

Scrutinizing the Critical Edition of Chopin's Étude Op. 25, No. 1: Insights and Challenges

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The Étude Op. 25, No. 1 in A-flat major for solo piano was composed by Frédéric Chopin in 1836 and was first published across Germany, France, and the United Kingdom in 1837.¹ Robert Schumann commented on this work, calling it "a poem rather than a study" and giving it a unique name as the "Aeolian Harp."² Due to its interpretative qualities, the piece has undergone extensive editorial modifications over time that influence how performers approach Chopin's intentions. One widely used edition in the U.S.,³ *The Fryderyk Chopin Complete Works II: Studies for Piano*,⁴ published by the Fryderyk Chopin Institute Polish Music Publications in 1977 as its seventeenth edition (CE), is a critical edition aimed at preserving Chopin's original intentions while providing practical guidance for modern users. This edition incorporated editorial decisions regarding fingering, ornamentation, pedalling, and notational modernization. However, while it attempts to present an authoritative text, certain editorial interventions raised concerns about over-editing and the potential distortion of Chopin's compositional intent. This study examines the reliability of the edition by analysing its alignment with primary sources, assessing the effectiveness of its editorial commentary, and considering its impact on contemporary interpretations of Chopin's

¹ Frédéric Chopin, "Etude in A flat major, Op. 25 No. 1," Narodowy Instytut Fryderyka Chopina, accessed April 29, 2024, <https://chopin.nifc.pl/en/chopin/kompozycja/187>.

² Robert Schumann, "12 Etuden für Pianoforte von Friedrich Chopin," *Neue Zeitschrift für Musik*, December 22, 1837, 199.

³ Thomas Higgins, "Whose Chopin?," *19th Century Music* 5, no. 1 (1981): 67, <https://doi.org/10.2307/746559>.

⁴ Frédéric Chopin, *Chopin Complete Works II*, ed. Ignace Jan Paderewski, Ludwik Bronarski, and Józef Turczyński (The Fryderyk Chopin Institute Polish Music Publications, 1977).

works. Although this article compares multiple primary sources with CE, it acknowledges further discrepancies beyond its scope and prioritizes the most significant discrepancies and notable features for discussion.

The approach to the sources of CE aims to present the most authentic way of Chopin's composition. In this edition, it contains a thorough commentary that listed out the sources, variants and other important information for comparison in each of the *Études*. The commentary includes fingerings, ornamentation, pedalling, metronome markings and other miscellaneous details. The edition also includes three autograph pages in the frontispiece and two photos of Chopin's hand modelled by J. B. Clesinger, which allow the users to delve into Chopin's handwriting and provide a closer look at this maestro's hands. By analysing the surviving sources, the editorial committee mainly focused on the autograph and the first editions approved by Chopin, aiming to adhere to the original source and Chopin's intention as closely as possible.⁵ This commentary created a simple reading and performance environment to safeguard the users from hesitations, uncertainties and misunderstandings. Additionally, the edition is modernized for its notations, such as annotating the beams in a modern way of writing, and some redundant accidentals have also been removed.

In the appendix, the editorial committee delineated their methodology about how they interpreted and edited the sources, such as dynamic, agogic signs, pedal markings, ornamentation, and how they corrected some minor modifications, which have been clearly stated here.⁶ Especially, the editors have decided to retain most of the pedal markings found in the original documents with only minor modifications, where necessary due to the greater resonance of modern pianos and "in analogous passages or repetitions, where comparison has revealed inconsistency, or where correction or completion is required owing to mistakes or negligence."⁷ Those aspects of the work that may engender ambiguity for users are meticulously elucidated in this appendix, imparting a refined and favourable impression upon the users.

However, this edition contained a substantial degree of misleading information, which has the potential to engender misinterpretations and erroneous conclusions among users. According to Higgins, "Worse, the

⁵ Chopin, *Chopin Complete Works II*, 133.

⁶ Chopin, *Chopin Complete Works II*, 133.

