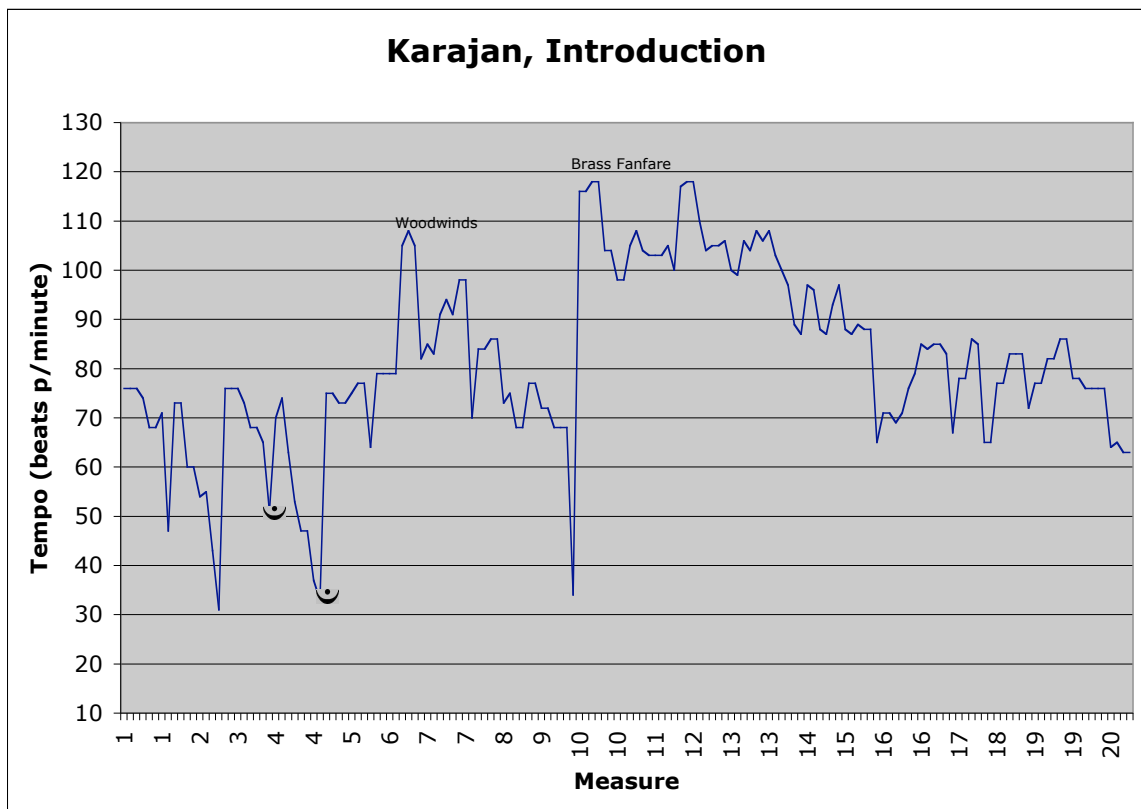
Munich Philharmonic Orchestra, James Levine (rec. 2000) OC 504

