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Commonality and Diversity in Recordings of Beethoven's Middle-Period String Quartets

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Studies of recording history have taken a healthy self-critical turn of late, especially in the realm of music for stringed instruments. Focusing on solo violin literature, Dorottya Fabian and Eitan Ornoy have critically probed the established notion that there is a wealth of diversity in early recordings of musical works, which gives way as the twentieth century progresses to a more homogeneous approach to performance.¹ David Milsom has pointed out flaws in the concept of “schools” of violin playing, and Richard Turner has shown that the international pedagogical connections between string quartets and individual players create a highly complex genealogy, which gives the lie to the very idea of coherent national styles or schools.² The more “monolithic” or “grand narrative” understanding of recording history, these scholars have found, can be tempered—rendered more nuanced and reflective of discontinuities as well as continuities—by considering the individual styles of particular performers on a detailed, case-by-case basis. This closer understanding of individual approaches can then be set within a broader understanding of the general performance style for a given genre and a certain generation.

1. Dorottya Fabian, “Is Diversity in Musical Performance Truly in Decline? The Evidence of Sound Recordings,” *Context* 31 (2006), 165–207; Fabian, “Diversity and Homogeneity in Contemporary Recordings of Solo Bach,” *Proceedings of the International Symposium on Performance Science 2009*, ed. Aaron Williamson, Sharman Pretty, and Ralph Buck (Utrecht: European Association of Conservatoires, 2009), 147–152; and Fabian and Eitan Ornoy, “Identity in violin playing on records: Interpretation Profiles in Recordings of Solo Bach by Early Twentieth-Century Violinists,” *Performance Practice Review* 14, no. 1 (2009). For received views on increasing homogeneity in performance in the recording era, see the works cited by these authors, and, for example, Michael Chanan, *Repeated Takes: A Short History of Recording and its Effects on Music* (London: Verso, 1996), 11; José Antonio Bowen, “Tempo, Duration and Flexibility: Techniques in the Analysis of Performance,” *Journal of Musicological Research* 16, no. 2 (1996), 148; and Robert Philip, *Performing Music in the Age of Recording* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2004), 252.

2. David Milsom, *Theory and Practice in Late Nineteenth-Century Violin Performance: An Examination of Style in Performance 1850–1900* (Hampshire, U.K.: Ashgate, 2003), 17–18; Richard Turner, “Style and Tradition in String Quartet Performance: A Study of 32 Recordings of Beethoven’s Op. 131 Quartet” (PhD diss., University of Sheffield, 2004), 38.

This essay moves further with a critique of the “grand narrative” understanding of performance history in the recording age, with a case study of recordings of Beethoven’s middle-period string quartets. This repertoire makes an ideal focal point since the Beethoven quartets are arguably the musical works that are most closely linked to ideals of *Werketreue*, or textual fidelity; correspondingly, they are thought to have attracted particularly strong performance traditions.³ The middle-period string quartets are representative. They have occupied a central place within the performance canon of chamber music in the recording age and have thus been recorded and re-recorded by most professional string quartets, so that there is a rich eighty-five-year recording history available for exploration. Qualitative studies of recordings of these works reveal trends and commonalities within the supposedly more diverse early recordings. Quantitative data from recordings, on the other hand, reveal persistent and even increasing diversity, and significant exceptions.

The more probing studies of recordings can tell us about views and practices from any given era that are specific to Beethoven performance, and performance practices that are associated with the string quartet in particular. However, it proves problematic to claim, as some scholars of recording history and some recording artists have done, that these views and practices coincide with those of early nineteenth-century performers in general, or indeed with those of Beethoven and his circle of quartet performers in particular.⁴ The idea of persistent or unbroken performance traditions from the nineteenth into the early twentieth century and beyond needs to be carefully scrutinized, as do concepts of “historically informed” Beethoven string quartet performance. Performance traditions prove to be complex and non-linear, breaking in some areas, continuing and circulating in others.

Commonalities in Early Recordings

New trends in early twentieth-century stringed instrument performance practice were very likely largely driven by the exigencies of phonographic recording. As Mark Katz has observed, after around 1920 a new approach to vibrato is observable in many violinists’ performances: vibrato became a basic element of tone production rather than an ornament.⁵ The use of continuous vibrato had technical and aesthetic grounds, and was

3. See especially Robert Martin, “The Quartets in Performance: A Player’s Perspective,” in *The Beethoven Quartet Companion*, ed. Robert Winter and Robert Martin (Berkeley and London: University of California Press, 1994), 115.

4. See especially Robert Philip, “Traditional Habits of Performance in Early Recordings of Beethoven,” in *Performing Beethoven*, ed. Robin Stowell (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 195–204.

