Urtext or Performing Edition?

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Pierre Boulez, speaking in an interview documentary about the video recording of the 1976 Chéreau production of Wagner’s *Ring des Nibelungen*, tersely rejected the concept of performance “tradition.” To paraphrase Boulez, tradition results when an inspired performer creates something original, and then someone else tries to copy it, only less well. The composer of the *Ring*, as is well known, played no small role himself in creating more than one tradition of performing Beethoven’s Ninth Symphony. At least one of these—the slow and weighty rendition of the instrumental recitatives in the finale—was in imitation of the speeds he heard taken by François Habeneck in Paris.1 Many other performance traditions have shadowed the Ninth Symphony throughout its history. But how did these various traditions begin? As Leo Treitler and others have rightly pointed out, the Ninth is a work that demands interpretation.2 What Treitler meant, of course, were not merely musical interpretations, but subjective interpretations that explore the layers of potential meanings contained within the work. In the case of Richard Wagner, of course, the Ninth was not only the catalyst for

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a complete overhaul of his aesthetic, but a turning point in cultural history. But how Wagner, or anyone else for that matter, received the work depended very much on how they heard it performed. And how it was performed depended in no small measure on the reliability and content of the text of the score itself.

All philosophical interpretations, political readings, and even deconstructions of Beethoven’s Ninth Symphony must begin with a text—preferably an accurate one. Arriving at an authoritative text for the Ninth, however, is no easy task, because the work’s several primary sources transmit information whose details—articulations, dynamics, rhythms, and even, in a few instances, pitches—disagree with one another. These disagreements, as significant as they may be, are relatively subtle and will scarcely alter one’s perception of the work. Several tempo indications for the Ninth Symphony, however, are another matter. These problems stem in part from the various interpretations of the Italian words Beethoven placed in the score. Confusion about the speed of certain passages was only further exacerbated by the creation in 1827 of metronome markings for the Ninth Symphony. Two tempo indications are especially notorious: (1) the trio section of scherzo (Presto) and the stringendo il tempo that precedes it, and (2) the “Turkish” march in the finale (Allegro assai vivace. Alla Marcia). More on this issue later.

A critical edition of the Ninth Symphony, one based on scrupulous research of all extant sources, has been a desideratum. Jonathan Del Mar has bravely attempted to reconcile the discrepancies found in the work’s primary sources to create what his publisher, Bärenreiter, calls an Urtext edition. In this post-positivist musical environment, the concept of Urtext itself has come under considerable fire. The New Harvard Dictionary of Music defines Urtext as a “text in its presumed original state, without subsequent alterations or additions by an editor; an edition purporting to present a work in such a state.” But which source defines the original state of the Ninth Symphony, let alone its final one (if such can be determined)? Dieter Rexroth, in a commentary that accompanies his recent edition of the Ninth Symphony, identifies no fewer than eight different primary sources for the work. Of these sources, Rexroth points to three as being the most important: the auto-

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3. This volume is among the first in a projected Urtext edition of all nine Beethoven symphonies.
graph manuscript residing in the Prussian State Library in Berlin (Del Mar’s Source A); the Stichvorlage Beethoven sent on 16 January 1825 to his publisher, Schott, and which now resides in the archives of B. Schott’s Söhne in Mainz (Del Mar’s Source C); and a copy of the score for the first three movements and performance materials for the finale that were sent by Beethoven in 1825 to Ferdinand Ries in Aachen (Sources D, DC, and DP). Del Mar gives primary authority to sources A and C, both of which are rather complex documents representing the work—especially in the case of C—of more than one copyist with corrections by Beethoven.

Scholars and aficionados of the Ninth Symphony owe Del Mar a debt of gratitude for presenting the most up-to-date account of the source materials, particularly as reflected in his stemma. But complete reconciliation of variant readings is impossible, and Del Mar has been forced to make difficult choices in light of conflicting evidence—choices that ultimately reflect the editor’s critical understanding of the work. Finally, Del Mar had to apply good sense and musical judgment, especially when the prima facie evidence found in the primary sources contradicts it. The importance of this last point is not to be underestimated, for therein lies the biggest problem with this new edition of the Ninth Symphony.