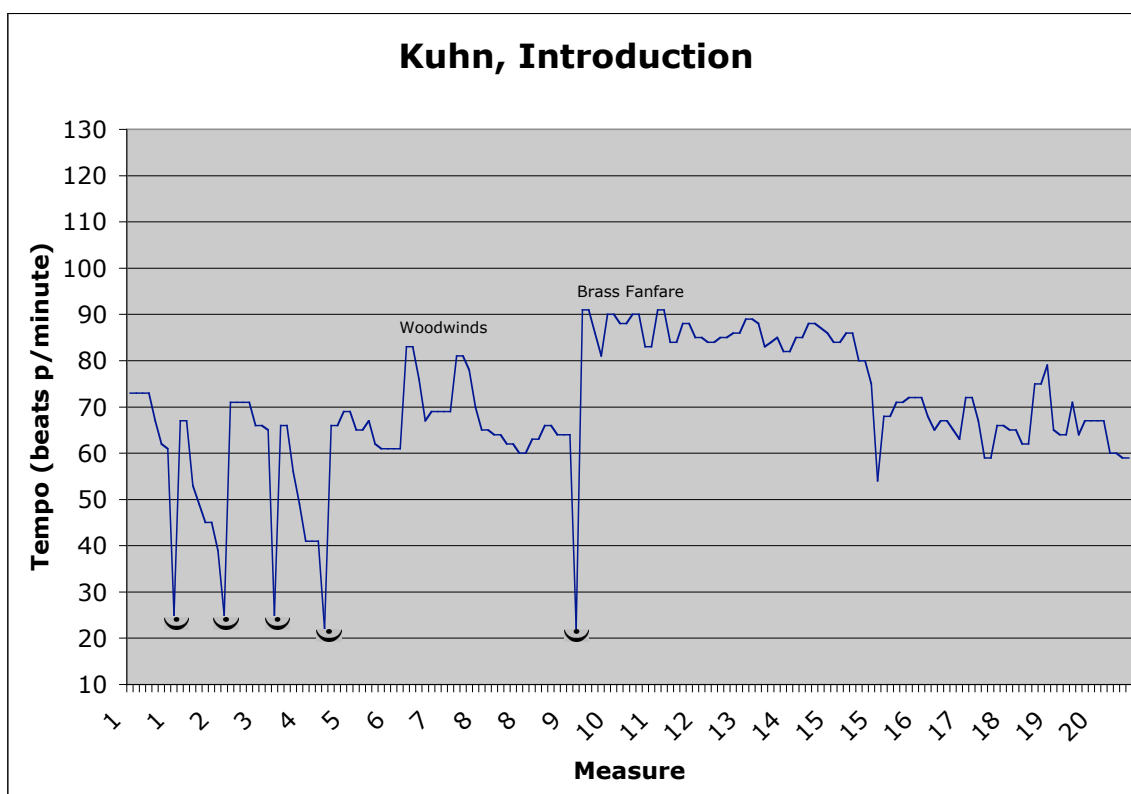
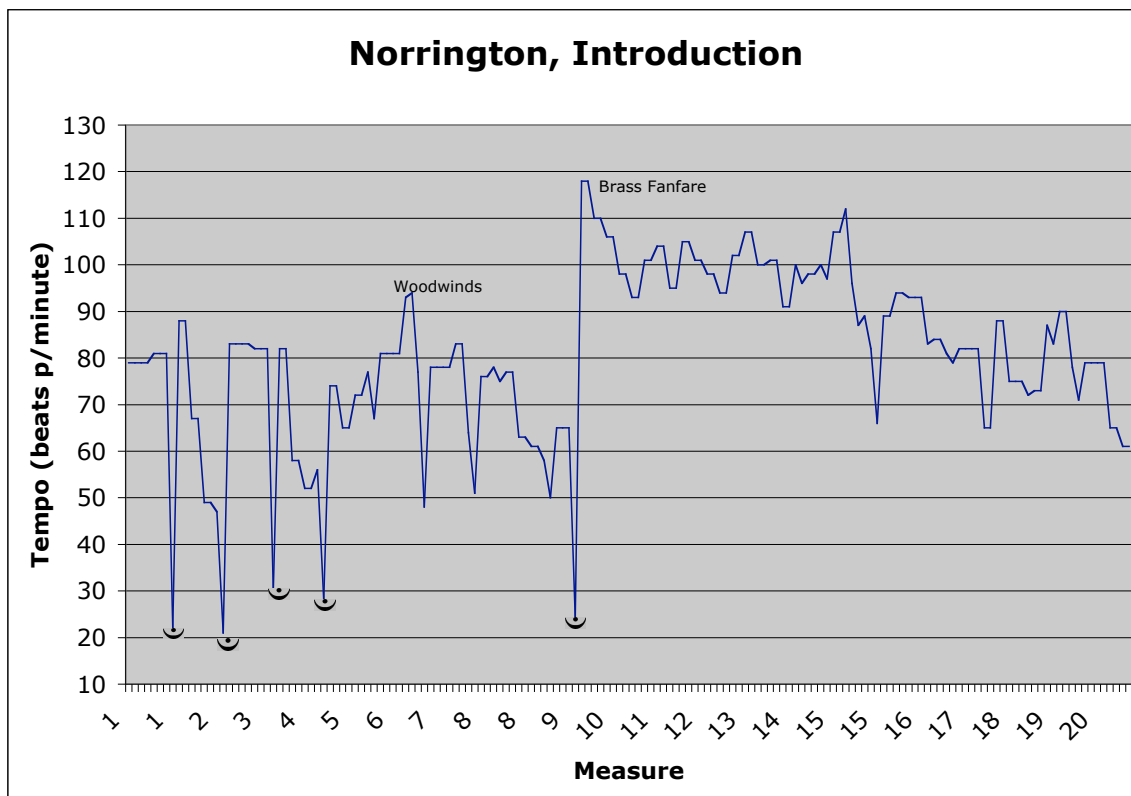
Appendix B—Introduction Tempo Maps