5. Mark Katz, *Capturing Sound: How Technology Has Changed Music* (London and Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004), 86.

also a product of the influential playing of significant musical personalities, especially Fritz Kreisler. So too, the varied application of vibrato, together with the use of prominent *portamenti* and *tempo rubato* passages have been understood as attempts to communicate as clearly as possible given the limited and often poorly receptive early recording equipment.⁶ These expressive devices might well have been deployed with a view to enhancing the sense of embodied, individualized presence in early recordings; this would have been more difficult to achieve in ensemble playing than in solo playing, especially in a relatively homogenous ensemble like the string quartet. In that context individual lines need to be clearly projected from within complex textures, especially in works like Beethoven's middle and late quartets.

The Capet Quartet recordings from the early twentieth century provide exemplary cases in which the performers successfully achieved a sense of embodied presence in their renditions of Beethoven's quartets. The vibrato of this ensemble is characteristically slow, continuous, and wide, much more a throbbing or trembling of the tone than one finds in modern recordings; this gives richness and poignancy to the slower sections and movements. It is used to particularly varied and beautiful expressive ends in the Capet Quartet's 1927 recording of the Adagio ma non troppo from op. 74. The performers' approach to vibrato is flexible, as is typical for the time; they tend to speed up the vibrato in movements or sections in faster tempi and in passages of fast harmonic rhythm. Thus their use of vibrato also contributes to a sense of urgency, destabilisation, and onward drive.

The same movement provides good examples of the leader's prominent use of portamenti.⁷ These are used to particularly poignant expressive ends in mm. 24–26. At the move to the tonic minor for the second theme, Lucien Capet reinforces the sense of sorrowful sliding into troubled (tonal) regions by increasing the "portamento rhythm": there are clearly audible portamenti between each of the first two eighth-note beats in each of these measures (see fig. 1, which shows an excerpt from a spectrogram for this phrase). In these downward slides, Capet appears to use what Flesch describes as a B-type portamento, in which the player slides with the finger that plays the first of a pair of notes, landing on the finger that plays the second note.⁸ To the modern ear these slides might seem vastly overdone, but Flesch, like Capet, understood the importance of

6. Katz, *Capturing Sound*, 93.

7. The flexible use of portamenti is one aspect of style that connects early twentieth-century stringed instrument performance practices with those of the nineteenth. See Clive Brown, "Bowing Styles, Vibrato and Portamento in Nineteenth-Century Violin Playing," *Journal of the Royal Musical Association* 113, no. 1 (1988), 119.

8. Carl Flesch, *The Art of Violin Playing*, vol. 1, trans. Frederick H. Martens (Boston: Carl Fischer, 1924), 16.

portamenti in providing an engaging sense of embodied presence: Flesch drew attention to the “pleasing and sensuous appealing qualities” of this technique.⁹

A new approach to performance was emerging in the era of the gramophone, which took effect particularly clearly in the realm of Beethoven quartet performance. The approach can be understood as a consciously heightened persuasive and “explanatory”

Figure 1. Beethoven, String Quartet op. 74, movement 2, mm. 24–27.



9. Flesch, *The Art of Violin Playing*, 17.

stance on the part of the performers, predicated on the need for good communication in an era of new communication challenges and new media. To be sure, this approach built on expressive trends in late nineteenth-century performance, perhaps most especially the use of tempo rubato in the hands of such influential interpreters as Richard Wagner.¹⁰ In the realm of Beethoven string quartet performance there was the additional motivation to attract a broader audience for the middle and late quartets at a time when these works were still perceived as difficult and their canonic status seemed at risk. In his 1927 article on Beethoven's quartets and "the music of friends" for *The Musical Times*, Thomas Dunhill observed an urgent need to "win friends" for the Beethoven quartets, given the critical climate of an age "which too often imagines that it is the correct thing to stifle emotion, eliminate climax, and render art as level and impersonal as possible."¹¹

An outwardly reaching, explanatory approach to the Beethoven quartets was taken by writers on these works of the early twentieth century. These writers include, for example, the authors of the Oxford pocket "Musical Pilgrim" guides to Beethoven's string quartets and journalists like Cyril M. Crabtree, who provided readers of *The Gramophone* with a detailed reading of Beethoven's op. 59, no. 1 with careful reference (including track timings) to the Budapest Quartet's 1927 recording; the article was to be read as one listened to this recording.¹² Ensembles like the Rosé, Capet, Budapest, and Léner quartets took a similar narrative approach: they attempted to "tell the story" of these works to their new audiences, and to render them as expressive and personal as possible, with the help of varied vibrato, portamento, and tempo rubato.

