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Urtext Editions? (What is an authentic and honest original manuscript?)

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Urtext Editions?

What is an authentic and honest original manuscript?

The definition, usage and translation derived from the word ‘Urtext’ has caused anxiety for those who perform music and read literature. For over a kiloyear (millennium), individuals, publishers, etc., often changed original creative works, causing the execution and understanding of how something is to be performed and/or understood into something other than what the original composer or author may have intended.

In compositional terms, Urtext is synonymous with performing editions in which a musical score has been prepared or altered, using distinctly formulated scholarly critical criteria.[1] The editors of music publishers include prominent musicologists as well as musicians who take all available sources into account. Different publishers generate their own philosophies as to what is accurate. These ideologies are often based upon modern contemporary works where instrumentation comes into account. To sell music, they must create a score that contains instruments that are accessible and not obsolete from generations past. The latter is based upon financial and current trends (instruments) of the period. While this statement will surely be contested, one needs to look no further than the glut of music being published since the computer age. The original gatekeepers in the publishing industry had high standards that were intended to keep lesser quality works from being published. In the twenty-first century, anyone can publish, leaving the quality of works to be inadequate for many. Secondly, an Urtext Edition may have a different meaning for those generating sub-standard work. In doing so, those unaware of standards outside of the industry will not question an edition. When this occurs, quality and ideologies of any scope could be considered the norm.

The word Urtext has origins in Germany. According to American music critic Harold C. Schonberg, the original term came from the ancient Babylonian city of Ur. The German prefix is used to define something that is original and very old. Urtext editions became more prominent around the1920’s as the number of publishers increased.

For the purpose of clarity in this paper, an Urtext Edition in classical music is a printed version that is intended to be the original, or as exact as possible, based upon the composer’s original intent, without modifications or additions. There are other kinds of editions distinct from Urtext such as facsimile and interpretive editions. These will be discussed later in this paper.

In addition, most musicians gain an awareness of who publishes a particular work by looking at the cover design and/or printed music. Publishers have created their own style by using unique fonts and page layouts, allowing the user to know who the publisher is. Music does not all look the same. Each publisher has their own rules as to how their product should look. For example, whether you are performing a Urtext Edition or arrangement, if you look at a score from Alfred, Warner Bros, Ludwig or other major publisher, they all appear different as the page pagination, size, fonts and symbols are different. Many use cover and artwork designs that musicians have come to know and there is everything in-between. Can you recognize these European publishers by looking at their covers?

While the definition of Urtext may seem clear, there are circumstances in which the contingency of time has affected editions. For example, musical notation and symbols used in the Baroque period can have

different meanings as performance practices have changed. Thus, a work by J. S. Bach could be performed differently on modern instruments. To avoid this dilemma, baroque instruments would need to be used and performance practices of the period would need to be followed. The plethora of examples provided in this paper come from different instrumental genres and time periods and include piano works, orchestral and wind-band scores.

We begin with a European publisher that has had a long history creating Urtext works. The Bärenreiter Urtext editions are based on musical text of what they call Complete Editions. Their works by Bach, Berlioz, Handel, Haydn, Mozart and Schubert are available in Urtext performance editions.

The company publishes Urtext editions of major works which do not derive from complete editions. For example, the symphonies of Ludwig van Beethoven, Jonathan Del Mar and the Mendelssohn Overtures by Christopher Hogwood are known as Critical Editions.

In addition, the company has violin concertos including those by Brahms (edited by Clive Brown), Mendelssohn (edited by Larry Todd), as well as the publication series of L'Opéra français, which comprises French operas composed between the revolution and the First World War era. A wide range of piano editions and chamber music focusing on French repertoire are also published. Works include Urtext editions by Claude Debussy's "Children's Corner", "Deux Arabesques", "Pour le piano" and "Suite bergamasque", Frescobaldi's "Organ and Keyboard Works" and chamber music for strings by Gabriel Fauré and César Franck.[2]

The German music publisher Henle Verlag specializes in critical editions from Austro-German music literature. Many of their piano score covers are blue. The music paper thickness is heavier than competitor publishers making it more durable to withstand the daily rehearsal rigors of a pianist. Also, the notational spacing of music is larger, allowing performers to be able to read the music easier.

Publishers often include historical content of the composer and back story of the work itself. Compositional information can include performance ideologies which create problems in today's contemporary era as performance practices have changed over time. However, this can be the most important part of the work and something to be taken seriously.

