Wagner on Welte: *Tristan und Isolde* around 1905[1]

Manuel Bärtsch

Early Wagner recordings

The beginning of the 20th century was marked by a complex cohabitation of the hypertrophic heritage of the ›romantic‹ era and harbingers of modernity. This period between 1900 and the outbreak of the First World War, when musical traditions of the 19th century were still widespread,[2] also saw the dawn of commercial music recording. The musical artwork now entered the phase of its technical reproduction, at a time when many of Wagner's close collaborators were still active musicians. A golden age for gathering performance practice information, one might think. But recordings are by no means straightforward sources.

The very early acoustic recordings of Wagner's music seem to be emblematic for this often problematic relationship between expectations and content. You could exemplify this phenomenon with a recording of the tenor Otto Briesemeister singing Loge in 1907.[3] This recording is a highly interesting document regarding vocal technique when singing Wagner, but it seems problematic to deduce more musical information from it. Any quest for information about ›interpretation‹ – that is, rubato, phrasing, speed, displaying structure, nuances and affects – produces only modest results. It seems hard to over-

1 This text is a revised version of a paper read at Jesus College, Oxford University, 11. 4. 2018, in: https://www.music.ox.ac.uk/wagner-1900/conference-programme (accessed: 8.7. 2019).

2 See e. g. Clive Brown: *Classical and Romantic Performance Practise 1750–1900*, Oxford: Oxford University Press 1999.

3 Various Artists - Topic: Otto Briesemeister: «Jetzt fand ich´s» (*Das Rheingold*), auf https://youtu.be/PBGmnBNsVOw (accessed: 8. 7. 2019. The orchestral passage after 1:12 is paradigmatic).

look the fact that the circumstances of this recording and the poor quality of the orchestra limited freedom of musical expression to a critical extent.

Of course, this is not a sufficient reason for us to dismiss these early acoustic recordings in favour of an exclusive return to written information about the interpretation of Wagner's music. On the contrary: In order to benefit from these exceptional sources, additional information is needed. Accordingly, this paper proposes the comparative use of a source whose reputation is even worse than that of acoustic recordings: the paper rolls that conserve interpretations for reproducing piano systems. In fact, these sources offer first-hand information about the historical performance of Wagner's music. In one of these many examples, Felix Mottl (1856–1911, conductor of the Bayreuth premiere of *Tristan*) plays a passage from *Tristan*, the duet *Oh sink hernieder, Nacht der Liebe*.[4]

When compared to the Briesemeister recording, the musical structure is accurate, clear, neat, and the recording seems to be much closer to a concert performance than in the case of the early acoustic recordings. This assessment is not merely retrospective, but was the main reason for the almost immediate success of the reproducing piano systems. Almost all the famous pianists of Europe and the USA made recordings for these systems and praised the results in the guestbooks of the companies, as did many composers and conductors.[5] When compared to the acoustical process, the roll recording process seems to have been much closer to a concert performance, and much less disturbing to the actual music-making. For obvious reasons, the possibility of storing up to 15 minutes of music was very important for Wagner recordings. In fact, the piano roll recordings of many iconic pieces, such as the *Liebestod*, the *Ride of the Valkyries*, *Siegfried's Death* and many others were made far earlier than their acoustic counterparts, simply because these are much longer than the three minutes then available on acoustic recordings.

Piano roll recordings of Wagner's music thus promise to contain important information about an early stage of Wagner Interpretation. But can such piano recordings be representative of orchestral interpretations of Wagner's music? Is it possible to extract reliable data from these rolls? And if so, what do they tell us?

4 The Welte-Mignon Mystery, Vol. 2: *Felix Mottl today playing his 1907 interpretations*. TACET, 2004.

5 See Jürgen Hocker: *Faszination Player-Piano*, Bergkirchen: Edition Bochinsky 2009.

Piano interpretations of Wagner's music

The first question, regarding the relevance of these recordings, is the easier one to answer. In the case of *Tristan* in particular, there is a close relationship between the piano reductions, the orchestral excerpts and the orchestral version of the opera. The piano reduction by Hans von Bülow was known as a paradigmatic transcription. In this regard, von Bülow wrote as follows to Karl Klindworth (1830–1916), himself a student of Liszt, a pianist, conductor, editor, friend and supporter of Wagner and also an arranger of his music for piano:

> »Mir sind in den W.schen Tempi (er ist in dieser Beziehung – ich hab's beim Tristan verfolgen können – successive ›sanguinischer‹ geworden) Deine Paraphrasen unmöglich auszuführen. Ich schließe daraus auf die Majorität der Klavierpauker […] und bin also genötigt, auszumerzen, zu simplifizieren usw.«[6]

This quotation shows that the piano reductions by Bülow, Klindworth and other musicians of Wagner's circle were meant to be much more than an easy way of reading Wagner's scores, nor are they artworks in their own right: Bülow argues that a piano reduction must be playable in the tempi that Wagner himself wanted. It is therefore likely that, when conductors such as Mottl played these piano reductions, they tried to document as much as possible an interpretation that might not have been identical to the Wagner's intentions, but at least based on the traditions that they perceived as being congruent with them. Moreover, the excerpts that Mottl recorded on piano rolls, such as the *Prelude* and the *Liebestod* from *Tristan*, were also paradigmatic for his own career, for he included both pieces many times in his concerts, long before he conducted the whole opera in the theatre.[7]

6 »When played at W's tempi (he has in this regard become continually more ›sanguine‹, as I was able to observe in Tristan), your paraphrases are impossible to perform. I suspect this is the case for the majority of piano-thumpers […] and am thus compelled to cull and to simplify […]« Letter of 13th July 1865 from Hans von Bülow to Karl Klindworth. Wagner, Sämtliche Werke, vol. 27, p. 175.