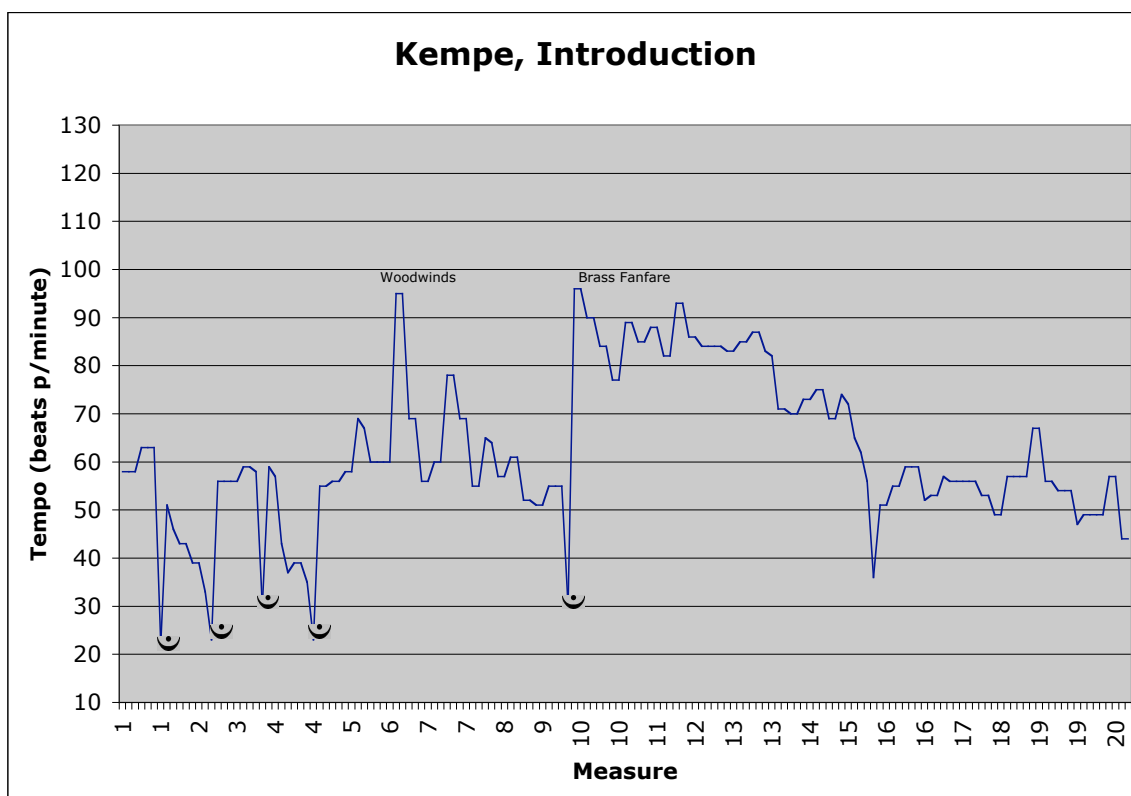
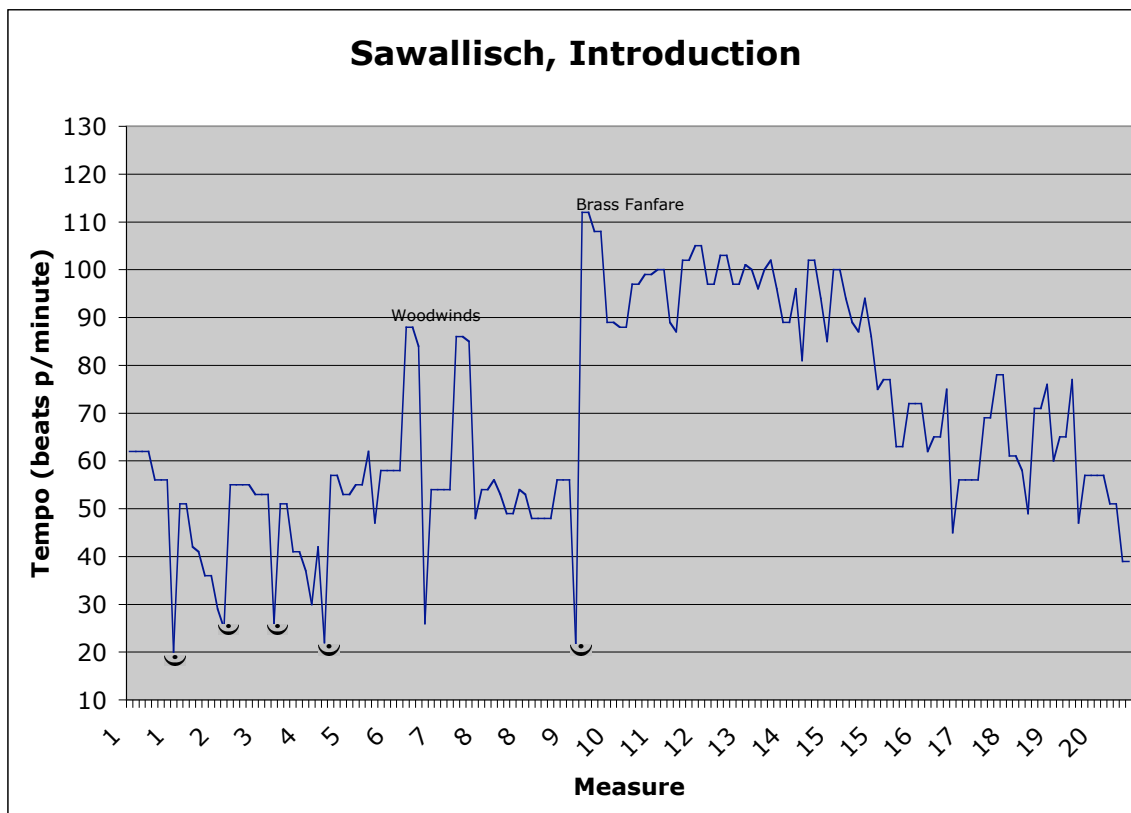


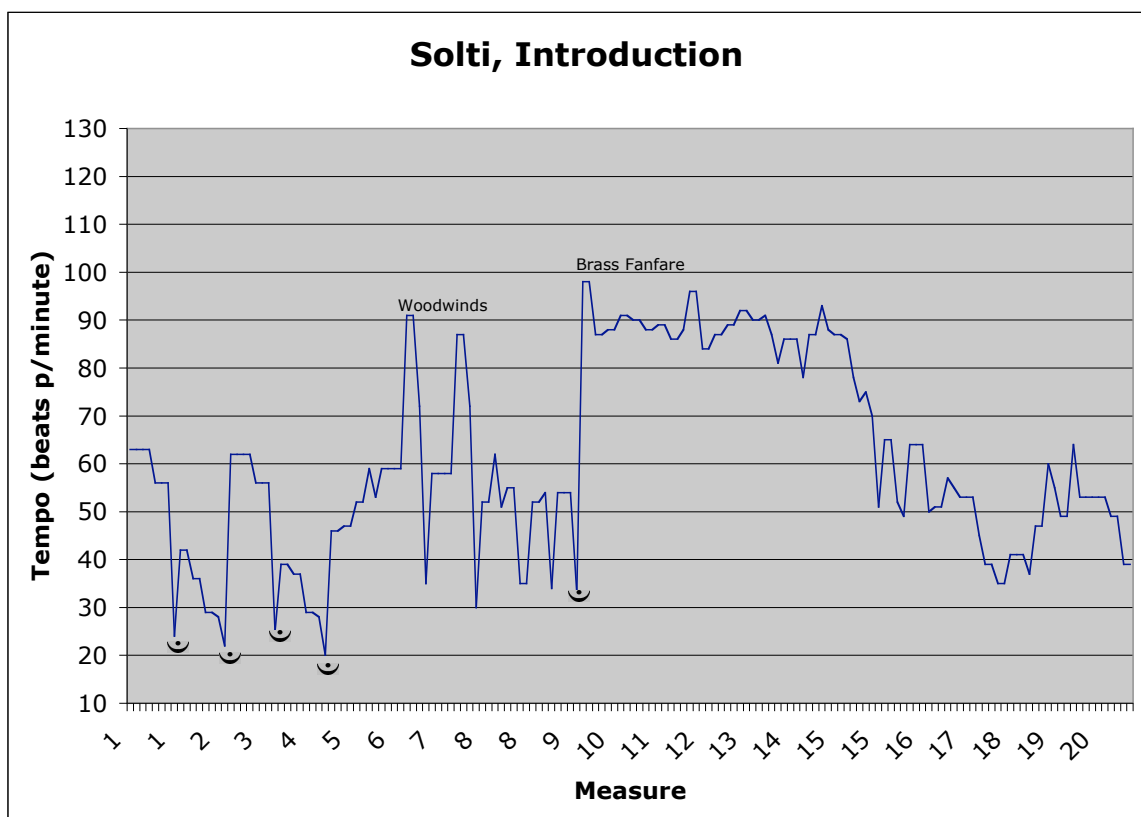
