

# Editing Beethoven



Jonathan Del Mar

The distinguished Beethoven scholar and editor outlines some of the problems inherent in divining the composer's true intentions.

In 1995 I had the great fortune to be awarded a contract by the publisher Bärenreiter to prepare new Urtext Editions of the nine Beethoven Symphonies. Having emerged 14 years later from that and from a number of other Beethoven works, my sense of wonder remains undiminished in two respects. Firstly there is the great honour of being able to study intimately and without restriction so many of Beethoven's original manuscripts, allowing a unique window into the way Beethoven worked. And at this point I really have to stress how essential it is to look at originals, as opposed to merely microfilms, photocopies or even published facsimiles – though some facsimiles are so lavishly and beautifully produced these days that they may be an adequate substitute in the initial stages. There are two reasons why original autographs are crucial for the best editorial work, one absolutely concrete, the other indefinable but (I insist) real though the derogatory word 'emotional' was hurled at me once by a zealous librarian in Germany insistent on denying access to the original. Concrete: it is quite shocking how many examples exist in so-called Urtext Editions of what are presented as authentic staccato markings, where a look at the original reveals immediately that they are no more than grains in the paper, stitch holes, or spots on the microfilm. It is truly astonishing that editorial boards of Urtext Editions deem it sufficient (presumably on economic grounds) that their editors work exclusively from

photocopies, when this approach is open to so many flaws. 'Emotional': I can only insist that as soon as you open the hallowed pages and view the original handwriting in all its vitality, immediacy and sheer animal temperament, details of the text shriek out at you, impress themselves on your consciousness, which in a cold, lifeless photocopy can well elude you. We are, after all, human, and we all overlook things. Even Urtext Editions have overlooked things. Seeing the original ensures that you overlook the absolute minimum. It is surely due to the fact that I checked every single detail of the Fifth Symphony from the original manuscript in Berlin, that a note was discovered in the cello part (third movement, bar 268) which had appeared as a rest in all previous editions (including two 'urtexts').

To return to the main thread: the second sense of wonder is that anyone should be interested in the results of a task which, in so many respects, is 'anorak' work.

Whether this note or that has staccato, whether the slur goes to this note or that: to be honest, who cares?

Yet the editions continue to sell steadily. The curious thing here is this: the Bärenreiter edition seems to have become 'the thing to be seen to be playing', though there is apparently no corresponding obligation to adhere to any features – whether details of slurring and staccato, or even the actual notes themselves – which distinguish it from any other edition.

As long as this edition is on the stands, the

conductor is free to alter anything – or indeed everything – back to the old Breitkopf edition. Or, as in the extreme case of David Zinman, he may embellish the text with fantasies and cadenzas of his own invention while at the same time proudly proclaiming on the album cover that his is the "World Premiere Recording according to the New Bärenreiter Edition". The extent of humbug, even rank false pretences, here is breathtaking. Yet while his recording has been lambasted in the German press as a 'Travestie', no British critic, as far as I am aware, has yet admonished Zinman for his outrageous liberties with Beethoven's text, preferring instead to hail the freshness and originality (this indisputable, perhaps) of his 'interpretations'.

Mercifully, Zinman remains exceptional. But the inescapable issue remains that eminent conductors such as Abbado, Haitink and Norrington proclaim the virtues of the new edition while rejecting some of its chief features. This could sound quite alarming: if musicians of this stature reject a reading in an edition which they otherwise extol, perhaps the editor really got it wrong here! So let's look at one of the most controversial places where the Bärenreiter edition departs from previous scores: Symphony No.9, first movement, bar 81, where we had always heard this: [Ex.1] so that the analysts obviously cited the series of rising fourths and fifths, virtually consistent throughout the movement. Unfortunately for the tidy-minded analyst, however, this is not



what Beethoven wrote. He wrote this: [Ex.2] Impossible! do I hear you cry? It can't be; listen to the analysts who explain why the fourths make sense. Beethoven obviously made a mistake.

Of course it is clear that this is putting the cart before the horse; analysts must analyse what Beethoven wrote, not what he didn't write. But in deciding what Beethoven 'wrote', we come to the central problem of editing Beethoven: because Beethoven was human, and indubitably there are places where he made mistakes. So how do you decide when to say "look: Beethoven wrote *this*; this is what we should play!" and when to say "oh dear, poor Beethoven was nodding here – this is obviously a mistake"?

