

*In this series of articles we will attempt to shed some light on the conventions which guided Baroque and Classical musicians in the performance of their music.*

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# *Aspects of 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> Century Performance Practices*

## *The Question of "Good Taste" and Implied Rhythms*

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In the Baroque and Classical eras written music—printed or in manuscript—was never intended to be taken as literally as is the music written in our age. The marks composers put on paper in the 17th and 18th centuries merely represented the tip of an iceberg—a small visible projection above a large mass of submerged implications. The assumption was that the performer was familiar enough with these to carry out the composer's intentions. This is a heritage which was lost in the intervening centuries. Yet without an understanding of these submerged implications—the conventions at the time the music was written—it is difficult for a modern performer to interpret the intentions of the written score.

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### **I. THE QUESTION OF "GOOD TASTE"**

A thread which runs through many writings on music in the 17th and, particularly, the 18th centuries (and which will run throughout this and subsequent discussions in this series) is that of "good taste." In the 18th century the highest accolade was often that a performer had played in "good taste." Good taste implied not only musicality, but a certain sense of discrimination – of knowing when, and when not, to apply certain conventions ... and to what degree. Discrimination, by definition, implies that a

choice is available—where there is no latitude for different kinds of behavior, there can be no question of "good taste." In the Baroque and Classical eras the conventions and implied practices provided a wide latitude of choices—and this, in turn, led to the great emphasis musicians and the musical public of that time placed on the question of "good taste."

No treatise, of course, is going to tell us subtleties of character of a piece of music, or, with any certainty, the way things were done in context. The following comments are

offered only as a guide—an attempt to give modern players some of the advantages their Baroque and Classical predecessors had in understanding some of the unwritten rules of performance—they will not teach you "good taste." But they may help to provide a framework in which "good taste" can manifest itself.

### **II. IMPLIED RHYTHMS**

In the 17th and 18th centuries certain conventions made it unnecessary for composers to be explicit—or consistent—in their notation of rhythms. One example of



**Example 1.** (From Pasqualino de Marzis' Sonata IV: Amoroſo, Grancino Editions ECS21, facsimile).

this is dotted rhythms. The following observations may help modern performers in understanding the underlying intention of the notation:

- Once a dotted rhythm was established for a given figure in a passage, it was usual to continue the dotted rhythm — even if not notated — in order to preserve the style and character of the piece. (However, it was ultimately left to the discretion of the performer, to his musical sense and "good taste" to determine when continuation of a dotted rhythm was appropriate.) (Ex. 1).
- The same passage serves to illustrate another important consideration in dotted rhythms: that of an alteration of a "straight" rhythm when set against a dotted rhythm in

another voice. Rhythms can be altered in either direction, but most frequently the voice with the "straight" rhythm will alter his rhythm to match the dotted rhythm of his partner. (Ex. 2).

against a triplet rhythm in another voice may play his dotted rhythm with a triplet feeling in order to match the other voice (some players refer to this as "under-dotting" in contrast to "over-dotting,"



**Example 2.** Adapted from Ex. 1.

- The same principle applies to duple rhythms set against triple rhythms. Often (though not always) the player with the duple rhythm may alter this rhythm to match the triplets of his partner(s).
- Similarly, a player with a dotted rhythm which is set

wherein the short notes in dotted figures are made even shorter). (Ex. 3).

**A Final Word of Caution:**

Sensitive musicians will realize that there are times when a clash of rhythms (straight vs dotted, triple vs duple) may be musically preferable—certainly not all 17th and 18th century rhythms should be so ironed out as to preclude any possible differences. Again, it was the musical sensitivity and "good taste" of the performer which made this determination. ♪



**Example 3.**