Bärenreiter, in its publicity material, boasts that many notable conductors have already recorded and performed the work using Del Mar’s edition. Specifically mentioned are Roy Goodman and the Hanover Band, John Eliot Gardiner and the Orchestre Révolutionnaire et Romantique, Sir Simon Rattle and the City of Birmingham Symphony Orchestra, and—even closer to the mainstream—Claudio Abbado and the Berlin Philharmonic Orchestra. At least two recent recordings, conducted by Gardiner and Heereweghe respectively, clearly are based on the Urtext edition. Only these conductors can say for themselves whether they have carefully examined the Critical Commentary that serves as an important companion to the score, but each of them adheres faithfully to the majority of Del Mar’s editorial recommendations as found in the score itself. The effect produced by some

7. Del Mar’s Critical Commentary, pp. 14–23, identifies these same documents as sources A, C, D, DC, and DP (see especially his stemma on p. 20). Del Mar also traces the publication history of the Ninth Symphony through the revised Eulenberg edition of ca. 1934 (ed. Max Unger). It is unfortunate that his review of the work’s publication history is not more thorough, however, since it fails to account for the faulty Litolf edition (n.d.), which enjoys wide circulation thanks to the 1989 Dover edition reprint.


of these editorial suggestions is startling. In a few cases, they also pointedly demonstrate fundamental flaws in this edition.

To state the problem succinctly, an Urtext edition—especially one with the complex issues presented by the Ninth Symphony’s primary sources—ought not also serve as a performing edition. The observations that follow are based on one overriding premise: conductors who use this score are going to take it at face value. This means, for example, when strokes (Striche) appear over certain notes, musicians will observe them scrupulously by not only playing the notes short (as in a staccato), but with a palpable lift of the bow between the notes (as one hears clearly executed in Heereweghe’s recent recording). Conversely, when a parallel passage appears ohne Striche, the assumption is that a different kind of articulation is to be applied. The concept of Urtext, after all, implies that all the pitches, dynamics, rhythms, and articulations contained therein are the ones that authoritatively transmit the composer’s true intentions. Indeed, Bärenreiter, in the way in which it has marketed its product, would have us believe that we need to purify ourselves of all previous editorial accretions and misconceptions. “Can you afford to give your audiences anything but the real Beethoven?” the publisher’s brochure asks rhetorically?

I shall consider a few provocative cases where the empirical evidence is clear, yet may at the same time be deceiving to the point of flying in the face of common sense. I begin with one of the passages alluded to above. Measures 102–03 of the Urtext score (where the orchestra plays the rhythmic figure: eighth, dotted sixteenth, thirty-second, eighth) show each note in both measures with a Strich over it. When the same rhythmic figure appears in mm. 106–07, however, the Striche are not to be found. As the Critical Commentary reveals, however, in the first edition of the Ninth Symphony (Del Mar’s source E), derived from the Stichvorlage (Del Mar’s primary source C), Striche were added to the notes in the parallel mm. 106–07. In other words, some unidentified editor or compositor in 1826 recognized a parallelism, indeed one that Del Mar is unwilling to allow into the Urtext. What, then, are conductors who trust the Urtext to do? Should they ask for a different articulation for mm. 106–07? A “diplomatic” critical edition would have added the Striche in brackets, showing the conductor that the articulation is missing in an important primary source, but also indicating that a performer in Beethoven’s day would have recognized the parallelism. Del Mar, in effect, takes that option away, leaving room for a possible misreading.

Another curious example may be taken from the first movement. One won-

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10. The same editorial decision applies to the parallel passage in the recapitulation, i.e., mm. 369–70 and mm. 173–74.
orders, for example, why Del Mar keeps the indication "ben marcato" in m.64 in the horns (who play a half note) instead of in the trumpets and timpani, who play eighth notes and for whom the indication surely was intended. When one compares the autograph manuscript with the first edition, it becomes clear that Beethoven, his copysters, and Schott's composer sought to use space on the page as efficiently as possible. This sometimes meant that verbal performing instructions had to be squeezed in wherever they could fit. But why should such an inconvenient layout be carried over into a new edition?

