Do We Really Know How to Read Urtext Editions? Part II

By Malcolm Bilson

In the August 1995 issue I considered the length of certain individual notes in the works of Mozart and Beethoven. The proper reading of the notation of a given composer is surely at the heart of any performance study, yet such questions as the length individual notes are to be held, or their degree of heaviness or lightness, are rarely considered in most conservatories. Although treatises of the period state clearly that unmarked notes are virtually never to be held full length, in most modern performances quarter, half, or eighth-notes are held for their full value (unless they are played staccato); interpretation generally concerns itself with matters of color and rubato.

The chapter on Performance (*Vortrag*) in Daniel Gottlob Türk's (1789) *Klavierschule* (Trans. and edited by Raymond Haagh. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1982) is divided into two sections: Execution (*Ausführung*) and Expression (*Ausdruck*). We can easily understand these concepts. Expression is the deeper understanding of the meaning of the music; Execution defines the raw details (length of notes, speed or tempo, rhythms, and so on). Proper execution is, of course, the only way to realize deeper interpretations. For example, if one were to execute the opening bars of the *Appassionata* forte, detached, and with sharply dotted rhythms, such an execution would be at variance with Beethoven's indications, and with the generally accepted expressive concept of the meaning of that movement.

In this article I would like to explore an aspect of performance that lies somewhere between the reading of basic notes and rhythms, on the one hand, and the ultimate Expression of the piece, on the other. A familiar example is the Viennese waltz rhythm, which today is still played with a sort of snap towards the second beat of each bar, followed by a late and weak third beat (this tradition comes presumably from Strauss' own day, although we can't be sure it hasn't changed somewhat since that time). If one plays a Viennese waltz with three even beats, it could be said that the minimum requirement for such a piece has not been met. It is important to note that the "Viennese snap" is merely the basis of the waltz; it does not say anything about the ultimate Expression. Lack of the proper rhythm will assure, I believe, a poor performance, but the proper use of it will not guarantee a good one.

In an astonishing article on this very subject, Claudia von Canon states that: "Two summers ago Johann Strauss would have been 150 years old. Yet while in recent years the heroes of sesqui-, bi-, tri-, and quadricentennials have had their works performed all over the world, the Strauss birthday was mainly a local celebration, although *in conspectu mundi*, especially during the Vienna Festival. This is the way it should be. For it needs a born Viennese to conduct these waltzes and polkas and the players had better be native too. Let me hasten to add that this is by no means a chauvinistic statement. It does not apply to the music of my homeland's other composers. Leontyne Price's Donna Anna is unforgettable. Richter plays Schubert exquis-

Allegro non troppo.

pp

mf

dim.

xample 1: Prokofiev: Gavotte in F#-minor, Mm. 1-8.

ely. And there are few greater musical pleasures than hearing and seeing Leonard Bernstein conduct a Haydn Symphony. Yet the same conductor has recorded the *Radetsky March* with the New York Philharmonic Orchestra and the piece is hardly recognizable, though all the notes are there and all the rests." (19th Century Music, Vol II, No. 1. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1978, p. 82).

Ms. von Canon seems to believe that Strauss' music requires an uneven, rhythmically and dynamically inflected rendition, while the musics of the other composers mentioned are to be played in an even, uninflected manner, typical of today's smooth style.

Such a statement leaves me stupefied! Does von Canon really believe that only Strauss' music gets inflection? Does she believe that up to, say July 23, 1849, all music in Vienna was played evenly and uninflected (Richter's Schubert, whatever one may think of it, is about as smooth as one can find), and that suddenly Johann Strauss decided at 11 AM that morning that everybody was going to "get swinging," and from then on all Viennese music got a nice lilt?

All 18th-century tutors, with no exception, devote the greater part of their sections on performance to details of how one must play "unevenly." We are always told that music is like speech and, as such, must be inflected with stressed and unstressed, longer and shorter syllables. Even, uninflected playing simply did not exist; it would have been considered completely unnatural. The idea that rhythms like those of the Viennese waltz were special or new in mid-19th century cannot possibly be correct. Yet how far back do they go—to Schubert, to Mozart, or even further?

The 19th century is less communicative about these matters than the 18th, for most tutors of the 19th century concentrate on technical proficiency, with an occasional observation about performance matters. In our own century, however, there is a remark[illegible] resource that until quite recently ha[illegible]n for the most part overlooked—rec[illegible]ngs.

We have many reco[illegible]ings of Prokofiev, Bartók, Rachmaninoff, and others playing their own music. Many of us may have taken a recording of Bartók, for example, sat down with a score and said, "Let's see how Bartók plays this piece." But there is another, I believe more profitable, way to use such recordings. "The performance on the recording represents what Bartók heard. Let's see how he managed to write it down!" Just how efficient are our methods for notating the kinds of flexibilities inherent in Bartók's music? (Bartók's playing of his own and others' music is a model of flexibility and freedom; his complete piano recordings are available on Hungaroton and are marvellously instructive.)

