

Helmut Breidenstein

MOZART'S TEMPO-SYSTEM

A Handbook for Practice and Theory

translated by

Lionel Friend

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All the tempi designated by Mozart himself listed in 420 groups of movements with the same characteristics with detailed comments, 434 typical music examples and all relevant historical texts

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Tectum Verlag

Helmut Breidenstein

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By their singing and playing, the soloists, orchestras and choruses of my own Mozart performances helped to verify my ideas for a new understanding of his 'tempo'-indications.

Yet before all others: without the great patience, love and willingness of my family to make sacrifices this decades-long work could not have been achieved together with that of my profession as theatre and concert conductor. I am deeply indebted to them.

Helmut Breidenstein
Berlin, December 2018

I thank the British Library Board and the Staatsbibliothek Berlin for permission to reproduce their digitalizations from the autograph manuscripts of the String Quartet in D minor, K 421 (Ex. 001) and *Die Zauberflöte*, K 620 (Ex. 099 and Ex. 355).

Note from the author

Since the main focus of Mozart's work was in opera, a book concerning his conception of „tempo“ needed to be written by an experienced opera conductor. For the same reason the translation needed an experienced opera conductor as well. Of course this is a musicological work, it is a work about Mozart's unique musical language, which is, however, based on the common language of his period. Yet it also aims to be useful to practical, performing musicians who have to deal with a terminology that has changed very much since Mozart's time.

This book was first published in German language in 2011 by Hans Schneider in Tutzing, the enlarged second edition in 2015 by Tectum-Verlag in Marburg.

After several highly qualified translators had given up because of their lack of familiarity with musical practice it was great luck that I found in Lionel Friend an English conductor who had worked in Germany and whose lifelong experience with Mozart had made him sensitive to the musicological problems raised by this 250-year-old music. I am most grateful for his willingness to sacrifice his time and bring his own knowledge in a most agreeable cooperation. Thanks to Lionel Friend my book can now reach beyond the limited circle of German readers.

Helmut Breidenstein
Berlin, December 2018

A Note from the translator

It has been a privilege as well as a pleasure to translate Helmut Breidenstein's major study of the system within which Mozart wrote. As a musical performer, I can also say that it has been an education. This work is, in my judgment, the most detailed, thorough and comprehensive study of a topic that is of concern to the majority of musicians.

Lionel Friend, December 2018

PREFACE

Alfred Brendel

Helmut Breidenstein's astonishing opus about „Mozart's Tempo-System“ is now completed - in so far as this can be said about a book that offers itself as „an aid ... for the interpreter *in his or her own* indispensable search.“ I regard it as one of those rare and important books in which music and musicology form a vital association; a lifelong study that makes one very much aware of a field to which attention is rarely paid. It accomplishes this by bringing to bear an understanding that never loses sight of the musical foundation on which it is built, and by a discerning intelligence that does not shy away from raising debatable topics, although without ever claiming infallibility.

One cannot be grateful enough to Helmut Breidenstein for his methodological accuracy which allows us Mozart interpreters to orientate ourselves with ease and pleasure. The appendix assembles extracts from texts about performance practice with a completeness that I have rarely found accessible in other places. This section of the book alone reveals - if one did not already know it - that one cannot do justice to a topic as complex and varied in shape and form as the one Breidenstein deals with by using only a few rules of thumb.

Breidenstein's book sharpens our perception, at the same time giving an overview and making us sensitive to each individual case. Admiration and gratitude.

London 2011

* * * * *

Peter Gülke

This is a work one wants to urge every reader who gets seriously involved in Mozart's music to take to heart. The author is enough of a practical musician to avoid any fixation on metronome marks and bases his research mainly on the establishment of relations, cross-references etc. That doesn't make it easier to read - in spite of 434 added music examples - but does lead one nearer to the music; the numerous vivid characterizations substantiate it more.

Breidenstein includes the theoretical background as a reference to Mozart's often ignored historicity. The reader finds assembled in quotations and a voluminous appendix everything important in this context. Where else is one led so directly, and always on the basis of concrete cases, to the sources; where else does a compendium exist that exemplifies all relevant questions to such a degree - all of Mozart's tempos are included! - and where else is information so competently given to the consistency of a chosen tempo, to the differentiations and sensitivity of Mozart's tempo indications, or to odd ‚holy cows‘ of tempo choice like mathematically „pure“ proportions - „quarter notes of the introduction equal half notes of the Allegro of the main movement“, etc.? We learn much - mostly in examples - about the ambivalence of characterization and tempo indication in one and the same term, about the difference between musical pulse and conductor's beat (Mozart's music was not *prima facie* for conductors) and about a hierarchy of tempos that is no longer current.

