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# Do we know how to read Urtext editions? or The Case of the Missing Dot

Pianist **Malcolm Bilson** has just performed all the Beethoven piano sonatas in a cycle of concerts which he shared with pupils and former pupils—the first such venture in modern times. He is noted for his intelligent and perceptive readings of the music of the Classical period and has recorded all Mozart's piano concerti with John Eliot Gardiner and the English Baroque Soloists for DG's Archiv label. In this article he assesses the significance of notational practices and the bearing that this has on the performance of the music of Mozart and Beethoven in particular.

THE following article was written for an American journal widely read by modern pianists and piano teachers. While I believe that many early instrument players are aware of these matters (as shown by the *Don Giovanni* example), I am not sure that many of us take them quite as seriously as we ought. There are, for example, countless recordings on modern piano of the Schubert B<sup>flat</sup> Impromptu. The modern piano, with its slow developing rich sound, is not capable of playing the opening bars as written: there are two slurs per bar in *alla breve*, which I read as two light diminuendos, the second somewhat less than

To quote C P E Bach:

What comprises good performance? The ability through singing or playing to make the ear conscious of the true content and affect of a composition. Any passage can be so radically changed by modifying its performance that it will be scarcely recognizable.

The subject matter of performance is the loudness and softness of tones, the touch, the snap, legato and staccato execution, the vibrato, arpeggiation, the holding of tones, the retard and accelerando. Lack of these elements or inept use of them makes a poor performance.<sup>1</sup>

The fact that early pianos handle these 'subject matters' differently from modern ones is the main reason I was drawn to them in the first place. I

## A Bone of Contention

the first, yet all four recordings I have heard on early piano simply make a crescendo across those bars just as any modern pianist would do.

would change Philipp Emanuel's last sentence to read, 'Lack of these elements or inept use of them can alter the meaning of a piece of music.'

Example 1: Beethoven: Sonata in F minor, op. 2/1/i

The use of so-called Urtext editions for the performance of music from the standard repertoire has become almost ubiquitous the world over. Not only famous artists, but virtually all serious students, whether in New York, Tokyo or Jerusalem use one or another of these excellent editions, believing that they have the closest possible source to what Mozart or Beethoven wrote down, not muddied up by additions and changes of a meddling editor. But how many of us have ever made a serious study of just how to read such texts? Do we know the real significance of connecting slurs; do we know how properly to execute various dotted rhythms; do we know how fast *Andantino* is, or even if it means the same thing from one composer to the other? The older I get and the longer I study these matters, the less sure I become. Reading scores with such questions in mind can be something of an adventure, often an exciting one.

This article will concentrate on one small—but quite important—aspect of the reading of musical texts: how long are individual notes, especially those not provided by the composer with a special mark (dot, slur, *ten.*, etc.).

**W**HY,' I was asked recently by a pianist acquaintance of mine, 'do you think there is no staccato dot on the upbeat to the first measure of the Beethoven F minor sonata, op. 2/1?' I was a little taken aback, for not only had I recently performed op. 2/1 for the first time since I was a child, but two years previously I had participated in the preparation of a new teaching edition for this work, and I had never noticed the absence of the dot.

I thought for a moment, then replied 'According to late 18th-century notation, an upbeat is normally short and unstressed, so no dot is needed. The more interesting question is rather, "Why are there dots on the four following notes?" The movement is in F minor; since F minor is a serious key—in the late 18th century, various keys were associated with different characters or "affects"—without the dots on those four notes one might well play them long and heavy, befitting a piece where Heavy Execution is suggested by that tonality.'<sup>2</sup>

I was, frankly, surprised that anyone could ask such a question; 18th-century sources are clear that an upbeat is short and light, unless otherwise marked. So imagine my astonishment at hearing, in the various recordings I took out of the library, that many pianists played the

upbeat somewhat longer than the four notes following—very peculiar and unnatural sounding, I thought). Still others slurred the upbeat to the following downbeat (not at all unnatural but clearly not indicated by Beethoven.<sup>3</sup> One pianist played the passage in the way that, to my mind, the notation suggested: Artur Schnabel. I knew that Schnabel had made an edition of the Beethoven sonatas so I looked up his edition; there was a dot on the upbeat. The autograph of this work is lost; we have only the first edition (from which the above example is taken), and Schnabel doubtless felt that the dot had been erroneously omitted.