Fortunately, perhaps, there are many criteria which can assist a judgement here. Page-turns often cause errors; it is easy to forget the last note of a phrase in the second violins over the page, writing a whole-bar rest by mistake. Leger lines are easy to miscount; there are several instances where Beethoven got them wrong. Transposing instruments often causes error, especially if your method for notating clarinets in B flat is (as Beethoven's was) to imagine writing in the tenor clef (the accidentals go wrong). And even if there is no such specific scapegoat, sometimes one has simply to judge – and this is my golden criterion – that the text in the source is *inconceivable*. If you can honestly, and with the best will possible towards the original reading, use

that word – inconceivable – and especially if you can find a reason why and how the mistake might have arisen, then as an honest musician you have no alternative but to adjust it to the text you believe the composer meant to write. But when you are producing an edition which calls itself Urtext, this decision cannot and must not be taken lightly; if there is any possibility that the reading in the source could be correct, you have a duty and a responsibility to print it, even if you might then also distance yourself from it in a footnote. An example of this is the 'missing' grace note in the solo violin in bar 128 of the Violin Concerto first movement. On the other hand, there are two examples in the Fourth Symphony where surely we have to say "what Beethoven wrote is inconceivable": first movement bar 183, where cellos and basses have an extra 'bom' which can only be an embarrassing *de trop* (a page-turn in Beethoven's autograph was probably responsible here), and finale bar 251, where Beethoven surely got himself in a muddle, writing [Ex.3] instead of [Ex.4], like the first time. There seems no possible virtue in the discrepancy.

But in the case of that note in the Ninth, none of these excuses will do; there are no mitigating circumstances; on the contrary, Beethoven wrote the note twice, both in the flute (in the higher octave) and the oboe (in the lower). And it was reproduced accurately in all the later copyist's scores and the parts for the first performance; and never altered or,

apparently, questioned. The tamer B flat was invented by the editors of the old Breitkopf edition in 1862. So instead of worrying about the D because it does not fit the received analysis, let's start afresh and think of it the other way round: not "Beethoven obviously wanted the fourth; why would he write just that one sixth?", but "When Beethoven first wrote the phrase, he wrote a sixth. Why did he not write a sixth every other time?" And then we look at the next appearance of the phrase, in the development (bar 275), and lo and behold, it is inflected into the minor, where the sixth would not fit; it has to be the more doleful fourth. And so every time, until we reach the recapitulation – by which time, we have heard the fourth so many times that the theme has undergone a transformation, and the sixth is now forgotten. A conjectural explanation, of course; but not inconceivable. It must have been the right decision to print the D; and of course conductors are at liberty to change anything they like, but one must not forget the power of familiarity. Once you have conducted a work dozens of times and have it in your blood to that extent, it can seem impossibly disturbing to accept new details and incorporate them into the way you think and live the piece, finely-tuned over many decades. But then it must also be wrong to claim that you are playing "according to" this or that edition! Lorin Maazel took the honest course, answering Bärenreiter's request that he might play the new edition with a ►

frank apology, saying that he was sorry, he was just too old to start again from the beginning with pieces he knew so thoroughly and intimately. One can only respect such integrity.

Sometimes a new edition has become famous – owes its very *raison d'être*, even – due to a single, paramount feature, and it is then particularly unfortunate if this feature is later found to be faulty or spurious, for the very quality of the piece can thereby meanwhile suffer. This happened to Beethoven's Fifth around 1980, due to an East German edition which restored the full repeat of scherzo and trio, a scheme Beethoven did originally experiment with but later deleted (surely, as Robert Simpson pointed out, due to the reappearance of the scherzo in the middle of the finale). So widely was this edition performed and circulated that for two decades it became the politically correct thing, showing that you were truly 'in the know', to make this extra repeat. It can take longer to dislodge a perceived new wisdom than for the myth to establish itself in the first place. A

similar fate is currently being suffered by Mahler Symphony No.1. In a recent reprint, newly edited, of the authoritative Mahler Society edition, the famous and wonderful double bass solo in the 'Frère Jacques' funeral march has been tortuously, and entirely fallaciously, argued to belong to the whole bass section 'playing soloistically'.

Though leading Mahler scholars now acknowledge this to have been misguided and wrong – the editor's argument does not stack up for a moment – the prestige of the edition is such (as also, it has to be said, is the difficulty of comprehending the sense of the argument in the editor's report) that many interpreters are simply taking it on trust and re-recording the work in this faulty guise. It was sad to read in a record review, just the other day, of Haitink's new CD with the Chicago Symphony, "opting (as we're now told Mahler would have wished) for smooth double bass ensemble rather than an ungainly solo".

But major textual differences between edit-

ions, such as this, are very much the exception.

The vast majority of editorial decisions and corrections to earlier editions concern small details of articulation and dynamics. To return, then, to the wonder with which we began: though every issue must be addressed, judged, and documented, it is hardly reasonable to expect the general musical public to be interested. Primarily, all the detailed work which goes into a new edition is inevitably directed towards the musicians, so that tiresome queries which used to crop up in orchestral rehearsals, and waste so much valuable time, are solved in a way which, even if not always ideally tidy (for the sources do not always allow that), is found by musicians to be both transparent (issues are discussed as simply, clearly and honestly as possible) and sensible (the final text must be one to which a musician can relate). Responsibility both to the composer and to the performer: balancing these two is what new editions must be all about. ■



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