7 Ibid., p. 185.

Reproducing pianos and their documents

In order to answer the second question about technical fidelity to the original performance, the Bern University of the Arts has carried out five consecutive research projects that have enabled us to analyse in detail the musical content of the Welte piano recordings.[8]

In order to understand the below analysis, it is important to know what a reproducing piano is and what it is capable of. These pianos evolved from the player-pianos known as the ›pianola‹, which was invented in 1895. The pianola was designed to render the mere pitches of a work, with the task of the ›player‹ being to add ›interpretation‹ in the form of dynamics, tempo and rubato. By contrast, the reproducing pianos, such as the German Welte-Mignon, the American Ampico and many less trustworthy systems, tried to record and render all parameters of performance. This invention was extremely successful before World War I, despite the horrendously high price of both the instruments and the paper rolls that conserve the interpretations. Reproducing pianos eventually disappeared from the music scene in the 1930s.

The poor reputation of piano-roll systems stems from the fact that every playback is a new act of technical reproduction, and there can be a multitude of small technical problems that alter the musical outcome. The Welte-Mignon is especially capable of masking such technical failures of interpretation, to such a degree that listening to the playback of a reproducing piano can mislead an audience about the musical character of a roll recording.[9] For example, lateral deviations of the paper roll can be heard as technical lapses on the part of the interpreter; leaks in the pneumatic system can slow down the playback at moments of maximum dynamics that in fact ›imitate‹ the rubato tradition of the time; and if springs in the dynamic unit stiffen with age, this can harden the attack of the hammers and produce a sound that suggests a lack of subtlety in the pianistic culture.

8 Hochschule der Künste: Institut Interpretation, in: http://www.hkb-interpretation.ch/index.php?id=342, http://www.hkb-interpretation.ch/index.php?id=316 (accessed: 28. 8.2019).

9 Youtube is full of distorted, out-of-tune roll reproductions, e. g. WelteMax: Welte-Mignon – Beethoven, in: https://youtu.be/I1q3Zx2qAIo (accessed: 8. 7. 2019), WelteMax: Welte-Mignon – Liszt, in: https://youtu.be/MsgBOkdz6-4 (accessed: 8. 7. 2019), Marc Widuch: Welte-Mignon push up player (Vorsetzer) playing Blüthner concert jub. Grand piano, in: https://youtu.be/NIa7Nt4VigA (accessed: 8. 7. 2019), etc.

At the Bern University of the Arts, we have tried to avoid these problems by directly accessing the information on the paper roll: we scan the piano rolls, and measure their parameters directly from the scan. The physical playback is only used for an initial aural impression and for cross-checking the results of our analysis. In addition, we use the data sets of another specialist, Peter Phillips from Australia,[10] who produces MIDI files from original piano rolls by means of physical emulation. These files have the advantage of including the dynamics in high fidelity when compared to an ideal analogue roll reproduction.

When preparing this paper, I tried to find as much piano-roll material as possible that was related to *Tristan* (in this, I was assisted by my colleague Sebastian Bausch). The below overview offers a surprisingly large number of potentially interesting recordings: (table pp. 178)

Regarding the different systems, I relied on rolls for the German brands Welte-Mignon, Philipps Duca and Hupfeld Animatic, and for the American Duo-Art and Ampico systems. There are important differences between both the piano roll systems and the data formats, both in the number of parameters recorded and in their accuracy and historical fidelity. These differences led to a distinct hierarchy of sources for this paper.

The Welte-Mignon was the first and the most prominent reproducing piano system. It was invented in 1904 and had the reputation of being as ›authentic‹ as possible.[11] A remarkable amount of research has been conducted into this system, so it is well-investigated in comparison to contemporaneous, rival reproducing pianos. For the Welte-Mignon, the initial speed of the playback is clear.[12] It is known that the company was relatively cautious when editing, and that the pedalling seems to have remained largely untouched. Moreover, the articulation is consistent with related audio recordings,[13] as is the »dislocation« (this being the technical term in performance practice

10 See Peter Phillips: *Piano Rolls and contemporary Player Pianos: The Catalogues, Technology, Archiving, Accessibility*, Sydney: University of Sydney 2016.

11 Peter Hagmann: *Das Welte-Mignon-Klavier, die Welte-Philharmonie-Orgel und die Anfänge der Reproduktion von Musik*. Bern and Freiburg: Peter Lang 1984, pp. 46–50.

12 Gerhard Dangel: »Archäologie eines Klangs«, in: Christoph Hänggi/Kai Köpp (Hg.): *Recording the Soul of Music*. Seewen 2016, pp. 13–21.

13 Manuel Bärtsch: »Welte vs. Audio – Chopins vielbesprochenes Nocturne Fis-Dur op. 15/2 im intermedialen Vergleich«, in: Hänggi/Köpp 2016, pp. 106–131.