One could well suppose, in the present instance, that the missing dot was indeed an omission in the first edition, but I doubt that that is so. There are four statements of this figure during the course of the movement: (i) the opening (without a dot); (ii) the beginning of the transition at bar 9 (with a dot, easy to see in the example); (iii) the beginning of the development in A<sup>b</sup> major (without a dot), and (iv) at bar 109, the transition in the recapitulation (again with a dot). [NB: bar 101 at the recapitulation has no upbeat, so we cannot use it for comparison.] In order to help—or perhaps further confuse the issue—it should be noted that similar upbeats in other movements of Beethoven's also lack dots, cf. the main theme of op. 2/3/iv (virtually all entrances throughout the movement); the fugato subject in op. 10/2/iii (again virtually all entrances throughout the movement). I am grateful to Carl Schachter for pointing out to me that the second theme of the third movement in the C major Sonata K. 279 of Mozart similarly has no dot on the upbeat in any of its appearances.

But haven't we all learned that a note without a staccato dot is *longer* than one with? Further, haven't we all learned that notes without dots are to be held their *full length*? Why am I suggesting that these are not absolute, inviolate verities?

The answer is that not only is there no evidence in any of the 18th-century sources to support the notion that notes are to be held their full length, but on the contrary, they tell us that notes are held their full length only in extraordinary cases. The general rule is fairly simple; here are two of the most important sources:

Carl Philipp Emanuel Bach, in his highly influential *Essay on the True Art of Playing Keyboard*

*Instruments* (1753, trans. and ed. William J Mitchell, New York 1949, p. 157) tells us:

Tones which are neither detached, connected, nor fully held are sounded for half their value, unless the abbreviation *Ten.* (hold) is written over them, in which case they must be held fully.

Later in the century, Daniel Gottlob Türk, in his *School of Clavier Playing* (1789, trans. and ed.



Example 2

What runs through all the tutors of the 18th century, however, is the concept that one cannot know the length of any note if one does not know what the Affect, or expression, of the piece is. The heavier and more serious the expression, the longer the note will be held. The lighter and

Raymond Haagh, Lincoln 1982, p. 245) cites Philipp Emanuel, but believes that half-length is somewhat too short:

For tones which are to be played in customary fashion (that is, neither detached nor slurred), the finger is lifted a little earlier from the key than is required by the duration of the note. Consequently, the notes in *a* are to be played approximately as in *b* or *c*, depending on the circumstances.<sup>4</sup>

gayer the expression, the shorter the note. *In other words, information regarding the precise length of notes is not given; it must be determined in each individual case.*

I should like to consider a few additional examples.

Example 3: Mozart



Sonata in C, K. 309/i

b.

Allegro con spirito

Klavier I

Klavier II

Sonata for 2 pianos, K. 448/i

Question: which note is the longest in the first two measures of both examples? Answer: the dotted crotchet in the second measure. Rationalization: the minims in the first measure will be longer or shorter according to their character, which here I perceive as military or fanfare-like; thus they are to be held quite long, but of course not full length in the absence of a

connecting slur. The dotted crotchet and semiquavers on beat 1 of the second measure are in reality also a minim, albeit here a *decorated* one, and as such will extend for the full minim value, with the little *Nachschlag* at the end to be played quickly and late.<sup>5</sup> These two opening passages are almost invariably heard nowadays played smoothly and connected, which is

inappropriate not only because it is not called for by slurs, but because if there were slurs the notes

under those slurs would have to diminuendo,<sup>6</sup> quite a different effect altogether.

The image shows two parts of a musical score. Part (a) shows bars 56 and 57. Bar 56 starts with a forte dynamic (f) and a slur over two crotchets in the left hand. Bar 57 starts with a piano dynamic (p) and a slur over two quavers in the right hand. Part (b) shows bars 82, 83, 84, and 85. Bars 82 and 83 show slurs over groups of notes in the left hand. Bars 84 and 85 show slurs over single notes in the right hand.

Example 4: Mozart: Sonata in F Major, K. 332/i

Are the crotchets in the left hand at bar 56 to be held longer than the quavers in the right hand? The answer, I believe, is no. The length of neither is specifically designated, but we understand that if the Expression is light, both will be shorter, while if it is heavy, both will be longer. I believe the Expression is light, and that therefore both are short.