Two early recordings of op. 74 by the Léner Quartet, from 1925 and 1932 respectively, help us to hear how such early recording artists used tempo rubato, in particular, to communicate with the new audience of gramophone listeners. In both recordings the Léner Quartet use rubato to articulate large-scale structure. There is, for example, an appreciable slowing down in the first movement before the beginning of the development section (m. 76) in the 1932 recording. In general, the main structural points are signalled to the listener by rubato just before the point of closure or transition. This is especially pronounced in the slow movement. For instance, there is a marked *ritardando* in m. 25 in the Adagio ma non troppo in the 1925 recording, as the second subject is introduced. The Léner Quartet takes slightly more liberties with tempo modifications in

10. Wagner's rather exaggerated "structural" approach to tempi was detailed and heavily criticized by Henry Smart, writing in London in 1855 for *The Sunday Times*.

11. Thomas F. Dunhill, "The Music of Friends: Some Thoughts on the String Quartets of Beethoven," *The Musical Times* 68, no. 1008 (1927), 113–114.

12. The "Musical Pilgrim" series books are: William Henry Hadow, *Beethoven's Op. 18 Quartets* (London: Oxford University Press, 1948); Gerald Abraham, *Beethoven's Second-Period Quartets* (London: Oxford University Press, 1944); and Roger Fiske, *Beethoven's Last Quartets* (London: Oxford University Press, 1948). See also Cyril M. Crabtree, "Chamber Music and the Gramophone," *The Gramophone* (January 1932), 328–329, 374–375 and *The Gramophone* (May 1932), 543–544.

this earlier recording. In part this is due to the fact that the tempi that they chose were generally somewhat slower: the slow movement is almost two minutes longer than that in their 1932 recording (see graph 2, below). The overall approach—a heightened, persuasive, rhetorical style of performance—is similar in both recordings.

Another unifying aspect of these early recordings is an overall legato approach to bowing. This is partly a function of the more prominent and frequent use of portamento in the early nineteenth century. The prevalent legato style in the early twentieth century is also related to the new approach to vibrato at that time. The bow had long been understood as the “soul” of the violin, as that which helped to determine the individuality of various players’ styles. In the early twentieth century, though, that role was increasingly taken over by vibrato so that by 1910, Siegfried Eberhardt could declare that “the individual characteristics of different artists are . . . recognizable only when the vibrato is employed.”¹³ Eberhardt may well have been drawing on Carl Flesch’s idea, later published in *The Art of Violin Playing*, that “the vibrato represents the most delicate expression of our general psychic constitution, or our congenital temperament.”¹⁴ The implications of this approach to vibrato for bowing are typified in both of the above-mentioned Léner Quartet recordings of the opening movement of op. 74. The players tend to maintain more or less steady bow pressure throughout the slurs in the introductory Poco Adagio, while deploying continuous but modulated vibrato. A well-connected style is precisely what one would expect players around 1800 to produce when reading a heavily slurred Adagio movement, and yet a slurred phrase would still have been shaped by means of the *mezza di voce*.¹⁵ The Léner Quartet exemplifies an early 1900s approach, as distinct from that of the early 1800s, in their use of almost seamless bow changes and constant bow pressure to create broad, smoothly connected phrases; thus they emphasize the long line of the musical paragraph rather than shorter musical motifs. Even the pizzicato is soft and round in the Léner Quartet’s readings.

Persistent Diversity in Recent Recordings

Tempo rubato is less prominent in quartet playing of the later 1930s and 1940s, which seems to be an index of changing aesthetics. For example, in a 1938 recording of op. 74 the Roth Quartet takes the slow movement at a leisurely tempo from which tempo deviations are not nearly so pronounced as those in the earlier Léner Quartet recordings. This might be understood as part of a more general ironing out of metrical and rhythmic

13. Siegfried Eberhardt, *Violin Vibrato: Its Mastery and Artistic Uses*, trans. Melzar Chafee (New York: Carl Fischer, 1911), 41.

14. Flesch, *The Art of Violin Playing*, 101.

15. See Clive Brown, *Classic and Romantic Performing Practice 1750–1900* (Oxford University Press, 1999), 235.

nuances in recorded performances of the Beethoven quartets from this era.¹⁶ However, new performance practices were being established at this time, which ensured the persistence of diversity in playing styles. A more piquant and varied approach to articulation was developing in the mid-twentieth century, for instance. This development was not uniform. Indeed, after mid-century it becomes increasingly difficult to generalize about any governing “approach” to string quartet performance, except in terms of historically informed performance.