Similarly to the expanded second edition of Eva and Paul Badura-Skoda's book on Mozart¹ the author offers an abundance of fine observations and advice for the performance. As in that book, the clues to the fact that we take Mozart's accessibility as a matter of course and too easily forget his „remoteness“ bring him closer. What seems to us natural is, as we all know, often established rather by habit and traditions.

As much as we have the right to treat this now nearly 250-year-old music in our own way, and communicate it to our contemporaries, we should at first take the trouble to get exact knowledge of what we are communicating. In spite of some great interpretations and in spite of the astonishing results of historical performance practice, things are not looking too good for that. Breidenstein's work is here an invaluable help to put things right.

Berlin, 14th February, 2011

¹ Eva and Paul Badura-Skoda: *Interpreting Mozart. The Performance of His Piano Pieces and Other Compositions*, New York – London <Routledge> 2008.

„On demandera peut-estre ici à quoy l'on peut connoître le veritable mouvement d'une Piece de Musique; mais cette connoissance est au dessus de tous les discours que l'on pourroit faire sur ce sujet, c'est la perfection de l'Art, où l'on ne peut arriver qu'à force de pratique & de genie pour la Musique.“

„Perhaps one will ask here how the true *mouvement* of a piece of music could be known? This knowledge, however, is higher than all discourses one could have about the subject; it is the perfection of the art, which can only be arrived at by practical experience and through a genius for music.“ (Jean Rousseau)²

INTRODUCTION

This book does not claim to know „the only right tempos“ for the works of Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart. It would like to help the interpreter in his own indispensable search for „the true *mouvement*“ for the work itself, but also for himself, his instrument, his ensemble, the venue, the audience and the character of the occasion. It assumes that there cannot be absolute „authentic“ tempos for Mozart's works; and yet, on the other hand, that his tempo indications, since he chose them with the greatest meticulousness, should be taken as seriously as the other parameters of his famously precise notation.

After 200 years of the most varied styles of Mozart interpretation - romantic, rigidly literal according to the „new objectivity“, „historically“ fast, or twice as slow - it is time to end the uncertainty (one could even say bewilderment) concerning his tempo indications, which began already when the music of Beethoven and the romantic composers lost its foundation in tradition after the overthrow of the social structures by the French Revolution. „It has become almost impossible to have any *tempi ordinari*; because performers must now follow the ideas of liberated genius“³

What Mozart and his time had meant by indicating their pieces with *time signature*, *smallest note values* and - unfortunately very vague - *tempo words* was the „*Mouvement*“ („movement“), an indication not for mere speed but for the *inner* movement of the music, i.e. the structure of the melody, the hierarchy of the metrical stresses, the density of the harmonic progressions, the heavy or light manner of playing, the configuration of rhythm, dynamics and articulation. A system of extremely fine grades, requiring „*Geschmack und Compositionswissenschaft*“ (taste and the science of composition),⁴ essential both for the „galant“ and the classical Viennese style. As a highly sophisticated artistic means it equalled the technical refinement of the other courtly arts.

The complex, artistically natural interdependencies of the „*mouvement*“ were to be overlaid by the more robust music of the bourgeois era with its more compact rhythm and fluctuating harmonies in heavy instrumentation. One wished now to measure the tempo of pieces of music with a standardised, rational, system equal to the way in which length, volume, weight, temperature and duration were measured. From 1816 the „metronome“ of the court mechanist Mälzel appeared to be the ideal tool for this purpose. But being exclusively based on the ‚beat‘ it became the reason for the many blind alleys in which later discussions of Mozart's tempo indications got lost. Already Beethoven had difficulties with the metronome, for the nature of classical tempo is in principle inconsistent with physical measuring. In spite of his initial enthusiasm and constant requests from musicians and publishers, he metronomised only about 6% of his works, after 1819 only the Ninth Symphony.⁵ And we do not know how the already deaf composer proceeded in practice using this mechanism.⁶

Mozart, however, was writing prior to the industrial era, in a time which was not yet focussed on technological solutions. His *tempi* must be found among the rules of tradition; they are, as it were, „hand-

² Jean Rousseau, *Méthode claire, certaine et facile pour apprendre à chanter la musique*, 1691, p. 87; - see: Johann Mattheson, *Der vollkommene Capellmeister* ('The Perfect Capellmeister'), 1739, p. 173, § 27 [app. p. 364].