Welte-Mignon

Rollnumber	Pianist		Title	
WR 188	Alfred Grünfeld	1852 - 1924	*Liebestod*	
WR 1347	Felix Mottl	1856 - 1911	*Prelude*	
WR 1351	Felix Mottl	1956 - 1911	*Oh sink hernieder, Nacht der Liebe*	

Ampico

Rollnumber	Pianist		Title	
	Cornelius Rybner	1853 - 1929	*Liebestod*	
	Benno Moisewitsch	1890 - 1963	*Liebestod*	
	Maurice Dumesnil	1884 - 1974	*Liebestod*	

Hupfeld Animatic

Rollnumber	Pianist		Title	
A 53558	Julius Prüwer	1874 - 1943	*Oh sink hernieder*	

Philipps Duca

Rollnumber	Pianist		Title	
PAG 95	Willy Rehberg	1863 - 1937	*Liebestod*	
PAG 518	Alfred Grünfeld	1852 - 1924	*Liebestod*	
PAG723	Germaine Arnaud	1890 - 1958	*Liebestod*	

Collected data overview. PP: Peter Philipps, SB: Sebastian Bausch, MB: Manuel Bärtsch

research for playing one hand after the other).[14] On the other hand, the recording process for the dynamics was kept a closely guarded company secret, perhaps because its simplicity would have called the company's advertising

14 See Neal Peres da Costa: *Off the record: Performing Practices in Romantic Piano Playing*, Oxford: Oxford University Press 2012, pp. 41–100.

	Recording Date (if known)	Optical Document	MIDI Data Set	Commercial recordings	Personal recordings
	19.1.1905	Scan	MIDI PP	Tacet	Audio MB
	3.3.1905	Scan	MIDI PP	Tacet	
	3.3.1905			Tacet	

	Recording Date (if known)	Optical Document	MIDI Data Set	Commercial recordings	Personal recordings
			MIDI PP		
			MIDI PP		
			MIDI PP		

	Recording Date (if known)	Optical Document	MIDI Data Set	Commercial recordings	Personal recordings
		Scan			

	Recording Date (if known)	Optical Document	MIDI Data Set	Commercial recordings	Personal recordings
		Scan	MIDI SB		
		Scan			
		Scan			

claims of ingenuity into question. The Welte is accordingly a good source for information on the initial speed, articulation, dislocation, pedalling and sometimes also on the dynamics, especially accents.

Its American competitor, the Ampico, was a later entrant onto the market for reproducing pianos, which it began to manufacture in 1913. It was different from the Welte System in important ways. As can be seen easily on the

scans, its editing reached epidemic proportions. Dynamics were coded in a more accessible way, and for a long time were not recorded but made by the editors by ear.

The *Philipps Duca* system engaged in a similar amount of editing to Ampico. In addition, its tempo is unclear – or at least very difficult to reconstruct. We can only extract relational tempo changes from these rolls. Its absolute speeds are currently an object of research.

The *Hupfeld Animatic*, however, is a much simpler construction. The dynamics are made by the user: there is an indication line on the roll that he can follow with the pointer for the dynamic lever, but this line is so schematic that it contains almost no original information at all. The only things that are at all informative are the notes themselves. Nevertheless, this information can still be interesting in cases of unedited transcriptions, improvisations or deliberate changes to the composition. For technical reasons, dislocations in both Philipps Duca and the Hupfeld Animatic are standardised. The resolution is much lower than on Welte or Ampico, and it remains unclear whether the notes of a chord were played precisely together or far apart from each other.

For my analysis, I used the output of our optical scan system[15] as well as the MIDI files from Peter Philipps, whose method is based on another idea: emulation. This means that the paper rolls are ›played‹ by a similar mechanism as in the Welte instrument, but instead of actually playing the notes, the mechanism emulates the reactions of its internal pneumatic device and records them as MIDI data.[16] The advantage of the optical-based proceeding is that it documents the rolls precisely without being dependent on potentially fragile playback procedures; the advantage of the *emulation* is that these data sets include dynamics. In addition, I utilised the recordings of the label Tacet in Freiburg in Breisgau and some of my own recordings of roll playbacks. It was impossible to assemble all the formats. Sometimes, only a scan or a MIDI file was available, and in one case only a recording. It seemed obvious to focus on the rolls for which I had the most complete set of materials. For this reason, I have based this paper mainly on the Welte recordings of

15 For technical details see Daniel Debrunner: »Von der Welte-Rolle zur parametrisierbaren Wiedergabe auf synthetischen Instrumenten und midi-fähigen Selbstspielklavieren«, in: Hänggi/Köpp 2016, pp. 96–105.

16 See Phillips 2016, pp. 206–229.

Alfred Grünfeld and Felix Mottl, even though my additional findings in the rolls of the other systems turned out to be more important than expected.

Alfred Grünfeld: *Isolde's Liebestod*

This initially seems to be an exclusively ›pianistic‹ recording of Isolde's *Liebestod* by Alfred Grünfeld (1852–1924) on Welte. Grünfeld was a student of Theodor Kullak and known as an elegant pianist, the dedicatee of the *Frühlingsstimmenwalzer* by Johann Strauss Jr., and someone at home in the world of more popular music. Walter Niemann called him »Der Wiener Altmeister der Salonkunst im älteren Sinne«[17] (»The Viennese grand master of salon art in the older sense of the word«). Grünfeld's recording of Liszt's transcription of the *Liebestod* is remarkable for two reasons: It is the only ›serious‹ music that Grünfeld ever recorded for Welte, and was also one of the best-selling recordings ever – in fact, it is at No. 3 in the list of extant rolls in known collections.[18] This wide distribution, along with Welte's claim to authenticity, makes it seem likely that it was a relatively accurate example of an existing Wagner style; for the moment, we shall call this the ›Viennese‹ style.