Another important element found in Henle's publications is something called a 'Critical Report.' They include a listing of sources from which the work was developed, an evaluation of sources, and different readings including a list of errata, corrections made over the works history.[3]

The difficulty in creating an Urtext edition is that the editors must strip away all previous facets that where added over the years or centuries. This can be an arduous task. Further, the older the music the harder it becomes. The Baroque period (1600-1750) is a good example where many of J. S. Bach's manuscripts have been lost. What he wrote may never be known, so the publishing editor must make changes and additions that reflect Bach's intent when publishing an unknown or incomplete work.

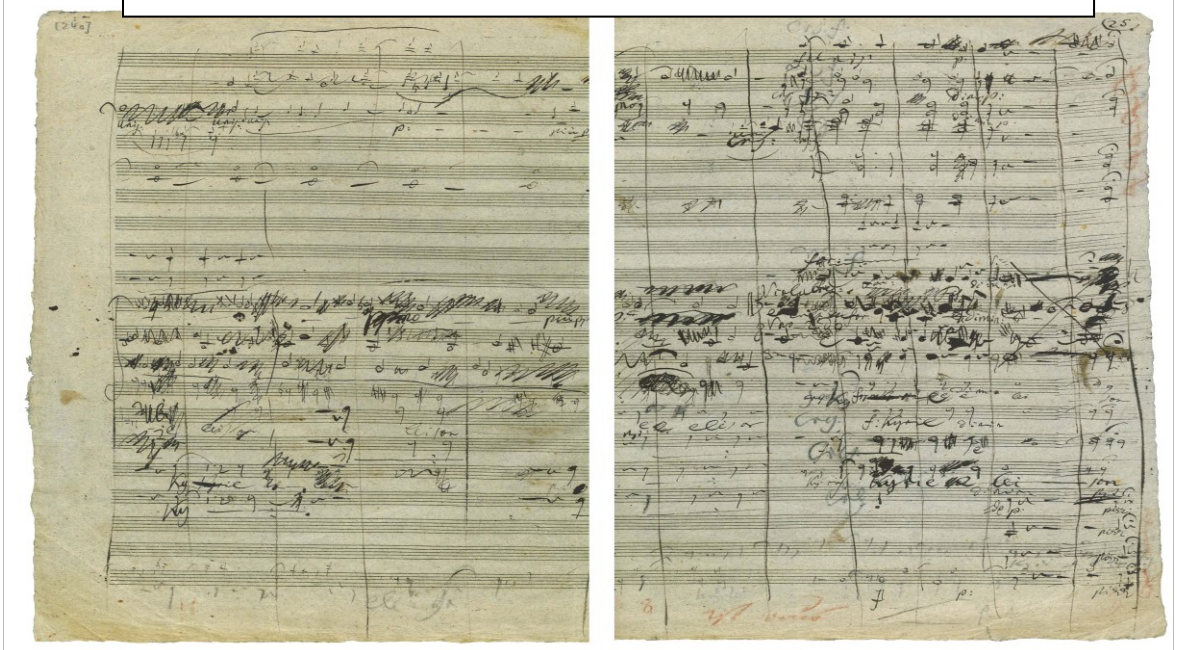
Publishers must know the rules and nuances of specific musical periods before they decide to create, or recreate a composer's work. For additional information on understanding composer scoring in the Baroque period, and how they wrote and used instruments of the period, readers should consider downloading a free in-depth study on Bach's wind music titled: "Johann Sebastian Bach's Wind/Brass Instruments and Scoring Techniques,"[4] written by Dan Rager.

An important source when creating a Urtext edition is finding the autograph manuscript produced in the composer's own hand. It becomes the signature proof needed to ensure authenticity. Secondly, copies made by the composer's students or assistants, or first published editions, and other early editions are crucial.

