

## FINGERINGS IN 'URTEXT' EDITIONS

By

Malcolm Bilson

(this article appeared in INTERNATIONAL PIANO in 2008)

In the March-April and May-June 2007 numbers of IP Murray McLachlan offers fine and indeed healthy advice on the general subject of fingering. After all the fingers are, whatever one's technical approach, the last element that contact the key, much as our two feet are what actually make contact with the ground, whether we walk in a goose-step or in a slouching manner. But while it is clear that what happens above those fingertips (hand, arm, shoulder, sitting posture, etc.) will have a significant effect on that 'last element' of contact, fingerings also considerably influence the musical gesture of a given passage. Thus McLachlan's ingenious fingering solutions for bars 42-45 from the *Presto* third movement of the Beethoven Sonata in F, Opus 10/2

The image shows a musical score for the third movement of Beethoven's Sonata in F major, Opus 10, No. 2. It consists of two staves, treble and bass clef. The music is in 2/4 time and F major. The first two bars are marked piano (p) and the last two bars are marked forte (f). Fingerings are indicated by numbers 1-5 above or below notes. In the first bar, the right hand has fingerings 1, 1, 1, 2, 1, 2 and the left hand has 1, 1, 1, 2, 1, 2. In the second bar, the right hand has 1, 1, 1, 2, 1, 2 and the left hand has 1, 1, 1, 2, 1, 2. In the third bar, the right hand has 5, 2, 1, 2 and the left hand has 1, 1, 1, 2, 1, 2. In the fourth bar, the right hand has 1, 1, 1, 2, 1, 2 and the left hand has 1, 1, 1, 2, 1, 2.

Example 1 - Beethoven Sonata in F, Opus 10\2\iii  
fingerings suggested by Murray McLachlan

which he calls 'maverick eccentricity in the name of characterization' will (on a modern piano I presume) have a very different dramatic effect than the one I strive for on my 1790 Walter-type fortepiano, with its extremely light quick action and more transparent tone. A good urtext edition should allow, perhaps even encourage, both interpretations. Yet the very presence of fingerings (or bow-marks in string music) can impinge radically on interpretive questions (McLachlan's fingerings in Example 1 render his execution distinctly audible!).

What is meant by the word 'Urtext'? The German prefix 'ur' means 'original' or 'first' and can be applied to any noun. In the January-February number of PI Barry Cooper points out, however (p. 43), that "the whole concept of an 'urtext'...implies some mythical perfect text that never really existed". Most 'urtexts' are in fact conflated versions from various contemporary sources. Yet those that call themselves by that title do purport to endeavour to give the composer's intentions as faithfully as possible, with no intervention of

the type we all know from, for example, the Beethoven Sonata editions of Bülow, Riemann or Schnabel.<sup>1</sup> In this article I refer to urtext editions in that generic sense.

One of the most astonishing and to me quite incomprehensible aspects of the majority of urtext editions is that the editorial work is done by a scholar, while the fingerings (or bowings in string music) are done by someone else, as if the two are unrelated. Examples below will show just how far this discrepancy can go. But there are further problems, in my opinion, with putting fingerings into *any* edition: there is often simply not enough information to make the fingering musically significant. Here is a fine example:



Example 2 - Mozart, Sonata in Bb, K. 333\i

Many editions, ur- or not, give the upper fingerings, a virtual guarantee that the appoggiatura c''-b-flat' will not be preceded by a silence. All sources from Mozart's time insist that an appoggiatura be preceded by an *articulatory silence* to set it off; none suggest that the upbeat be run directly into the downbeat. The lower fingering, as in this urtext, is of course better suited to realizing the little break, but haven't we all learned, in our scale practicing, to cross over the thumb evenly and inaudibly? In order for this lower fingering to render the passage different from what it would be with the upper one, *more information* would have to be given, namely that one *not cross* over the thumb but rather move the entire hand to the left.<sup>2</sup>

Now some readers may not like what I suggest here, claiming that it would make the phrase 'choppy' rather than expressive, and in most performances on modern pianos one indeed hears no such slight break before bar 1. But then what difference musically is there between the two fingerings; why is one better than the other? And more importantly why is this not interpretive meddling just as the changing of slurs or the insertion of a hairpin?