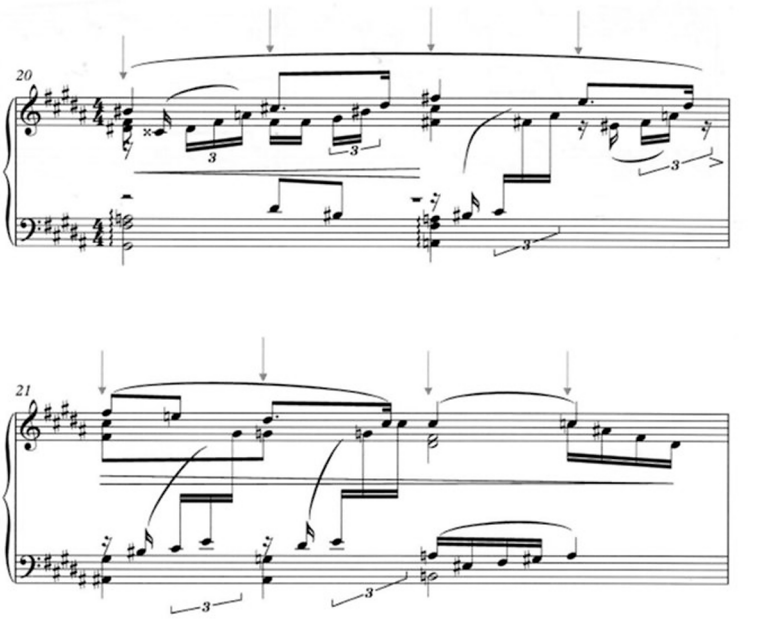
At an initial hearing, we perceive an elegant, playful, smooth version of the *Liebestod*. Upon closer listening, however, we find several features that contradict our first impressions.

Alfred Grünfeld's first bars demonstrate how wide the amplitude of a Wagner rubato can be. After just a few bars he reduces the tempo by more than half, leaving the listeners in doubt as to whether they are hearing a rubato, or a change of metre and rhythm. A careful analysis shows even more than this; let us here consider bars 20–22 of the *Liebestod* in illustration of it:

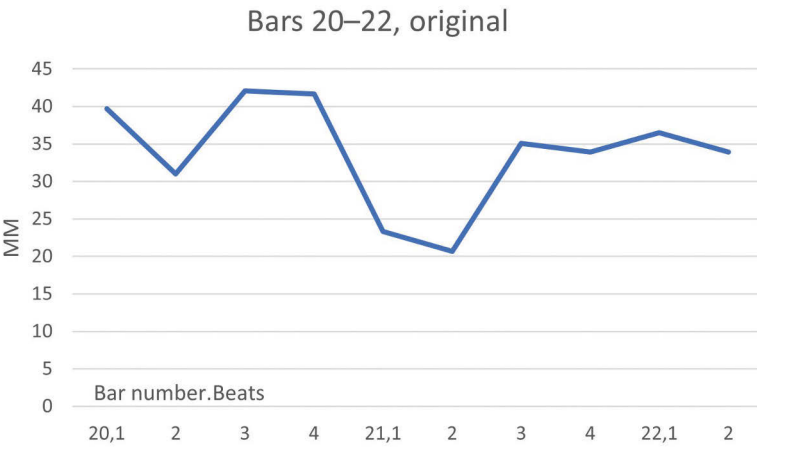
17 Walter Niemann: *Meister des Klaviers*, Berlin: Schuster und Loeffler 1919, p. 152.

18 See Gerhard Dangel/Hans-Wilhelm Schmitz: *Gesamtkatalog der europäischen Aufnahmen 1904–1932 für das Welte-Mignon-Reproduktionspiano*, Stuttgart: self-published, 2006.

Ex. 1: Liebestod, Bars 20-21, original metrics, piano reduction by Felix Mottl [as depicted by:] Manuel Bärtsch.

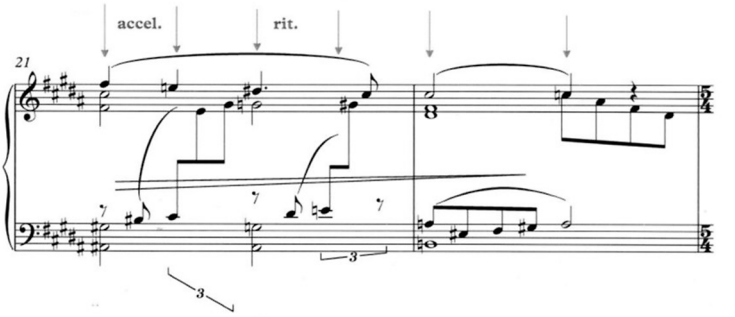


Liebestod, Bars 20–22. Grünfeld's rubato, original metrics.

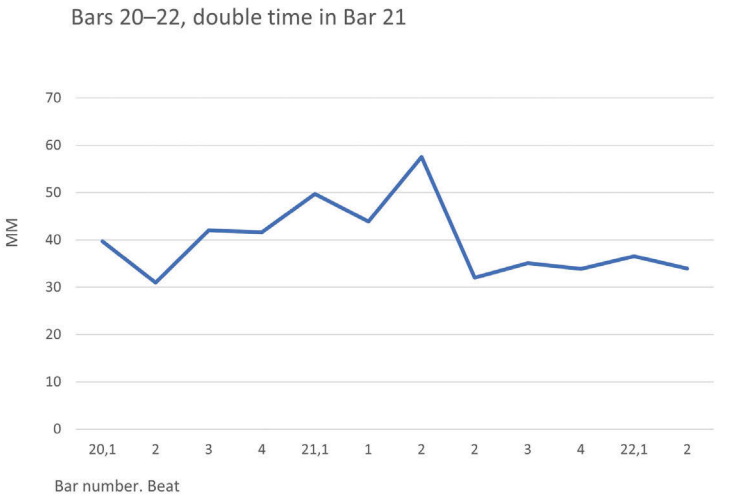


When we compare Grünfeld's performance with a strictly mathematical rendition of the score, we find that he doubles the durations of the first two quavers of bar 21 and almost makes a fermata. But there are other ways of understanding what we hear. If we assume that the note values in that bar were actually doubled, then we can perceive a much smoother rubato.