The most striking editorial decision found in the first movement concerns the choice of pitch for the second note in the flute and oboe parts in m.81. Sources A and E clearly and unmistakably indicate that Beethoven wrote D instead of the B♭ commonly heard in performance. According to Del Mar's commentary, B♭ was first "invented" as a "correction" in source Br1, published in 1864—long after Beethoven's death—to create the interlocking perfect fourths that one finds in two parallel passages: mm.275ff. (in the development) and mm.345ff. (in the recapitulation). The passages to which these measures belong are examples of the durchbrochene Arbeit one often finds in Beethoven's wind scoring. While one must admit that it is possible that Beethoven truly desired a skip of a major sixth (F–D) in the exposition and a perfect fourth in the development (C–F) and recapitulation (A–D), I suspect that this is not the case. Is it not just as plausible to propose that Beethoven, in writing out the autograph score at m.276 (where the tonality is B♭ major), was thinking ahead to the parallel passage at m.346 in the recapitulation (in D major), where D is the proper second note for the oboe and flute? Indeed, many published analytical studies of the Ninth Symphony have drawn attention to the significance of the interval of the perfect fourth (and its inversion, the perfect fifth), not only within the first movement, but throughout the entire work.11

Unfortunately, Del Mar failed to catch a significant error in all primary sources except the autograph manuscript (source A). I refer to the metrical placement of the critical shift from F♯ to F♯ in m.312 in the recapitulation of the first movement. Source A clearly shows in the bass and cello parts a "4" written beneath the high F♯, followed by an "8" under the octave jump downward, and another "4" written under the F♯. Confirmation that Beethoven, in effect, wanted the shift to F♯ to occur on the second half of the second beat of the measure is found in the interesting ossia for these instruments, written beneath the score.12

11. Among the analysts who have made this observation are Tovey, Schenker, Solomon, Winter, Markevich, and Webster.
A glaring problem spot may be identified in the finale. The passage in question is the end of the 4/4 meter “Turkish” march (mm. 381–394). The horns play F in octaves from m. 517 until m. 540, with the following rhythmic pattern: quarter note, eighth, dotted quarter tied to quarter. The pattern is broken in mm. 529–30 and 535–36, where bassoons and oboes intimate the return of the Freude melody—first in major, and then in minor. Sources A and C show, however, that in mm. 532–33, 538, and 540 Beethoven has placed ties between the eighth note and the dotted quarter, thus breaking a pattern that had otherwise been consistently applied from m. 343—a span of nearly 175 measures. “Contrary to existing editions, Beethoven did write ties here from the eighth note to the dotted quarter note. They are not mistakes!” (emphasis in original), claim Del Mar and Bärenreiter. Thus, on the authority of Del Mar’s primary sources, the ties go into the Urtext edition without so much as a cursory explanation from the editor as to why he thinks the additional slurs are correct. Once again, however, Schott’s composer in 1826 recognized the “mistakes” in the Stichvorlage and corrected them. Which reading, then, belongs in the Urtext?

The most contentious issues surrounding the Ninth Symphony, as mentioned earlier, are some of its metronome markings. It is well known to Beethoven scholars that Beethoven dictated metronome markings for the Ninth Symphony to his nephew Karl, who entered them into the Conversation Book of 27 September 1826. The markings, in turn, were transmitted to Schott, who published them in its house journal, Cäcilie, in December of that year.13 A set of corrections of the metronome indications for op. 125 and 127 appeared a few months later. I shall first examine the notorious trio from the scherzo. The received metronome marking for this passage is half note = 116. Peter Stadlen, however, disagreed with this reading and proposed that the correct note value ought to be the whole note.14 Both Gardiner and Heereweghe play the trio very fast (in one)—suggesting that they have concluded that the proper note value ought to be the whole note. Del Mar, however, argues that the note value is authentic, refusing to accept (along with virtually everyone else, including Roger Norrington) that the marking of 116 can be correct. His solution in the Urtext is to omit the number and refer the performer, via a footnote, to the Critical Commentary. It is here that one reads that the “ill-fated” metronome marking must be correct, but that Beethoven may have meant 160, as argued by Norman Del Mar (the editor’s father and author of monographs on

conducting). Jonathan Del Mar has speculated elsewhere that Beethoven's nephew may have misheard his uncle and written "sechzehn" instead of "sechzig." A hint of this theory ("It remains most likely that Karl failed to catch the figure of the Trio") makes its way into the Critical Commentary, but Del Mar fails to address the broader issue of the interpretation of Beethoven's metronome markings. It would have been useful to refer the user of the Urtext to more recent scholarship that deals with the subject.  

