Examining Editions of Beethoven's Piano Sonatas

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Does Choice of Edition Matter?

- Piano teachers and students are presented with many editions of Beethoven's Piano Sonatas.
- Choice matters because some editions represent the source material much more accurately than others. When the source material is clear, musicians can better understand the composer's intentions.

Types of Editions

- **Urtext** – Seeks to provide original text. However, what the original text is when primary sources differ is debatable.
- **Critical** – Provides text drawn from a combination of historical sources.
- **Interpretative** – Includes interpretative and performance advice, but such editorial additions can be difficult to distinguish from source material.

Textual Issues in Beethoven's Piano Sonatas

- **Problems with Extant Autographs** – Many of the autographs of the sonatas no longer exist. Available autographs provide unique interpretive insights, but also raise questions—for example, Beethoven's phrasing and articulation markings were often inconsistent or illegible.
- **Publishers' Errors in Original Editions** – The original publication of each sonata is an important source, but publishers often made engraving errors or intentional changes without Beethoven's approval.
- **Revision Process Between Autograph and First Edition** – Often, Beethoven himself was involved in revising the sonata between his autograph and the publisher's first edition. This makes it impossible to claim that either the autograph or first edition is the definitive source.

Our Process

- After comparing various editions of several sonatas, we decided to examine Op. 101 in depth. Both the autograph and original edition of Op. 101 exist; so we compared these original sources with seven editions readily available today. We attempted to trace differences from the sources and understand the basis for editorial decisions.

Conclusions

- Modern critical editions represent the original sources more accurately than older performance or interpretative editions. These modern editions include fewer editorial changes and additions that obscure the source material.
- For Op. 101, G. Henle's edition edited by Perahia and Gertsch offers the clearest representation of the original sources and the most insight into the decisions of the editors.

Revealing Differences

- These four examples represent four types of textual differences we found between the editions. They also illustrate differences of editorial approach.
- **Preservation of Beethoven's Notation** – Schenker and Perahia / Gertsch preserve different stem directions from the autograph in movement 1, measures 50 – 51.
- **Editorial Changes to Phrasing** – Many editors add a tie to movement 1, measure 64 even though a tie is not present in either autograph or original edition.
- **Editorial Changes to Pitches** – Schnabel changes the final F in the left hand of movement 2, measure 64 to an E to better match the pattern of the canon. However, both the autograph and original edition have an F.
- **Editorial Insight** – Perahia / Gertsch interprets the autograph to place the hairpin crescendo / diminuendo in movement 3, measure 18-19 in a different location.