Ex. 2: Liebestod, Bar 21, augmentation.

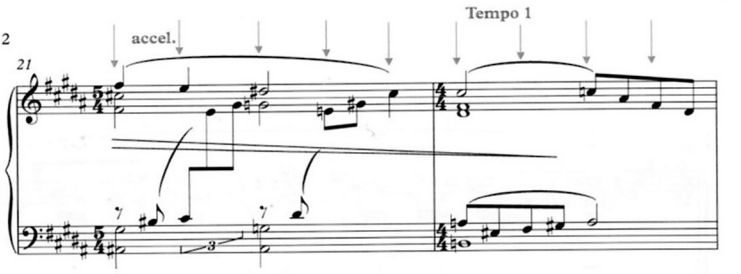


Liebestod. Grünfeld's rubato, doubled metrics in Bar 21.



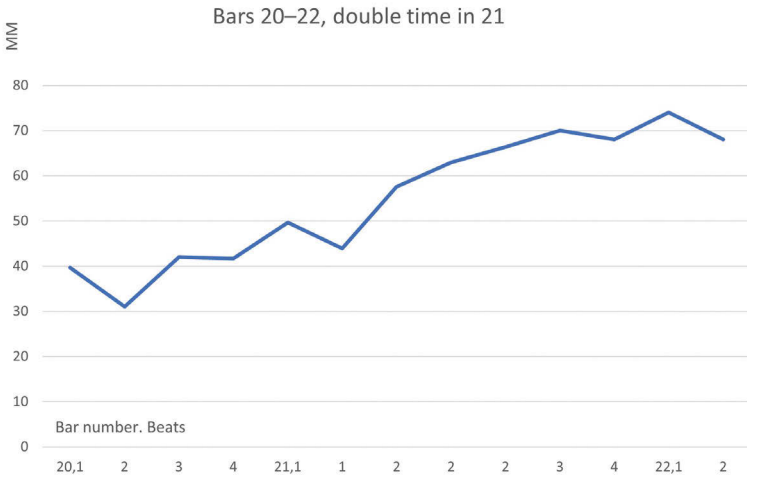
And if we assume that Grünfeld expands this bar to 5/4, we may even perceive a continuous accelerando here.

Ex. 3: Liebestod, augmented bar 21 with an extra beat at the end of the first half.



This sort of ambiguity makes this characteristic form of brisk ritardando consequential and rich. I found several similar passages in Grünfeld's recording.

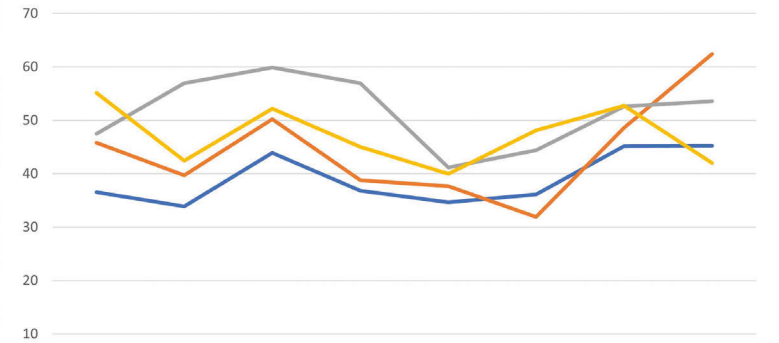
Liebestod, Grünfeld's rubato related to the score above.



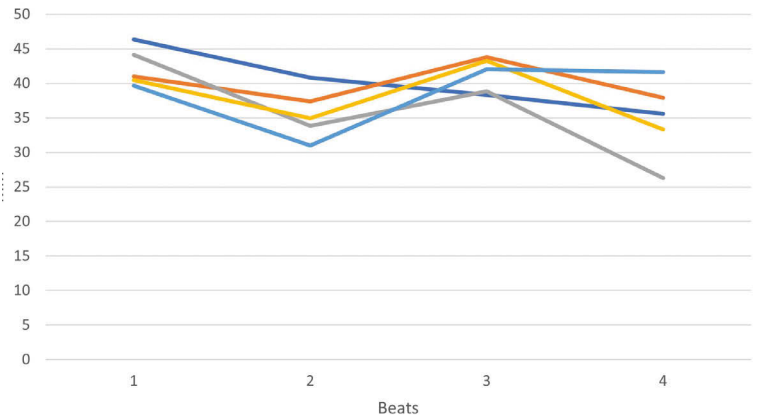
Another symptomatic rubato form can be found in the sequential passages. Piano transcriptions of this piece highlight Wagner's excessive use of simple sequences in the central apotheosis of the opera. Grünfeld reacts in an interesting way to this compositional fact. I was able to find three different types of rubato in sequential passages:

Bars 22–29. Grünfeld chooses a two-bar rubato pattern with slight variations.

Ex. 4: Comparison of the rubato forms of the two-bar sequences from Bars 22 to 29. Blue=22–23, red=24–25, grey=26–27, yellow=28–29. Deviation from the rubato pattern in 26.

