

# Performance Practice Review

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Volume 7  
Number 2 *Fall*

Article 7

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1994

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### Recommended Citation

Schwandt, Erich (1994) "Stephen Hefling's book: another view," *Performance Practice Review*. Vol. 7: No. 2, Article 7. DOI: 10.5642/perfpr.199407.02.07

Available at: <https://scholarship.claremont.edu/ppr/vol7/iss2/7>

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## Stephen Hefling's Book: Another View

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Erich Schwandt

The object of Stephen Hefling's book<sup>1</sup> is to reassess the status of our present understanding of rhythmic alteration as practiced in the baroque era, and to offer performers and scholars an opportunity to reconsider some matters that have been objects of controversy during the last 30 years or so. Hefling reviews all of the historic documents that deal with the use of the *notes inégales* and the practice of overdotting, as well as those that offer information about the rhythmic adjustments to be made to the various dotted figures that occur in accompanying parts; he quotes the documents in their original languages and translates them into clear and idiomatic English prose. The book is well organized, the index is complete, and there are many musical illustrations, including a generous number of facsimile pages from 17th- and 18th-century prints and manuscripts; moreover, it is almost free from typographical errors: on page 180 an example is missing from note 43, and about 98% of the time Montéclair's accent is missing.

Every reader of *Performance Practice Review* knows how vast the secondary literature on rhythmic alteration is; nonetheless, Hefling has apparently read (and re-read) everything written on the subject in the last 80 years, and he here evaluates the secondary sources. He offers useful comments, frequently pointing out instances of mistranslation, misunderstanding, manipulation of quotations (including the "silent conflation" of sources made by various authorities), and so forth. The book can thus serve as "a firm and useful foundation from which to proceed in addressing issues of rhythmic alteration as they come up in performance" (p. xiii).

The book has three chapters on the *notes inégales*: 1) Conventional Aspects of French Inequality; 2) The Negation of Inequality, Discrepancies among the Sources, and Related Matters; and 3) *Notes Inégales* outside France.

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<sup>1</sup> Stephen E. Hefling, *Rhythmic Alteration in Seventeenth- and Eighteenth-Century Music: Notes inégales and Overdotting*. New York: Schirmer Books, 1993, xvi, 232p. ISBN 0-02-871035-5

The next three chapters are concerned with overdotting: 4) The Value(s) of the Dot; 5) The Earlier German Sources on Overdotting; and 6) Later Sources on Overdotting. Chapter seven presents Hefling's "Summary Observations."

Hefling wisely confines his criticism of various modern authorities to the book's endnotes, and he is extremely thorough in citing the arguments—both pro and con—put forth in the secondary literature. Many widely held ideas are clarified and put into focus. For example, Hefling writes (p. 15):

It is sometimes claimed that allemandes should be excluded from the custom of *notes inégales*,<sup>35</sup> but there is only one ancient source that hints at this: in the preface to his second collection (1701) Marais refers to the allemande as a case in which taste does not require rhythmic inequality, and he therefore assumes it unnecessary to mark dots to negate the custom; Marais does not, however, advert to the specific note values involved.

The endnote clarifies the statement:

35. Apparently Arnold Dolmetsch (*The Interpretation of Music of the Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries* [*sic!* but cited correctly in the bibliography], London: Novello, 1915; new ed. 1946, 75-76) established the notion by misunderstanding the references in Marais and Couperin cited below: it was then passed on by Dart (*Interpretation of Music*, 81) and later writers, including Neumann ("Facts and Fiction about Overdotting," *Musical Quarterly* 63 [1977]: 165, 166, n. 24, expurgated from *Essays*, 119).

Nearly everybody who has written on the subject of rhythmic alteration comes in for a knock or two; however, Hefling, who "cannot avoid noting apparent misunderstanding in previous writings," does not "press the viewpoints of the 'right' or 'left'" (p. xii), but writes always as a gentleman. It is this calmness in his approach that will make the book so useful to readers: indeed, those who remember the acrimonious and sometimes violent exchanges between scholars that took place in the 60s and 70s will find no trace of confrontation here.

Are the *notes inégales* and overdotting appropriate to the music of Bach and Handel? Hefling's answer is a qualified "yes"—at least for their pieces in

French style;<sup>2</sup> moreover, he has shown that in several German centers French musicians and dancing masters were active and influential (pp. 40-50, 83). Rhythmic alteration can be used, with caution, in the overtures and French dances of Bach and Handel; however, Hefling advises the performer to consider whether rhythmic alteration adds or detracts from the music (pp. 143-5, 148).

Hefling advocates the "fashionable" faster tempos that have been appearing in concerts and recordings in the last few years. His remarks seem to me to be too generalized to be of much real help to performers trying to make an informed decision about tempos<sup>3</sup> in early music, he states, for example:

In practice, tempo is a limiting factor in ensemble music, particularly for string players; accordingly, a brief excursus may be in order. There is persuasive evidence that French overtures and dances were, on the whole, taken faster than many twentieth-century interpreters have played them. According to writers such as L'Affilard, Pajot (Count D'Onzembray, Choquel, and Quantz, a courante, for example, should move in the vicinity of M.M. 80-90 to the beat; a gavotte should be taken somewhere between 97 and 152 to the half note; and the beat of a gigue should be about 100 to 120, perhaps even as fast as 160. Such tempo indications raise issues that cannot be taken up here. But my point is a fairly simple one: in ensemble playing, relatively quick speeds put practical limitations on the extent to which rhythmic alterations are performed—and perceived. (p. 142)

Ralph Kirkpatrick, from whose article the metronomic indications have been taken, stressed that tables of metronomic markings "without the music, apart from the general crudity of such indications, cannot take into account the mood and character of the individual pieces from which the determination of tempo is inseparable" ("Eighteenth-Century Metronomic Indications," *Pa-*

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<sup>2</sup> See Peter Williams, *The Organ Music of J. S. Bach* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), 3: 97-102, where there is a thoughtful and persuasive discussion of "French Influences" in Bach's music.

<sup>3</sup> Wendy Hilton (*Dance of Court and Theater: the French Noble Style 1690-1725*, Princeton Book Company, 1981, 266), observes that "in establishing an area of tempo for a dance and its music, a range of speed should be worked through, first for the mechanically possible and then for the aesthetically pleasing . . . If a theoretical conclusion in trial has to be forced upon the dance and music to its obvious distortion, the theory should be reexamined."



pers, *American Musicological Society*, 1938, p. 46).<sup>4</sup> In citing tempos for the courante, Hefling fails to state that for Quantz and Pajot the "beat" is the quarter note, while for L'Affilard the "beat" is the half note. The difference is, as Kirkpatrick says, "bewildering."

Hefling's book should be a welcome addition to the libraries of those who are interested in the performance of 17th- and 18th-century music. He brings fresh and new insights into the vexed question of rhythmic alteration. His concluding paragraph is something that has needed to be said for a long time:

The task remaining for scholars and performers is to cease polemicizing, absorb what we now know about rhythmic alteration, and continue the process of historical reconstruction and artistic realization through informed performance and critical observation. (p. 160)

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<sup>4</sup> Lionel Sawkins ("Performance Practice in the *Grands Motets* of Michel-Richard de Lalande as Determined by 18th-Century Timings," *Actes du colloque international de musicologie sur le grand motet français* [Paris: Presses de l'Université de Paris, 1986, 105-116]), presents important new information about 18th-century tempos, and finds that Lalande's fastest tempos require *notes égales*.