Let's look at an example. I am grateful to Richard Taruskin for bringing to my attention Prokofiev's own 1932 recording of his little *Gavotte in F#-minor*, written in 1918. (See more on this subject in *Text and Act*, Taruskin, Richard. Oxford University Press, 1995, esp. pp. 187-191.) See example 1.

In Prokofiev's rendering of this work, he delays the downbeat of M. 1 considerably, and plays the little grupetti all faster than written; all the two quarter-note upbeats he plays heavy and delayed, and so on. Such a rendition, it seems to me, is just as characteristic as the particular three-four in the Viennese waltz, and it might be fair to say that if one plays this piece with evenly spaced beats and even eighth-notes, one has not met the primary requirements of the music, *at least according to what Prokofiev presumably thought the music was about.* This is an important point, for Bernstein's evenly spaced version of Strauss may give pleasure to many listeners, and as such can be considered an "authentic" rendition on its own terms, von Canon's opinions notwithstanding.

But the question will be asked, "How could we possibly know about these rhythmic inflections without having Prokofiev's recording? Are such subtleties in the score?" It is my belief that such inflections are indeed encoded in the notation, if we know how to read them. Prokofiev is playing his gavotte

Agitato

Example 2: Brahms: Rhapsody in B-minor, Op. 79, #1, Mm. 1-7.

very much in accordance with instructions in 18th-century tutors. In a gavotte one must hesitate before the downbeat of the first measure, otherwise a listener might not understand that the first two beats are upbeats. In addition to hesitating before the downbeat, we are told to stress it as well, with a light accent. Grupetti are usually to be played a bit later and faster than written, and so forth, all of which is very much in evidence in Prokofiev's rendition.

It seems to be a general truth that long notes were to be stressed and held a little longer, and short notes (or groups of short notes) played a bit faster than written. Such rules appear strange at first and, when one tries them out, one often exaggerates their effect. Yet in Prokofiev's rendition they are subtle and colorful and have never seemed odd to anyone for whom I have played the recording. But let's go back to earlier repertoire for which we have no recorded evidence from the composer. Here's the beginning of the Brahms B-minor Rhapsody, Op. 79, #1. See example 2.

I have twice heard this work performed live recently, by two of the world's most famous and excellent pianists. Both executed the eighth-notes quite evenly, in spite of what I see as Brahms' very specific notational clues to the contrary. The word *agitato* appears alone; normally it would be used as a modifier for *allegro*, *presto*, and so on. Here Brahms gives it by itself, thus apparently assigning it greater importance than usual. Whatever the rules for the proper rendering of any sentence, if an actor is to say it in an agitated fashion, normal inflection will have to give way to a more unevenly accentuated one. Let's put a text to Brahms' notes. (I have purposely chosen a rather silly one, so that it cannot become "obligato," as so many such texts do.)

"Hea-ven knows I love my kids, but some-times they get on my nerves, oh so much on my nerves!"

Try saying (not singing to the music) this sentence in an agitated manner. If music is like speech (and we are told that it is in all 18th-century German sources, and we know that Brahms subscribed to this notion), then the word *agitato* must refer to a similar type of rendition for the music as it would for a written text. (For more on Brahms' performance ideas, see "Brahms and the Definitive Text," Pascall, Robert; in *Brahms: Biographical, Documentary and Analytical Studies*, edited by Robert Pascall, Cambridge, 1983.) In addition, look at the left hand. Brahms might well have written it thus:

Writing it late (starting on the second eighth-note, and reinforcing that weak beat with an octave) points unmistakably to an execution that virtually lunges in, probably a bit later and a bit faster than notated.

My point of view is that the two very fine pianists I heard perform this work did not come up to a minimum reading of the text, according to von Canon's definition for the Strauss waltzes. If the reader disagrees, he or she might refer back to the concept of playing the opening of the *Appassionata* forte, detached, and marcato. Such a reading of those bars might be in no way unmusical, and could easily be imagined as the beginning of a very fine and important composition, albeit one with quite another Expression than that which we generally assign to Opus 57/i. *Expression is revealed and made manifest through Execution.*

Let's turn now to a somewhat more varied example—the first page of the Mendelssohn *F#-minor Fantasy*, which I heard recently in a quite lovely but smooth, uninflected performance. See example 3.

Once again we find the word *agitato*, here attached to *con moto*. The music looks smooth enough and I think that, without the annotation from the composer, I might play it quite smoothly. There are the hairpin swells, however. On the face of it these seem normal, but perhaps in context they may suggest tempo fluctuations called for by the *agitato* mode. I believe the large swell in M. 3 could be an indication to rush at the

Con moto agitato.