As several writers have noted, the historically informed performance movement was one of the most influential factors on the styles of mainstream stringed instrument performers in the middle of the twentieth century.¹⁷ A move towards a non-legato bowing style can be understood as one of the most significant influences of this movement. Of the important products of historically informed performance traceable in modern solo violin playing, we find not only a more highly articulated “off-string” or “lifted” bowing style but also a decline in the use of vibrato, and an increase in the use of lower positions and open strings. These trends are found in string quartet performance practices in more recent decades as well as in the solo performance of string repertoire.

Clive Brown argues that the treatment of all separate notes as necessarily short and detached in Classical and early Romantic chamber music has achieved the status of an orthodoxy among quite a number of today’s string players.¹⁸ If one considers an isolated example, the 1990 New Budapest String Quartet recording of the first movement from op. 59, no. 1, one might agree. The triplets in the first violin in mm. 42–43 and in the cello in mm. 46–47 make particularly good test passages for comparing various performers’ approaches to articulation. The New Budapest Quartet players’ rendition is truly “off the string,” much more highly articulated than either the earlier Léner or Roth Quartet versions, for example.

Moving to consider the more recent recordings one cannot take the New Budapest Quartet’s approach as representative; nor can one chart a general decrease in diversity in terms of articulation practices. Let us consider a more extended set of data, comprising twenty-six recordings of the first movement of op. 59, no. 1, which span the seventy-four-year period 1927–2001. Qualitative and quantitative conclusions can be drawn from this data, which suggest persistent diversity in the performance of this repertoire. One finds, in particular, that some highly influential modern string quartet ensembles do not adopt a fundamentally non-legato approach to articulation in the first movement of op.

16. Philip, *Performing Music in the Age of Recording*, 121–122.

17. John Butt, “Bach Recordings Since 1980: A Mirror of Historical Performance,” *Bach Perspectives* 4, ed. David Schulenberg (Lincoln, NE and London: University of Nebraska Press, 1999), 181–198; Michelle Dulak, “The Quiet Metamorphosis of Early Music,” *Repercussions* 2, no. 2 (1993), 31–61; and Dorottya Fabian, “Is Diversity in Musical Performance Truly in Decline,” 176.

18. Brown, “Bowling Styles, Vibrato and Portamento,” 110.

59, no. 1. In fact there seem to be two basic approaches to the interpretation of this movement in terms of bow articulation in the more recent recordings, and these do not divide neatly into chronological order or national groups. Ensembles such as the Takács String Quartet (2001), Alexander String Quartet (1996), New Budapest String Quartet (1990), Medici String Quartet (1989), and Gabrieli String Quartet (1979) deploy off-string (i.e., clearly detached) strokes and a generally homogenous approach to articulation among the four parts. By contrast, ensembles such as the Vogler Quartet (1992), Guarneri String Quartet (1991), and Tokyo String Quartet (1989) deploy a more “conversational” approach to articulation, making use of more variety and imitation within and between the voices and deploying gentler, more legato bow strokes.

More generally one finds at least as much if not greater diversity with respect to articulation in the more recent recordings as compared to earlier recordings. Consider, for example, the *non ligato* passage that occurs in exposition of op. 95, m. 20. Listening through a random sample of twenty post-1950s recordings of this movement, one finds that the approaches to this passage run the gamut, from highly articulated and “off the string,” as in the Végh Quartet’s recording from 1972, to firmly “on the string,” as in the Budapest Quartet’s 1960 recording. The earlier the recording, the less likely it is that the players perform “lifted” (off-string) strokes. For example, the Léner (1926), Busch (1932–33), Pascal (1953), and Kockert Quartets (ca. 1953–55) all perform this passage in a mainly legato style.

The type of bowing style deployed by modern string quartet ensembles has been influenced not only by the historically informed performance, but also through the (related) process of canonisation of Classical chamber music. As William Weber has shown, this process takes place not only in the scholarly and pedagogical spheres, but also, and powerfully, through performance.¹⁹ In the realm of Classical string quartet performance there is a clear sense of the serious “aura” that is part of—or apparently should be part of—the performance of this music. Bowing style is heavily implicated in the creation of this aura. As Robert Martin points out in connection with the *non ligato* in op. 130, a more detached bowing style is loaded with connotations. Imagining a modern-day string quartet in rehearsal of this passage, he writes: “Off the string sounds wrong to all of them—too light, capricious, not serious enough.”²⁰

Would a prevailingly legato style in the performance of Classical string quartets have fit with practices of the Beethoven era? The answer is yes, and no. The subject of bowing styles in Beethoven’s day is complex, and has been addressed in detail

19. On types of canon, see William Weber, “The History of Musical Canon,” in *Rethinking Music*, ed. Nicholas Cook and Mark Everist (Oxford: Oxford University Press 1999), 339–341.

