

## Roger Norrington's Stupid Mahler Ninth

There will surely be enthusiasts for abominable performances such as this one, because novelty for its own sake always has its attractions. The problem, though, is that gratuitous quirks imposed on any piece of music may sound intriguing once, but a compact disc is (virtually) forever. The second time they sound predictable, the third boring, and the fourth time infuriating—assuming the listener gets that far at all. Norrington's Mahler, as with so much else from his baton, is so deficient in basic musicality, and so lacking in ideas beyond mere effrontery, that it's hard to imagine anyone taking it seriously. But they did in Stuttgart evidently, not that this means anything, and I propose to do so as well, if only to explore just how ridiculous Norrington's pretensions really are.

That Norrington has no business conducting Mahler can be seen most readily in considering the issue for which his interpretations have become notorious: their lack of string vibrato. This recording of Mahler's Ninth Symphony is openly modeled on Bruno Walter's 1938 live Vienna Philharmonic performance, a version that Norrington would say similarly avoids vibrato. Indeed, in an article published in the *Boston Globe* on January 12, 2007, Norrington states categorically that vibrato "didn't come into the Vienna Philharmonic until 1940." How it got there in the intervening two years he does not deign to tell us. I suspect it has something to do with the orchestra's Jews being replaced by heavily vibrating *Goyim* after the *Anschluss*. So blame Hitler.

Of course Norrington's quixotic view of history is nonsense, like most everything he has ever said on this particular subject. Previously, it was impossible to make a direct comparison between versions because Norrington's recording was not available. Now it is, and I invite anyone to contrast Walter's Vienna Mahler Ninth to this one. Start with the beginning of the finale, and if you don't immediately hear the difference between the healthy Viennese string tone and the desiccated timbre Norrington demands, then you'd better have your hearing checked. Even the violin solos in 1938, presumably played by Mahler's brother-in-law Arnold Rosé (who was described as "old fashioned" in his discerning use of vibrato) reveal its natural and unstinting presence. Norrington's concertmaster sounds stiff in comparison.

If you don't trust the input of your own ears, then you might want to sample some of the unequivocal and basically incontrovertible anecdotal evidence of those who actually played under Mahler, or heard the Vienna Philharmonic between the dawn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century and 1938. I cite some of it in the second part of my series of essays on the use of vibrato in orchestral music, "Historical Recordings, Shabby Scholarship," and also in my previous reviews of Norrington's Mahler symphonies. For the purposes of this article, there is an additional authority worth mentioning who offers particularly interesting insights that are precisely on point.

In the British musicological journal *Music and Letters*, Volume XII, No. 1 (1931), a certain Henry Welsh published a fascinating article entitled "Orchestral Reform," in

which he attempts to account for the inferiority of native orchestras as compared to their foreign counterparts in order to suggest ways to solve the problem. Welsh chooses as his points of reference three ensembles in particular which had recently toured the United Kingdom: the New York Philharmonic, the Berlin Philharmonic, and the Vienna Philharmonic. Welsh writes:

“After having heard many different orchestras in this country as well as abroad, and notwithstanding the recent success of the New York Philharmonic (which, I believe, was due more to the glamour attached to the genial Toscanini than to the actual playing of the orchestra) [don’t forget, Welsh is British], I have come to the conclusion that the Vienna Philharmonic is far and away the best in the world, and it is for this reason that I propose to take it as my model.”

Welsh then proceeds to discuss the sterling qualities of the orchestra section by section. Regarding the strings, he writes:

“Everyone who took the trouble to summarize the press criticisms of the two concerts given by the Viennese players under the direction of Dr. Wilhelm Furtwängler, must have been struck by their unanimity concerning the strings. One and all agreed that this section was perfect in the fullest sense of the word. This is not to be wondered at since the strings are, for obvious reasons, the most immediately apparent part of an orchestra. I would just like to remind my readers of the unanimity of their bowing, the precision of their attack, and also, how well the first and second violins were balanced. Many of us did not fail to notice their particularly rich and luscious tone, far sweeter than in the Berlin strings. It has something of a Latin quality in it, which may be accounted for by the fact that the Austrians lie nearer to Italy than the Germans.”