Assuming that Mozart wanted both hands played the same length, as I suppose, what options did he have for notating this passage? Could he have written crotchets in the right hand as he does in the left? Obviously not, for this would make syncopes, and syncopes, according to the rules of proper Execution, are always agitated and heavy, and held as long as possible. But might he have written quavers with rests in the left hand? The answer is yes, and indeed he does so in bars 82 and 83. Then what is the difference between these two notations? Writing quavers in the left hand as well as in the right shows, I believe, that he wants both hands played still lighter.<sup>7</sup> Then, in bars 84 and 85 he chooses still another notation: crotchets and octaves in the left hand to show a heavier Execution in those bars—again I believe with both hands: Mozart has made the right hand longer by means of the three-note variant. That this notation is not absolutely exact is well demonstrated by the fact that in the recapitulation these two heavier bars (220 and 221) also have quavers in the left hand—the only bars in the entire recapitulation to be notated differently from those in the exposition!

Someone will surely challenge me for this interpretation, on the grounds that Mozart

notated subtle differences very exactly and that I am simplifying a precise distinction in notation. My view is that the notation of these composers is less exact and more *suggestive* than is usually presumed. The fact that these bars are notated with subtle differences is evocative of how Mozart may have wanted them to be played—but the interpretation of these differences can be meaningful only if one understands the *basic* notation which Mozart subtly varies. Playing the crotchets in bb. 56ff twice as long as the eighthths, or, as one often hears, even connected—there are no connecting slurs—will distort the basic concept of the figure, and how will anyone get Mozart's subtleties if he/she is not aware of how to read notation in its basic form? Once again: *the length of any given note is not specified; one must infer it from the affect of the passage.*

To illustrate this point further, let us look at the opening chords of the Overture to *Don Giovanni* (see Example 5).

I was once again startled to learn that 'traditional' performances of these chords hold the bass notes in bars 2 and 4 longer than those of the upper strings and winds. I listened to some ten recordings of this opening; all the recordings I could find with modern orchestras—Böhm, Haitink, Klemperer, Busch, Karajan, etc.—held the bass notes much longer than the upper ones. Interestingly, *all* the recordings by period instrument orchestras (Norrrington, Gardiner, Östman and also Harnoncourt) released all the voices together.

Ouverture  
Andante

Example 5: Mozart: *Don Giovanni*, beginning

If simultaneous release of all voices is what Mozart wanted, how would musicians of his day have understood so from his notation? Let us examine the respective parts.

Winds: have a long note in b. 1, without the syncopes of the upper strings. Mozart writes a crotchet for their release on the down-beat of the second bar; anything else would seem absurd. A quaver would look silly after a semibreve, and would produce an unnatural hiccup from the players; I doubt that one can find an example of a semibreve tied to a quaver in this period. A minim would look heavy and long, not suggesting release.

Upper strings: are notated in minims, albeit

syncopated ones. The third sounded note of the violins is a minim held over the bar—not a crotchet—and as such is identical in notated value to the last note of the basses.

Basses: Mozart cannot notate a crotchet in bar two, because a crotchet is *lighter* than a minim;<sup>8</sup> the basses would then play **heavy-heavy-light**. If Mozart had wanted the basses held longer than the upper voices, he would either have marked the third D *ten.*, or written a longer note. Mozart's notation is direct and clear for those trained to read it.

To return to Beethoven and piano music, let us consider the beginning of the second sonata, in A major, op. 2/2:

16

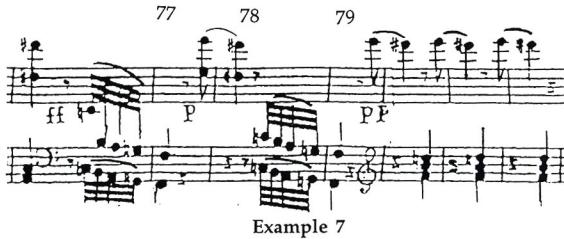
SONATA  
II

Allegro Vivace 2

Example 6: Beethoven: Sonata in A major, op. 2/2/i

Many recorded performances play the downbeat of bar 2 longer than the downbeat of bar 1. Yet 18th-century sources tell us that a note at the end of a slur is short; there is therefore no need for a dot on the downbeat of bar 2.<sup>9</sup> There is no justification from the notation that the downbeat of bar 2 should be

any longer than the downbeat of bar 1. They are all short; this is clearly Light Execution. At bars 77 and 78, on the other hand (see next example), the slur over the four demisemiquavers is not tied over to the following downbeat; those two downbeats will therefore be played heavier and longer.



