All the Maestro's Men: Ethics and the House Editor

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This case history raises questions about the editor's obligations to challenge the author as an artist.

Textual critics very often talk about what goes on inside publishing houses, discussing the changes that are ordinarily made to a work as a result of its going through the process of publication. Sometimes they deplore these changes; occasionally they applaud them; but the reality of publishing is that some very peculiar things can happen along the way to the bindery, things not always easy to find out about or to reconstruct. My own experience has been in a music publishing house, but I expect that something similar to the tale I am here to tell you could have happened, with a few alterations, to my counterparts in almost any press.

To begin with, it's important to understand the normal course of events in a music publishing house. The whole process begins when someone somewhere composes a piece of music and hopefully (or sometimes doubtfully) sends it in to a publisher. The publisher accepts it, for reasons that are nearly always opaque to the composer, and the work is passed to a house editor. I almost said "the manuscript is passed to a house editor," except that nowadays the house editor generally gets a photocopy of the composer's manuscript, for composers live in eternal hope that they will become famous and their manuscripts will become valuable before they die. The house editor begins by checking the mechanical correctness of the copy: he counts beats to be sure that there are four and only four beats in every four-beat measure, he checks that beams and stems are used in accordance with standard practice, and so forth. But depending on the specific situation—who the composer is, who the house editor is, and how much the house is willing to invest of the house editor's time—he may go beyond checking mere correctness to concern himself with matters of a less mechanical nature. He may very well, for example, look for consistency in the treatment of a figure that comes up throughout the piece. Is it notated the same way each time? Should it be? If the composer meant for it...

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to be notated consistently and neglected to carry out his intention (and com-
posers are notoriously unwilling to turn back a few pages in the score to check
what they did with the same music the last time it appeared), a performer may
well puzzle over the significance of each different way in which the figure is
notated, and, performers being what they are, will probably either ignore any
difference as a stupid mistake or exaggerate the composer’s tiny inflection into
a grand gesture. The house editor may need a good ear for style: he may, for
example, catch the composer’s error in having left off a flat or a sharp before a
note, even in places where either reading might arguably have been intended;
it has even happened from time to time that a house editor has had a flash of
brilliance about some structural alteration that might help the work. What
happens next depends on the editor’s confidence in the composer and the
house’s relationship to the composer, but the editor will probably pose any
questions he may have to the composer, asking for divine guidance.

This brings us to what is probably the biggest difference between editing a
literary and a musical work. With a literary work, the editor discussing a
passage with the author has at least one guide to evaluating the reading the
author chooses: the meaning of the text. Unfortunately, no one has yet con-
vincingly worked out how to get past what music says to what it means,
which leaves the editor of a musical work with the task of trying to make sure
that the edition of the work says what the composer wants it to say without
either of them knowing what it means. Even this modest goal assumes that the
composer knows what the edition should say, and composers are often bliss-
fully unconcerned with the lesser art of converting their inspiration into ad-
equate notation; in some difficult cases they can be an active hindrance to the
realization of their own desires.

But to my tale. Some years ago, the firm I worked for received a piece from a
well-known composer who shall remain nameless. Because the composer was
a “grand old man,” and because he had been published by the firm for a long
time, and because the work at first glance looked interesting and saleable, it
was accepted. It was soon evident, however, that there were going to be prob-
lems. To begin with, the manuscript was clearly the product of at least three
different hands, none of which was obviously the composer’s. Moreover, dif-
ferent sorts of things were connected with the different hands. At least two
had contributed music: a quite professional European-style hand and a profes-
sional American-style hand. It was clear, even though we were working from
a photocopy, that some of this material had been literally pasted up: staff lines
changed length in the middle of more than one page, and some pages had
more or fewer staff lines than others. To top it off, a third hand had contrib-
uted to the editing of the work in ballpoint pen on the photocopy.

This third hand was interesting. The writing was rather crabbed and quite
large, and it appeared at first that this hand had edited the work from a
structural point of view: notes were changed, dynamics were added, and so
forth. The composer’s eyesight and general health were failing, and we consid-
ered briefly that this might be the composer’s hand, looking over a manuscript