Although he gives few specifics in his article, the concerts to which Welsh refers occurred on the 27<sup>th</sup> and 29<sup>th</sup> of April, 1930. The first included Mozart’s Serenade No. 13, Schubert’s “Unfinished” Symphony, Smetana’s “The Moldau,” R. Strauss’ “Don Juan,” and J. Strauss, Jr.’s “The Blue Danube” Waltz. The second program featured Bruckner’s Symphony No. 4, Schubert’s “Rosamunde” interlude and ballet music, Strauss’ “Till Eulenspiegel,” and Wagner’s “Meistersinger” Prelude. Welsh does not mention string vibrato at all at this point, although that “Latin quality” may well be code, as we will see below. Rather, Welsh spends a lot of time thrillingly discussing the technique of bowing employed by the double basses. Then, however, he comes to the woodwinds, and offers this remarkable statement:

“To begin with, our method of blowing the woodwinds is unsatisfactory. We have adopted the French and Italian system, viz., with a vibrato [There. I told you. It was code.]. It is extremely difficult properly to control the reed when playing with even the slightest of vibratos. It is this circumstance that impairs the purity of tone and intonation in the higher registers. The vibrato of which I speak is, I believe, an absurd endeavour (perhaps unconsciously) on the part of the performer to imitate the vibrato of the string players, and of the human voice. In the case of the former

the vibrato of the left hand is nowadays regarded as a fundamental necessity, and is used at all times, except on open strings. If you were to 'slow motion' a good vibrato, it would appear to you as a series of oscillations on both sides of the true tone. (The true tone would alternately be raised and lowered in pitch by just a few vibrations.) In the case of a singer, however, you can often save yourself the trouble and expense of 'slow motioning' their voices. (See the brief, but nevertheless excellent, article on 'Vibrato' in 'Grove'.)

But as for the woodwinds, I fail to see any aesthetical or technical reason why they should trespass on the noble and intimate qualities which belong so inseparably and essentially to the strings. A plea that vibrato-playing enhances the quality of tone cannot therefore be upheld. Wind instruments should be played with a tone that is as steady as a rock and as pure as crystal. Played in this manner, they assume a character that is at once impressive, expressive, and convincing. That, briefly, is why vibrato-playing is not tolerated in Vienna. Also, it is with these and other ideals in mind that the Vienna Academy of Music has established what may well be called the finest woodwind school in the world. Those of my readers who can recall the performance of 'Till Eulenspiegel' will remember the remarkable and beautiful playing of the woodwinds; particularly of the clarinets."

There you have it. An impartial observer with absolutely no axe to grind in the modern vibrato debate describes unequivocally not only the approach to vibrato characteristic of the Viennese players, but also all orchestral string sections more generally during this period. It is an "inseparable and essential" aspect, in his view, of their "noble and intimate qualities." Welsh's observations can be corroborated in many ways. For example, concerning Toscanini *The Penguin Music Magazine* noted in 1948 that "One of the secrets of Toscanini is that he insists on pianissimos always being 'warm'--that is, played with vibrato." Mengelberg's Concertgebouw Orchestra strings also can be seen using vibrato liberally in a splendidly clear and vivid 1931 film of the "Adagietto" of Bizet's *L'Arlésienne* Suite No. 1.

The use of a continuous *but highly variable* vibrato timbre in orchestral string sections explains much that might otherwise appear confusing in the scores themselves. Vibrato, like dynamics, occurs over a wide range, from the completely inaudible (as an actual pitch oscillation), to a distinct wavering in tone. In order for this last quality to be perceptible at all to the listener, it must be exaggerated strongly and unanimously, and it is this effect that composers often have in mind when they either use the actual word "vibrato" in their scores, or call for heightened expression in any number of ways. However, one of the best pieces of evidence for the expectation that a natural level of vibrato should be present most of the time, particularly in melodic passages, is the fact that composers sometimes specify "no expression," "no vibrato," or (especially in earlier periods) "semplice."

This practice dates back at least to the mid 18<sup>th</sup> century, if not before, and an extremely telling example occurs in Mahler's Ninth Symphony. Listeners already familiar with the score will have noticed those icy calm, "ohne Ausdruck" ("without

feeling”) episodes in the finale, a contrast that basically goes for nothing in Norrington’s performance because the string section plays “without feeling” almost the entire time. This opposition of timbres occurs not just between major sections, but within them, and represents an important tool by which Mahler and other composers balance simultaneous melodic lines:

Here, in this passage from the finale, the horn plays the principal melody forte and “strongly prominent.” The first violins have a quiet countermelody emphasized by being played “molto espressivo,” that is, with a strong vibrato that gives it presence without compromising the soft dynamic. The violas double the first violins, pianissimo and “without feeling,” with no vibrato or accentuation of any kind. Meanwhile, and most intriguingly, the second violins double the horn, not “without feeling,” but simply “not espressivo.” In other words they play with normal timbre, employing a level of vibrato that does not draw attention to itself. So do the cellos and basses, which need not be marked specifically because they do not have a principal melodic voice in the texture.

