Kleine Beiträge

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Ambiguity and Interpretation: Conducting *Der Freischütz* from the critical edition score of the Weber Gesamtausgabe

Musical notation is an inherently ambiguous medium. Even at its most prescriptive, it leaves open the possibility for multiple valid interpretations of note length, tone color, articulation, dynamics, attack, phrasing, tempo, and Geist. Occasionally, as in the case of questions of "alto" or "basso" transposition for the horn parts in Italian operas, notation can even leave room for multiple valid interpretations of sounding pitches. Ambiguities can persist even when performers have recourse to recordings of composers interpreting their own works, as Richard Taruskin has observed regarding the five different recordings Stravinsky made of *Le Sacre du Printemps*[1]. It is up to the interpreter to bring the work to life, relying on their admittedly subjective sense of aesthetics, style, taste, mood, and the particularities of the given performance and rehearsal process.

When one performs *Der Freischütz*, the job of interpreter is further complicated by the weighty baggage of performance traditions, frequently of murky provenance, beginning with the first bar of the overture, where many performers mistrust Weber's indication of pianissimo for the oboes and 2nd bassoon, who have difficulty producing a soft, clear attack low in their compass, and thus instruct them to "sneak in" once the strings and clarinets have begun to swell. Later in the overture, at the C-major apotheosis, one often hears a rallentando and fermata in bar 291, even though nothing in Weber's notation hints at such a gesture. And for interpreters living in the 21st century, the catalog of recordings provides ample examples of past interpretations, none looming larger than Carlos Kleiber's landmark 1973 recording with the Staatskapelle Dresden. In some places, Kleiber adheres strictly to the letter of Weber's manuscript, as in his *come scritto* execution of bar 38 of no. 6,

1 Taruskin, Richard. "The Pastness of the Present and the Presence of the Past." *Authenticity and Early Music: a Symposium*, by Nicholas Kenyon, Oxford University Press, 1988, pp. 137–210.

in which the violins play an arco chord while the violas, cellos, and basses play pizzicato, whereas other recordings have normalized all the strings to one form of playing or the other. In other places, Kleiber departs drastically from Weber's notation, as in the famous "Uhui" declamation of the upper voices of the chorus in bar 15 of the Wolf's Glen Scene, where Kleiber has the voices match the pitches and rhythm of the woodwinds.

When an interpreter approaches the new critical edition of *Der Freischütz* from the Weber Gesamtausgabe, one finds that the editors have faithfully preserved all the ambiguities and inconsistencies of notation from Weber's manuscript. In most cases, the score is not suitable for a direct *come scritto* realization; the ambiguities demand interpretive resolution, and frequently multiple solutions are possible. But it is a great credit to the editors that they have not produced an edition that elects particular editorial solutions to these inconsistencies. Other older editions have done so, and although such "performing editions" are suitable for immediate realization upon a first reading, such editorial solutions preclude further interpretations and explorations by performers. By leaving the ambiguities intact, and presenting them in a format that highlights them to the interested performer, the editors have produced a score that leaves all the tools of interpretation available to the performer.

Queen City Opera, where I am the founder and Artistic Director, recently performed the world premiere of this edition in Cincinnati on May 31st and June 2nd 2019. Using the score, we identified two main types of ambiguities in Weber's notation:

– Vertical inconsistency, in which material appears simultaneously in multiple instruments or voices, but the staves have differences in articulation, dynamics, or rhythms.
– Horizontal inconsistency, in which material reappears after an initial statement, and the return has different articulation, dynamics, or rhythms than the original.

The example listed above of no. 6, bar 38 is a vertical inconsistency, in that all the strings play a chord together, and only the cello, bass, and viola have a pizzicato indication. It is always possible to approach such cases with a positivistic approach, and to undertake the detective work of tracking down "Weber's intention." Perhaps Weber intended for all the strings to play pizzi-

cato, and starting from the bottom of the score, he added such an indication for the bass, cello, and viola staves, and then decided that his intention of including it for the violins was obvious, and being under enormous time pressure to complete the score and move on to rehearsals and other projects, left the violin staves alone. But one could counter that for such an interpretation, a single "pizzicato" indication in one staff would have been sufficient if Weber thought that the performer would assimilate the instructions from one staff to the others. The only unambiguous instructions would have been if Weber had included a redundant and prophylactic "arco" indication in the violin staves, which instead are blank.

For our production, we took into account the resulting dramatic ramifications of the sound event. As the orchestra strikes this chord, Ännchen sings the word "fall'n," amidst a discussion of a painting that has fallen off the wall. Having the lower instruments play pizzicato while the violins play arco chords produces an effect that has an initial consonant bass hit, followed by a ringing splash in the violins, exactly as if it were depicting the sound of a heavy painting falling.

