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Did Couperin ever play a trill before the beat?

Claudio di Veroli

Claudio di Veroli throws down the gauntlet to challenge the recent relaxation in attitudes to ornament realisation in French Baroque music.

WO DECADES AGO the issue of ornament timing in baroque instrumental music, and particularly so in François Couperin's works, seemed a settled one: "thou shalt not play any ornament before the beat". The principle was confirmed in standard reference works like Robert Donington's¹ and in authoritative recordings like Kenneth Gilbert's². Only one exception was acknowledged: the *coulé de tierce*³, discussed by K. Gilbert in his edition of F. Couperin's harpsichord *Pieces*⁴ and more recently by R. Harris-Warrick in her edition of St. Lambert's treatise⁵.

During the seventies, however, quite a few performers seem to have changed their ways. Today, *lié* (slurred) trills and mordents played before the beat crop up here and there in many otherwise excellent recordings of the "original instruments and performance" bandwagon. This happens mostly when the ornament is placed on the weak beat and slurred from the strong beat. This is most frequently observed in the performances of violin, harpsichord and gamba players.

Would François Couperin and his contemporaries have approved of this practice? Let us quote his own direction on the matter⁶:

AGRÉMENS... les batements; et la note ou L'on s'arête, doivent tous être compris dans la valeur de la note essentielle.

GRACES... the repercussions, and the note on which one stops, must all be included in the value of the principal note.

Nowhere does Couperin mention ornaments played *before* the beat, and we can only find traces of such practices as rare exceptions⁷. Rameau specifically prescribes on-the-beat performance of *lié* ornaments (Ex.1).



Pièces de Clavecin, 1724. Table des agréments.

I agree that some present-day musicians may find interpretation as per Ex.2 unnatural.



Septième ordre. L'enfantine, 2nd bar.

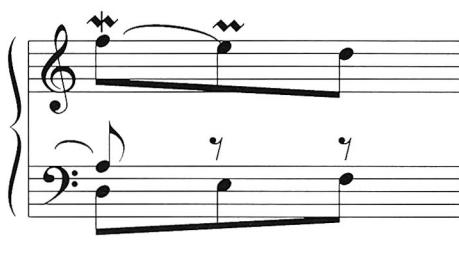
However, the many extant French-baroque music boxes show mercilessly how things 'unnatural' to us were matter-of-fact for Louis XIV/XV's musicians and audiences⁸.

Still more evidence is embedded in the music scores. First of all, throughout the published corpus of French harpsichord music (and most chamber music also) I have not been able to find a single instance in which playing a trill or mordent on the beat could be deemed technically or musically unfeasible. Before-the-beat interpretation instead, even if restricted to *lié*-and-weak-beat ornaments, does give rise to problems. These are of two types:

a) horizontal, when the ornament is preceded by another (this one very obviously on the

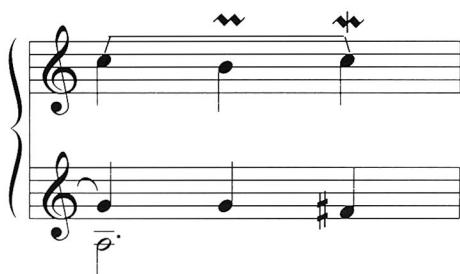
beat) and there is simply not enough time to play both of them on the same beat;
 b) vertical, when the ornament appears in parallel with another one played by another instrument or hand.

These examples, though unfortunately very rare elsewhere, are instead easily found in F. Couperin's harpsichord music and show conclusively how before-the-beat interpretation is contradictory with Couperin's own musical notation. Let us see first some horizontal' situations.



Ex.3 *Dixneuvième ordre. Les culbutes* Ixcxbxnxs, bar 28.

In Ex.3, performed *légèrement* as prescribed, the trill cannot be played before the beat without becoming merely the 2nd repercussion of the preceding mordent.



Ex.4 *Troisième ordre. Les laurentines*, 2nd bar.

Conversely in Ex.4 the mordent, if played before the beat, merges nonsensically into the preceding trill.