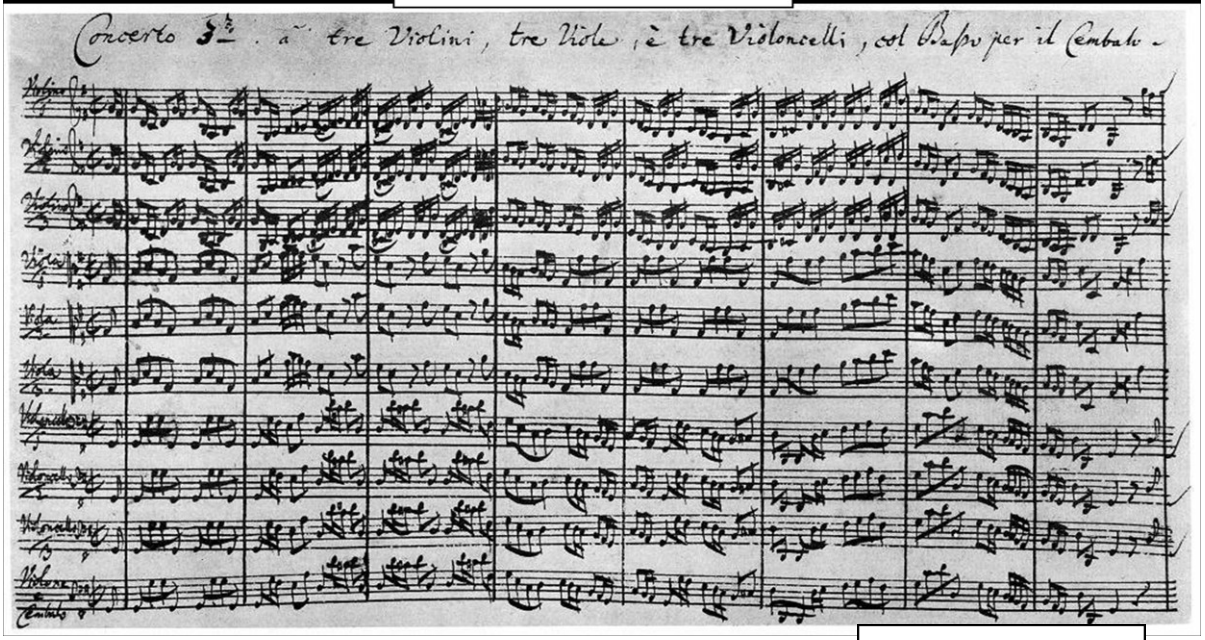
In the case of penmanship of a composer, reading their writing can often be a challenge. Beethoven is a good example. His handwriting was not only poor, he made constant changes to the point where his scores and parts where not legible. There is a 198 page book on this very subject titled

"Beethoven's Sketches: An Analysis of His Style Based on a Study of His Sketch-Books" which tries to interpret his original meaning. Included is his 5th symphony that was very different from the final version.[5] The following examples are original scores in the composers own handwriting.

Beethoven's original handwriting. He constantly made changes to the music.



