

Metronome Tempo Markings

File Under: "Lies My Music Teacher Told Me."

Or, more charitably; "Things My Music Teacher Forgot to Mention (Or Assumed I Knew)."

Sometimes we accept things at face value without examining them carefully. Indeed, we are bombarded every day with information from the media, much of which is simply not true.

When I wear my hat as an educator, I do my best to see to it that my students are accurately informed and that they analyze "facts" carefully.

A common misconception many musicians have involves our friend the metronome. You know those words that are printed around the dial on most metronomes? (On old pendulum-style metronomes the words are printed up and down the scale.) Yes, I am referring to the tempo markings (from slowest to fastest): Largo, Larghetto, Adagio, Andante, Moderato, Allegro, Presto, Prestissimo. Okay, get ready to be shocked. Brace yourself.

THOSE WORDS HAVE LITTLE TO DO WITH THE NUMBERS WITH WHICH THEY ARE PLACED ON THE DIAL. Adagio is NOT necessarily 66-76. Allegro is NOT necessarily 120-168. There is no real musical correlation between the words and the numbers. Zero. Zilch. Nada.

The unscrupulous Johann Maelzel (see below) did assign numerical values to the common tempo terms. But no professional musician sanctions them—then or now. Some musicologists and metronome manufacturers believe the numbers are correct about 75% of the time.

But one big problem (among many others which I won't go into here) is that the meanings of the words differ in music from different historical periods and even from composer to composer within a given period. The words ARE placed correctly in terms of relative relationship. In other words, Adagio is slower than Andante. Presto is faster than Allegro. But that is as far as it goes. The numbers that are underneath, beside, above, or bracketed with a particular tempo word should not be associated with that word in any way.

Certainly, as a matter of curiosity, if you are learning a piece marked Allegro, you can check the numeric range the metronome specifies for Allegro. **But let the music, your instrument, the performance environment, and your instincts tell**

you what the tempo should be. Don't be a mind-numbed robot to a numeric table of tempo markings.

If you want to do further study on educated guesses as to the "correct" speed of various tempo markings and dances, I highly recommend German musicologist Curt Sachs's *Rhythm and Tempo* which is one of my all time favorite books. But be very careful—if you are thumbing through the book, you will come across a table of tempi of baroque dances for example. You might think, "Wow, I always wanted to know what the proper metronome speed is for a German Allemande from the 1730's and here it is!" Well, if you read on a few pages, Sachs proceeds to explain why the table you were drooling over in your hallelujah moment is in error, and that the table that follows three pages later is the one to use, but with reservations.

At dinner tonight with your family or close friend, be sure to share this little revelation about metronome numbers and tempo markings. I'm certain those in your presence will admire your perspicacity and will be grateful for your willingness to enlighten all around you with your knowledge. Well, maybe not.

More fun metronome facts:

1. Credit for invention of the metronome in all fairness should go to Diederich Nikolaus Winkel. However, credit usually is given to the unscrupulous Johann Nepomuk Maelzel who stole many of Winkel's ideas and proceeded to perfect and patent the device as his own. He was a very shady character frequently pursued by the law. Even his former friend Beethoven filed legal action against him in the Vienna courts.
2. M.M. or MM means Maelzel's Metronome, not metronome mark.
3. The numbers on the metronome scale are beats per minute (B.P.M. or BPM). It is increasingly common to see the indication BPM=66, rather than MM=66. Unfortunately, a few writers use BPM to indicate beats per measure.
4. Composers are generally terrible at assigning correct metronome speeds to their own pieces.
5. Beethoven's own metronome markings for his pieces are arguably incorrect. Notice I say "arguably." Nasty fights have been known to break out over this assertion at musicologist gatherings. An aside: musicologists can really get worked up over this stuff. Some people believe it has something to do with their pent-up feelings of hostility caused by their inability to actually PLAY a musical instrument. Just kidding...

6. Gyorgy Ligeti wrote a piece titled *Poeme symphonique* (1962) for 100 metronomes. It's worse than you can possibly imagine. Here is a good description of the piece from *Wikipedia*:

The piece requires a conductor and ten "performers," and most of their efforts take place without the audience present. Each of the hundred metronomes is set up on the performance platform, and they are all then wound to their maximum extent and set to different speeds. Once they are all fully wound they are all started as simultaneously as possible. The performers then leave. The audience is then admitted, and takes its place while the metronomes are all ticking. As the metronomes wind down one after another and stop, periodicity becomes noticeable in the sound, and individual metronomes can be more clearly made out. The piece typically ends with just one metronome ticking alone for a few beats.