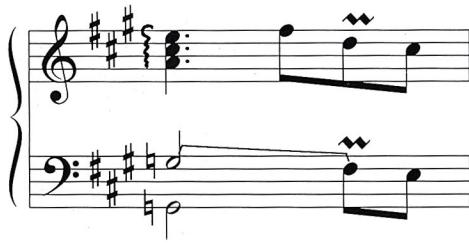


Ex.5 *Troisième ordre. Seconde courante*, bar 21.

In Ex.5, at courante speed it is really awkward to play, on the same E flat crotchet, both the upward slide and the following trill. The latter clearly belongs instead to the following D quaver, the *liaison* serving mainly to prevent beginning the trill with a repeated E flat.

There is of course a quite obvious variant of 'horizontal argument' when the slurred weak-beat trill has also an ending, thus absolutely preventing before-the-beat interpretation⁹.

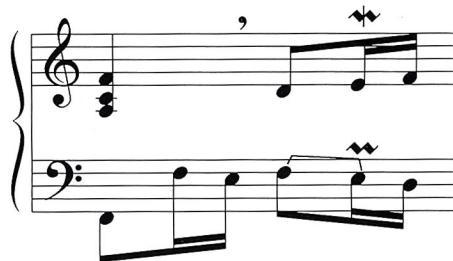
Let us see now a few of the relatively frequent 'vertical' situations.



Ex.6 Cinquième ordre. *La dangereuse sarabande*, bar 14.

In both Ex.6 and Ex.7, parallel ornaments in both hands clearly assume on-the-beat (and even after-the-beat) interpretation.

So, and in spite of 'new trends', it seems more certain than ever that French essential ornaments (except some *coulés*) were always played on the beat by F. Couperin and his contemporaries. This assertion is valid also for music in French style



Ex.7 Dixneuvième ordre. *L'ingénue*, bar 44.

by authors from other countries — e.g. Bach and Handel — where, by the way, slurred ornaments on the weak beat are very rare. The last of the great baroque musicians to deal specifically with the matter is Carl Philip Emmanuel Bach: he fully agrees with both F. Couperin, and Rameau ¹⁰.

Claudio di Veroli is a harpsichordist in Buenos Aires.

Footnotes

- ¹ R. Donington. *A Performer's Guide to Baroque Music*. Faber and Faber, London 1973, rev. 1978, pp.202–203.
- ² F. Couperin: *Pieces de Clavecin, Premier Ordre*. Recording by Kenneth Gilbert, harpsichord. Harmonia Mundi, Paris 1971. The recording of the whole *Premier Livre* has recently been re-issued as a 2-CD set, HMA 190 351.
- ³ A small passing note filling a descending third. When used by F. Couperin as an ending for a trill or mordent, he often writes it in ordinary large notes leaving no doubt as to its execution before the beat. However, all other appoggiaturas or *coulés* by Couperin fall on the beat: *Il faut que la petite note perdue... frape... dans le tems qu'on devroit toucher la note de valeur qui la suit.* (The small grace note must... be struck... on the beat of the large note that follows it.) See note 6
- ⁴ F. Couperin. *Pieces de clavecin... premier livre*, Paris 1713. Modern edition by K. Gilbert, Heugel, Paris 1969.
- ⁵ M. de Saint-Lambert. *Les principes du clavecin etc.* Paris 1702. Modern edition (in English) by R. Harris-Warrick, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 1984, pp.87 and 89.
- ⁶ F. Couperin. *L'Art de Toucher le Clavecin*. Paris 1717. Modern edition by Anna Linde, Breitkopf & Härtel, Wiesbaden 1933.
- ⁷ For example evidence for trills before the beat in mid-17th century Froberger sources, mentioned by Davitt Moroney in *Early Music*, vol.VII no.1, p.140.
- ⁸ I owe this remark to Hubert Bédard, while showing me the *séritinettes* (bird organs) at the *Musée Instrumental du Conservatoire* in Paris, back in 1971.
- ⁹ As in bar 25 of the *Muséte de Choisi, Quinzième ordre*.
- ¹⁰ C.P.E. Bach *Versuch über die wahre Art das Clavier zu spielen* first part, Berlin, 1753. English edition by W.J. Mitchell, London 1949, reprinted by Eulenburg, London, 1974 See page 110, figure 113.

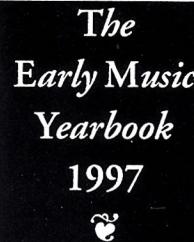
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