Without an intelligent and sympathetic application of vibrato, passages such as this fall flat, as in Norrington’s performance. But his avoidance of vibrato has other consequences as well. One is his tendency to rush in slow music, because the dry and leathery timbres he prefers would be even more intolerable if sustained at the tempos Mahler’s finale, much of the first movement, and the central interlude in the Rondo: Burleske ideally require. Norrington’s avoidance of vibrato goes hand in hand with a near total lack of true legato, as a result of which the first movement’s opening theme breaks up into a series of disconnected fragments. It’s very interesting to compare this to Walter in 1938--almost as quick, in places quicker still--but never sounding as rushed because the Vienna strings create a genuine, singing line. Vibrato helps to sustain the sound and join the phrases together.

This Mahler Ninth also features Norrington’s typically squashed dynamic range and

poor ensemble balances. The brass and woodwinds, for example, especially in the middle movements, routinely drown out the strings. At the climax of the finale, trumpets and trombones blast away at their parts with hair-raising vulgarity, then leave the poor violins hanging in a pathetic parody of Mahler's obvious intentions. The very opening of the symphony asks for a clear differentiation between pianissimo (cellos and fourth horn), forte (harp and second horn), and piano (second violins, with the tune). Here you'd be hard pressed to note any particular variance from a general mezzo-piano/mezzo-forte. The codas of both outer movements have never been played so insensitively.

Norrington's take on the middle movements suffers from further defects. In quick music, vibrato isn't so much an issue. Either it can't be used because there isn't time, or it won't be audible as a timbral enhancement even when it is present to some degree. In the second movement, Norrington's rapid speed downplays the first dance's rustic clumsiness and blurs the tempo contrast with the ensuing waltz, which fails to accelerate (as it should) when it recurs. The Rondo:Burleske also begins very quickly, but the orchestra's inability to characterize and accentuate its lines at the designated tempo turns the movement into a mindlessly mechanical exercise, an effortful slog that becomes truly desperate in the reprise. At the end, the ensemble starts to fray, and Norrington's absurd decision to have his percussionist attempt (with utter futility) to play the sharply rhythmic final page on suspended cymbal blots out much of what articulation remains.

Curiously, although Norrington has no qualms about ignoring anything that Mahler wants at any given time, he tends to be generous with string portamento. This, combined with the lack of vibrato, generates the kind of allure we might find in a particularly wizened senior citizen dressed up like a teenage hooker. It's grotesque in all of the wrong ways, and kind of sad at the same time. At 72 minutes, this is also the quickest Mahler Ninth available aside from Walter's. From a purely note-accurate point of view, it is better played. Walter's performance, aside from its unseemly haste, is a technical disaster, a fact that he himself recognized and regretted when he wrote at the time of his stereo remake:

"My last European performance of Mahler's Ninth took place shortly before Hitler marched into Vienna. A gramophone recording was made during the actual concert and sent to me in Holland, where I was lucky enough to be engaged during that catastrophic period. But I was so concerned at that time about [my daughter] Lotte that I couldn't devote the necessary attention to the test pressing, with the result that it turned out to be deeply unsatisfactory. This unfortunate affair, which has always weighted heavily upon me, I can now offset with a total success."

In the event, Walter's remake wasn't exactly a "total success" either, and it's a pity he didn't say "shortly before Hitler marched into Vienna with his accursed vibrato." However, it was substantially finer than his 1938 performance, which still has admirers among fans of historical recordings for whom matters such as accuracy, clarity, decent sonics, and the performer's own feelings about his work scarcely

matter. Nevertheless, one thing Walter's first recording displays which Norrington's does not is a genuine feeling--not so much for Mahler's style--but for the way Western music over the past three centuries is supposed to be played. That Norrington has a career at a major orchestra, highly paid and supported by state subsidy, and documented by a reputable record label, is too depressing a commentary on our musical culture to warrant further comment. Looking on the bright side, Norrington's tenure is just about over, and the very talented Stéphane Denève will be taking up the baton in Stuttgart shortly.