20. Martin, “The Quartets in Performance: A Player’s Perspective,” 115.

elsewhere.²¹ Suffice it to say that surviving accounts suggest a great diversity in the styles of the early nineteenth-century Viennese violinists among Beethoven's chosen performers, including Franz Clement and Joseph Mayseder, who specialized in the light and delicate style. Hence concurrent with a legato trend in some quarters, notably in disciples of the French Violin School, off-string strokes maintained their popularity, although some players would have restricted their use to pieces of a light-hearted or virtuosic nature. The off-string bowing orthodoxy among modern string players, noted by Brown, and the opposite modern-day attitude that off-string bowing is a taboo for the Beethoven quartets are both extreme positions with regard to articulation practices; neither one can be considered as historically "true to Beethoven."

Returning to the subject of diversity in modern recordings: even when one considers such a basic measurement as overall duration the degree of variability among modern recordings can be significant.²² Performers' choices regarding tempi allow them to make their own interpretive marks on the final movement of op. 59, no. 1, in particular. Graph 1 shows the average metronome marking for each movement in twenty-six recordings of op. 59, no. 1, drawn from 1927 (which is the Capet Quartet recording) to 2001 (recordings by the Lindsay and Takács quartets).²³ The variability in the durations of the very earliest recordings is entirely to be expected: these durations are often at least as much technically as aesthetically determined, owing to the need to fit recordings as neatly as possible on to the sides of 78 rpm discs. Yet this applies to the first four recordings only, and of these only the Capet Quartet seem to carefully choose and "stage" the points at which the recording will be cut. As we can see, the variability continues, especially in the duration data for the fourth movement (shown in purple). To some extent this variation is due to the internal tempo changes that Beethoven marked in the movement, and to the various quartets' different responses to these; but even weak trends over time are not evident in this set of data.

When we consider the first and third movement, we can see some trends, albeit within persistent fluctuations over time. Indeed the persistent variability into the era of CDs is perhaps the most striking aspect of this data. The tendency we see here, for performers to play a fast movement faster (see the blue data points), fits with the unfounded but popular view that performances of Western classical music are generally

21. Brown, "Bowing Styles, Vibrato and Portamento," 97–110; and my "Off-String Bowing in Beethoven: Re-examining the Evidence," *Ad Parnassum: A Journal of Eighteenth- and Nineteenth-Century Instrumental Music* 7, no. 14 (2009), 129–153.

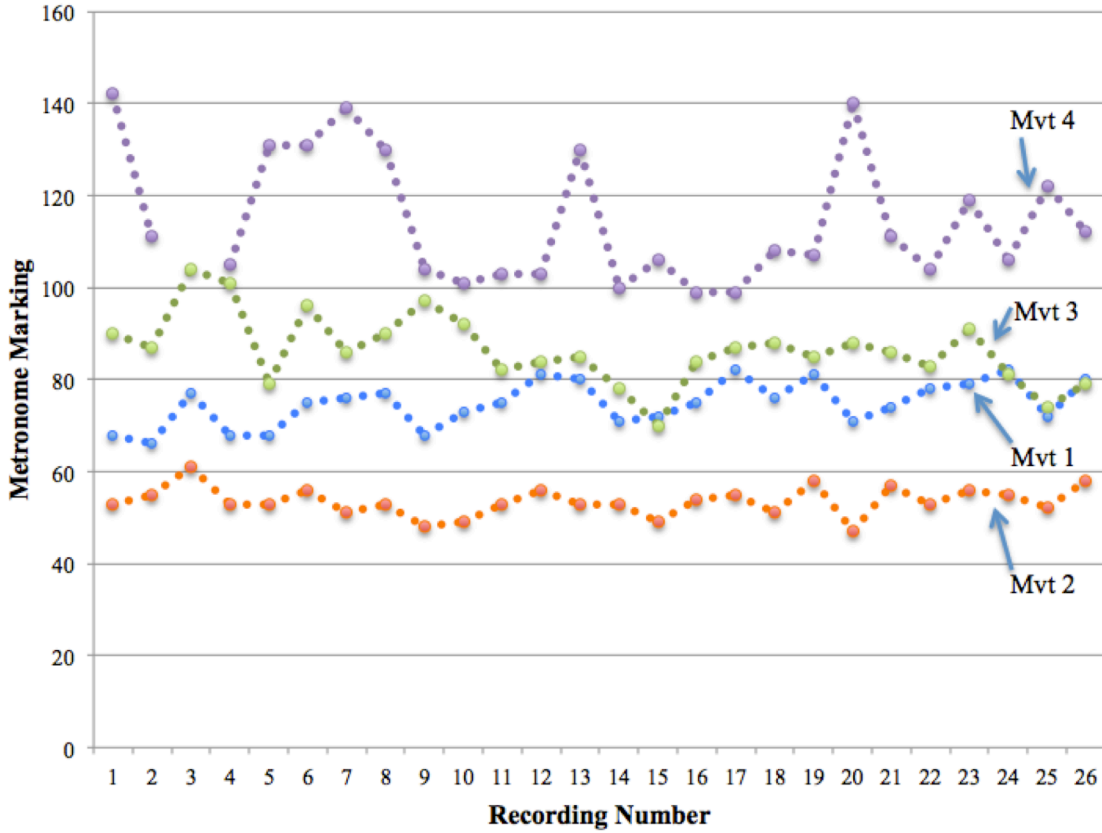
22. As Bowen has shown, there are many more sophisticated measurements of tempo that one can make from recordings; see "Tempo, Duration, and Flexibility."