<sup>1</sup> Such editions, incidentally, though today generally in disfavor, can reveal much about the history of Beethoven performance since the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century.

<sup>2</sup> This is very easy to demonstrate, yet virtually impossible to describe in writing. The almost imperceptible break, like the glottal stop before a consonant in speech, must of course not create a hiccup...

Kenneth Hamilton describes a master class at an important US conservatory where the entire group of piano students found a late 19<sup>th</sup> century, heavily edited edition of the Beethoven Piano Sonatas preferable to an Urtext because “it gives you more ideas how to play them.”<sup>3</sup> Many young musicians, then, seem able to read Hans von Bülow’s directions, whereas no one has taught them how to read those provided by Beethoven. I claim that if we understand their meaning Beethoven’s clear early 19<sup>th</sup> century directions for execution can actually provide *more* precise information for details of execution than do Bülow’s, yet to my knowledge no conservatory or music school in the world has a course on how to read such notations.<sup>4</sup>

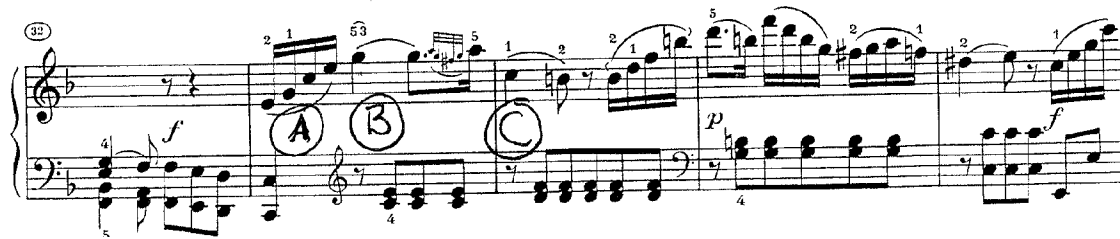
If we are going to use urtext editions instead of those earlier heavily edited ones, it is imperative that we learn how to read them. Some composers, like François Couperin in the 18<sup>th</sup> century and many composers today, give lengthy instructions on just how their notation is to be read, but there are no such instructions from Haydn, Mozart, Beethoven, Mendelssohn or Brahms; it was expected that persons at the time would know the ‘rules’ and ‘pronounce the words’ correctly. Music in the late 18<sup>th</sup> and early 19<sup>th</sup> centuries was considered akin to speech, and as such needed to be enunciated properly. This short article cannot begin to address the common usage of notation at that time, but a few everyday grammar rules understood by everyone at the time will suffice to show how different they were from those generally understood today: 1. No note is *ever to be held its full value* unless it is either under a slur or has the word *ten.* over it. 2. All notes under a slur taper, with the first slightly stressed and the last one soft and released. 3. Higher notes, dissonant notes, etc. are to be brought out over lower or consonant ones.

Here is an example of fingering that *positively guarantees* that Mozart’s clear articulatory expressive marks will simply be run over with a smooth legato. This fingering is identical in three ‘urtext’ editions; in all three the musical editing was done by a scholar studying the sources and the fingering by someone else.

---

<sup>3</sup> Hamilton, Kenneth. *After the Golden Age – Romantic Pianism and Modern Performance*. Oxford University Press, 2008, p. 23.