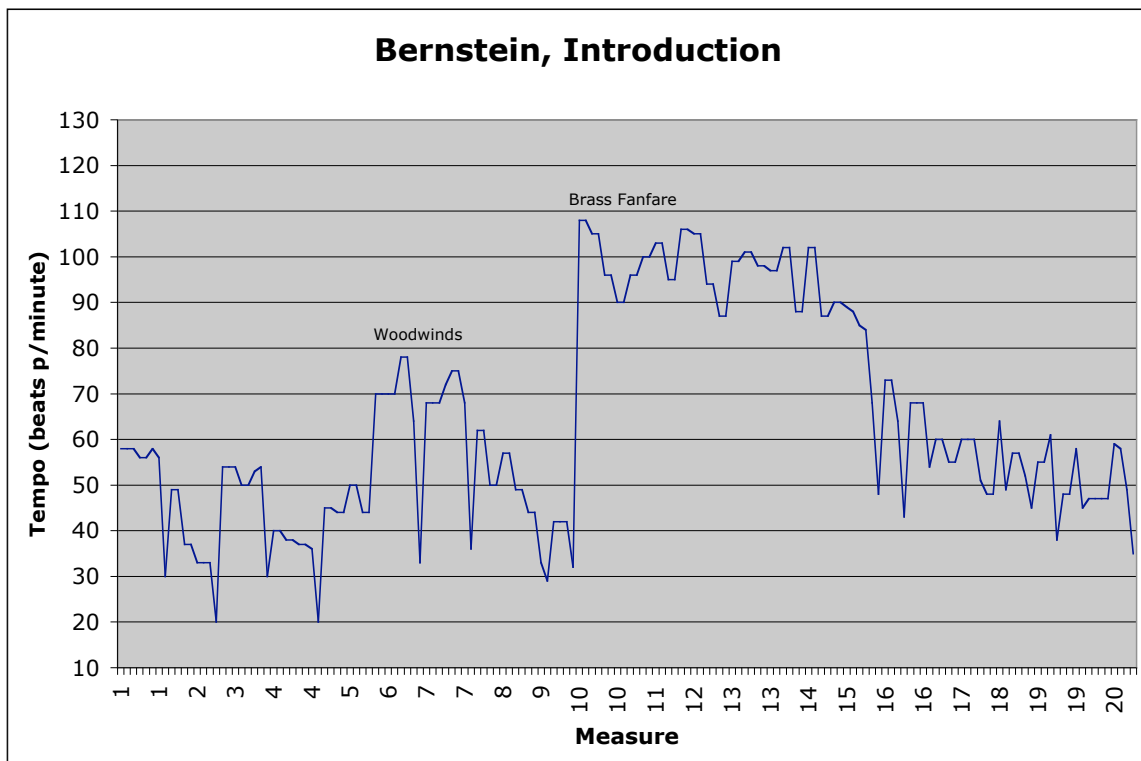


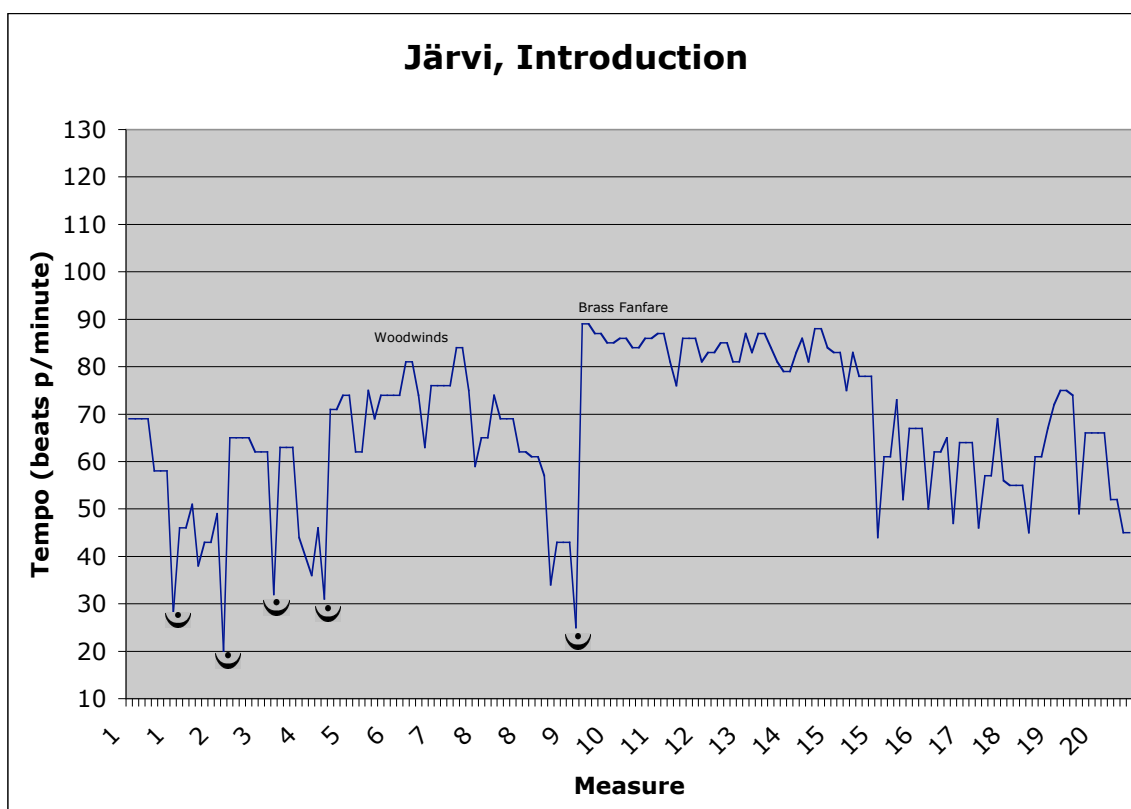
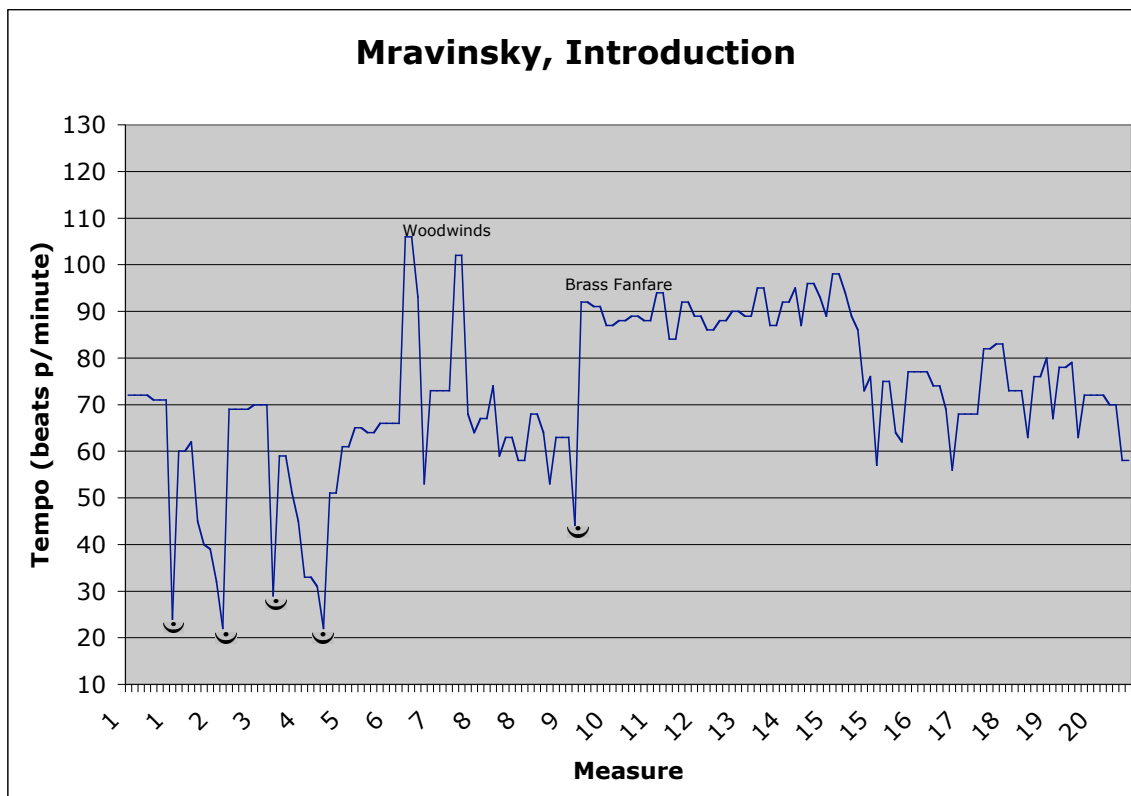