Example 7

A more problematic example is provided by the opening of the Sonata in G major, op. 31/1, first movement:



Example 8: Beethoven: Sonata in G major, op. 31/1/i

The 'topic'<sup>10</sup> here is the fact that the hands do not seem to manage to play together. (Sometimes they do, of course, as in bars 10–11, but that is a good part of the joke.) How long is the crotchet note at the beginning of bar 3? Is it, for example, longer than the quaver at the beginning of bar 5? I claim that the notation suggests no difference. (One must understand that two notes that are notated the same are never played *exactly* the same; we are told that this would be unmusical. But the crotchet cannot be considered as being twice as long as the quaver.) Granted, this is an unconventional and complex music to notate; yet it is clear that the crotchet note at the beginning of bar 3 is the release of the whole figure from the beginning: the long note *g''* runs down through the little semiquaver figure—which according to the sources should be played slightly late and slightly faster than notated; cf. fn. 5—and is released by the *g'* at the bottom; that note will

therefore be short, as are all release notes. In bars 4 and 5 there is an attempt to reinforce this *g'*, but we seem to be stuck. Just how long are these syncopated right-hand chords to be held? It is very difficult to know. Surely not full length—there are no slurs—but just how long? Reading this music takes a great deal of insight and judgement, and a player who simply takes each note value and holds it out fully will never be able to penetrate the surface of such a witty movement. I would go so far as to say that if one plays the crotchet at bar 3 full length, all hope for what follows may be lost then and there!

The notations of the light, unstressed upbeat of op. 2/1/i, and of the left hand crotchet notes at bar 56ff. in K. 332/i are, I believe, simple and unproblematic. Let us look at a still more problematically notated passage. Here is one where I find most readings far off the mark:



Example 9: Beethoven: Sonata in A major, op. 101/ii

This is a march (Beethoven even tells us so), and has the modifying words *Lebhaft* and *vivace*, both of which seem to indicate Short Execution. Bar 1 in the left hand is indeed usually played short and crisp, but what do we hear at *a* or *b*? The middle voices are notated as crotchets; one hears them most often played longer than the clipped top voice. Can that be Beethoven's intention? In many orchestral works of the period different instruments have simultaneous but different-length releases (as we saw in the *Don Giovanni* example); orchestral musicians of the time were supposed to (i) understand the character of the music, and (ii) listen to each other and not release in a ragged fashion. Further: the fully notated crotchets at *c* and *d* are syncopes, and as such must probably also be played short.

But, the reader will quickly point out, why has Beethoven then notated *all* the voices short at *e* and *f*?

If Beethoven had written a quaver with a rest at *c* and *d*, it would have implied a lighter Execution. In effect *e* and *f* do suggest a lighter Execution than *a* and *b*. Beethoven's notation is highly sophisticated, written for those versed in its subtleties. Indeed, it is a tribute to his contemporaries that he could write such complex and difficult music and presume that his notation would be understood by them. One of our principal tasks is therefore to try to learn to read it as they would have.

From where do we get the modern notion that notes are to be held full length? Clementi, as early as 1801 (cf. fn. 4) stressed a kind of continuous legato as the basic touch. But Clementi was in London, another musical world entirely from the Germany and Vienna of Mozart, Haydn and Beethoven. London can be considered the birthplace of the modern style of music-making based on a continuous singing line. Whereas

English instruments of that period became better at connecting long vowels and poorer at articulating consonants, the German and Viennese tradition of an articulated speech continued right up to the end of the 19th century. Brahms, at the end of his life, complained that many younger players no longer understood the proper execution of the two-note slur—often referred to as a 'sigh' in the late 18th century—the kind of slur still used in his very last piano works (cf. for example, Brahms's individual one-bar slurrings in the B minor Intermezzo, op. 119/1).

**T**HIS short article can only, with a few examples, scratch the surface of an enormous subject. Our point of departure, the missing dot at the opening of op. 2/1, concerned itself with a simply and directly notated passage which the world's finest artists seem to have misunderstood, and about which I have heard several elaborate Schenkerian theories as defense.<sup>11</sup> But in contrast, Beethoven did write a very unusual articulation of that same figure at b. 20 (see Example 1).

One does not normally begin a slur on an upbeat. The sources tell us that the beginning of a slur is always stressed, especially if it is on a weak beat, since this is a special effect. Thus the upbeat  $f''$  is indicated by Beethoven to be stressed more than the downbeat following, and all five notes under the slur make a diminuendo (cf. fn. 6), releasing at the end of bar 21. The  $f'$ , at bar 22, must be approached by a separation for its proper effect; a dissonant appoggiatura is always approached by a break, here insisted on by the *sf*. Every version on record I have found (including several, by the way, on early pianos) start weakly and *cresc.* across the slur landing on the *sf* with no articulatory break.

