

Decorating the Dots

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Until well into the nineteenth century, all composers expected their performers to decorate the music. Some, Bach for example, seemed to expect less of it, even to discourage it in the way that he wrote, but others expected it and welcomed it. We have contemporary examples of this. For instance there are contemporary published editions of both Corelli and Telemann sonatas, printed with two solo lines, one as written and the other as performed. In each, the two solo lines are very different, one plain and the other heavily infilled, and each is supposed to be an example, not a definitive version – players were expected to devise their own versions. Equally, Hummel wrote down what Mozart actually played in his concertos and sonatas, as distinct from what the composer had written. Singers were expected to do the same in their arias, especially in the common da capo sections, and if the singer were accompanied by an obbligato instrument, that player was also expected to do the same, one hopes always in sympathy with the singer rather than in rivalry.

Many composers added ornamentation signs to their music, with some writing out how they were to be interpreted, whereas others left it to the player's general knowledge or to the common instruction books. Playford's *Breefe Introduction to the Skill of Musick* was printed and reprinted for over a hundred years (Purcell was one of the last editors), and almost every edition shows differences in the interpretation of ornament signs, keeping up to date with contemporary practice. All expected cadences and other obvious places to be ornamented, just as when they wrote the appropriate chord in the accompaniment or a penultimate caesura, they expected a cadenza.

Nor did they expect a figured bass just to be a series of plonks; that was also expected to be part of the musical experience. When Haydn 'presided at the pianoforte', as Salomon advertised in London, it is silly to suppose that he just

played along with the bass line. And nor did Beethoven figure the basses of the tuttis in his piano concertos just for fun.

But after Beethoven's time, other than at the specified cadenza points, players in what we might term 'serious music' had become expected just to play or sing what was in front of them, though still with the exception of some Italian opera composers.

This was also the time when music started to divide between 'serious' and 'popular' (or maybe 'light' is a better word). It was the serious composers who expected players to play the dots and nothing but the dots. Can you imagine Brahms, even more Wagner, permitting their music to be ornamented? But decoration stayed on with the lighter side.

Back in the later eighteenth century, composers such as Mozart, Haydn, and many others churned out 'light' music just as they did their serious music. Beethoven wrote serenades, marches, versions of popular songs, and nobody thought any the worse of him or of any of the others; it was all music.

But by the mid-nineteenth century, it was another matter. Wagner was not expected to compose waltzes, and Johann Strauss was not expected to write music dramas – operettas yes, but that was another matter, and the operettas did provide opportunities for decoration. Chopin wrote waltzes, and so did Richard Strauss, but nobody would be expected to dance to them in a dance hall. On an opera stage, yes as Tchaikovsky did, or as a ballet, as happened to Chopin, but these were not intended for dance halls as Mozart's and Schubert's were.

It was in the dance halls, in the cafés, and on the band stands that decoration continued. We have many versions of opera music converted into serenades for the band stands and cafés, often nicely decorated. No gypsy band ever played the music as it stood on paper (if it ever was on paper!). A Brahms Hungarian Dance only marginally agrees with a real Hungarian dance.

And this decoration of 'light music' has gone on ever since, strengthened all the more from the early twentieth century with the introduction of jazz. There is not even any way to notate jazz – even leaving aside all the improvisation (another word for decoration), you can either play jazz or you can't – you can never play

it just from the printed page. And here we go back to earlier times; one has to have a feeling for Baroque and earlier music, an instinct for the decorations. We often think we have it, but I often wonder whether a time traveller from earlier centuries would recognise his own music when we play it.

Very certainly when we do produce a little tentative ornamentation it is a pale shadow of what we can see in the sources above. When I've spoken to some ensemble directors about this, the normal reaction is that the audience wouldn't like it – how do they know? The audience has never had the chance to experience it. I can remember a *Messiah* when Thurston Dart was playing continuo – a continuous flow of melodic accompaniment, and when an aria was repeated in rehearsal, the flow was different but still always appropriate. And at a different point in that work, what do we do about 'The Trumpet Shall Sound'? Do we go on dotting or do we slack off into even notes and then start dotting again?

Another obvious point that I've mentioned elsewhere: what about the middle of Brandenburg 3? All we have is a half close, just two chords. Back in the old days, Boyd Neel and others would solemnly play those two chords and then dash into the finale. Those two chords are surely the end of something, but what? Some twiddles on the harpsichord? Violin and harpsichord? Or a shortish joint improvisation by first violin, first viola, and first 'cello? Or a whole slow movement with the whole band? Donald Tovey way, way back, pointed out a different Bach slow movement that ended with the same chords. Decisions have to be made, but surely today we can't just play those two chords.

There are works by Vivaldi and others where a slow movement is just a progression of chords, slow and beautiful, and that's how I directed one once, but I came off the platform unhappy – surely this had been an accompaniment to nothing. We weren't trained to this in the early 1950s, but we should have been and very certainly we should be today.