23. These data are subject to errors of up to ± 2 seconds. Final *ritardandi* were included in the calculations. Note that the discrete data points in graphs 1 and 2 have been joined by dashed lines to make the positioning of the data, and their fluctuations, more apparent.

Graph 1. Average metronome marking for twenty-six recordings of op. 59, no. 1.

Beethoven's markings:

- Movement 1 Allegro: half note = 88
- Movement 2 Allegretto vivace: dotted quarter note = 56
- Movement 3 Adagio molto, molto cantabile: sixteenth note = 88
- Movement 4 Allegro: quarter note = 126
Adagio ma non troppo: eighth note = 69
Presto: quarter note = 92



1	Capet	1927	10	Végh	1973	19	New Budapest	1990
2	Philharmonia	1930s	11	Talich	1979	20	Guarneri	1991
3	Léner	1937	12	Gabrieli	1979	21	Vogler	1992
4	Roth	1938	13	Alban Berg	1979	22	Brandis	1992
5	New Italian	1951	14	Orford	1986	23	Emerson	1994
6	Pascal	1952	15	Vermeer	1988	24	Alexander	1996
7	Budapest	1959	16	Borodin	1989	25	Lindsay	2001
8	Tatrai	1960	17	Medici	1989	26	Takács	2001
9	Vlachovo	1963	18	Tokyo	1989			

speeding up.²⁴ However, this view is contradicted by several other data-driven studies, for example those by Bowen, Turner, and Fabian cited above. It is also contradicted by the slow movement data from my own study, which suggest that performances of this movement from op. 59, no. 1 are slowing down (shown in green).

I focus on tempo or rather duration here since it does have a significant effect on the way in which a movement is perceived. Beethoven acknowledged this, assigning metronome markings to his first eleven string quartets.²⁵ We might wish to attribute the speeding up of movement one to an increasing awareness of and tendency to follow the metronome markings that Beethoven specified for these works, after Rudolph Kolisch's work on this topic in the early 1940s. However, the average tempo for all of the quartets surveyed was half note = 75 beats/minute for movement one, which is still distinctly slower than Beethoven's half note = 88. In fact all of the tempi are, on average, slower than those specified by Beethoven. In the case of the Finale, however, seven out of the twenty-five quartets surveyed (the final movement of the Léner Quartet recording is missing, hence its omission from the graph) take the movement appreciably faster, on average, than Beethoven specified.

“Historically Informed” Beethoven Quartet Performance

When considering “historically informed” quartet performance, a comparison between the approaches of early twentieth century quartets (who were not making any conscious attempt to be “historically informed”) and that of the Eroica Quartet (1999) is revealing. The Eroica Quartet disc is marketed as “historically informed.” Certainly this group's ornamental use of vibrato is in keeping with early nineteenth-century string performance practices; the group opts for a basic non-vibrato sound, warming the tone only on long notes and at expressive high points.²⁶ Op. 74 provides, once again, a useful case-study work for making comparisons between recordings. The effect of the Eroica Quartet's non-vibrato in the Adagio ma non troppo is not unlike that of a consort of viols; yet an early nineteenth-century string quartet might well have applied a little more vibrato. The Capet or Léner Quartet's more flexible use of this expressive device here, if not their liberal use of it, arguably connects the modern-day listener more closely to the experiences of early nineteenth-century listeners than does the Eroica Quartet's version.

In the Eroica Quartet's performances, and especially in this slow movement, there are more portamenti than one would expect to hear in a modern performance of this

24. Fabian, “Is Diversity in Musical Performance Truly in Decline?,” 166.

25. Rudolf Kolisch, “Tempo and Character in Beethoven's Music,” *The Musical Quarterly* 77, no. 1 (1993), 90–131. (English trans. of the original 1943 German article.)