Thus much ado is made about a perfectly normal everyday notation (bar 1) whereas an

extra-ordinary one (bar 20) seems to go completely overlooked. What good are Urtext editions if one does not learn how to read them, especially in light of the seriousness with which notation is taken by virtually all players nowadays?

Do I really know how to read everything? I am sure I do not, and that in these very examples I have misread something. We know that different languages use the same letter for different sounds, for instance *sz* in Polish (*Szymanowski* as in *sugar*) and *sz* in Hungarian (*Liszt* as in *sweet*). In a like manner Clementi's prescription for Proper Execution of a particular notation is different from that used by the Viennese. Chopin's notation is different from Brahms's, Debussy's is different from Schoenberg's, which is different from Stravinsky's. But for no period are such differences as easy to study as for the 18th century, when piano, voice or string tutors deal in great detail with just these very matters.

Every student must begin to look at these questions for him/herself. This is 'performance practice' in the highest sense, by no means confined to original instruments (although those can often help). The many fine Urtext editions that are now available should only be the beginning tools for our study. And that study, which in the best instances will lead to artistic and imaginative interpretations of the works of the great masters, must be founded on as close a reading as possible of the text: we have nothing more basic.

#### Notes

<sup>1</sup> C P E Bach, *The True Art of Playing Keyboard Instruments*. 1753, trans. and ed. William J Mitchell, New York 1949, p. 148

<sup>2</sup> 'Heavy' and 'Light' were concrete concepts in the late 18th century, and governed the weight of a given note or series of notes. The most determining characteristic for imparting the impression of heavy or light is the length of the notes in the particular passage; dynamics contribute as well, but are secondary. (For a detailed discussion see Daniel Gottlob Türk,

*School of Clavier Playing*, 1789, trans. and ed. Raymond Haagh, Lincoln 1982, pp. 347ff.)

<sup>3</sup> Indeed, this identical 'rocket theme', with an upbeat slur, is used by Mozart as the theme for the Finale of the G minor symphony, K. 550

<sup>4</sup> However, Muzio Clementi, in his *Introduction to the Art of Playing on the Piano-Forte* (1801, ann. Sandra Rosenblum, repr. Da Capo Press, New York 1974, pp. 8-9), states that, 'the best general rule, is to keep down the keys of the instrument, the FULL LENGTH of every note; . . . When the composer leaves the LEGATO and STACCATO to the performer's taste; the best rule is, to adhere chiefly to the LEGATO; reserving the STACCATO to give SPIRIT occasionally to certain passages, and to set off the HIGHER BEAUTIES of the LEGATO.' This is England in the early 19th century—different instruments, different musical aesthetics, different use of slurs altogether. We will come back to this later on.

<sup>5</sup> The question of how to handle dotted notes is one that has filled many an article and even volume; the reader is directed once again to Philipp Emanuel Bach, pp. 157-8, where we are told that in general one holds dotted notes longer than prescribed by the notation, and plays the short notes—or group of notes—quickly and at the end. This rule, like most rules, will vary according to the character of the music.

<sup>6</sup> Leopold Mozart is quite clear on this point: The first note of a group of two, three, four and even more [slurred notes] must be somewhat more strongly stressed, but the remainder slurred onto it quite smoothly and *more and more quietly*.

<sup>7</sup> In a similar fashion, I assume that the presence of the upbeat dot in the Beethoven Sonata op. 2/1/i in bb. 9 and 109 is likewise an indication that the entire upward figure be played lighter than in b. 1.

<sup>8</sup> Türk is quite clear in this regard; crotchets are lighter than minims, quavers lighter than crotchets. See Türk, op. cit., pp. 349ff.

<sup>9</sup> This situation is slightly complicated by the fact that composers handle such releases differently. Mozart never puts a dot at the end of a slur, but Haydn often does, and we cannot be sure what he means. Beethoven does occasionally, but not in the present instance.

<sup>10</sup> 'Topic' is the term for a 'subject for musical discourse', coined by Leonard Ratner in his *Classic Music: Expression, Form and Style*, New York 1980, pp. 9ff.

<sup>11</sup> One of these theories asserts that the upbeat c' (5th degree of the scale in F minor) is structurally important to 'help define the upward sixth C-Ab motive that is elaborated in b. 5, which is a condensed variation of bb. 1-2' (private communication to the author). This is an interesting concept, to be sure, but there is no 18th-century treatise known to me that justifies the upbeat as being *notated* as anything but short and light.

Musical examples for this article were prepared by Marc Mellits.



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