The Fateful Consequences Of Misinterpreting Beethoven

Gestern brachte ich einen Brief auf die Post, wo man mich fragte, wo der Brief hin soll? Ich sehe daher, daß meine Schrift vielleicht ebenso als ich selbst mißdeutet werde.

Yesterday I took a letter to the post office, and they asked me there where it should be sent. I am thus aware that my writing perhaps is as misinterpreted to the same degree as I myself am.

Ludwig van Beethoven to Nikolaus Zmeskall on the 9th October 1813

The picture which the public chooses to paint of their most prominent citizens can never be 100% accurate. Spotlights, however bright, are not there to illuminate the shadows which they themselves create.

This is particularly true of Beethoven. Since his appearance in the world of music Beethoven's admirers have attempted to see him according to their wishes. These preconceptions have led to an almost total distortion of his being. Nowadays one believes to know his fierce facial expression, his difficult character, his ever problematic love life and much more. No-one considers that this view might be controlled perhaps through a higher power. Beethoven himself contributed somewhat to the situation in enjoying giving his admirers puzzles, often continuing to conceal the tempo dilemma.

I feel it as a challenge to try and discover these puzzles and to resolve them as best I can. The result of these deliberations is a wholly new approach to the life and work of the master which I invite you to share through this recording of the second symphony and my book "THE OTHER BEETHOVEN".

The Puzzling Tempo Indications

Es ist dummes Zeug, man muß die Tempos fühlen

It is humbug – you have to feel the tempi!

Beethoven on the metronome to Johann Nepomuk Mälzel, 1813

One of the most broadly conceived misconceptions of Beethoven is of his apparent approval of Mälzels metronome. Overlooked was the fact that the invention was restrictively imposed upon the composer. With this new instrument for measuring the speed of music, Beethoven was urged in 1817 to fix the tempo for how he imagined the piece should be. Questions to the correct tempo were intolerable for the composer however, as he was of the proven opinion that the tempo indications could be read directly from the notes themselves and this lay in the interpretive responsibility of the performer. Music at that time was still ruled by classical convention as regards to tempo but these conventions were seriously threatened by the arbitrary licenses that the "romantic" performers seemed to indulge in.

So, in his own inimitable way, Beethoven lived up to the expectations demanded of him. He gave Mälzel apparently the requested tempo markings of his works. He delivered them however in a cunning puzzle that was hidden to Mälzel. In this puzzle only a seventh of all the tempo markings are correct; all the other tempi are based on faked mistakes. These "mistakes" are artfully executed to form pairs of various dissonances which can be recognized and resolved according to the tonal music system. Beethoven never referred directly to these errors but indirectly tried to steer the performers to interpret his "broken", "fluctuating" or "ill" metronome markings. In vain! Right up to the present day have his endeavors been ignored.

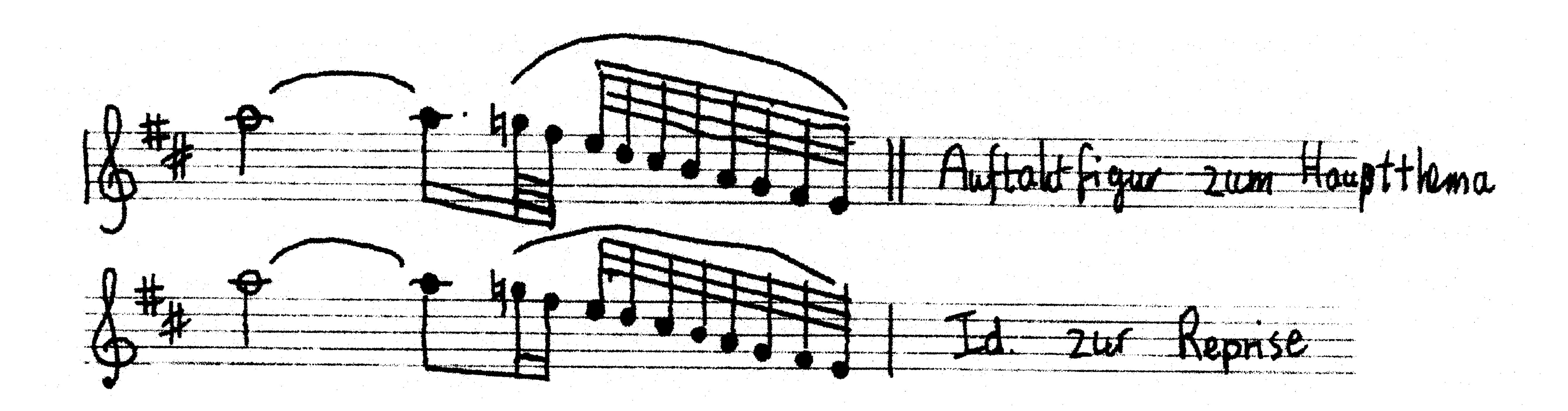
The Original Shape Of The Second Symphony

Da sich alle diese Dissonanzen scheinen sehr langsam aufzulösen, so ist's am besten, solche hervorzubringen, die man selbst auflösen kann, - und das übrige dem unvermeidlichen Schicksal anheimzustellen.

Since all these dissonances seem to dissipate very slowly, it seems best to feature those which oneself can resolve and leave the others to their fate.

Beethoven to Archduke Rudolf, 1814

Among the tempi published in 1817 are found the puzzling tempi of Beethoven's second symphony, which he had composed 15 years earlier in Heiligenstadt. There are five disjointed tempi. Thus is the first tempo a third too slow, the second tempo in relation to this, half as much too fast. One could also say the Adagio was "inadvertently" changed through the harmonic proportion of a fifth and the following Allegro accordingly by the same proportion higher. The original tempo octave, which the laws of classical relationships dictate, has been apparently increased to a value of more than two octaves and from the 1:2 relationship incremented to 1:5. Proof of the original tempo octave can be found in the difference between the types of notation used in the opening figure of the main theme:



The other three movements are altogether faster: the second movement by a third, the final two movements by a further half of their original speed. This sort of interference results in a meaningless mutilation of the work, disintegrating the basic pulse of the composition as well as the whole architecture.

More to the reasons and background for Beethoven's actions can be discovered in my book. I do not believe however that the dislocated tempi which we have become used to should be rules for eternity, even though we have become familiar with them. Guided by "BETTER LATE THAN NEVER", as dictum has, after two centuries, this very first attempt, been made for a recording with corrected tempi.

The Lichnowsky Recording

Lebt wohl und liebt euch; - allen Freunden danke ich, besonders Fürst Lichnowsky und Professor Schmidt.

Live well and be loved; I thank all my friends, especially Prince Lichnowsky and Professor Schmidt

Heiligenstädter Testament, 6th October 1806

Beethoven dedicated his Opus 36 to his friend and patron Prince Karl von Lichnowsky. Dedications by Beethoven have often been underestimated and were always a sign of an inner bond felt deeply by the composer. To make amends I dedicate this recording to Count Eduardo von Lichnowsky whose great grandfather Max Franz is a grandson of Beethoven's patron. Eduardo is the present head of the family.

I thank the Vienna Symphonic Orchestra for being the first orchestra willing to restore the original version of Beethoven's second symphony and manager Gergely Sugar for cooperating courageously in this experiment.

Our recording took place at the end of September 2010 in the Baumgartner Casino Vienna. Executive producer was Michael Haas (London, Vienna) previously a sound engineer with DECCA London, and winner of twelve Grammys for classical recordings. Our recording engineer was George Burdicek from Vienna.