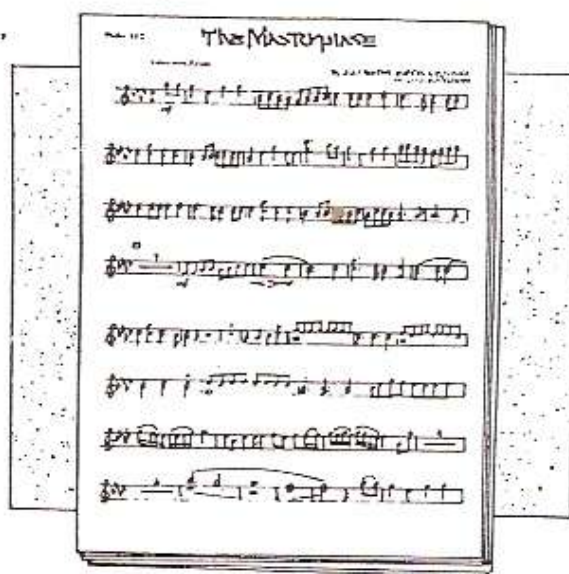


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# Do We Really Know How to Read Urtext Editions?

Or, the Case of the Missing Dot

By Malcom Bilson

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 muddled 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 little 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.)?

Why," 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, Opus 2/1?" I was a little taken aback, for not only had I recently performed Opus 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 these four notes one might well play them long and heavy, befitting a piece where Heavy Execution is suggested by that tonality." ("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.)

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



Example 1  
Beethoven, Sonata in F minor, Opus 2/1/1

others slurred the upbeat to the following downbeat (not at all unnatural but clearly not indicated by Beethoven). 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; 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 Example 1 is typeset), 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: 1. the opening (without a dot); 2. the beginning of the transition at bar 9 (with a dot, easy to

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 Opus 2/3/iv (virtually all entrances throughout the movement); the fugato subject in Opus 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

highly influential *Essay on the True Art of Playing Keyboard Instruments* (1753, translated and edited by William J. Mitchell, New York, W.W. Norton, 1949, page 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, translated and edited by Raymond Haagh, Lincoln, University of Nebraska Press, 1982, page 245) cites Philipp Emanuel, but believes that half-length is somewhat too short (see Example 2):

*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,*

Example 2

see in the example); 3. the beginning of the development in Ab Major (without a dot); and 4. at bar 109, the transition in the recapitulation (again with a dot). [N.B. bar 101 at the recapitulation has no upbeat, so we can't use it for comparison.] In order to help (or perhaps

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

*the notes in a are to be played approximately as in b or c, depending on the circumstances.*

Twelve years later, Muzio Clementi seems to say the opposite in his *Introduction to the Art of Playing on the Piano-Forte* (1801, annotated by Sandra



Example 3a  
Mozart, Sonata in C, K. 309/i



Example 3b  
Mozart, Sonata for 2 pianos,  
K. 448/i

Allegro con spirito

Klavier I

Klavier II

Rosenblum and reprinted by Da Capo Press, New York, 1974): "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 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." However, this is England in the early 19th century—different instruments, different musical aesthetics, and different use of slurs altogether.

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 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 would like to consider a few additional examples.

Question: Which note is the longest in the first two measures of Examples 3a and 3b? Answer: the dotted quarter in the second measure. Rationalization: The half notes 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-quarter-and-16ths on beat 1 of the second measure is in reality also a half note albeit here a *decorated* one, and as such will extend for the full half-note value, with the little *Nachschlag* at the end to be played quickly and late. [C.P.E. Bach tells us (pages 157-58) that in general one holds dotted notes longer than prescribed by the notation, and plays the short notes, or group of notes,

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



Ouvertura  
Andante

Example 5 Mozart, *Don Giovanni*, beginning

quickly at the end. This rule, like most rules, will vary according to the character of the music.]

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*, quite a different effect altogether. (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*."