³ Ludwig van Beethoven, *Letters* (*Briefwechsel*), Complete Edition no. 2244, Dec. 1826) [app. p. 348].

⁴ „He has taste and - more than that - the greatest knowledge of composition“, Joseph Haydn about W.A. Mozart according to Leopold Mozart's letter of 16.02.1785 (no. 847, [app. p. 268])

⁵ „The metronomizations (to hell with all mechanism).“ (Beethoven, *Letters*, Complete Edition, no. 2187, concerning the String Quartet op. 131, which in fact he did *not* metronomize.) - In no single case did he realize the following promise to Ignaz Franz Mosel: „I am glad to know that we share one opinion of those indications used to describe the tempo, surviving from times of musical barbarism. [...] For myself, I have long thought of giving up these senseless terms: *Allegro*, *Andante*, *Adagio*, *Presto*. Maelzel's metronome gives us the best opportunity to do so. I give you here my word, I shall no more make use of them in all my future compositions“ (*Letters* compl. ed. no. 1196 [app. p. 348])

⁶ Peter Stadlen wrote in detail about this topic: „Beethoven and the Metronome“, *Music and Letters* 48, London X/1967, p. 330-349;

◇ Peter Stadlen: "Beethoven und das Metronom" in: *Beethoven-Kolloquium* 1977, Kassel 1978, p. 57;

◇ Herbert Seifert, *Beethovens Metronomisierungen und die Praxis*, loc. cit., p. 184.

made". Because of the exceptional nature of his genius, the generalising textbooks of the 18th century provide only limited assistance; reports of contemporaries are often not reliable², metronome indications of the 19th century are quite useless. Finally there is no other choice but to question Mozart himself - and not only in individual categories of his oeuvre but by meticulously comparing all his indications in all his works. Max Rudolf called for this to be done already in 1976.³ In his letters Mozart has only sporadically commented on his tempi, and not always clearly. In his works, however, he indicated them all the more precisely and with equal importance as the other parameters, sometimes correcting the first version laboriously. How then did he define the *Mouvement* in his scores?

First of all, by means of what was at the time called the „natural tempo“ of the different metres; he used 14 of them:

- the ‚large‘ C (2/1 or 4/2), ‚small‘ C (2/2), ‚large‘ C and 3/2 of the *stile antico*,
- the *classical* C (2/2), ‚simple‘ 2/4, ‚light‘ 3/4, 3/8, and ‚simple‘ 6/8,
- the *compound* metres 4/4 (2/4+2/4), 2/4 (2/8+2/8), 6/8 (3/8+3/8),
- 12/8 (6/8+6/8), and the ‚heavy‘ 3/4 (2/8+2/8+2/8).

Secondly, he determined the *Mouvement* by the smallest „prevailing note values“ - (he used eight kinds). By thus setting a speed-limit they completed the „tempo“-information of the metre into what was called „tempo giusto“. „Thus the *tempo giusto* is determined by the *metre* and by the longer and shorter *note values* of a composition.“⁴

Although not all note values were possible as the smallest - or even sensible - (quarter notes in 3/8 and 6/8, sixty-fourth notes in the 3/2- and C -metres of the *stile antico*), of the imaginable 126 combinations Mozart still used 49 variants of this *tempo giusto* (which was not at all the „moderate standard tempo“ that it is sometimes regarded as today.)

The tempo words - which today are regarded as the sole „tempo indications“ (although an *Allegro* (Ex. 197) can actually be slower than an *Adagio* (Ex. 276)!) - followed only in *third* place. Tempo words served only to modify the *tempo giusto* which was predefined by metre+smallest note values. The opinion that they were nothing more than indications for the *character* of the piece - based on confusion in the historical tradition - is untenable.

In Mozart's autograph scores we find 19 verbal modifications of *Allegro*, 18 of *Andante*, 6 of *Allegretto*, 5 of *Adagio*, 5 of *Andantino*, 3 of *Presto*, 4 of *Minuet* or *Tempo di Minuetto*; moreover he uses *Marcia*, *Moderato*, *Largo* and *Larghetto*, plus *Maestoso*, *Grazioso* and *Cantabile* as self-contained indications. Not to forget some German terms for his „Lieder“.

Altogether as many as 97 verbal indications!

Although he did not even use all the possible combinations within this system, he had a corpus of 420 models or *modules* for the „*mouvement*“ consisting of *metre*+*smallest note values*+*tempo word*. They were remarkably finely graded and precise, though flexible enough in practice to define the execution of a particular piece in a comprehensive way.