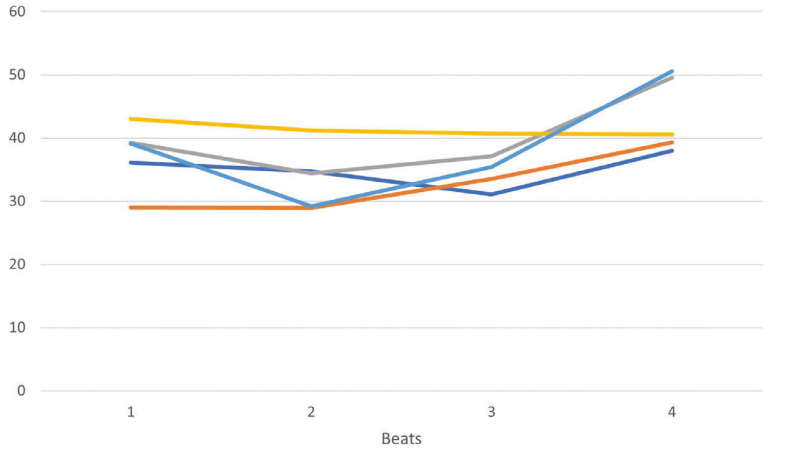


Bars 16–20. A one-bar rubato pattern goes beyond the sequences.



Ex. 5: Comparison of the rubato forms of each bar from 16 to 20. Blue=16, red=17, grey=18, yellow=19, light blue=20. The sequence ends in 18, but the rubato pattern remains in place.

Bars 38–42. Sequence with shifting rubato models from bar to bar.



Ex. 6: Comparison of the rubato forms of each bar between 38–42. Blue=38, red=39, grey=40, yellow=41, light blue=42, continuous sequences, variable rubato patterns.

In this recording, we never find any stable tempo, nor any attempt to achieve continuous tempo gradations in the sequential passages such as we so often hear today.

This recording shares a third performance characteristic with many other recordings of the time: The notes of a chord are rarely played together. Instead, more or less all chords that change the harmony are arpeggiated in different ways – this is the phenomenon of ›dislocation‹ already referred to above. This technique must have been very common in piano playing in around 1900, but its frequency and the degree of variation applied differs from pianist to pianist. Grünfeld uses this technique excessively, but not as anything automatic. In bars 38–42, every voice that has an expressive motive enters later than the voices that accompany it, which is not the case in the subsequent bars that culminate in 47. From bar 50 onwards, Grünfeld establishes an agitated character less by means of rubato than by playing the bass

notes before the main chord. The greater the musical tension, the earlier the bass notes enter.

This last feature is by no means a rare phenomenon. It could be used to question the value of such recordings as serious sources for early Wagner performance practice, because it could be considered as evidence for a Wagnerian ›salon‹ style. Given the prominence of the recording, however, this seems unlikely to me. And by placing it in the context of other recordings, we can better understand its style. A similar, but even more eccentric recording of the work was made by Benno Moisewitsch (1890–1963), who was a student of Theodor Leschetitzky and the very opposite of a ›salon‹ pianist. By contrast, the recordings of French pianists such as Maurice Dumesnil on Ampico or Germaine Arnaud are very different and demonstrate a strict, somewhat academic interpretation with virtually no dislocation.

Felix Mottl: The Prelude to *Tristan*

When we look for performance traditions close to Wagner's circle, the recordings of Felix Mottl are indispensable.[19] Felix Mottl conducted all performances of *Tristan* at Bayreuth from 1886 to 1906. Cosima generally preferred his interpretations to those of the two other Bayreuth conductors, Hans Richter and Hermann Levi. Mottl at this time represented the official ›Bayreuth‹ style and was considered as the highest authority, especially for *Tristan*;[20] this was surely the reason why Welte invited him to record key pieces from that work, because the company had a clear interest in documenting historically important interpretations. Initially, it seemed to me that his recordings preserve a monumental, slow, rigid ›Bayreuth‹ style, but here, too, a closer analytical look reveals that they are much more interesting than any such cliché.

19 In her diary, Cosima Wagner wrote as follows on 19th June 1881: »Zu Mittag K[apell]meister Mottl aus Karlsruhe, […] Wie R. zur Ruhe geht, bitten wir den K[apell]meister, uns den 3ten Akt von Tristan zu spielen; er tut es, und zwar so gut, dass wir alle furchtbar erschüttert sind«, CT II 751, in: Wagner: *Werke*, Vol. 27, p. 197.

20 See Peter Jost, Art. Mottl, Felix: »Würdigung«, in: *MGG Online*, ed. Laurenz Lütteken: Kassel u. a., p. 2016ff., first published in 2004, published online in 2016, in: https://www.mgg-online.com/mgg/stable/50966 (accessed: 9. 7. 2019).