Andante.

Example 3: Mendelssohn: F#-minor Fantasy, Op. 28, Mm. 1-31.

end of that bar into M. 4, slowing down again on descending. The same will be true for the small swells in Mm. 6 and 7; a somewhat lunging effect would seem appropriate. Is this realization what Mendelssohn wanted? One can never be sure, but to me it is sure that an even and smooth rendition of this introductory passage must be incorrect.

For our purposes the *andante* is even more interesting. I suggest that according to Mendelssohn's notation, no single bar (with the possible exception of M. 23) is notated evenly, if we know how to read the various indications before us. M. 9: There is no slur between beats 1 and 2. In the late 18th century this would clearly have indicated separation, but by Mendelssohn's day legato had become the norm. Besides, the pianos of Mendelssohn's time would make such breaks sound a bit hiccuppy, much as they do on modern pianos. A slur over the bar, on the other hand, would have indicated smooth connection and a tapering of the sound (much as the inflection of a single two-syllable word will be different than that for two one-syllable words, whether or not one takes a breath in between). The second beat of M. 9 is dotted and the general rule, which I would follow here, is to hold the first note somewhat longer and to play the little note somewhat shorter than written.

In M. 10 we see that the slur begins only on the second beat. Just as in the Prokofiev example, this presumably indicates a slightly later and slightly faster rendition, albeit not in Prokofiev's manner because the Expression here is so different from that of the other work, and that always has direct influence on execution. Nevertheless, this gruppeto seems to rush into the *sf* on beat 1 of M. 11 and M. 19. *Sforzando* probably means to hold the note somewhat longer, which would in turn shorten the three remaining eighth-notes. The downbeat of M. 12 will likewise be held a bit longer than written, but less so than the downbeat of M. 11, because a small accent indicates less holding than a *sf.* (There is considerable evidence to show that *sforzandi* often indicate length, not merely dynamic stress.) M. 12 could easily have been written as two quarter-notes under a slur, rather than a quarter and an eighth; a slur over two notes (often referred to as a "sigh" in 18th-century sources) indicates that the second is shorter and softer than the first. The present notation seems to indicate a still further "feminizing" (if one dares use this old-fashioned word) effect than would have been the case with two simple quarter-notes; the rest also suggests that we breathe before continuing.

M. 14 is similar to M. 11, but with no *sf* on the downbeat; it should therefore be played differently. Note the difference in notation between Mm. 15-16 on the one hand and Mm. 23-24 on the other. The slur over Mm. 15-16 is the only slur over two bars in the entire statement. A slur means diminuendo on the one hand but, on the other, the tones are rising (which almost always indicates more tone). This is a wonderful double effect, often used exquisitely by Mozart. Effects such as these are very sophisticated, and require the greatest art of the world's finest players, but who, before they can achieve them, *must realize that they are there.* I never had a teacher who imparted any of this information. Yet we know from the sources that such indications are no less important to musical expression than *allegro* or *forte* or *ritardando.*

Another aspect of notation documented in the sources, but rarely mentioned today, is punctuation. Both music and speech are written down, but there are important differences between the two systems of writing. In music notation, as we have been discussing here, inflections for weak and strong are indicated; in speech they are not. Thus Americans say ga-RAGE, while the British say GA-rage. When we read this word in a book or newspaper, there is no indication as to which stress the author may prefer. On the other hand, written speech has punctuation marks—commas, periods, semicolons, question marks, and exclamation points. These are absent in music notation, yet we are told that they must be supplied by the player for proper rendering of the musical argument. In order for us to supply them, we must know whether we are dealing with surprise, assertion, questioning, sighing, or merely breathing. Look, for example, at the second *Bagatelle*, in C Major, of Beethoven's Opus 33 set. Punctuation between the different measures is clearly the key to the meaning of each, and differing punctuation can alter the sense of this *Scherzo* radically. Yet punctuation marks are not given by Beethoven; our job is to divine them. And what an intriguing task it is!

We must return to the notion that it is our responsibility (and indeed our privilege) to turn a limited form of notation into living, breathing flexibility.

Although music notation is not exact, it can be highly suggestive. In recent years, scholarly articles abound on the proper execution of various kinds of dotted rhythms, whether to "overdot" or not, whether to align dotted notes to triplets, and so on. But what must be stressed even more than the possible correctness of the reading of any notation is the simple fact that between an eighth-note and a sixteenth-note (the one being twice as fast as the other) there is no other notational possibility. It does not seem reasonable that the only possible lengths for notes are those specifically given by our limited notational system. Indeed, what becomes abundantly clear from reading 18th-century sources (and by listening to recordings of 20th-century composers playing their own works) is that in a measure of four quarter-notes *each beat must be different,* in length as well as stress. There is enormous variety in the ways one can execute a dotted rhythm, and it was expected and demanded that such variety be developed in every fine player. There is no difference in the notation of a dotted rhythm that expresses languidness from one that is military and warlike. Yet the Execution of these must differ radically.