² „Is it right to transmit the performance habits of the time - even if one could gain a complete idea of them - onto works that in form and content are so far from what was common at their time?“ (Stephan Kunze, „Musikwissenschaft und musikalische Praxis. Zur Geschichte eines Mißverständnisses“, in: *Alte Musik. Praxis und Reflexion*, special edition of the series „Basler Jahrbuch für Historische Musikpraxis“, 1983, p. 121).

³ „A comprehensive research into the tempos in Mozart's works doesn't yet exist. What is missing is a description of Mozart's tempo indications on a broad basis, i. e. one that considers his complete works and uses a comparative method; in other words, an attempt to regard Mozart's indications as categories of time, and to document these by spans of speed.“ (Max Rudolf, „Ein Beitrag zur Geschichte der Temponahme bei Mozart, in: *Mozart Jahrbuch* 1976/77, p. 223). ✧ The only such attempt until now, Jean-Pierre Marty's comprehensive book, „*The Tempo Indications of Mozart*“ (1988), started out from the arbitrarily chosen tempo for „Andante“ of either MM=60 on the one hand or MM=44 on the other, which seems to me an inappropriate approach for the pre-metronome time of Mozart.

⁴ Johann Philipp Kirnberger / Johann Abraham Peter Schulz, *Die Kunst des reinen Satzes in der Musik* ('*The Art of Strict Musical Composition*'), trans. Beach/Thym, p. 377, vol. II, 1776, p. 107 [app. p. 275]

HOW THE BOOK IS ARRANGED

Conceived as a reference book of practical interpretation for musicians, this book offers, after a general explanation of how tempos were determined in the 18th century:

- a compendium of all the 1,576 movements designated by Mozart himself
- in 420 lists of pieces of the same characteristics
 - (works marked with an asterisk are discussed in the subsequent commentary)
 - which, by overlapping modules, enable the player to compare slower with quicker pieces,
 - illustrated by a range of 434 typical music examples,
 - and, in an Appendix, a collection of all relevant historical texts.

Beginning with the METRES, the movements with autograph tempo indications are grouped in lists of movements with the same module: *ascending* from the slowest to the fastest TEMPO WORD (except on p. 106-114); then from the smallest to larger CLASSES OF NOTE VALUES (thus again from slow to fast regarding metre and tempo word), and finally *descending* from late to early works according to the Köchel-catalogue¹⁰. In this way - *identical metre, identical class of note values and identical tempo word* - pieces which can explain each other are grouped together within a module (* = additional commentary); and there is often among them one which „drives forcefully into its natural motion.“

As it was not practicable to show three different lists according to 1) metre, 2) class of note values, 3) tempo word, the reader should take care when comparing pieces from different modules to see that in each case at least two of the three parameters are the same: for instance, not to compare an *Andante* 4/4 with 16th-notes to an *Andante* ϕ with 8th-notes. Especially in the eye-catching music examples differences can be too easily overlooked.

- If the *tempo word and metre* of two pieces are identical (e.g. *Andante* ϕ), the *class of note values* („with 32nd notes“, „with 16th notes“ etc.) defines the difference between slower and faster;
- if *metre and smallest note values* are identical (e.g. 4/4 „with 16th notes“), the *tempo word* defines the difference.

Reasons for the numerous overlappings of tempo indications are articulation, manner of playing, metrical organisation and character:

For example, in spite of its faster indication (*Allegro assai* 4/4) „Der Hölle Rache kocht in meinem Herzen“ (*Die Zauberflöte*, no. 14, aria Queen of the night, Ex. 140) is, because of its 16th-notes, physically *slower* than Leporello's „Madamina“-aria (*Don Giovanni* no. 4, Ex. 153) with its unmodified [non-increased] *Allegro* 4/4, since the latter has only 8th-notes. Nevertheless the high-tension aria of the Queen *appears* to be faster: one senses it metrically in fast quarter notes, whereas the cold-hearted mocking aria of Leporello seems to pulse slowly in half-notes;

Sarastro's *Adagio* 3/4 „O Isis und Osiris, schenket“ (*Die Zauberflöte*, no. 10), which has essentially only quarter-notes (Ex. 276), is physically *faster* than the *Andante* 3/4 with 32nd-notes of the 2nd movement of the Piano Sonata in F, K 533 (Ex. 318), - but it is heavier;

because of its 32nd-notes the 1st movement of the Piano Sonata in B-flat, K 281 (Ex. 197 and Ex. 230), is, in spite of the indication *Allegro* 2/4, *slower* than the *Andante*-2/4 of Papageno's bird catcher song, which has only 16th-notes (*Die Zauberflöte*, no. 2, Ex. 198, Ex. 235, Ex. 268) - metrically, harmonically and structurally, however, it is richer.