J. S. Bach's manuscript

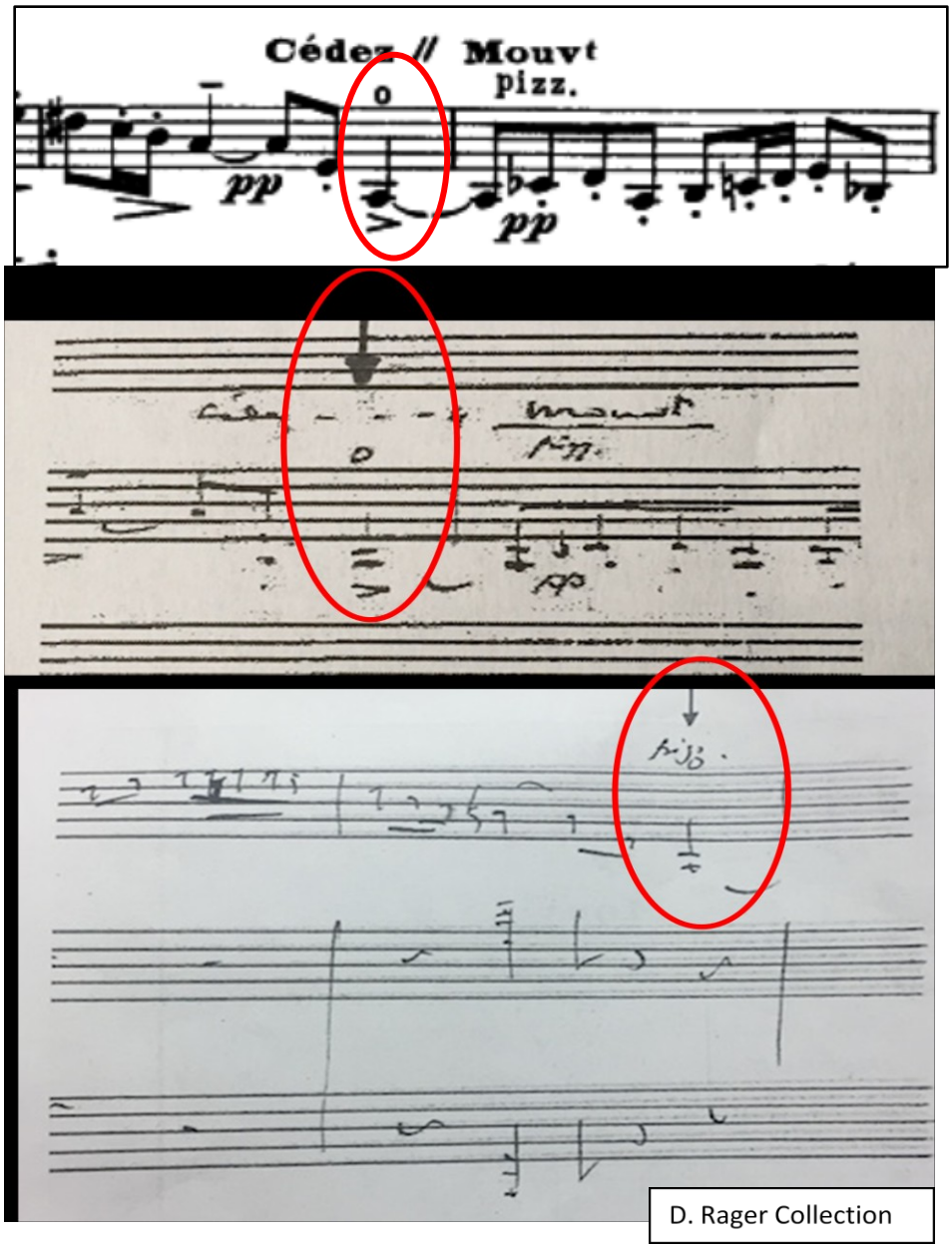


D. Rager Collection

Another situation of difficulty arises when a passage of music is repeated or contains a similar section mirroring the first idea. This can occur throughout a long work or in sections or movements. This is known as recapitulation and is used in most forms of music including concerto, sonata and rondo form. To complicate matters, dynamic markings, accents, bow and breath marks or other markings of expression found in one location in the source material are missing in analogous locations. However true, composers up until the 19th century did not usually use these elements. For example, when Bach wanted a section to be played louder, he doubled or tripled the part in other instruments automatically making the important theme more prominent.

Editors often remove such markings because they may have been added after the first publication. A Urtext edition should point out the markings found in parallel passages.[6] This leaves the use of such elements up to the performer and how they will perform the work. A common response to many of these issues is to provide written notes or footnotes in the score or part(s) for the musician.

One might have the idea that deciding whether something is correct or wrong is easy. For publishers such as Bärenreiter, Ludwig or Henle, there is no such thing as a right interpretation, but a correct interpretation of a score based upon the composer's ultimate text. There are often no answers to critical questions. Thus, decisions must be made. For urtext publishers, musical scholars who edit such works justify their decisions in their Critical Report or in the footnotes of the text with cited sources.



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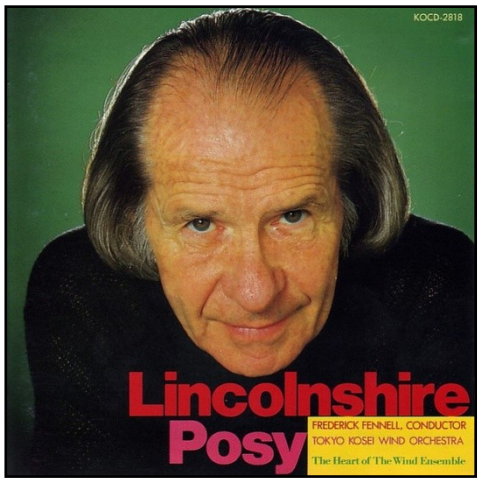
This next example shown on the right is one where the performance practices have changed over the past century. In Debussy's Cello Sonata, he wrote an "o" above the low 'C' note. In our modern time, this means to play the note on the open string. On a cello, the 'C3' is the lowest note possible. This asks the question, why did Debussy mark the "o" into the score when the performer would automatically play it that way. However, when we look at performance practices of his period, the "o" in Debussy's France meant to play a left hand pizzicato (pizz.). Today, we mark this expression with a "+". Articulations and signs we use today had a completely different meaning to composers in the 19th century. Many performers today play this music and other great works by the masters incorrectly because they have not learned the performance styles from the