Del Mar's solution for the metronome marking of the "Turkish" march, however, is quite different. In this case, the number is not at issue, but the note value. One finds the dotted half note = 84 (with the note value in parentheses) printed in the Urtext edition. No reference whatsoever is made to the Critical Commentary, which is actually far more extensive (even informative) than the one for the trio section of the scherzo. The options, of course, are that 84 could refer either to the dotted quarter or to the dotted half. A strict adherence to either one extreme or the other always produces unhappy results. The difference in effect between the extremes, however, is of critical importance. We learn from Del Mar's discussion that the earliest source for the dotted quarter is source F, the dedication copy of the score (Widmungsexemplar) sent to King Friedrich Wilhelm III. Interestingly, Del Mar cites no "authentic" source to justify his decision to choose the dotted half as the correct note value. The fact that he has chosen to place the latter in the score evidences his belief that the fast interpretation of the march is the correct one and that many of Beethoven's problematic metronome markings tend to be too fast, rather than too slow. The empirical evidence, however, is equivocal. Even the recently published volume of Beethoven's Conversation Books—the original source material for the metronome markings for the Ninth Symphony—fails to resolve the issue. As is the case in his explanation for the other controversial

17. Del Mar, Critical Commentary, pp.36–57.
18. Ludwig van Beethoven's Konversationshefte, vol.10 (Leipzig: Deutscher Verlag für Musik, 1993), pp.244–45. A facsimile of one of the relevant pages from the Conversation Book is included. Del Mar has ventured to add one metronome marking never before seen in scores of the Ninth—whole note = 80 for the final Prestissimo—deducing this extra tempo indication found at the end of Karl's entry. The entry, in any event, is not far removed from the previous marking for Prestissimo of half note = 132. See Del Mar, Critical Commentary, p.69.
metronome marking, Del Mar projects "the confusion and haste that must have characterized the almost bizarre scene in Beethoven's workroom, with Ludwig hammering out one incipit after another as poor Karl tried both to wield the metronome and scribble down the figure in a way that would somehow tell him later which section the M.M. referred to and what the metric unit was—before Ludwig impatiently intoned the next one." Even allowing for the possibility that this scenario as described is accurate—there is no clear evidence to confirm that it is—Beethoven and others in his intimate circle had several opportunities to set the record straight later regarding the "incorrectness" of the dotted-quarter-note value. In the absence of any such refutation, it seems rather "bizarre" to see a patently inauthentic note value finding its way into an Urtext edition of the score. Furthermore, as I have proposed, there may be good justification to support an interpretation that takes the passage more slowly than one is accustomed to hearing.

The Urtext of the Ninth Symphony is a handsome volume. Its layout is attractive and quite easy to read, using modern clefs for the voice parts. Its basic problem, in summary, is that Bärenreiter and Del Mar have tried to have it both ways by offering a score that purports to be an Urtext while functioning as a performing edition. Del Mar, a conductor and musicologist, knows that the performer does not enjoy the luxury of choices. When it comes to the most controversial issues, Del Mar has denied conductors and performers (Bärenreiter also offers performance materials based on the Urtext edition) the evidence and subsequent options to which they are entitled. Indeed, Del Mar's edition has already started to create new—and quite possibly false—traditions for performing the Ninth Symphony. One can only hope that in future those who use this score will do so cautiously. We must also hope that the editors of Henle's critical edition of the Ninth Symphony that will form part of the Neue Beethoven-Ausgabe will avoid some of the more egregious problems that plague this one.

19. Del Mar, Critical Commentary, p.56.
20. Levy, Beethoven: The Ninth Symphony, pp.106–09. When I conducted a performance of the Ninth Symphony in 1997, I started the march dead slow, allowing the tempo to speed up gradually until it found its "groove.”
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