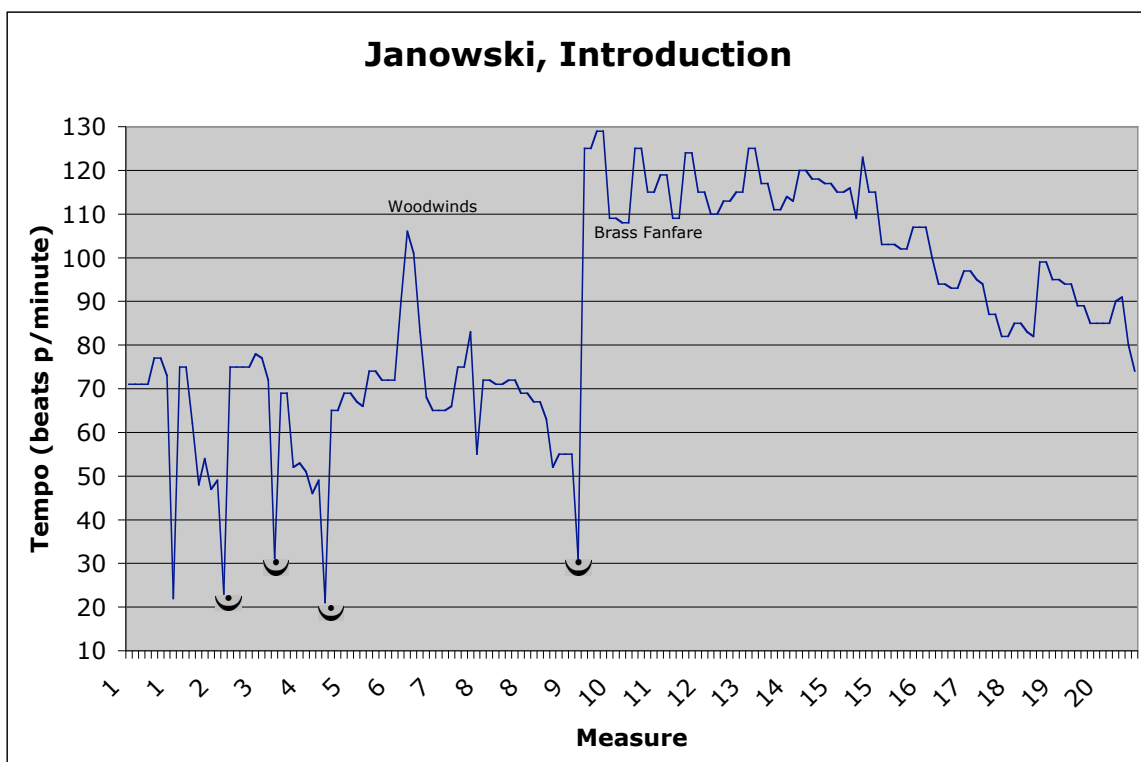
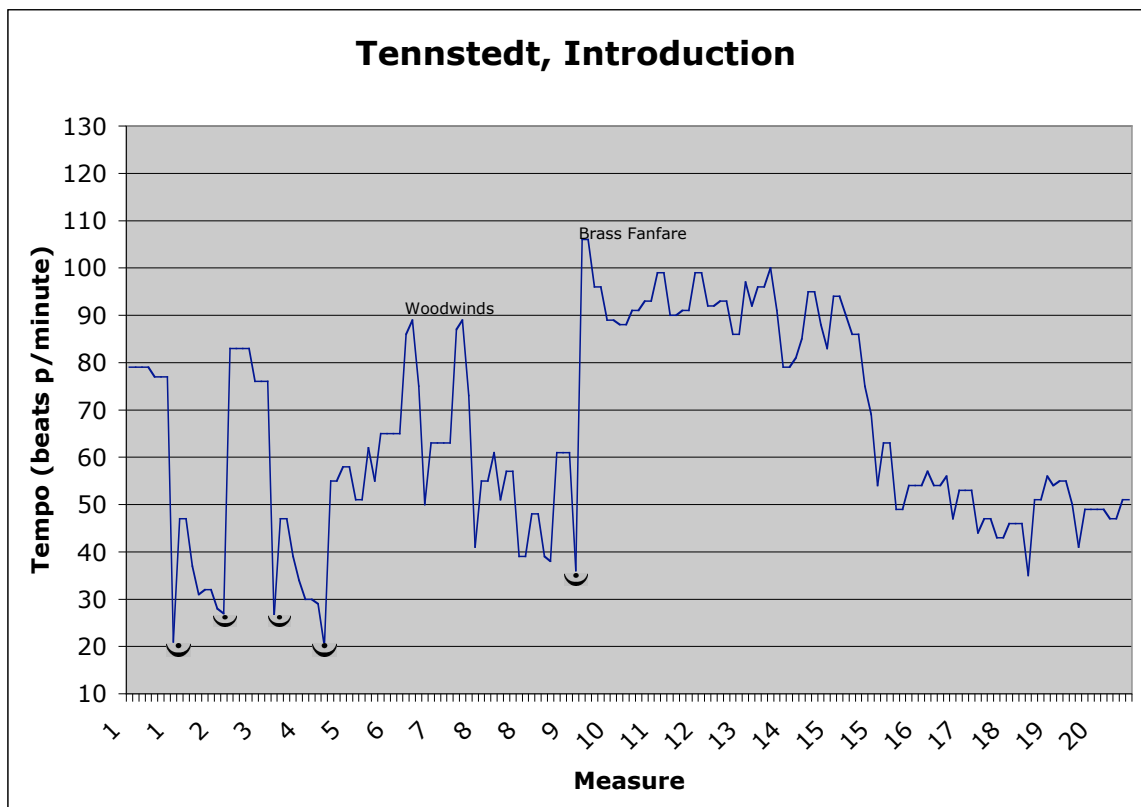


