New Urtext Edition: Beethoven Symphonies 1–9

Jonathan Del Mar *began his work of compiling new Urtext Editions of the nine Beethoven Symphonies in 1995. Until now the edition most commonly used by orchestras has been the Breitkopf & Härtel, made as long ago as 1862–4, and the past four years' research will result in the first complete scholarly edition of the Symphonies since that date. The method of research normally uses as a base the standard Breitkopf score, comparing this in every detail with all surviving sources, primarily from facsimiles and paper copies of microfilms; specific queries are then checked against the original manuscripts, held in repositories all over Europe. This project has been supported throughout the period by small research grants from the British Academy, and the final symphony, No.7, will appear in June 2000. Here Jonathan Del Mar reports on the preparation of Symphony No.5, which was published in November 1999.*

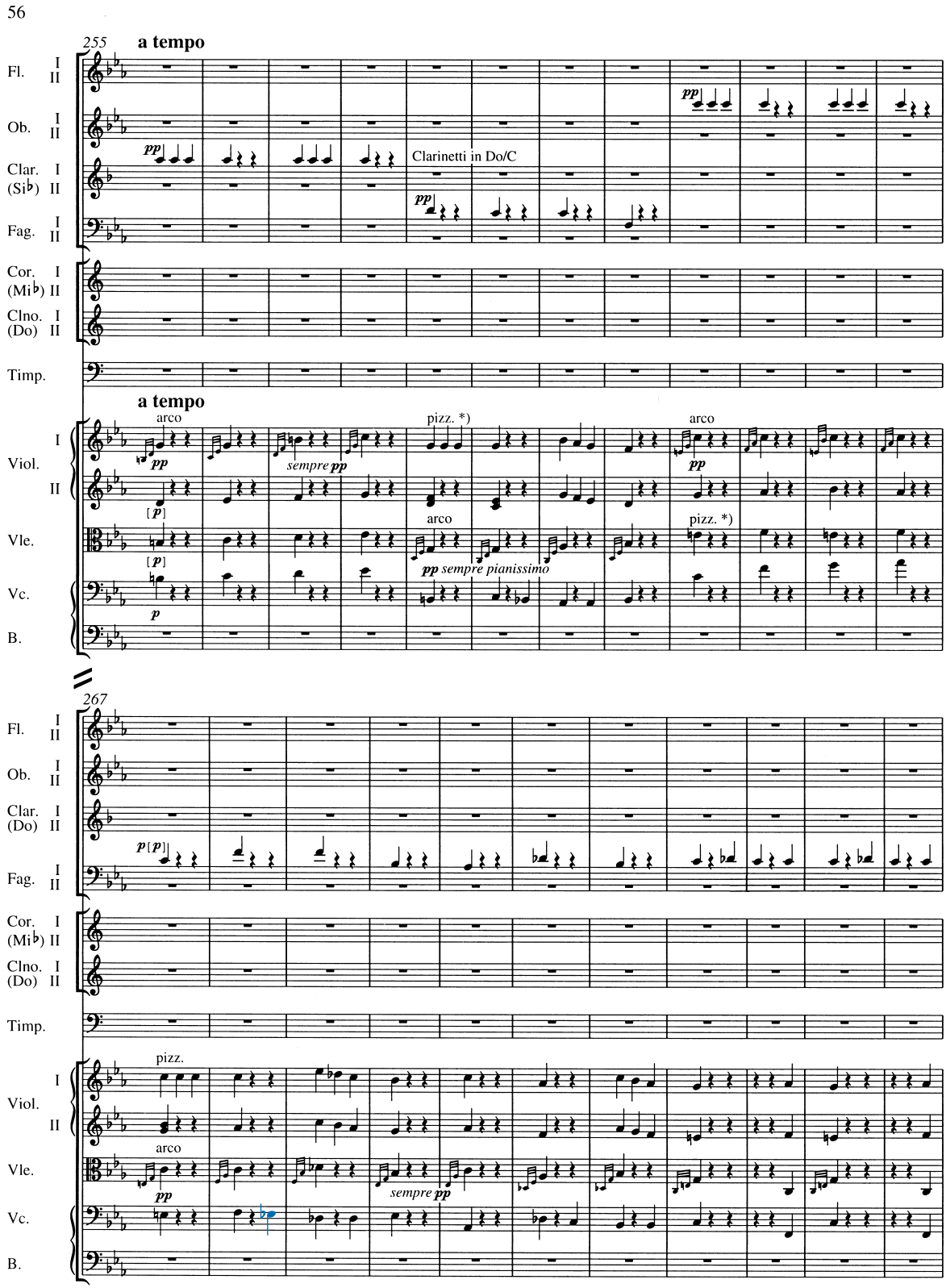
In many ways, the Fifth Symphony was the most scary of all to research. Over the last 30 years or so, several studies of the Fifth have been published, highlighting a quantity of details in the authentic sources, yet the chief problem, whether or not Beethoven intended a full repeat of the scherzo and trio (making in effect a five-part movement, like Symphonies 4, 6 and 7), has remained intractable. To publish yet another edition, but still to have to admit defeat over this crucial issue, was a depressing prospect.