The complex variety and the interrelationship of the modules become apparent:

why did Mozart write the Three Boys' „Bald prangt, den Morgen zu verkünden“ (*Die Zauberflöte* no. 21) as *Andante* ϕ (Ex. 050) and not as *Allegretto* 4/4 - which has in performance, after all, the same speed? - why Sarastro's „In diesen heil'gen Hallen“ (Ex. 206) neither as *Adagio* ϕ nor as *Andante* 4/4, but as *Larghetto* 2/4 (4/8)? - why Osmin's fast „Erst geköpft, dann gehangen“ (Ex. 304) not in the ‚mischievous‘ 3/8-time, why Ferrando's slow „Un'aura amorosa“ (Ex. 335) not in the more serious 3/4? - why the Pamina / Papageno duet „Bei Männern, welche Liebe fühlen“ (Ex. 099, Ex. 355), in view of the metrical problems of the compound 6/8-metre, not simply in 3/8-time?

In Mozart's time, *odd-numbered* metres were in irrational relation faster than *even-numbered* metres; this book therefore treats them separately. The ‚large‘ C-time and the ‚heavy‘ 3/4 metre are retrieved from oblivion; the ϕ -metre of the *stile antico* is distinguished from the *classical* ϕ . It is

¹⁰ The conventional numbering serves here only to ease the finding of works; my lists could not go into datings differing from Köchel⁶.

explained how *compound metres* are composed of *simple metres*. The *recitative-metre* is dealt with separately. The implications of the *virtual changes of metre* for a whole series of tempos within movements are examined. It remains to be tested, whether - aside from his church music, which has to be examined separately - genres and perhaps tonalities play a part; and to what extent a development of Mozart's conception of tempo from his early to his late works is identifiable.

After the proposed clarifications, the architecture of Mozart's operatic finali, composed as integrated movements with a large-scale rhythm, should no more be distorted by arbitrary realisations of their up to 16 tempo indications. These do not influence only expression, what is playable and singable, the dramatic impact, but also the duration, so to speak the width, of the individual parts of the form. If the speed is exaggerated, a whole main section can shrink into an unimportant transition, a tall column in the construction of the finale into a stump. Conversely, an arch of the arcade collapses if the „Mask-Trio“ in the first finale of *Don Giovanni* (No. 13, b. 251, *Adagio* 2/2, Ex. 030) is overextended into *Adagio* 8/8. The perfect construction of the *Figaro* Act 2 Finale is severely disturbed in its proportions - and the pace of the action distorted - if Susanna's „*Molto Andante* 3/8“ (Ex. 352, p. 221) is spread out in *slow motion*, and the preceding and following sections are shortened from „*Allegro C*“ into „*Allegro molto* ♩“ (Ex. 156 a,b,c).

The logic of this ‚tempo‘-system for indicating the *manner of performing* a piece becomes understandable and reproducible, if the following facts are respectively observed:

1) metre, 2) smallest note values relevant to the speed, 3) tempo word, 4) harmonic density¹¹ and, connected to it, metrical organisation, 5) rhythm (periodicity), 6) articulation and manner of playing, 7) genre („Church-, theatre- or chamber-style“) and 8) if applicable - with special caution! - text, metre of the lyrics, and the dramatic situation. 9) Minuets in particular show distinct differences between Mozart's early and late work.

THEORETICAL LITERATURE of the 17th through the 20th centuries is consulted collaterally. In order to facilitate reading, abridgements in the excerpts are not marked as such, but the respective passages can be found in full in the *Appendix*. *Excursi* clarify fundamental problems; *commentaries* inserted between the lists referring to well-known pieces (*), often with *music examples* (mostly including the places with ‚smallest note values‘¹²) show how Mozart used the ‚modules‘. In order to be clear, I have marked the classical tempos (in spite of certain aesthetic qualms) in the modern way by numerical fractions. As I am sure no one will read this book from start to finish, principal points are picked up repeatedly, to serve users who study only parts of it. My earlier publications contain scholarly discussion in more detail than is possible here.¹³

FOOTNOTES: All sources are indicated with their original titles. Those used repeatedly have a short English translation of the title in brackets. The most important ones with their full text in English will be found in the appendix.