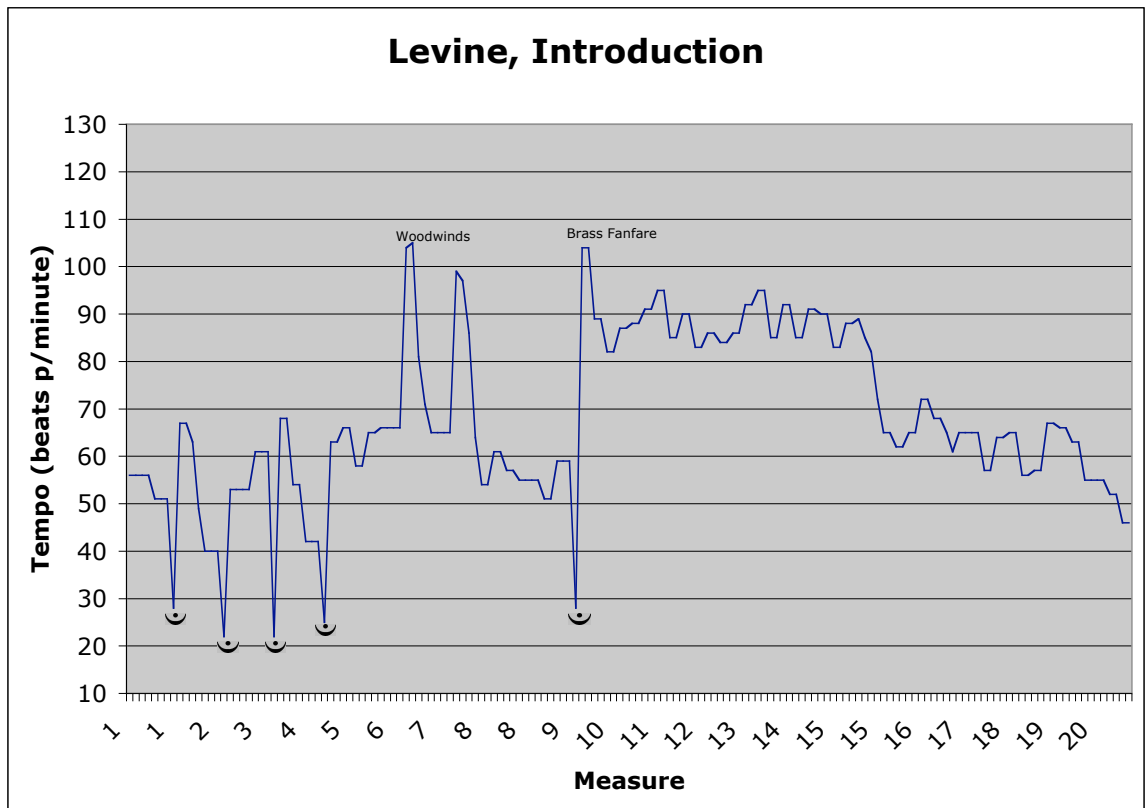
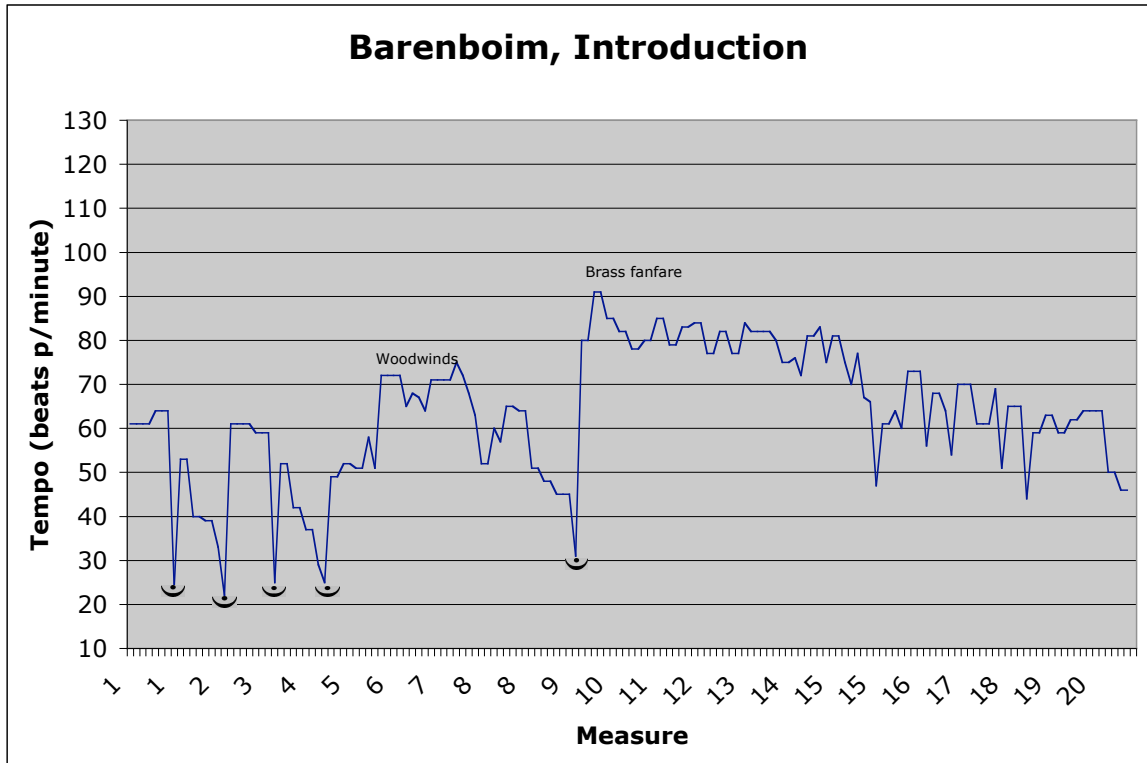












Bibliography

- Banks, Paul, "Aspects of Mahler's Fifth Symphony: Performance Practice and Interpretation," The Musical Times Vol. 130, No. 1755 (May, 1989).