⁷ Chopin, *Chopin Complete Works II*, 133.

musical text (CE) suffers seriously from over-editing: orthography is changed, some metronome rates are altered, pedalings are regularized where they reveal ‘inconsistencies,’ and ‘certain slurs have been modified whenever this makes for an easier orientation, a better comprehension, or a more exact interpretation of the phrase in question.’”⁸ Thus, due to over-editing to CE, some information presented in the commentary might have altered Chopin's original intentions.

For example, in terms of dynamic markings, there was only one large crescendo in Measure 3 (Example 1) in CE. However, the editors acknowledged that both the French First Edition (FE) (Example 2) and the German First Edition (GE) (Example 3) indicated an additional decrescendo in the latter half of the bar, as did the *Stichvorlage* autograph (Example 4) itself,⁹ on which the GE and FE were based. Despite this, the editors did not provide any justification for their editorial alterations.

Example 1: Étude Op. 25, No. 1 in A-flat major, CE, m. 3.¹⁰



⁸ Higgins, "Whose Chopin?" 68.

⁹ Frédéric Chopin, *Stichvorlage Autograph of Étude Op. 25, No. 1* (National Library of Poland, 1835–1837).

¹⁰ Chopin, *Chopin Complete Works II*, Étude in A-flat Major, Op. 25, No. 1, m. 3.

Example 2: Étude Op. 25, No. 1 in A-flat major, FE, m. 3.¹¹



Example 3: Étude Op. 25, No. 1 in A-flat major, GE, m. 3.¹²



Example 4: Étude Op. 25, No. 1 in A-flat major, *Stichvorlage* Autograph, m. 3.¹³



Moreover, in Measure 7, a dynamic discrepancy arose: FE (Example 5) indicated a hairpin, whereas GE (Example 6) had no dynamic marking, as did the *Stichvorlage* autograph (Example 7). Yet, CE included a crescendo in the score (Example 8). This was quite confusing for the

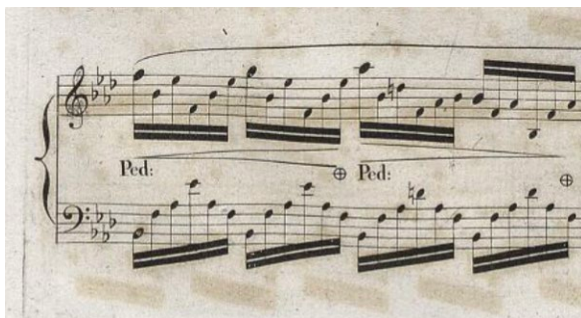
¹¹ Chopin, *Etudes Pour Le Piano*, Op. 25, m. 3.

¹² Chopin, *Douze Etudes Pour le Piano*, Op. 25, m. 3.

¹³ Chopin, *Stichvorlage Autograph of Étude Op. 25, No. 1*, m. 3.

users, as CE did not explain why its final decision included only a crescendo without referencing any of these sources.

Example 5: Étude Op. 25, No. 1 in A-flat major, FE, m. 7.¹⁴



Example 6: Étude Op. 25, No. 1 in A-flat major, GE, m. 7.¹⁵



¹⁴ Chopin, *Études Pour Le Piano*, Op. 25, m. 7.

¹⁵ Chopin, *Douze Etudes Pour le Piano*, Op. 25, m. 7.

Example 7: Étude Op. 25, No. 1 in A-flat major, *Stichvorlage*
Autograph, m. 7.¹⁶



Example 8: Étude Op. 25, No. 1 in A-flat major, CE, m. 7.¹⁷

In Measure 27, the editors indicated the *f* in the first beat of the measure (Example 9). However, when compared to most of the sources available, such as the authoritative *Stichvorlage* autograph (Example 10), FE (Example 11) and GE (Example 12), they all did not indicate the *f*. Hence, the rationale behind the editorial modifications in CE remains both contentious and perplexing. Unfortunately, the editors failed to provide a thorough explanation in the commentary to clarify this issue.

¹⁶ Chopin, *Stichvorlage Autograph of Étude Op. 25, No. 1*, m. 7.

¹⁷ Chopin, *Chopin Complete Works II*, Étude in A-flat Major, Op. 25, No. 1, m. 7.

