WHAT IF? . . .

Gospel or blueprint? *Anton Kuerti* sees more in the score than meets the eye

When Beethoven first imagined the playful but heartfelt sweetness at the opening of his Sonata Op 109, what if his inner ear – the only one he had at the time – did not hear exact semiquavers, but rather two quintuplets?

Ex 1
Vivace, ma non troppo *Sempre legato*

Or even something between semiquavers and quintuplets? He could not – and would not – have tried to specify that on paper.

Or in the opening of the 'Archduke' Trio, what if he wanted perhaps one half or one third of a dot on the first chord?

Ex 2
Allegro moderato

What if Mozart, in his String Quartet in E♭ major K428, imagined the third note a trifle longer than the dotted minim he wrote, to emphasise the expressive pain of the unexpected note?

Ex 3
Allegro, ma non troppo

Or perhaps Schubert, in his Piano Sonata in G major D894, might have wanted the short chords to be halfway between a quaver and a semiquaver, so as to keep them from becoming too agitated?

Ex 4
Molto moderato e cantabile

Just as every plausible dynamic nuance is permitted, every imaginable rhythmic pattern should be possible, even if it does not fit precisely into our standard musical orthography. Why, indeed, should there be no intermediate possibilities between a single dot and a double dot? Just because it is difficult or impossible to notate, does that mean it must be forever excluded from our rhythmic vocabulary? In mathematics, it is proven that there is an infinite number of possible increments between any two numbers. Why should music restrict itself to just the simplest ratios. 1:4. 1:8 etc.?

An interesting case is the second movement of Beethoven's Piano Sonata in G major Op 49 no 2. Its very naïve little tune sports a dotted rhythm featuring a single dot.

Ex 5
Tempo di Menuetto

When Beethoven used the same theme later in his splendid Septet Op 20, it had sprouted a second dot.

Ex 6

And indeed, that piano sonata would sound very dreary if the single dot were executed with pedantic precision.

All of us instinctively over-dot many rhythms, for example the funeral marches of both Chopin and Beethoven. Let us remind ourselves that the double dot did not exist in early baroque music, the dot simply meant to extend the note, not exactly by 50 per cent, but to whatever extent felt right to the performer. The first instance of a double dot was introduced by C P E Bach in 1753 as a 'new notation'.

To de-sterilise the sanctity of absolute rhythmic conformity dictated by the limited variability of our notation system, Max Reger, in his Trio Op 2 for violin, viola and piano, introduced a new symbol, to indicate that a note's length should be slightly extended. Not quite a fermata, which could disturb the pulse, but a hint to linger marginally, giving that note a more penetrating expression. It is written as a wide, upside down V. I have only seen it in one other Reger work, the *Lose Blätter* Op 13, though I have not made an exhaustive search. Unfortunately it didn't catch on, but I for one wish it had. In working with students, I now often put in a fermata in parentheses, to encourage the slight extension of a note, so often desirable for its ideal characterisation and to prevent repetitive, mechanical squareness. I call this a 'virtual fermata'. It should not mutilate the rhythm, nor be obvious to the listener, whose reaction should not be 'Oh, that note was extra long', but rather 'How wondrously that phrase was shaped'.

While of course there are any number of passages where absolute regularity is imperative, like the opening of Beethoven's 'Waldstein' Sonata, more often the imaginative performer will allow each note

to find its most exquisite personal length, without going so far as to impose a pre-calculated distortion on the composition. As in every detail of interpretation, the line dividing great artistry from mannered exhibitionism is elusive, hard to find, and easy to violate; while a timid approach to these matters may facilitate a decent performance, it will never result in a towering one. Better to risk offending the listener than to take refuge in unassailable competence.

Returning to the first example above, the Op 109 sonata, I find the cautious approach (in which every semiquaver remains an exact semiquaver, creating an unyielding matrix of identically spaced notes) to be as devoid of character as an idling motor car. It needs a little twinkle, an elegant quiver, emphasising the start/stop nature of the short note followed by the long note – thus my wish for (approximate) quintuplets.

In contemplating the authenticity of this approach, one must remember that, even if I should be right in guessing what Beethoven may have wanted, he would never have written quintuplets. It would be unsightly, laborious to notate, a nuisance to the engraver, and would ruin the simplicity of the score's visual aesthetic. And it would imply a lack of confidence in the performer's instincts to give a splendid, convincing character to the music. Furthermore, while quintuplets might in principle be notatable, a more complex rhythm, say 4.6-lets, would not be. My mantra here is that we are on safe ground if we can claim that the composer's notation is the closest convenient way of writing down what we are doing. So if the first semiquaver should ever become closer to a demisemiquaver than to a semiquaver, we would have severely betrayed the score.

This theme also cries for a clear demarcation of its telescoping phrase lengths, a four-bar phrase followed by a two-bar phrase, two one-bar phrases and a half-bar phrase; let each one breathe before plunging on to the next, but without allowing any obvious deviation from the pulse. Remarkably, after just eight-and-a-half bars, this short subject leads directly into the second theme, which is obviously a written-out improvisation, in which almost every note must indeed find its ideal length. To try to describe the desired liberties in this section would take quite a long article, and would completely defeat its own purpose, for it requires a deeply felt personal spontaneity, not a manufactured or imported one. To create living, aromatic and inspired performances, we must relive the music each time and dare to step into the composer's shoes, rather than just slavishly follow his written indications, which can only convey an approximate shadow of his genius.