As a final example, I would like to propose a reading of the opening bars of Schumann's *Carnaval* that diverges from the one usually heard. See example 4.

When first learning this piece as a young man, I remember being somewhat perplexed by the eighth-note upbeats to M. 1 and M. 7, contrasting with the sixteenth-note upbeat of the subsequent measures. I knew about the rule pertaining to different dotted rhythms as applied to the opening of the *Sinfonia* in Bach's *C-minor Partita,* for example, where eighth-notes and sixteenth-notes are clearly equally short. But Schumann's use of eighth-note rhythms in the 1st and 2nd endings, where he easily could have dotted the rest and given sixteenths, gave me pause. I now see this as follows. This music is *maestoso* and, as such, will normally require a sharply dotted fanfare-like rhythm. If I start by playing the eighth-note upbeats somewhat sharper than written, then perceive that Schumann wants me to play *still sharper* as I go along, there may be the suggestion here of a gradual increase in sharpness all the way along the line! Such an increase can be suggested by such a notation, provided *that the player understand that a true eighth-note upbeat probably didn't exist!*

One may well counter, "But how would Schumann have notated what pianists normally play, if that was what

Préambule.

Quasi maestoso.

Pedale

Example 4: Schumann: Carnaval, Op. 9

he wanted?" My answer would be, "He wouldn't have wanted such a thing, for such a rhythm did not represent any sort of musical figure prevalent at that time." We have many examples in twentieth-century literature, for which we have recordings, to bear out such a statement. William Bolcom's wonderful *Graceful Ghost Rag* has evenly notated rhythms, but is played "swingingly" (dotted) in both his own and Paul Jacobs' recordings. Even playing of ragtime doesn't exist, just as three even beats don't exist for a Viennese waltz. My hypothesis in regard to the opening of *Carnaval* is based on the assumption that the rhythm on the page can't be what is genuinely called for. (A similar case is the opening of the first movement of the great Schubert *A-Major Sonata*, D959, where the eighth-notes at the end of Mm. 1 and 2 are surely to be played faster than written. This is made clear in M. 341 in the coda, which would not have sixteenth-notes had Schubert wanted the opening played as eighths. Playing eighth-notes here gives a rhythm that was, as far I can determine, not current in the Vienna of Schubert's day.)

I do not give these examples to convince other pianists that "this is the true reading of the passage," but rather to demonstrate what I feel we all must do—try to absorb different styles and learn to read different texts according to our understanding of these variant styles. In this regard, one may well ask Claudia von Canon what she thinks the proper left-hand rendition should be in a waltz of Chopin, who was not born Viennese.

The smooth and even playing heard in most performances today seems to be a product of the post-Second-World-War generation. It is probably an outgrowth of the so-called *Urtext* mentality, which was embarked on early in this century by serious musicians who wanted to do away with frivolity and arbitrariness in performance and desired to find the way back to the "original wishes of the composers." This movement has traveled many worthwhile and interesting paths: faithful editions, original instruments, performance practices of earlier times, and so on. But there have been deleterious effects as well—to my mind the most serious of all being the notion that Beethoven's original notation (as opposed to Bülow's or Schnabel's revisions) represents something that should be followed exactly, *with nothing added or subtracted.* That concept may be a good one in itself, but in the process we seem to have unlearned how to properly read Beethoven's notation, with all its suggestiveness and variety. Relearning it is, I feel, the next step to be taken, and is surely even more important than either good editions or proper instruments. To quote CPE Bach: "What comprises good performance? The ability through singing or playing to make the ear conscious of the true content and affect of a composition. ... The subject matter of performance is the loudness and softness of tones, touch, the snap, legato and staccato execution, the vibrato, arpeggiation, the holding of tones, the retard and accelerando. Lack of these elements or inept use of them makes a poor performance." (*Essay on the True Art of Playing Keyboard Instruments.* Trans. by W. Mitchell, W.W. Norton, 1949)

What Bach expresses here is that the best performer understands the deeper message inherent in the composition, and utilizes these "subject matters" (as he calls them) to make that message manifest. These basic principles need to be reestablished in conservatories and music schools. Modern players, even the finest of them, have limited the use of such "subject matters" to a previously unknown extent. Seven Urtext editions of the Mozart sonatas are now in print; we now need to begin to relearn how to read them. We must return to the notion that it is our responsibility (and indeed our privilege) to turn a limited form of notation into living, breathing flexibility. ⁜