A REGISTER of all movements designated by Mozart himself gives the page numbers of their appearance in the text.

I do not claim that any two tempos I have put together here are completely equal - since their contents are not. Sixteenth-notes in *Allegro* for instance may be coloraturas, or instrumentally virtuosic, differently articulated, *legato*, *staccato*, mixed, and with trills - regardless of the *musical* content and expression. In slow movements sometimes even smaller „virtual“ note values must be considered, which makes the classification uncertain. The lists will compare similarities, separate them from dissimilarities and serve as references for studies by the readers themselves. *Mathematical* relations are not at stake. Setting metronome figures, even „margins of speed“ for each single tempo - such as Max Rudolf suggested - seemed to me to contradict the realistic yet astonishingly flexible system. They would have promoted the misunderstanding that I claim to know the only „right tempos“ which yet everyone must, within Mozart's system, find for himself.

I hope therefore that performers find encouragement here for - maybe surprising! - comparisons of *their own* across Mozart's work in spite of my possibly numerous mistakes in the classification of the move-

¹¹ Jean Jacques Rousseau: „The more elaborate the harmony, the less lively the tempo must be in order to give the mind time to grasp the pace of the dissonances and the quick linking of the modulations.“ („*Dictionnaire de Musique*“, vol I, 1767/81, p. 339, trans. L.F.)

¹² The selection depended on the technical possibilities of notation within the given limitations of space.

¹³ Helmut Breidenstein, *Mozarts Tempo-System ...* (See bibliography).

ments. A new, liberating comprehension of Mozart's defining of the „*mouvement*“ of his works may originate from this.

My investigations are based on the *New Complete Edition of Mozart's works* (Neue Mozart-Ausgabe NMA) of the publishing house Bärenreiter which now - including the critical reports (in German) - is accessible *gratis* on the **internet**:

→ <http://dme.mozarteum.at> ←

My numbering of the works follows the Köchel-Catalogue as there.

The translation of Mozart's early letters is taken from:

"In Mozart's words": perspectives on a new, online edition of the Mozart family letters from Italy, 1770-1773.

ABOUT THE TRANSLATION

The reader will see that it was not possible to draw up Mozart's autograph tempo indications for 1,576 movements in 434 clearly laid out lists using the traditional English terminology which (like the French and Italian) is based on the notation of the mensural music of the 15th century. We had to choose the terminology of the German speaking authors of the 17th and 18th centuries quoted in the appendix of the book („*Ganze, Halbe, Viertel, Achtel, Sechzehntel, Zweiunddreißigstel, Vierundsechzigstel*“) which American usage has adopted in literal translation (see below). In this terminology the note values in the lists could be expressed by figures more easily than in British English - for example *sixty-fourth* notes by „64th notes“ rather than „*hemidemisemiquavers*“.

In his *Anleitung zur praktischen Musik* (1782) Samuel Petri gives a good explanation for these unambiguous rational divisions of the 4/4 metre (*) in place of the variable relations in the mensural „*tactus*“. The terminology of this book had to follow that, particularly as it can also be understood internationally - and by English readers as well.

*) JOHANN SAMUEL PETRI: „4/4 or common metre is the main metre of all; it has given the notes their values. For the name the notes have in the bar [measure] is kept even when [...] the relation of the parts or notes to the whole changes. This happens because the same note would otherwise have to be named differently, now this, now that. For example ♩ is in 4/4 metre an *eighth*; in 4/8, i.e. 2/4 metre, it would be a *quarter*; in 3/4 metre a *sixth*; in 3/8 metre a *third*; in 12/8 a *twelfth* [...] Since this, however, would make it very complicated not only for beginners to learn the metre [measure], but would generally cause frequent confusion among all musicians, the basic names that come from 4/4 metre, as the main metre, have been adhered to, so that one can always represent one and the same note-value by one and the same name.“ (*Anleitung zur praktischen Musik*, Leipzig ²1782, p. 143).

American	English	Italian	French
♩ whole note	semibreve	semibreve / intero	ronde
♪ half note	minim	minima / metà	blanche
♩ quarter note	crotchet	semiminima / quarto	noire
♪ eighth note	quaver	croma / ottavo	croche
♩ sixteenth note	semiquaver	semicroma / sedicesimo	double croche
♩ thirty-second note	demisemiquaver	biscroma / trentaduesimo	triple croche
♩ sixty-fourth note	hemidemisemiquaver	semibiscroma / sessantaquattresimo	quadruple croche