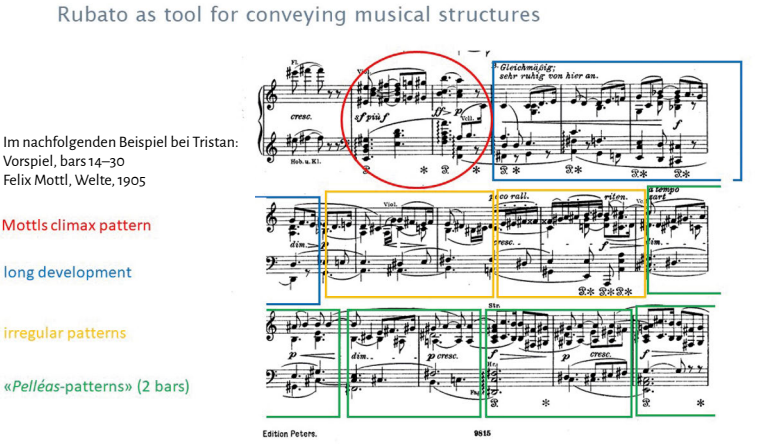
A careful analysis shows one pianistic difference when compared to the Grünfeld recording. Mottl uses arpeggiation at least as often as Grünfeld, and he varies the speed and the frequency of these arpeggios. But dislocation is by no means an automatism for him; for example, bar 12 in Mottl's version shows nothing asynchronous whatsoever. A comparison with the orchestral score can illustrate Mottl's intentions. He differentiates systematically between slightly uncoordinated playing for the string section (for which he plays broad arpeggios of different sorts) and a well-organised woodwind section (with almost no arpeggios at all). It thus becomes apparent that these arpeggios are not a bad habit adopted from salon music, but are instead meant to imitate an orchestral performance.

From bar 16 onwards, this piano roll offers a remarkably consistent interpretation. Normally, a certain degree of extrapolation is needed to explain rubati on roll recordings, but not so in Mottl's case. He is one of the very few pianists whose recordings on Welte keep a slow tempo in an almost metronomic sense. Within this stability there are two principles of time management. The first principle is phrasing, i. e. the way Mottl follows the structure of the composition and separates motives, phrases or harmonic events by means of tempo shifts. These tempo shifts are always smaller than those applied when the score explicitly indicates a change in tempo. The second principle, the management of the climax, is also obvious to understand because of its consistency in Mottl's recording. In many places, Mottl follows a common rubato tradition of the 19th century, in that his interpretation shows an interdependence of melody, dynamics and tempo.[21] In the same year that Mottl made his recordings, Xaver Scharwenka wrote about the interplay of melodic design, rubato and dynamic nuances, in which it seemed natural to him to combine a rising melodic line with a crescendo and an accelerando. However, he also claimed that this combination should by no means be automatic. In his recording of the *Tristan* Prelude, Mottl also links melodic design, rubato and dynamic change, but in an unusual way. The first climax (bars 16–17) combines an ecstatic exclamation of the melody with a crescendo and a large ritardando. This combination underlines effectively the expressive tension of this initial climax. This combination is characteristic of Mottl, who almost always uses it in similar passages. Three other rubato strategies combining melodic design, tempo and dynamics can be found on the

21 See e. g. Xaver Scharwenka: *Methodik des Klavierspiels*, Leipzig: Breitkopf & Härtel 1907, p. 73.

following pages. Mottl uses these in reaction to certain formal and harmonic features. In bars 17–21, irregular rubato patterns are caused by holding onto dissonant chords and by two-bar patterns with almost identical combinations of rubato and dynamics. The first effect may be partly responsible for the high reputation of Mottl's *Tristan* interpretation at Bayreuth.[22]

Ex. 7: Structuring rubato. Felix Mottl on Welte.

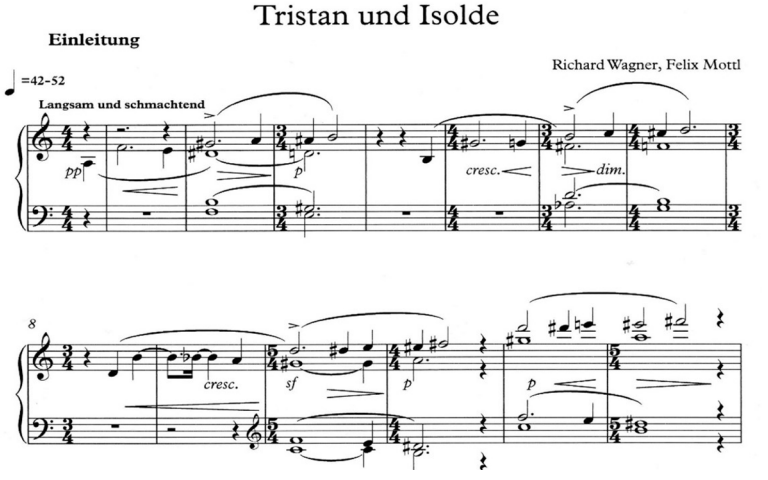


These rubato strategies and patterns are excitingly different from the rubato that one can hear in more recent Wagner interpretations. However, there is a major problem at the beginning. The timings measured on the piano roll do not match those in the score. The only way of making sense of the times measured on the roll is as simple as it is odd: Mottl does not play this in 6/8, but actually in 4/4, later even in 3/4 or 5/4.

22 See Jost 2016.

Piano arrangement of the beginning in Mottl's edition.[23]

Ex. 8: Felix Mottl playing the beginning on the Welte roll WR 1351; approximate score, following the tempi measured on the roll.[24]



23 Klavierauszug arr. Felix Mottl, Leipzig: Peters 1914

24 Felix Mottl on Welte-Mignon, approx. 1907. WR 1351, recorded 3. 3. 1905 in Freiburg im Breisgau. An acoustic recording of a playback of the roll is available on tacet 9794290. The Welte-Mignon Mystery, Vol. 2: *Felix Mottl today playing his 1907 interpretations.* Selected works by Wagner 2004.

