



The Confusion Over Andantino Markings

BY JOSEPH SMITH

Among the many ambiguous musical markings, *andantino* is one of the most elusive and perplexed even Beethoven. In a letter to the Scottish publisher who commissioned him to arrange British folk songs, Beethoven wrote:

If among the airs that you may send me to be arranged in the future there are *andantinos*, please tell me whether *andantino* is to be understood as meaning faster or slower than *andante* for this term, like so many in music, is so indefinite that *andantino* sometimes approaches *allegro* and sometimes, on the other hand, is played like *adagio*.

The root of the word *andantino* is *andante*, the present participle of the Italian verb *andare*, to go. "Going" suggests movement, so *più andante* (more going) should mean faster, and *meno andante* should indicate slower movement. A passage from Mozart gives an example of such correct use of *più andante*. The drama of the finale to *Die Entführung aus dem Serail*, K. 384, shows that *più andante* means faster, not slower. Mozart depicts a character's increasing rage by a progressive tempo acceleration. Beginning *andante*, the tempo changes to *più andante*, *allegretto*, *stringendo il tempo*, and finally *allegro assai*. The *più andante* bridges *andante* to *allegretto*, just as *stringendo il tempo* bridges *allegretto* to *allegro assai*.

On the other hand, there is a different understanding of *andante* in Grieg's *Ballade*, Op. 24, his most ambitious piano work. The theme is marked *andante espressivo*, and the first variation, *poco meno andante*, *ma molto tranquillo*, slightly less *andante*, but very tranquil. Less *andante* ought to mean slower, but if this were Grieg's intention, the warning "but very tranquil" would be meaningless; he should instead have said "and very tranquil." We can infer from this that a later variation, marked *un poco andante*, should be a little faster than the theme.

Brahms adds to the confusion by using *più andante* to mean either faster or slower, according to the context. It seems clear in the second movement

of his G-major violin Sonata, Op. 78, that the agitated central episode marked *più andante* should be faster than the main *adagio* tempo.



The New College Encyclopedia of Music (New York, Norton) cites this as an example of the correct use of *più andante*. Had Brahms wanted the episode slower, he probably would have written *più adagio*.

In the waltzes of Opus 39, #6 is *vivace*, *quasi pizzicato*, and strongly rhythmic.



While #7 waltz is dreamy, *dolce*, *legato*, Brahms marked it *più andante*, evi-

dently intending a slower, not faster, tempo.



Brahms probably understood *più andante* not to mean more going, but more an *andante* than the previous tempo. Thus, after a slow tempo, *più andante* means faster, and after a fast tempo, it means slower.

Confusion arises when musicians who do not know Italian pick up the musical terms from context. Beethoven's limited knowledge of Italian shows in markings such as *molto poco adagio* in



Joseph Smith performs in the U.S. and Europe and records for the Musical Heritage Society and Premier Recordings. His articles and reviews have appeared in M.L.A. Notes and the Chopin Journal, and he writes the "Rare Finds" feature for Keyboard Classics. He has edited Grainger's "The Nightingale and the Two Sisters" for forthcoming publication by Bardic Edition. Smith also gives masterclasses and lectures.

the *presto* movement of the C# Minor String Quartet, Op. 131. The context confirms that Beethoven is calling for a slight relaxation of the rapid tempo; *Un poco più adagio* follows shortly after. In Italian, however, *molto* can not modify *poco* (as *sehr* modifies *wenig* in German, or *very* limits *little* in English) and *adagio* means "slow," not "slower." *Pochissimo ritenuto* probably expresses Beethoven's intention correctly. Under these circumstances, it may be natural to conceive of *andante* as the most moderate kind of slow movement, rather than as a positive indication of speed. When the marking is *andante* this concept causes no problem, but it reverses the literal meaning of *più andante* and *meno andante*.

Andantino is a diminutive of *andante*. In English the use of diminutives is restricted primarily to nicknames and baby talk, but in Italian the diminutives "-ino" and "-etto" appear with great frequency and significance. If *allegretto* is less fast than *allegro*, and *larghetto* is less slow than *largo*, then *andantino* ought to be less "going" than *andante*. Clementi included a tempo table, progressing from slow to fast, in his *Introduction to the Art of Playing on the Piano Forte* (1801). *Andantino* appears between *larghetto* and *andante*, for a slower tempo than *andante*. Not simply as an important classical composer, but also as a native Italian, Clementi has a special authority in this matter.