Meanwhile, the other problem facing the editor of the Fifth Symphony is that Beethoven's autograph is one of the most, if not the most, fearsome and tortuous of all his manuscripts where the deciphering of every detail of the text is concerned. Even the fine 1942 facsimile is in countless places inadequate for the unravelling of all its complexities. Often the apparently forbidding mass of deletions can simply be brushed aside, and the valid text is clear enough; but in some places, the sheer extent of revision and correction causes a real problem in the disentangling of one detail or another of what Beethoven actually intended to stand.

With these two problems staring me in the face, I decided to abandon all compromise and tackle the beast head-on. Instead of studying photocopies, or even the facsimile (a copy of which I was incredibly lucky to procure), I booked a two-week trip to Berlin, and remained in the library there from dawn to dusk every day, checking every single detail from the original manuscript. This is quite certainly the first time that this manuscript has been checked in such detail since Beethoven's first copyist wrote out the first performance score from it back in 1808. Several entirely new textual features were revealed (including a new note where until now we have heard silence), and some essential insights into the gestation of the work were gained; but the repeat problem remained elusive.

And then, sitting at my desk at home one evening at midnight, I was blessed with inspiration. Suddenly it dawned on me what the missing link was: a detail in the duplicate first performance parts which proved that they were copied from the Stichvorlage score (now lost, sadly destroyed in 1943 in the bombing of Leipzig). As these performance parts *included* the repeat (all written out in full), this proves that the Stichvorlage – until now assumed *not* to have included the repeat – *was* copied with the repeat (which we know Beethoven had originally stipulated), and was even sent in this state to the publishers. Only there were all the pages containing this written-out repeat bodily excised, an operation which could only have been carried out on Beethoven's own instructions. This, together with two pieces of already known evidence (for example Beethoven's explicit correction, in a letter, of a mistake the publishers made when they excised the repeat), makes the case as good as water-tight, and the problem may at last be regarded as solved. At last, I felt the new Edition had justified its existence.

Otherwise, the task was very much as usual, with the checking of all authentic sources. A trip to Vienna was necessary to document Beethoven's hand-written corrections in the few first-performance string parts surviving there; the corrections were written in red crayon, so are hard to spot on photocopies, but are immediately evident in the original. More important was a visit to Prague, where all the wind and brass parts, similarly corrected by Beethoven, are held in the Roudnice Lobkowicz collection, Nelahozeves Castle. Then, once the basic job of editing was completed, all these trips had to be made once again in order to settle the final queries.



A page from the scherzo movement of Beethoven's Fifth Symphony as it appears in the new Bärenreiter Urtext Edition. Highlighted in blue is the 'new' note discovered (in Beethoven's autograph manuscript) in the course of intensive research into all the original sources for the work.

The result of all this, then, is a Beethoven Fifth hardly different from that which we have always known, but free of an appendage (the extra repeat in the scherzo) which had recently become almost 'politically correct', and therefore something of a thorn in the flesh of those musicians who were convinced it was wrong but lacked the evidence to substantiate their instinct. Otherwise, where discoveries are concerned, the new note in the scherzo mentioned above (bar 268, cellos) is amusing, but goes by in a flash; more significantly, perhaps, there are four bars in which the first violins play with the woodwind instead of resting (first movement, bars 325–326, 329–330); and most entertainingly, three bars (finale, bars 309–311) where the cellos and basses join in the general celebratory cavorting instead of (as hitherto) chugging away on a repeated note. This last error was due to a misreading of one of Beethoven's favourite types of ditto marks, often a source of ambiguity when deciphering the manuscripts of this most idiosyncratic – but also meticulous, and therefore particularly fascinating – of the great composers.

Publication details

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