

To Urtext Is Human...

More about Beethoven and Mozart,
dots, strokes, slurs, and upbeats BY ANTON KUERTI

My friend and colleague Malcolm Bilson's August 1995 article, "Do We Really Know How to Read Urtext Editions" demands a (somewhat belated) rejoinder, for it is rather subversive of the wonderful progress that has been achieved over the last decades in replacing contaminated, distorted editions with editions that at least try to publish music the way the composer wished to present it to the public.

Bilson contends that the length of notes is governed by the *Affekt*. He writes, "The length of any given note is not specified. One must infer it from the *Affekt* of

The great composers were very fussy and precise about their markings. Beethoven absolutely insisted on the accurate copying of his scores, down to the minutest details. In an 1825 letter to Karl Holz, he writes: "For heaven's sake impress on Kempel to copy everything just as it stands... When a dot is placed over a note, a stroke is not to take its place, and vice versa. It is not the same thing to write [3 quarter-notes with strokes] as to write [3 quarter-notes with dots]. My swells are often purposely placed after the notes. The slurs must be exactly as they are now placed... I have spent the whole morning today and yesterday afternoon

correcting these two pieces, and I am quite hoarse from swearing and stamping." In any number of other letters he insists that the publishers

upbeat of the opening of Beethoven's Sonata Op. 2/1 (example 1) is indeed longer than the following staccato notes. I may be in error here, and it has definitely occurred to me that Beethoven, could he hear me play this or other similar passages (like the last movement of Op. 10/2), might say: "Idiot! Do I have to indicate every last obvious detail? How can anyone imagine the upbeat would be different from the following short notes?"

But let us examine the possible consequences of this attitude elsewhere. What if the oboe (and later most of the other instruments) in the last movement of Beethoven's Third Piano Concerto (example 2) adopted this "all upbeats short" mentality? This would be in absolute contradiction to the piano's opening statement, where the upbeat is actually slurred over (example 3). If the upbeats in this movement are played short, its passion and pathos become flip-pant and shallow. Or look at the solo entrance in Beethoven's First Piano Concerto (example 4). Playing this upbeat staccato would be as barbaric as playing the dominant chord in the next bar short. Where he wants staccato, on the 8th-note upbeats in the fourth bar, Beethoven does not assume that the performer automatically shortens upbeats, but generously provides the appropriate dots.

I would suspect and regret every supposed convention of notation that rules out certain categories of expression. A composer with Beethoven's incredible range of emotions must have the possibility of sometimes having a long upbeat, even when the following notes are short.

If indeed, in the 18th century "an upbeat is short and light, unless otherwise marked," and that is why there is no staccato indicated for the first note of Op. 2/1, why did Beethoven indicate the upbeat staccato in the *Menuetto* of the same piece, or at the beginning of Op. 2/2 and Op. 10/2, or for the last movement of



Example 1



Example 2



Example 3

the passage." This is tantamount to saying ignore the score, play short or long according to the *Affekt*, which is of course mainly determined subjectively by the performer. Quite to the contrary. Instead of the *Affekt* determining the lengths, the indicated lengths should play a large role in defining the *Affekt*, or character, of a composition.

send him proofs to correct, and castigates them for not copying precisely what he wrote.

Considering Beethoven's obsession with the accuracy of his published works, one cannot imagine that the frequent absence of a staccato on upbeats is unintentional, and I am one of the pianists Bilson mentions on whose recording the



Example 4

Mit Lebhaftigkeit und durchaus mit Empfindung und Ausdruck



Example 5

Op. 27/1, to name just a few? Even if the shortness of the upbeat were obvious (I don't believe it is), I believe that the aesthetic visual benefit of seeing the same mark on adjoining notes which are to be played identically would have induced Beethoven to expend the miniscule extra labor of putting in one more dot here and there amidst so many others.

Op. 90 can shed an interesting light on this question (example 5). In the opening

bar, rather than a staccato, Beethoven opts for an 8th-note followed by a rest. Two bars later, in the piano, it is a full quarter-note upbeat. Surely this one must be full length, and there must be many other less obvious ones that demand the same.

It is not only on the upbeat that staccatos are sometimes conspicuously missing in Beethoven. Often it is on the downbeat following a group of staccato notes. A further inspection of the score to the First Piano Concerto reinforces my conviction that Beethoven was very subtle and very conscious about which notes to anoint with a dot. The concerto's opening motive (example 6) is marked *p*, and it ends with a staccato chord. But when the same motive comes *ff* in the winds, in bar 16, the downbeat is not staccato, and would sound truncated if played very short (when it is soft, the short chord sounds quite natural). Throughout the movement, the third and fourth beats are always marked staccato and the following downbeat (in good editions) is always



Example 6



Example 7a

marked with a staccato when it is soft, and always without when it is loud.