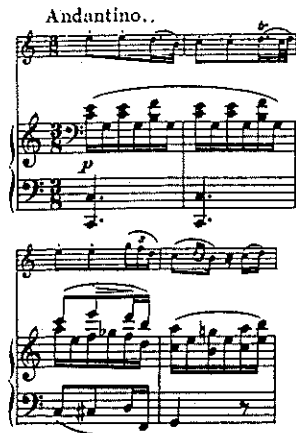
The second movement of Mozart's E♭ Major Piano Concerto, K. 271, is an example of the correct use of *andantino*. In the impressive C minor *Andantino*, the canonic imitations of the sighing *ritornello* and the right-hand solo arabesques suggest the influence of Bach. These sinuous melismas, often divided into thirty-second notes, clearly demand a moderately slow tempo, not one approaching *allegretto*.



Some composers use *andantino* to mean a tempo close to *allegretto*, faster than *andante*. Schubert marks the second movement of his Piano Sonata in A Minor, D. 537, *Allegretto quasi andantino*.



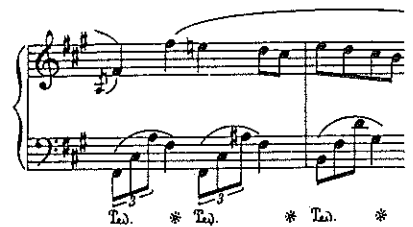
Writing "almost an *andantino*," Schubert shows that he thought of *allegretto* as close to *andantino*. The *Andantino* of his sunny Sonata in A Major for violin and piano, D. 574, resembles this movement in its regular pulsating accompaniment and naive tone.



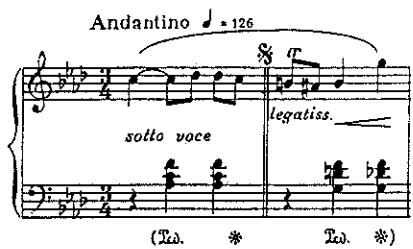
Schubert must have meant this movement too as a fast *andantino*, but does not remain consistent in his use of the term. The profoundly serious *Andantino* of his last Piano Sonata in A Major, D. 959, is a troubling case; despite the evidence of the earlier works, the musical context calls for a slow *andantino*.



Chopin marked an early version of his A♭ Prelude, Op. 28, #17, *Allegretto quasi andantino*, indicating he thought of *andantino* as faster than *andante*. However, even if he had not left this concrete evidence, other examples would lead us to the same conclusion. For instance, the F# Minor Nocturne, Op. 48, #2, *Andantino* has to be a fast *andantino*; otherwise the slower *più lento* central episode, with longer note values and repetitive phrase structure, would completely bog down.



In another example, the innocent first theme of the second Ballade, Op. 38, *Andantino*, calls for a faster tempo than the principal theme of the tragic fourth Ballade, Op. 52, *Andante con moto*. If Chopin wrote the metronome mark of the Mazurka in F Minor, Op. 68, #4, it would prove that he meant a fast *andantino*. However, this piece is a posthumous work; Chopin's friend Fontana prepared it for publication and may have added the metronome mark.



When a composer confuses *più andante* and *meno andante*, or uses *andantino* to mean faster than *andante*, there is reason to question his definition of *andante*. It is likely that he conceives of the term as the slowest of moderate tempos, rather than a going tempo.

There is also the possibility that the diminutive ending of *andantino* modifies *andante* as the title of a movement. The *Scherzino* from Schumann's *Faschingsschwank aus Wien*, Op. 26, is not less humorous or playful than a regular *scherzo*; rather, it is a miniature

scherzo. When Schumann marked the second movement of his G minor piano sonata, Op. 22, *Andantino* he probably meant to convey the movement's intimate, informal tone, rather than to modify an *andante* tempo.

Perhaps the *andantino* problem is a conflict between denotative and connotative meaning. The diminutive form usually conveys something less imposing and serious than the original word. For example, a *sonatina* is not only shorter than a *sonata*, it is usually lighter in mood and texture, as well as easier to play. *Larghetto* satisfies this expectation by reducing the weight of the *largo* tempo, and *allegretto* usually implying a playful quality, reduces the energy of *allegro*. The incorrect meaning of *andantino*, faster than *andante*, reflects these other diminutives and, as a result, is widely used.

Performers cannot insist on linguistic accuracy in musical indications, but should instead try to understand the word as the composer did. Like Lewis Carroll's Humpty Dumpty, the composer exercises the prerogative to use words as he chooses. Composers' markings should help performers to interpret the music. When the markings are ambiguous, however, musicians sometimes reverse the process and can use their understanding of the music as a guide to interpreting the markings. □

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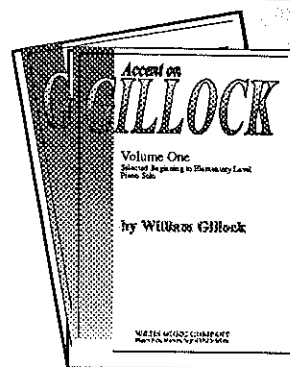
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