Alternative explanations could be considered here. In many piano roll recordings, long notes or silences are shortened, perhaps due to a collective pianistic *horror vacui*. Furthermore, a combination of an emphatic upbeat and interpretational exaggeration in iconic passages can make the beginning appear as if in 4/4. But such explanations seem insufficient to me. The same music at the end of the Prelude is played in time, so it is difficult to believe that Mottl would have been careless when playing the famous beginning. I would not go so far as to say that he intentionally played in a different metre, but we can at least state that he apparently thought of the first 16 bars as a kind of recitative.

Felix Mottl: *O sink hernieder, Nacht der Liebe*

The second recording of Mottl, the Duet *O sink hernieder, Nacht der Liebe* draws our attention to an elementary feature of the *Tristan* recordings, namely the importance of the vocal lines in relationship to the orchestra score.

As is well known, Wagner conducted the *Prelude* and *Liebestod* many times in concert, long before the world premiere of the opera. For this, the *Liebestod* had to be composed so that it could be played with or without singer. At the beginning, there is one single phrase where the soprano's vocal line adds substantial contrapuntal content to the music; in all other places, the voice is doubled by orchestral instruments, with some rhythmic variations at most. This situation changes with the phrase »Wie den Lippen, wonnigmild». The passage »sind es Wellen» also gives the voice an important counterpoint, but by using the unchanged orchestra part in the concert version, Wagner treats the few independent vocal phrases as counterpoints *ad libitum*. In his concert transcription for piano, Liszt inserts the important opening phrase, but the remainder of the piece is quite congruent with the orchestral version. The *Liebestod* thus offers us an uncomplicated example; but what happens to the integration of the vocal line in a section that was not designed to be one of the ›best of‹ passages to be played in concert? In Mottl's recording of *O sink hernieder*, we find that he deals with this feature in a differentiated way. At the beginning of the duet, he inserts every note of both singers in the piano part, even strictly observing the original octave position. But after the first few pages of score, he decides to omit the vocal line here and there in favour of an orchestral solo. This is remarkable for two reasons:

1. It is possible to play all the lines, as the piano reduction by Robert Kleinmichel of 1894 demonstrates.[25]
2. Unlike in the *Liebestod*, the vocal lines in the duet are more independent from the orchestra. This means that Mottl favours the orchestral parts, finding it permissible to neglect the vocal line. This happens several times during the piece, even at the culminating point.

We can compare this recording with a Hupfeld Animatic roll by Julius Prüwer (1884–1943), a student of Hans Richter and Moriz Rosenthal. The Prüwer version shows rather the same tendency. However in some passages he plays more notes from the vocal lines, though it seems possible that they were inserted in the postproduction phase. This means that both Mottl and Prüwer considered some vocal phrases as an ›accompaniment‹ to the orchestral score.

This in turn allows us to venture an educated guess about the musical consequences. It is unlikely that the orchestra would be prominent in such places, and there is enough evidence that Wagner wanted to hear his singers clearly. But it is possible that singers should from time to time be aware that they are not singing the *Hauptstimme* (the principal voice) but a *Nebenstimme* (a subsidiary voice) and that the *espressivo* part is in the orchestra. Maybe this might be a moment to favour the declamation over matters of vocal volume.

Results

This essay is an initial approach towards a ›historical interpretation practice‹ of Wagner's music. I choose this term carefully, knowing that it is unusual in English, but I would like to differentiate between Wagnerian performance practice and research about the historical ›interpretation‹ of his music. Both are fact-based, empirical fields of research, but whereas the former tends to deal with organological aspects and playing techniques, the latter is involved in forming the musical language itself. The ›historical sound‹ is not our prime concern here. At first glance this distinction might seem to be artificial, though it does seem pertinent in light of our studies, given that orga-

25 See: Robert Kleinmichel: *Tristan und Isolde. Piano solo*, Leipzig: Breitkopf & Härtel 1882, pp. 167–169.

nological and practical research about Wagner's music seems far more advanced than any quest for a firm basis for making musical decisions.

The Wagner piano rolls offer us an opportunity to observe such decision-making processes in musicians close to Wagner and his circle. Our analysis of these rolls does not produce any cast-iron laws for authentic Wagner performance, but I would go as far as to formulate certain propositions to consider when performing *Tristan*:

In the interpretation of Wagner's music, according to the performers of 1907, extreme rubati play a crucial role. It is not uncommon to double or halve the initial tempo. There is an area of ambiguity between rubato and a change of metre and rhythm up to the point where a passage can be heard as both a ritardando and an accelerando at the same time. Another expressive device is the way in which the melodic design, tempo and dynamics are associated or disassociated with each other.

The use of rubato to emphasise motives, phrases and segments helps to communicate the structure of Wagner's music. These rubato forms can be modified according how the harmonic tension increases or decreases.

Sequences have to be varied consistently, but not schematically. The beginning and end of sequential passages offer particular opportunities for integrating or separating such passages from their environment.

It is not desirable to achieve exact vertical coordination at every moment. Instead, non-simultaneous playing can be used to react to polyphonic structures, harmonic surprises or emotional requirements.

A crescendo before the culminating point can be accompanied by a ritardando. This seems typical for Mottl's interpretation, and can probably be considered as a Bayreuth tradition.

Singers are not bound to consider their line as the most expressive musical element all the time. The fact that they sing a *Nebenstimme* from time to time could give them the freedom to enrich their expressive possibilities through their declamation, rather than worrying about the acoustic balance.

There would seem to be more ›recitative‹-like passages than the score itself suggests; at the beginning of *Tristan*, for example, not counting every quaver strictly seems permissible.