26. On this topic, see especially Brown, “Bowing Styles, Vibrato and Portamento,” 110–119.

movement; indeed, in the latter there are often none. Yet these are not nearly so conspicuously deployed as, for example, in the Capet recordings. This careful approach to expressivity evidences an ethos of restraint that pervades this and other modern-day “historically informed” string quartet performances. For a comparative modern-day example drawn from mainstream string quartet performance, one could instance the opening movement of op. 74 played by the Brodsky Quartet in a daring 1986 recording—daring in terms of the ensembles’ use of both portamento and tempo rubato. The first violinist makes two prominent slides in the introductory Poco Adagio, in mm. 1 and 3, between the first and second notes. The pauses marked by Beethoven are carefully staged, and the contrast between the legato bowing of the opening Adagio and the piquant, off-string style for unslurred notes in the ensuing Allegro is also striking—more so than in the Eroica Quartet’s recording. All of this is in keeping with early nineteenth-century approaches to reading the notation. The Brodsky Quartet makes no claim to be historically informed; yet this ensemble has perhaps been influenced, and its palette of expressive effects broadened, by the historically informed performance movement.

This Brodsky Quartet recording of op. 74, even though it is in some respects an exception, is in other respects once again clearly a product of its time. The ensemble’s reading of the Adagio ma non troppo is one of the slowest on record, at eighth note = approx. 46 beats/minute. This can be seen from graph 2, which shows the overall duration of the movement in a sample of thirty-five recordings drawn from the seventy-four-year period 1925 to 1999. The fastest is the 1927 Rosé Quartet recording of the movement, eighth note = approx. 63 beats/minute, but even this falls fairly well below Beethoven’s own metronome marking of eighth note = 72 beats/minute. Beethoven seems to have wanted something a little more sprightly than the tempi that are offered by most recordings of this work; only the earliest, by the Léner (1925), Rosé, and Bouillon Quartets (1940) approach this aesthetic. Most of the later quartets seem to see “Adagio” but to ignore Beethoven’s indication “ma non troppo.” Copious vibrato and a sweet, almost saccharine tone are also frequent. Two Guarneri Quartet recordings of this movement, from 1968 and 1988, exemplify this approach. In this context, the Eroica Quartet’s faster-than-average tempo and the asceticism of their non-vibrato sound are at least refreshingly different from the mainstream.

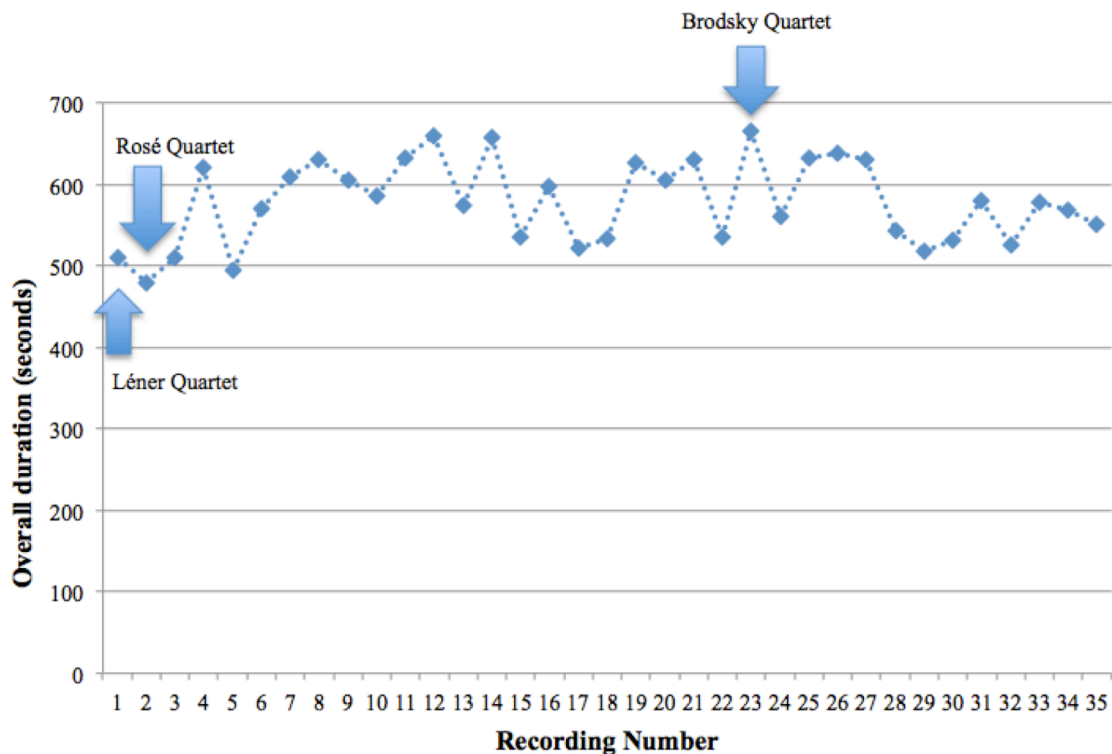
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Philip’s central message concerning Beethoven performance is that “authentic” performers of Beethoven must reconnect with the “tradition,” and that the early twentieth-century recordings hold a key to this.²⁷ Yet the early twentieth-century performances tell us mostly about the aesthetics and performance ideals of time, and what Beethoven and his string quartets meant to early twentieth-century listeners and performers. The early recordings of Beethoven’s middle period string quartets will often