Example 9: Étude Op. 25, No. 1 in A-flat major, CE, m. 27.¹⁸**Example 10:** Étude Op. 25, No. 1 in A-flat major, *Stichvorlage* Autograph, m. 27.¹⁹**Example 11:** Étude Op. 25, No. 1 in A-flat major, FE, m. 27.²⁰

¹⁸ Chopin, *Chopin Complete Works II*, Étude in A-flat Major, Op. 25, No. 1, m. 27.

¹⁹ Chopin, *Stichvorlage Autograph of Étude Op. 25, No. 1*, m. 27.

²⁰ Chopin, *Etudes Pour Le Piano, Op. 25*, m. 27.

Example 12: Étude Op. 25, No. 1 in A-flat major, GE, m. 27.²¹



As critical users, we should also consider the persuasiveness of information conveyed through the notation in CE. For example, the *Stichvorlage* autograph (Example 13), FE (Example 14) and GE (Example 15) all contained the F' note rather than Eb' in the fourth treble note. However, the editors may have prioritized consistency with Measure 39 (Example 16), where Eb' appears in the fourth treble note, and consequently chose to revise this passage to reflect Eb' in Measure 37 of CE (Example 17), aligning also with the editorial approach taken by Alfred Cortot (Example 18).

Example 13: Étude Op. 25, No. 1 in A-flat major, *Stichvorlage* Autograph, m. 37.²²



²¹ Chopin, *Douze Etudes Pour le Piano*, Op. 25, m. 27.

²² Chopin, *Stichvorlage Autograph of Étude Op. 25, No. 1*, m. 37.

Example 14: Étude Op. 25, No. 1 in A-flat major, FE, m. 37.²³**Example 15:** Étude Op. 25, No. 1 in A-flat major, GE, m. 37.²⁴**Example 16:** Étude Op. 25, No. 1 in A-flat major, CE, m. 39.²⁵

²³ Chopin, *Etudes Pour Le Piano*, Op. 25, m. 37.

²⁴ Chopin, *Douze Etudes Pour le Piano*, Op. 25, m. 37.

²⁵ Chopin, *Chopin Complete Works II*, Étude in A-flat Major, Op. 25, No. 1, m. 39.

Example 17: Étude Op. 25, No. 1 in A-flat major, CE, m. 37.²⁶

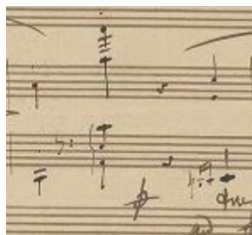
Example 18: Étude Op. 25, No. 1 in A-flat major, Alfred Cortot Edition, m. 37.²⁷

Moreover, in Measure 48, the chord on the second beat of this measure has no Eb^{'''} in the treble in both the *Stichvorlage* autograph (Example 19) and GE (Example 20), whereas only FE (Example 21) contained Eb^{'''}. However, the editors of CE chose to follow FE and added an Eb^{'''} to the chord without providing an explanation (Example 22), thereby compromising the clarity and reliability of the edition.

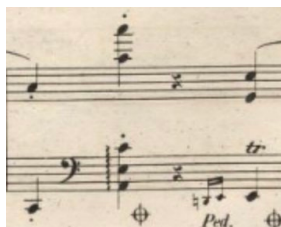
²⁶ Chopin, *Chopin Complete Works II*, Étude in A-flat Major, Op. 25, No. 1, m. 37.

²⁷ Frédéric Chopin, *Édition de Travail des Euvres de Chopin 12 Étude Op. 25*, ed. Alfred Cortot (Maurice Senart, 1916), m. 37.

Example 19: Étude Op. 25, No. 1 in A-flat major, *Stichvorlage* Autograph, m. 48.²⁸



Example 20: Étude Op. 25, No. 1 in A-flat major, GE, m. 48.²⁹



Example 21: Étude Op. 25, No. 1 in A-flat major, FE, m. 48.³⁰



²⁸ Chopin, *Stichvorlage Autograph of Étude Op. 25, No. 1*, m. 48.

²⁹ Chopin, *Douze Etudes Pour le Piano, Op. 25*, m. 48.