- Bowen, Jose A., "Finding the Music in Musicology: Performance History and Musical Works," Rethinking Music, eds. Nicholas Cook & Mark Everist (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999).
- Bowen, Jose A., "Tempo, Duration, and Flexibility: Techniques in the Analysis of Performance," Journal of Musicological Research, Vol. 16, No. 2 (July 1996).
- Brinner, Benjamin, "Performing Practice, I. 8: Western: The 20th century", *Grove Music Online* (Accessed 02 March 2006), <<http://www.grovemusic.com/shared/views/article.html?section=music.40272.1.8>>
- Galkin, Elliot W., A History of Orchestra Conducting in Theory and Practice (New York: Pendragon Press, 1988).
- Hudson, Richard, Stolen Time: A History of Tempo Rubato, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994).
- Philip, Robert, Early Recordings and Musical Style (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992).
- Philip, Robert, Performing Music in the Age of Recording (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2004).
- Sherman, Bernard D., "Tempos and Proportions in Brahms: Period Evidence," Early Music, Vol. 25, No. 3 (Aug., 1997).
- Taruskin, Richard, "The Pastness of the Present and the Presence of the Past," Text & Act: Essays on Music and Performance (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995).
- Weber, Carl Maria von. Arturo Toscanini Collection, Vol. 16. NBC Symphony Orchestra. Cond. Arturo Toscanini. RCA Victor, 1992.
- Weber, Carl Maria von. BBC Legends: Tennstedt. London Philharmonic Orchestra. Cond. Klaus Tennstedt. BBC, 2002.
- Weber, Carl Maria von. Beecham Conducts Favorite Overtures, Vol. 2. London Philharmonic Orchestra. Cond. Sir Thomas Beecham. Dutton Laboratories, 1994.
- Weber, Carl Maria von. Bruno Walter in Concert, Vol. 1. Los Angeles

- Philharmonic Orchestra. Cond. Bruno Walter. Eklipse, 1994.
- Weber, Carl Maria von. Bruno Walter: Previously Unreleased Concert Performances. NBC Symphony Orchestra. Cond. Bruno Walter. Music and Arts, 1988.
- Weber, Carl Maria von. Early Romantic Overtures. London Classical Players. Cond. Roger Norrington. EMI Classics, 1990.
- Weber, Carl Maria von. Famous Overtures. Chicago Symphony Orchestra. Cond. Sir Georg Solti. Decca, 1999.
- Weber, Carl Maria von. Great Conductors: Mengelberg. Concertgebouw Orchestra, Amsterdam. Cond. Wilhelm Mengelberg. Naxos, 2002.
- Weber, Carl Maria von. The Israel Philharmonic Orchestra 60th Anniversary Gala Concert. Israel Philharmonic Orchestra. Cond. Daniel Barenboim. RCA Victor, 1997.
- Weber, Carl Maria von. Karajan: Famous Overtures. Berlin Philharmonic Orchestra. Cond. Herbert von Karajan. Deutsche Grammophon, 2003.
- Weber, Carl Maria von. Leonard Bernstein: The Royal Edition, No. 63. New York Philharmonic Orchestra. Cond. Leonard Bernstein. Sony Classical, 1993.
- Weber, Carl Maria von. Levine: Documents of the Munich Years, Vol. 4. Munich Philharmonic Orchestra. Cond. James Levine. Oehms Classics, 2004.
- Weber, Carl Maria von. The Mravinsky Collection. Leningrad Philharmonic Orchestra. Cond. Evgeni Mravinsky. Russian Disc, 1995.
- Weber, Carl Maria von. Oberon. Bavarian Radio Symphony Orchestra. Cond. Rafael Kubelik. Deutsche Grammophon, 1990.
- Weber, Carl Maria von. Oberon. German Symphony Orchestra of Berlin. Cond. Marek Janowski. RCA Victor, 1997.
- Weber, Carl Maria von. Overtures. Philharmonia Orchestra. Cond. Neeme Järvi. Chandos, 1992.
- Weber, Carl Maria von. Overtures. Philharmonia Orchestra. Cond. Wolfgang Sawallisch. EMI Classics, 2002.
- Weber, Carl Maria von. Overtures. Staatskapelle Dresden. Cond. Gustav Kuhn. Capriccio, 1985.
- Weber, Carl Maria von. Rudolf Kemp: Artist Profile. Vienna Philharmonic Orchestra. Cond. Rudolf Kempe. EMI Classics, 1996.

Weber, Carl Maria von. Six Overtures. Theater Orchestra of National Opera, Paris. Cond. Hermann Scherchen. Ades, 1987.