Another such example with dramatic ramifications in no. 3, bar 81. In Weber's manuscript and the earliest copies, the eighth notes in the first violins have no slurs, but slurs do appear on this figure in bars 99, 101, 105, and 106. The critical commentary accompanying the score identifies a manuscript copy from 1822 for a performance in Bremen as the earliest appearance of bar-long slurs throughout this passage, which are present in all other printed editions. These slurs are also present in Weber's own piano reduction, but one could argue that the slurs are a pianistic effect relevant only to the sound world of the piano reduction, rather than an indication of Weber's intention for how the violins should execute the figure. Perhaps Weber intended the few bars with slurs to serve as a model for how all the bars should be executed, but did not want to spend the time and the ink adding the slurs to every bar. If this is the case, it is strange that he did not write slurs into the first few bars before stopping, rather than adding them only after 18 bars. We again chose to follow the letter of Weber's manuscript as it informed the text and the drama. As Max sings about how he used to traipse through the forest, the detaché articulation in the violins depicts his footsteps, and the articulation

changes to warmer sustained tones when he sings about his interactions with his beloved Agathe.

There were also many places where we departed from the literal notation of Weber's manuscript, as it presented both horizontal and vertical inconsistencies that we deemed as indications of a compositional shorthand that benefitted from the assimilation of details or rhythms from one staff to another. In number 16, bar 185, the violas and cellos play a melody that ends with a dotted eighth note and a sixteenth note. In bar 189, this melody reappears, sung by Cuno, accompanied by the violas and first bassoon. In the second statement of the melody, the violas have the exact rhythm they did the first time, but for Cuno and the bassoon, Weber's manuscript has two eighth notes in place of a dotted eighth and a sixteenth. One could make the case that such a discrepancy was intentional, as it lends itself to a declamation of the text or to particularities of instrumental articulation or resonance. But in this case, rather than executing the exact notation of Weber's manuscript, we chose to assimilate the rhythm for Cuno and the Bassoon to match the violas and the prior statement.

One finds a similar problem in the presentation of the famous melody from the Jägerchor, which first appears in no. 11, bar 19. In the first appearance, Weber's manuscript has a tie between the quarter note and the first of the following sixteenth notes only in the horn 1 part. The editors of this edition have added the tie for horn 2 in brackets, and bar 23 has the identical presentation. When the motive returns in bar 27, the horns are joined by oboes and clarinets, for whom Weber notated the tie, which is now absent from the horn parts. In bar 31, Weber leaves the tie out of all the parts. When the melody returns in no. 15, the tie is nowhere to be seen. The resulting score presents both horizontal and vertical inconsistencies. A literal *come scritto* realization is certainly possible. In the film production "Hunter's Bride," directed by Jens Neubert, Daniel Harding elects a hybrid interpretation, in which the melody always has the slur in no. 11, but does not have it in no. 15[2]. For our production, we chose to normalize all the statements of the melody, always preserving the slur.

2 Although this film predates the publication of the critical edition score, Harding must have consulted the manuscript or a digitization thereof.

By far the most controversial inconsistencies and resulting interpretations are reserved for the most famous scene of *Der Freischütz,* the Wolf's Glen. In bar 13, the tremolo in the violins and violas is notated pianissimo. Two bars later, when the winds and brass erupt along with the iconic "Uhui" of the upper voices of the chorus, the violins and violas are marked up to fortissimo. Two bars later, as the choral basses continue their incantation, the violins and violas are back to pianissimo. When the "Uhui" returns with the next eruption in the winds, Weber's manuscript has no dynamic indication for the violins and violas. One interpretation would be to assume that Weber had intended to set up a pattern of the violins and violas always matching the dynamic of the other instruments around them, and that Weber had intended for the fortissimo he marked in bar 19 for the winds to apply to the violins and violas as well. However, we chose to follow the letter of the manuscript by keeping the violins and violas pianissimo even as the winds played fortissimo. The resulting effect was foreboding and menacing, like the rustling of dead leaves in a pitch-black forest. This same technique of orchestration appears in a similar scene depicting the forest by one of Weber's most ardent admirers: Richard Wagner. In the beginning of the second act of *Siegfried*, the cellos and violas maintain an unwavering pianissimo tremolo even as the dynamics of the other instruments around them swell.

No interpretation of *Der Freischütz* is complete without taking a stance on the execution of the "Uhui" itself. In the foreword to the score, Professors Solveig Schreiter and Joachim Veit acknowledge that the score allows for a range of interpretations, some of which may depart from the literal notation, but they chastise Kleiber for his interpretation of the "Uhui," citing an article by August Apel, which they claim Weber knew, regarding aesthetic ideals for depicting ghastly horrors on stage: the article recommends a performance closer to a monotone, "without alternating tone and rhythm."[3] Given the numerous instances of compositional shorthand and Weber's apparent intention of assimilating details from one staff to another in realizing his notation, it is certainly possible that he had intended for the "Uhui" figure to assimilate the rhythm and contour of the woodwinds, but it is admittedly highly unli-

3 WeGA Serie III, Bd. 5: *Der Freischütz* (WeV C.7), Bd. 5a, S. XX.

kely, as there are no other instances in the score where inconsistences involve assimilating pitch. Nonetheless, I must confess that in this instance, we did bow to tradition and the ghost of Kleiber in matching the "Uhui," to the woodwinds. In this specific situation, given our setting of the Wolf's Glen, it somehow made aesthetic sense to depart from Weber's manuscript. But this new edition of the score is a joy to use and to interpret, and it demands continued engagement to explore the enormous range of possibilities the editors have made available to performers. And perhaps for a future performance, we will try the "Uhui" as it appears on the page.