

String Players: Take Responsibility and Make Your Own Decisions

Exploring all options while respecting the score

By David Finckel

There could be nothing further from the road of progress than the restriction of creative experimentation.

- Pablo Casals

A recording, live performance, or the instructions of a teacher can be powerful influences on a student's conception and performance. Undoubtedly, most of us are guided and inspired by mentors and great performers. However, there comes a time in every performer's life when he or she must take full responsibility for his or her own interpretation. When that moment arrives, there are only two places to turn: the composer's original score and our own educated instincts.

I believe a good teacher should always ensure that composers are a part of every student's study. What is the point of excluding the composer's intentions from the learning process? The composer's wishes should be balanced with the teacher's ideas.

To this end, I can't say enough about making the right start when learning a piece of music. In a lesson, or a master class, it's often an unhappy discovery to realize that a student's musical problems arise from inferior musical editions. When learning a piece of music, there is *no* substitute for getting as close to the original source as possible. This means looking at the original manuscript (usually difficult, but it is getting somewhat easier) and finding the most reliable edition—one that has preserved the composer's markings.

Source Materials and Outside Influences

The best edition of any piece is one that has *no editing* in it by any performer whatsoever. It is always unfortunate to discover – often too late - that we have learned someone else's bowings when we thought we had learned Beethoven's phrasing. Some editions have both types of markings, as well as the editor's suggestions in dotted lines on top of the original. This provides the option of seeing how the composer wrote the music—but I still believe it is better to see something for the first time without an interpreter's ideas. After all, *you* are going to play the piece. You must take full responsibility for your choices; and they should be your own *educated* choices, based upon the composer's intention, not made for you by someone else, no matter how famous or brilliant they may be.

In a concerto, the best way to see the composer's intentions is to look at the solo part in the full score. In sonatas, it's easiest to look at the solo line printed above the piano part. Usually it's untouched. Fortunately, for chamber music, there are now many responsible edition publishers: Bärenreiter, Universal, Doblinger and Henle, to name a few. Invest in them. It's a small price to pay for the peace of mind that comes with knowing what the composer wanted.

In the worst-case scenario—when you can't get around music that's been massacred by an inaccurate editor—you'll learn through experience that there's always White-Out, a freshly sharpened pencil, and your own educated instincts.

Making Your Own Decisions

So you've seen the composer's wishes in the score, and it's time for you to make initial decisions on bowings and fingerings. Where do you begin?

Let's look at one of the cello literature's most famous phrases, the opening of Beethoven's A-major Sonata, Op. 69. Here is the way it appears in the manuscript, copied in my hand:

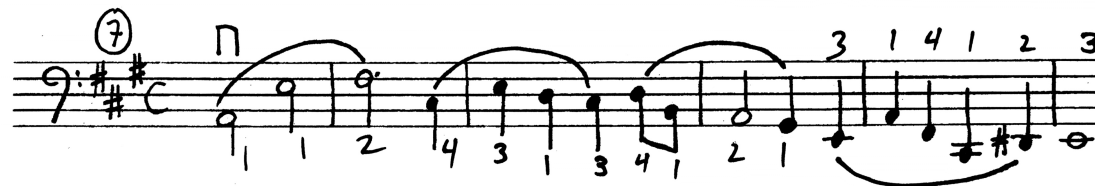
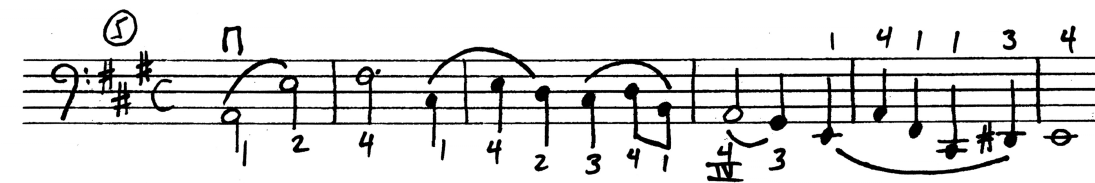
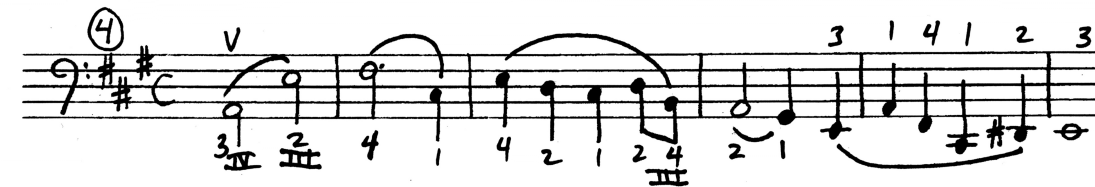
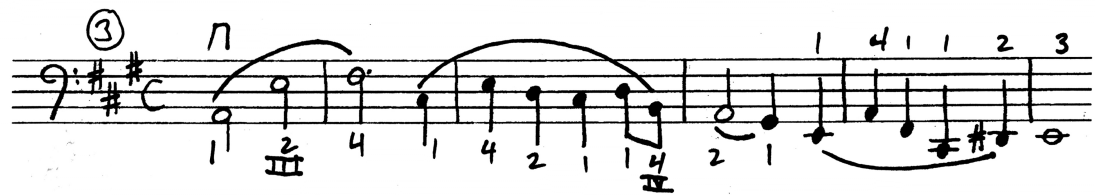
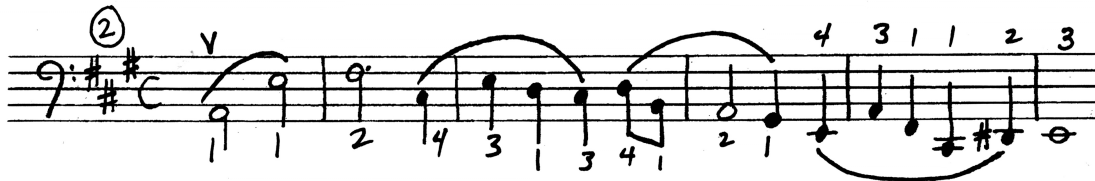


What intentions can we deduce from the original phrasing? We see that Beethoven was thinking of a long, legato line. And at one point, when the music becomes more active (bar 2–3), he slurs over two bars to ensure continuity. A pivotal moment comes in the fourth bar, where he definitively slurs the appoggiatura A to G#, then breaks the phrase as the line dips to the low E fourth-beat pickup. His idea of the E belonging to the note group in the next bar is emphatically illustrated by slurring across the bar line.

Now let's look at options. Let's say that we'll always begin by giving the composer the benefit of the doubt (and try what he or she has written down, no matter how impractical it may seem). In this case it could work. However, should we begin up bow or down bow? The only way to find out is to try both and see which sounds better, and which feels more natural. (Remember that many of the greatest composers were pianists who didn't always know much about bowing technique.)

We shouldn't stop here, just as we shouldn't stop with any bowing we've been given by an editor, or even a teacher. Let's talk about fingering possibilities and how they affect the success of different bowings. The following examples mix various fingerings and

bowings, showing only some of the possibilities for executing the passage. They are all workable in one way or another, and I jotted them all down in about five minutes. As I look at them now, I realize that the combination of bowing and fingering I have been using recently is not even there.



There are two points I'd like to make with these examples. The first is obvious: that there are many ways to bow and finger a passage while still respecting the composer's

intentions. The second has to do with how quickly I invented the bowing and fingering choices, how it has become second-nature for me to explore every possible option within the bounds of good music-making. Having developed this ability not only makes my musical work easier but more fun as well.

In most master classes I've witnessed, the teachers would have welcomed a greater awareness of fingering and bowing possibilities on the part of the students. Often, a teacher can sense that a young performer is afraid to stray from the printed page. There could be nothing further from the road of progress than the restriction of creative experimentation.

I hope that the subjects I've touched on will open a few doors and be of help. There certainly could be no greater reward for any teacher.

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