Looking at Example 4 from Mozart's Sonata in F Major, K. 332/i, are the quarter notes in the left hand at bar 56 to be held longer than the eighth notes 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 quarters 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 eighth notes 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 eighth notes in the left hand as well as in the right shows, I

believe, that he wants *both* hands played still lighter. Then, in bars 84 and 85 he chooses still another notation—quarters 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 eighth notes 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





Example 6 Beethoven, Sonata in A Major, Opus 2/2/i



Example 7

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 that Mozart subtly varies. Playing the quarters in meas. 56ff. twice as long as the eighths, 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, look at the opening chords of the Overture to *Don Giovanni* (Example 5 on page 27):

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 (Norrington, Gardiner, Östman, and also Harnon-

court) released all the voices together.

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:

The winds have a long note in meas. 1, without the syncopes of the upper strings. Mozart writes a quarter note for their release on the downbeat of the second bar; anything else would seem absurd. An eighth note would look silly after a whole note, and would produce an unnatural hiccup from the players; I doubt that one can find an example of a whole note tied to an eighth in this period. A half note would look heavy and long, not suggesting release.

The upper strings are notated in half notes, albeit syncopated ones. The third sounded note of the violins is a half note held over the bar (not a quarter note), and as such is identical in notated value to the last note of the basses.

Mozart cannot notate a quarter note in bar two for the basses, because a quarter note is *lighter* than a half note; 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's *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's consider Example 6, the beginning of the 2nd Sonata, in A Major, Opus 2/2. 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. 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 example 7), the slur over the four 32nds is not tied over to the following downbeat; those two downbeats will therefore be played heavier and longer as befits its transformation to a much heavier character.

A more problematic example is provided by the opening of the first movement of the Sonata in G Major, Opus 31/i (Example 8 opposite).

The "subject" here is the fact that the hands don't seem to manage to play together. (Sometimes they do, of course, as in bars 10–11, but that's a good part of the joke.) How long is the quarter note at the beginning of bar 3? Is it, for example, longer than the eighth note 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 quarter note cannot be considered as being twice as long as the eighth note.) Granted, this is an unconventional and complex music to notate; yet it is clear that the quarter 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 16th note figure (which according to the sources should be played slightly late and slightly faster than notated) 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 syn-copated right hand chords to be held? It's 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 judgment, and a player who simply takes each note value and

56ff. in K. 332/i (example 4) are, I believe, simple and unproblematic. Let's look at a still more problematically notated passage, example 9 from Beethoven's Sonata in A Major, Opus 101/ii, which is one where I find most readings far off the mark.

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 quarter notes; 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 example 5 from *Don Giovanni*); orchestral musicians of the time were supposed to understand the character of the music, and listen to each other and not release in a ragged fashion. Further, the fully notated quarters at *c* and *d* are syn-

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.

Where do we get the modern notion that notes are to be held full length? As mentioned earlier, Clementi 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

Vivace

Example 8  
Beethoven, *Sonata in G Major, Opus 31/1/i*

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 quarter note at bar 3 full length, all hope for what follows may be lost then and there!

The notations of the light, unstressed upbeat of Opus 2/1/i (example 6), and of the left-hand quarter notes at bar

copies, and must 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 an eighth 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

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' individual one-bar slurrings in the B minor Intermezzo, Opus 119/1).

This short article, with its few examples, can only scratch the surface of this



Vivace alla marcia

1. 2.

Ex. 9, Beethoven, Sonata in A Major, Opus 101/ii

enormous subject. Our point of departure, the missing dot at the opening of Opus 2/1, concerned itself with a simply and directly notated passage that the world's finest artists seem to have misunderstood, and about which I have heard several elaborate Schenkerian theories as defense. But in contrast, Beethoven did write a very unusual articulation of that same figure at meas. 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*-flat " is indicated by Beethoven to be stressed *more* than the downbeat following, and all five notes under the slur make a diminuendo, releasing at the end of bar 21. *F*-flat ' , 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 extraordinary one (bar 20) seems to go completely overlooked. What good are Urtext editions if one doesn't 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'm 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', 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. †