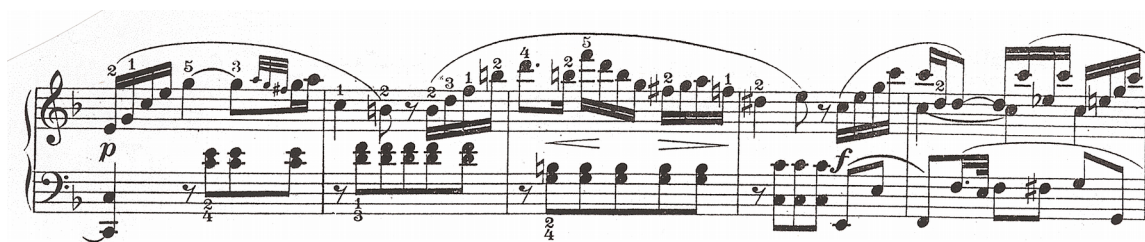
<sup>4</sup> I have argued for years that having urtext editions without instruction on how to read them has rendered much music-making dry and rather inflexible. Proper reading of (say) Beethoven’s scores can actually lead to far more musical and passionate performances than one might suspect. See DVD “Knowing the Score” at [malcolmbilson.com](http://malcolmbilson.com)



Example 3 - Mozart, Sonata in C, K. 309, bars 32-36

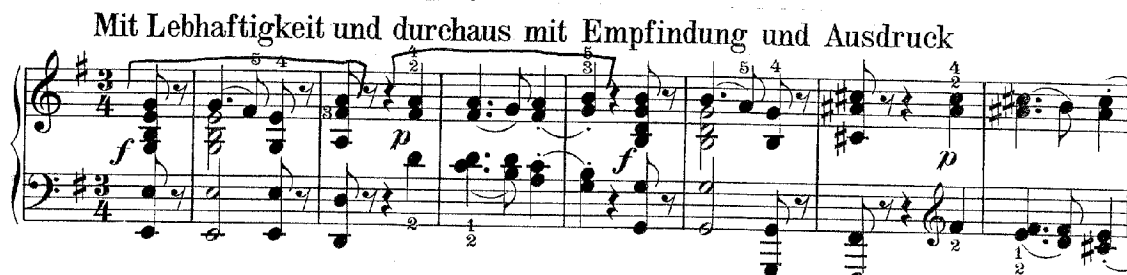
Mozart's clear (and expressive!) articulation would suggest that the first four notes (A) be played 1-2-4-5, ending with the weakest note played by the weakest finger (although the figure is also rising; a downward arpeggio on the same four notes would, of course, taper differently). Using the third finger at letter B (by moving the hand, not crossing!) would give the natural small break that makes that note expressive (in speech one doesn't approach an expressive word without articulating the first consonant). I would again use third finger at letter C, causing the leap downward of a 5<sup>th</sup> from g'' to c'' to take slightly *more* time than the break before letter B. Try singing this passage; it takes more time to negotiate a 5<sup>th</sup> than a 3<sup>rd</sup>; all of this makes the music speak more naturally; it is the typical lively surface of virtually all of Mozart's singing passages.

Once again there are doubtless readers who, urtext or no, would like to hear this passage in a more legato style; for them the fingerings provided are preferable to those I suggest. But the question remains: What is the purpose of an urtext edition, when the fingerings distinctly countermand the expressive indications given us by the composer? Aren't we then better off with an edition where the articulation and fingering are in concert, as in this late 19<sup>th</sup> century copy I found in my library (unfortunately with the title page missing - is it Hans von Bülow... Sigmund Lebert...?)



Example 4, idem. late 19<sup>th</sup> century edition

Let's look at what I consider an example more radically violated by fingerings that countermand the composer's directions:



Example 5 - Beethoven, Sonata in e, Opus 90*i*

Note how Beethoven states the same little figure (bracketed) in as opposite a manner as possible: first as a strong gesture with loud, short notes, then as a gentle one with soft, longer notes. There is only *one* execution indication that remains identical in both: the *slur between beats one and two*.<sup>5</sup>

How might one finger this little figure in order to realize Beethoven's articulation? First of all, the minim chord in the left hand of bar 1 *must not* be held its full value; there is no *ten.* over it to warrant such an execution.<sup>6</sup> If the minim (half-note) is lifted just before the quaver (quarter-note) f# is struck the passage is easy to execute as written with the fingering 5-4 5, and the f# will sound weaker than the g' as the second note (release) of a two-note slur. Yet every version I have consulted gives an identical fingering to the one in this *Heinrich Schenker* edition.