27. See Philip, “Traditional Habits of Performance in Early Recordings of Beethoven,” 195 and 203–204.

differ radically from any that would have been heard in Beethoven’s day, especially in terms of the performers’ use of the bow, and vibrato. Where these performances seem to connect with nineteenth-century traditions is in terms of flexibility of expression—powers assumed by performers to shape the work. Yet this flexibility does not necessarily lead to diversity: there is a certain commonality of intent in these early recordings, a heightened “explanatory” mode of musical expression. This seems not only related to the tricky new task of communicating via the phonograph, but also to an increasing desire to

Graph 2. Overall duration of the Adagio ma non troppo in thirty-five recordings of op. 74.



1	Léner	1925	13	Budapest	1960	25	Guarneri	1988
2	Rosé	1927	14	Guarneri	1968	26	Vermeer	1988
3	Capet	1927	15	Prague	1968	27	Sharon	1988
4	Léner	1932	16	Gabrieli	1978	28	Tokyo	1989
5	Bouillon	1940	17	Lindsay	1978	29	Alban Berg	1989
6	Budapest	1940-44	18	Talich	1979	30	Medici	1990
7	Pascal	1951	19	Allegrì	1979	31	Cleveland	1992
8	Konzerthaus	1950	20	Juilliard	1982	32	Emerson	1995
9	Végh	1952	21	Orford	1984	33	Kodály	1997
10	Paganini	1952	22	Melos	1985	34	Arriaga	1999
11	Koeckert	1955	23	Brodsky	1986	35	Eroica	1999
12	Tatrai	1960	24	Amadeus	1987			

secure a place for “difficult” works like the later Beethoven string quartets within a performance canon, given new and rapidly expanding audiences.

The evidence suggests that powers assumed by the early twentieth-century performer have not been lost, but rather reinterpreted in later string quartet performances. One of the greatest legacies and on-going benefits of the historically informed performance movement has been the opening up of perceived performance options. Ironically, this opening up seems to have happened to the greatest degree in mainstream string quartet performance, possibly since the moral imperatives to fidelity—to the text, to the composer—are felt differently there. In that sphere, the early nineteenth-century imperatives to subjective expression and engagement in performance are (no doubt largely unwittingly) being renegotiated by a handful of more recent string quartet ensembles. In embracing diversity, recent ensembles can be understood as setting and following late twentieth- and twenty-first-century fashions, and not necessarily Beethoven’s expectations.

Select Discography

String Quartet Ensemble	Date of recording	Record label
Op. 59, No. 1		
1. Budapest	1927	HMV D1600-3
2. Roth	1938	Columbia records, original issue numbers LX 578 to 582
3. Gabrieli	1979	DECCA LONDON, 4583012
4. Tokyo	1989	RCA VICTOR RED SEAL, RD 60462
5. Medici	1989	Nimbus, NI 5207
6. New Budapest	1990	Hyperion, CDA 664030
7. Guarneri	1991	PHILIPS 4329802
8. Vogler	1992	RCA Victor Red Seal, 9026611852
9. Alexander	1996	ARTE NOVA, 74321636372
10. Takács	2001	DECCA, 4708472 DH2
Op. 74		
1. Léner	1925	Columbia records, original issue numbers L 1675 to 1660
2. Capet	1927	Columbia records, original issue numbers L 2248 to 2251
3. Léner	1932	Columbia Records, original issue numbers LX 319 to 322
4. Garneri	1968	RCA VICTOR GOLD SEAL GD 60457
5. Brodsky	1986	IMP PCD 831
6. Guarneri	1988	PHILIPS 4223412
7. Eroica	1999	HMU 907 254
Op. 95		
1. Léner	1926	Columbia records, original issue numbers L 1926 to 1298
2. Busch	1932-33	Reissue Toshiba-EMI (1998) SGR-8512
4. Pascal	1953	Concert Hall M2046
5. Kockert	ca. 1953–55	Deutsche Grammophon DGM 18257
6. Budapest	1960	Sony Essential Classic CD 47665
7. Végh	1972	Naïve Classique 2009 NC 40004