So let us forget about this stupid Mahler Ninth, and consider instead some of the more interesting implications of Welsh's article. In particular, I would like to explore what his observation concerning continuous vibrato says about score notation. Welsh's selection of the Vienna Philharmonic under Furtwängler as his paradigm is fortuitous, because like Mahler, Walter, Klemperer, and others, Furtwängler was also a composer. However, unlike Mahler his compositions straddle what Norrington as well as some theoretically serious musical scholars view as the "great vibrato divide," that is, the Second World War. And unlike Walter and Klemperer, Furtwängler's works have been published recently in clean modern editions, by the Berlin firm of Ries & Erler.

In 1908, Furtwängler composed a symphonic movement that he later reworked as the opening of his First Symphony. It begins with a huge exordium in largo tempo, and already in bar five we find "vibrato" marked in the first and second violins. The reason, as you can plainly see in the extract below from the Ries & Erler score, is not because they weren't using an expressive timbre already—not at this tempo, and at this volume. Rather, in the fifth bar the violins yield the melody to the violas and cellos (and horns, not shown), and instead sustain a syncopated rhythm in tandem with the woodwinds. Furtwängler wishes them to emphasize and sustain this rhythm with particular force without covering the theme in the lower voices. Extra vibrato helps to accomplish this goal.

The image shows a page of a musical score for the first movement of Mahler's First Symphony, specifically the opening section. The score is arranged in five staves: Violin I (1. VI), Violin II (2. VI), Viola (Vla), Cello (Vc), and Double Bass (Kb). The key signature is one sharp (F#) and the time signature is common time (C). The tempo is marked 'Breit'. The score includes various performance markings: 'vibrato' is written above the first and second violin staves; 'ff' (fortissimo) is marked in the violin and viola parts; 'f' (forte) is marked in the cello and double bass parts; 'p' (piano) and 'pp' (pianissimo) are marked in the double bass part; 'div.' (divisi) is marked in the viola and double bass parts; and 'espress.' (espressivo) is marked in the double bass part. The score is attributed to W. Furtwängler, Symphonie - Erster Satz (1908).

One of the practical conventions that we often find in Romantic and 20<sup>th</sup> century scores is this: If the part is melodic or otherwise “moving,” the composer will often write “dolce,” “espressivo,” or one of their equivalents because these directions ask the performer not just to make timbral adjustments, but also suggest particular ways of handling phrasing, rhythm, and dynamics. On the other hand, if the composer is thinking *primarily* of timbre, or if the line consists of sustained notes in a subsidiary part, he may well ask specifically for vibrato. This does not mean “use it where there was none previously,” but rather, “exaggerate it to the point of audibility beyond the ordinary context suggested by the particular passage.”

This is exactly what we find in the extract below from the coda of the first movement of Mahler’s Ninth (critical edition). The cellos enter, pianissimo, at the same time that the solo violin finishes on a low G. This is an open string, and so it has no vibrato (but it does have a great deal of vibrato-like natural resonance). This being the case, Mahler only asks that the cellos “turn up” their own vibrato in the next bar, providing a warm cushion of tone for the very different sounds of the harp and horns. It’s a subtle touch, really not consciously noticeable in performance at all, but a useful indicator of the fact that composers often will take great care to ensure continuity of expressive timbre.

The image shows a page of a musical score for Mahler's Ninth Symphony, measures 434-435. The tempo is marked 'Wieder a tempo (aber viel langsamer als zu Anfang)'. The score includes parts for 1. Fl., 1. Ob., 1.2. Klar. in A, 1.2. Fag., 2.4. Hr. in F, Harfe, Solo-Vl., Vla., Vic., and Kb. The Solo-Vl. part has markings 'schmeichelnd' and 'espr.'. The Kb. part has markings 'pp' and 'vibrando'. The Harfe part has a 'pp' marking. The 1.2. Fag. part has markings 'pp', 'pp', 'pp', 'pp', and 'dolcissimo'. The 2.4. Hr. in F part has a 'pp' marking.

This is all well and good, the vibrato naysayers might suggest, but we have no real evidence based on this discussion so far that a continuous vibrato timbre existed before 1931. In fact, common sense suggests that we do. In the first place, Welsh does not claim that continuous vibrato is a recent innovation, nor does he suggest that prior to his date of writing vibrato was unknown. “Less,” after all, does not mean “virtually none,” at least not to the extent that the Norringtons of the world

insist. What they are saying is that vibrato was a “yes or no,” “on or off” proposition, in fact mostly “no,” and that is how they are playing the music. There is absolutely no support for this approach in any historical sources.