Bilson writes, "18th-century sources tell us that a note at the end of a slur is short," and gives bar 2 of Op. 2/2 as an example. Well, 18th-century sources notoriously disagree with each other, and do not really apply to Beethoven anyway. So I prefer to go by the plentiful evidence to be found in Beethoven's scores. To start with, there are numerous slurs whose last note cannot possibly be short. A good example is in the first bars of the second movement of "Les Adieux," Op. 81a. Aside from obvious cases like this, if the end of a slur is always short (which would put another artificial limitation on musical possibilities), why does Beethoven so often still put a staccato at the end of a slur? One can find any number of examples, starting with the second bar of Op. 2/1 (example 1), and in the eighth bar of the piano part of the First Piano Concerto (example 4).

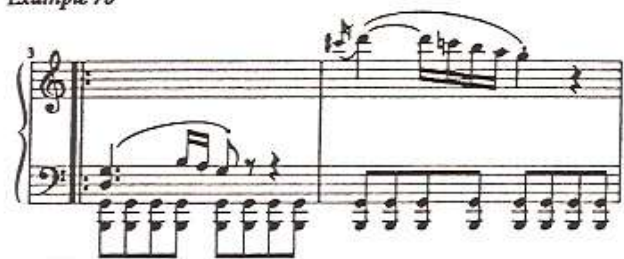
An especially good example is the last movement of Op. 31/2, where consistently, on each of its hundreds of appearances, the four-note slurred motive has a staccato at its end—except in bars 350-357, the only place where there is also a held, tied-over note above the motive (examples 7a/7b). Can anyone doubt that a difference is intended here, or believe that Beethoven would have written those hundreds of staccatos if they were implied anyway by the end of the slur?

The opening of Op. 53 is particularly interesting in that not only do the two fragmentary motives display a staccato on the last note of each slur, the motive with two 16ths always ends with an 8th-note, and the one with four 16ths with a quarter-note (example 8). Surely this means that the latter must be slightly longer than the former, and again contradicts the notion that the end of a slur is always very short. One of my pet peeves, in fact, is the habit of many musicians who automatically clip the end of almost every slur, whether it be in a scherzo or a lyrical adagio.

The discussion of the opening run in Op. 31/1 is also, in my opinion, misguided. The "normal" way to end a run of 16ths that stops on the first beat of the following bar is with an 8th-note, not a quarter-note. In the development of this movement Beethoven does exactly that, consistently (example 9). If he did not intend the quarter-note at the end of the opening run to be longer (example 10), then there



Example 7b



Example 8



Example 9



Example 10

is no point in his writing note values at all. The run can have as much charm with a long ending note as without, provided it is played softly, without any accent. Indeed, that way it nicely balances the even longer opening note.

The most preposterous suggestion in Bilson's article was the one referring to the overture to *Don Giovanni*, where, in the second bar, Mozart wrote a half-note in the cellos, basses, violas, and bassoons (every low instrument playing the root of the chord), and a quarter-note for everyone else. Bilson contends that "Mozart cannot notate a quarter-note . . . for the basses, because a quarter-note is lighter than a half-note; the basses would then play heavy-heavy-light." If this were true, one can imagine the confusion at Mozart's first rehearsal in Prague.

Mozart: No, no, bassi, don't hold that D longer than the others. Can't you hear that they stopped playing long before you?

First Cellist: Maestro, our part has a half-note; the copyist probably was half-asleep by the time he got to the bottom of the score and wrote our part; we hear you only finished the overture last night.

Mozart: No, the copyist is correct. I gave you a half-note because that is a very important note and must be accented exactly like the notes in the first bar.

First Bass: Maestro, you mean that that half-note is only one beat long, while those in the first bar are two beats?

Mozart: Yes, you must listen and understand my music, not just blindly play what is written. The notation can never tell you everything. Besides, it is obvious that the bass line cannot hang on after everyone

else has finished their notes. Have you ever heard anything like that?

First Viola: Herr Mozart, there is so much in your music which is unlike anything we have ever heard. If you want us to change everything that sounds strange, then we'd better postpone this opera for a few weeks.

First Bassoon: Yes, Maestro, it is hard enough to play your music with all its modern dissonances from these hastily scrawled parts, without having to figure out which half-notes are half-notes and which are quarter-notes. Here in Prague, when the composer writes a half-note we give him a half-note; maybe it is different in Salzburg. *Wysiwyg.*

Mozart: What was that? Is he trying to be funny? Doesn't his instrument give us enough buffoonery? Or is he swearing at me?

Concertmaster: No, Maestro, that is a new slang term which means "What You See Is What You Get."

Mozart: This is ridiculous. Are you musicians? Do you have ears? Just play the opening again and see how ridiculous it sounds if you hold that note for two beats. . . . Oh, oh, wow. I love that. How lucky that you misunderstood me! That long low note left all by itself . . . what a perfect premonition of the dark and evil depths of Don Giovanni's character. It makes my hair stand on end with its threatening, penetrating insistence. Why couldn't I think of that myself?

Well, in fact, Mozart did, and trying to overrule it with a convoluted theory is as close as you can get to sacrilege in music. Of course performers must understand the context of markings and the practices and style of the composer's day, not turn into musical robots who automatically carry out the apparent orders of the score without even thinking about them. There may be rare occasions when the implicit demands of the music can overrule the explicit directions of the score in regard to note lengths, but for most music by Mozart and later composers it is best to give composers the benefit of the doubt and assume that they wrote exactly what they hoped to hear. †