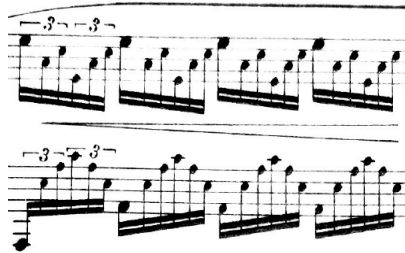
³⁰ Chopin, *Etudes Pour Le Piano, Op. 25*, m. 48.

Example 22: Étude Op. 25, No. 1 in A-flat major, CE, m. 48.³¹



Additionally, unmentioned in the appendix, users should be cognizant that the triplets sign in the first beat of Measure 1 (Example 23) and the added fingerings (Example 24) incorporated throughout the piece, are entirely the result of the editors' intentional interpretative decisions.

Example 23: Étude Op. 25, No. 1 in A-flat major, CE, m. 1.³²



³¹ Chopin, *Chopin Complete Works II*, Étude in A-flat Major, Op. 25, No. 1, m. 48.

³² Chopin, *Chopin Complete Works II*, Étude in A-flat Major, Op. 25, No. 1, m. 1.

Example 24: Étude Op. 25, No. 1 in A-flat major, CE, m. 6.³³

Consequently, CE exhibited notable divergences from certain primary sources. The failure to account for the authority of these corrections may undermine the integrity of the musical text's construction and its fidelity to the composer's original intentions.

CE, however, also presented valuable insights that can aid users in their understanding of the work. Particularly, I take issue with Higgins's assertion that "certain slurs have been modified whenever this makes for an easier orientation" in this edition.³⁴ With reference to the FE and GE, the slurs in CE largely aligned with those found in these first editions, with only minor deviations in Measures 14–15 where the *Stichvorlage* autograph connected the slur (Example 25).

Example 25: Étude Op. 25, No. 1 in A-flat major, *Stichvorlage* Autograph, mm. 14–15.³⁵

While CE may have been adapted to accommodate modern piano pedalling techniques, aside from this consideration, all slurs remained consistent with the *Stichvorlage* autograph. The pedal markings in CE

³³ Chopin, *Chopin Complete Works II*, Étude in A-flat Major, Op. 25, No. 1, m. 6.

³⁴ Higgins, "Whose Chopin?," 68.

³⁵ Chopin, *Stichvorlage Autograph of Étude Op. 25, No. 1*, mm. 14–15.

also agreed with the editors' assertion in the appendix that they aimed to "leave the pedalling as found in the original documents."³⁶ Accordingly, the pedal markings in this edition closely correspond to those in the *Stichvorlage* autograph, FE, and GE, with only negligible deviations. Besides, the editors enclosed parentheses to indicate that certain musical texts were sourced from alternative materials, using this typographical means to distinguish elements that originate from sources other than the principal one (Example 26).

Example 26: Étude Op. 25, No. 1 in A-flat major, CE, m. 8.³⁷

Thus, despite some editorial modifications, CE still strives to provide useful insights that adhere to Chopin's original intentions and offer performance guidance for users as a reference.

To conclude, as Grier argued, even the Urtext edition is the same as CE with the editor's interpretation.³⁸ As critical users, we should filter and identify what information is suitable and adhere as closely as possible to the composer's original intention. In addition, it is crucial for the editors to establish and present a text that fully represents the editor's conception of the work, as determined by a critical examination of the work.³⁹ Thus, editors should avoid excessive modifications that might distort the composer's intent and to ensure the musical text maintains its authoritativeness. Although this edition may serve as a valuable resource for those studying pedal markings or seeking performance guidance, it

³⁶ Chopin, *Chopin Complete Works II*, 133.

³⁷ Chopin, *Chopin Complete Works II*, Étude in A-flat Major, Op. 25, No. 1, m. 8.

³⁸ James Grier, *The Critical Editing of Music: History, Method, and Practice* (Cambridge University Press, 1996), 11.

³⁹ Grier, *The Critical Editing of Music*, 37.

ultimately falls short of meeting the expectations for a definitive, authoritative edition.

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[https://imslp.org/wiki/Études,_Op.25_\(Chopin,_Frédéric\)](https://imslp.org/wiki/Études,_Op.25_(Chopin,_Frédéric)).
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