Indeed, the very idea would require proving that players all over the world woke up one day and decided that vibrato, previously anathema, was suddenly a necessity, or that whole populations of vibratoless orchestral personnel were suddenly replaced. It makes no sense. No one has described convincingly the process by which the “continuous vibrato revolution” actually occurred. Vibrato has always been with us, and if the question then becomes “How much?” it falls to the proponents of earlier performance practices to prove that their choice of absolute quantity is historically correct, never mind artistically satisfying. This they cannot do.

For example, Norrington’s glib reply in that previously-cited *Boston Globe* article to the question of why Mahler conductors who worked in the pre-vibrato days raised not a single objection to the new, post-War vibrato style is, “They had to get used to it.” In other words, the likes of Walter, Klemperer, Furtwängler, Talich, Toscanini, Monteux, Szell, Reiner, Boult, Kleiber, Ormandy, Scherchen, and Stokowski had no say in the matter, but Roger Norrington, uniquely, does. This ridiculous answer more than anything else reveals the low level at which much of today’s “historically informed” scholarship operates.

Henry Welsh in fact offers the most logical explanation by far: there was nothing to get used to. Vibrato most likely was there all along, and had been for quite some time. Another way we can judge this is by looking at Furtwängler’s post-War works. His Second Symphony, for example, was composed in the late 1940s, during a period of enforced inactivity as he awaited clearance to return to (presumably) vibrato-and-Nazi-free conducting. At the beginning of the finale, after the brass announce the main theme, we find the following in the strings (Ries & Erler edition):

The image shows a page of a musical score for the strings of Mahler's Second Symphony. The score is arranged in five staves: 1. VI (Violin I), 2. VI (Violin II), Vla (Viola), Vc (Cello), and Kb (Double Bass). A box with the number '1' is placed above the first measure of the Violin I staff. The music is in 4/4 time and features a main theme. Performance markings include 'vibrato' above the notes in the Violin I, II, and Viola parts, and 'ppp' (pianissimo) below the notes in the Violin I, II, and Viola parts. The Cello and Double Bass parts have markings for 'dimin.' (diminuendo), 'ppp', 'div.' (divisi), and 'unis.' (unison). The score is set in a key signature of one sharp (F#) and a common time signature (C).



As you can see, Furtwängler's practice here is exactly the same as was his and Mahler's in 1908. Similar habits, especially in these fanatically detailed and precisely marked scores, suggest continuity over time. If vibrato truly were uniformly "on" by the late 1940s, not just according to Welsh but even to the Norringtonians, then to ask for more would be meaningless given their "on/off" theory. If, on the other hand, vibrato belongs to an expressive continuum whose intensity varies according to emotional context, dynamics, and other specific factors unique to each work, then composers would be acting reasonably in asking either for more or less than usual at any given time. This corresponds to what the scores actually say. We can also confirm with reasonable certainty that continuous vibrato was not a Nazi plot.

Incidentally, you can actually hear the timbral differentiation in the above example if you listen to either of Furtwängler's own recordings of his Second Symphony. After the vibrato phrase in the violins and violas the woodwinds comment briefly, and then the strings reenter, now marked "dolce." In his live performance with the Vienna Philharmonic (on Orfeo), the disparity in sonority is plainly audible, more so than in the Berlin studio recording for DG, but at no point do we hear that ugly, vibratoless sound whose awfulness, thanks to Norrington, we can now recognize as wholly modern, unmusical, and without historical foundation. It is foolish to suggest that Furtwängler in the 1920s would have stood for it, whether in his own music or anyone else's, any more than he does in the post-War period. He and his colleagues clearly *cared* about vibrato, viewed it in a positive light, and used it with gusto.

The fact that a few contemporary artists dislike vibrato, whether through genuine artistic conviction or opportunism, does not give them license to rewrite musical history to validate their particular prejudice. For hundreds of years composers have prescribed precise degrees of expressive intensity through musical notation, and they have assumed that well-trained players would bring every tool of their art to bear in performance. There is absolutely no justification for excluding the frequent use of vibrato from the orchestral string player's repertoire when called for, and no evidence that this ever happened in the real world. The most credible sources all point to continuity of performance practice over time. Anything else is rank speculation fortified by third-rate scholarship and the artist's need to stand out from the crowd. It's that simple.

David Hurwitz

***Mahler: Symphony No. 9. Stuttgart Radio Symphony Orchestra. Roger Norrington, cond. Hänssler Classic CD 93.244.***