Am I suggesting that only I, among everyone for the last 100+ years, understand this (according to me) simple and direct notation? Not at all; many performers and scholars recognize this, yet why do no editions (revised by xxx, fingerings by yyy...) reflect it through

<sup>5</sup> There are actually three clearly distinguished executions of this 'germ motive' during the movement. The two-note slur version is seen in every instance from bars 84-100 in the development section, but then, in the rather unsure, even confused, lead-in to the recapitulation at bars 133-144 Beethoven slurs all three notes together. In the codetta at bars 232-236 the figure has no slurs, indicating in the notation of the time that *none* of the notes be connected. Each of these executions gives a different *Affekt* or tone of voice; indeed this motive is the nucleus for the psychological development of the entire movement. Both the Bülow and Schnabel editions slur bars 232-236 as at the beginning, and Arrau suggests it by a dotted line. In all good urtext editions, however, these articulatory differences are shown clearly, yet I have found none with fingerings other than those here, guaranteeing that all will be articulated both wrongly and identically.

<sup>6</sup> I realize that this may seem a revolutionary concept, yet was a basic rule in the late 18<sup>th</sup> and early 19<sup>th</sup> centuries and is a vitally important part of Beethoven's musical vocabulary. Cf. for example the beginnings of Opus 2/3/ii where the lower chords are not marked connected, and Opus 7/ii where they are clearly slurred. No single issue is more important for the proper performance of music of this period than the length of unmarked notes, and I treat it in detail in the DVD referred to in footnote 4.

their fingerings? My suggested fingering for this little figure would seem peculiar without the shortening of the minim chord, a concept likely to be rejected by many reading this article who have been taught their entire lives to hold notes out fully.

The *most* important transformations in musical performance occurred across the 19<sup>th</sup> century as instruments, sizes of halls and performing styles changed drastically, from a speaking rhetorical style towards a style predicated on long legato lines. These changes prompted new editions to show how ‘we do it nowadays’<sup>7</sup>. Those basic performing parameters introduced from about 1850 have persisted across the 20<sup>th</sup> century and are still to be heard in most concerts and recordings today, in spite of the tendency in the last half-century or so to go back to original notations and what is generally called *Werktreue*.

It is not sufficient to simply get rid of the editions of Bülow and Riemann (who, according to those conservatory students, told us better ‘what to do’). If we want to be more faithful to the language and spirit of earlier composers, urtext editions are surely the place to start but we must also learn how to read them as understood by composers and performers of those periods. Fingerings are inevitably the final realization of musical concepts, and thus present a *limitation* to the real usefulness of the particular edition. I would not put my fingering of the Beethoven passage in Example 1 in an urtext edition, nor I imagine would Mr. McLachlan his – each one renders the musical concept of the other more difficult to achieve.

The best urtext edition should represent the composer’s efforts to show us what his music is about; it is not a set of directions to be followed blindly. Each of us has the responsibility and the privilege of digging in and trying to understand the music as best we can – it’s called *Interpretation*. Too many students are unfortunately told by their teachers not to indulge in such an activity, and I find that a bleak outlook for the future of musical performance. Perhaps the saddest commentary about those conservatory students who preferred the late 19<sup>th</sup> century editions of Beethoven was that they *wanted* to be told what to do.

I am passionate about using the best edition I can get, the one that gets me as close as possible to the composer. But composers as a rule want their music to be loved and understood and performed by passionate players who ‘take the ball and run with it’. A true urtext edition can be the best starting point for those who know how to read

<sup>7</sup> In a typical note from the preface to Sigmund Lebert’s edition of the Mozart Piano Sonatas from the 1860s we read “The signs of phrasing and articulation, so necessary to correctly indicate the structure of a composition, are carefully amplified in this edition. The utter inadequacy of such notation in the manuscripts of Mozart’s time was a deplorable practice of that period. This was undoubtedly due to instrumental limitations.” Many such quotes are to be found from the 1850s onwards.

it and who are truly conversant with the composer's style (whatever we think that may be). Fingerings and bowings, exactly like altered slurrings or dynamic markings, are an interference, not an aid, in this process.

Malcolm Bilson  
Ithaca, New York