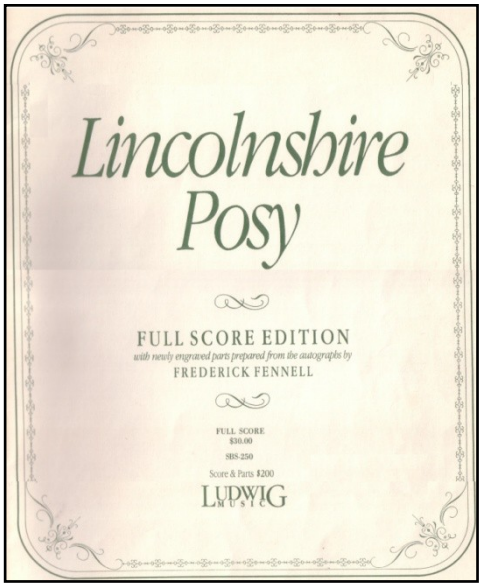
period in which the music was written.



Frederick Fennell's recording of Lincolnshire Posy, performed by the Tokyo Kosei Winds

A final example comes from the wind-band genre on Percy Grainger's Lincolnshire Posy. This six movement work was written in 1937 and published by G. Schirmer, Inc. Grainger wrote each movement at different locations over time. His handwriting was not always clear. When the engraver engraved the first published edition it was full of errors. An errata sheet was added to the work so directors knew the problem spots. One would ask why there were so many errors. Seventy years later when Dr. Frederick Fennell decided to create a new error free edition, nearly 650 errors were discovered. It wasn't until the final 6th edition that Fennell felt he had accomplished an error free edition. Ludwig Music Publishing would hold the most editions on this monumental work.

There are many reasons why there were so many mistakes in the original Schirmer edition. Simply, the engraver could not make-out Graingers handwriting. For example, Grainger traveled by train when he could. On one trip, he went to the last passenger car on the train which happened to be empty. He put a blank piece of manuscript paper on each seat making each seat a different instrument. He had the third movement of Lincolnshire Posy in his head and wrote out the parts from memory. As the train bounced up and down, Grainger wrote the parts from each seat. This caused his writing to smear on the pages. The engraver had trouble discerning the difference between accents, slurs and ties. Many notes were unclear as they could be an 'F' or 'G', or 'B' or 'C' etc. From this, the engraver did his best and Schirmer published it. This author had the opportunity to edit along with Fennell on the final version of the Lincolnshire Posy. The parts and score where typeset by hand and the corrections were also made by hand. No computer programs were used in this Critical Edition. Footnotes and liner notes were included in the score for conductors and musicians to read.



I mentioned Facsimile editions earlier and want to explain how they are used in academia. A facsimile is when a publisher recreates a music composition with perfect detail, such as a copy of a photograph taken from the original, whatever that happens to be. They are usually published in limited quantities and have appeal to collectors as the work may be memorable and have aesthetic value. Musicologists and others in research often value facsimiles in research and academic publishing when an original edition cannot be found.

The second non-Urtext edition I mentioned is the Interpretive Edition. However idealistic, this offers the editor's personal opinion on how a work should be performed. The meaning of this term is completely opposite of the Urtext edition where the performer is given an exact definition (instruction) on how to perform a work. Indicated markings are provided in the score for dynamics, articulation, bowing and other forms of musical expression. These supplement or replace those written by the composer.

There are extreme cases where interpretive editions have deliberately altered the composer's notes or even deleted entire passages.[7] During the 19th and early 20th centuries, several famous performing musicians provided interpretive editions such as Harold Bauer, Artur Schnabel, and Ignacy Paderewski. Before recorded music, facsimile editions were often the only way that students could obtain inspiration from the performing practice of leading artists.

A compromise between Urtext and interpretive editing is an edition in which the editor's additions are typographically distinguished from the composer's own markings. Often these editions are particularly useful for the study of early music, where the interpretation of music notation can pose difficulties. The editor marks the score using parentheses, size, grayscale or detail in accompanying prose.

In conclusion, Urtext Editions and other forms of editions can be a double-edged sword. Occasionally, publishers create editions that may not be authentic or what the musician thought they were getting. So-called titles using the word Urtext on the cover combined with company profits can often create grey areas, leaving the interpretive truth of a musical work up to the eyes of the beholder. In the end, Urtext Editions are and will continue to be the closest edition connected to the composer, leaving the musician and listener one seat away from them.

References

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6) Bärenreiter, (1AD). What does "Urtext" mean? Retrieved January 15, 2020, from https://www.baerenreiter.com/en/focus/what-is-baerenreiter-urtext/.
7) Example: Harold Bauer deleted many passages from his edition of Franz Schubert's B flat major piano sonata; for an appreciative 1919 review by Richard Aldrich.