

1996

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Recommended Citation

Hunter, Desmond (1996) "The Application of (Ornamental) Strokes in English Virginalist Music: a Brief Chronological Survey," *Performance Practice Review*: Vol. 9: No. 1, Article 6. DOI: 10.5642/perfpr.199609.01.06

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Renaissance Ornamentation

The Application of (Ornamental) Strokes in English Virginalist Music: a Brief Chronological Survey

Desmond Hunter

Signs in the form of oblique strokes were used by the virginalists to indicate graces.¹ Only one sign, the double stroke (//), enjoyed widespread currency. It appears in virtually every source of English keyboard music of the virginalist era, but surprisingly is not explained by any contemporary English theorist. The sign appears also in various 17th-century north-German sources and is mentioned by Reincken in his *Hortus Musicus* (1687): "two strokes II denote a shake which impinges on a note from above."² The association of the double stroke with a form of shake is suggested by the application of the sign in several 16th-century sources of English keyboard music and is one which continued throughout the virginalist era. The single stroke (/) does not appear to have been

¹ For background see David Wulstan, *Tudor Music* (London, 1985), ch. 6.

² D-Bds Mus. ant. pract. R283 [fol. 12]: *quemadmodum hae duae II tremul. notant, qui supernè tonum contingit.*

used as a grace sign until around 1570, and until the latter part of the 17th century only exceptionally was it used with any frequency. A triple-stroke sign (Ξ) is used in a small number of sources which includes 16th- as well as 17th-century manuscripts. Idiosyncratic usage of signs is evident in certain sources, underlining the fact that composers and copyists may not always have used the signs with similar intent.

c1530 - c1570³

The Single Stroke

The single stroke was used primarily as a correction sign and in this form it identifies notes which were notated in error at a level too low. In this method of correction the sign was normally drawn horizontally rather than obliquely. The earliest indication of any connection with embellishment is found in the music entered in the *Evesham Abbey Bible* (c1540).⁴ A single stroke drawn obliquely through a semibreve appears to be an abbreviation for a division.

In two important 16th-century manuscripts, the *Mulliner Book* and the *Dublin Virginal Book*, the application of the sign is striking in that it is used only in combination with at least one other single stroke to indicate embellishment.⁵ In *Mulliner*, in pieces entered c1570, RH triads are graced with either three single strokes or two single strokes and a double stroke (see Ex. 1). The implication would appear to be elaborate arpeggiation of each triad. In the *Dublin Virginal Book* single strokes are applied in pairs, and most grace thirds notated on the upper staff. The consistent application in

³ For a detailed examination of the application in 16th-century sources see Desmond Hunter, "The Function of Strokes in Sixteenth-Century Sources of English Keyboard Music," *Irish Musical Studies: Musicology in Ireland*, eds. G. Gillen and H. White (Dublin, 1990), 131-49.

⁴ For a discussion of the source see M. D. Knowles and Thurston Dart, "Notes on a Bible of Evesham Abbey," *English Historical Review* 79 (1964), 775ff.

⁵ Unfortunately, application in the latter source is misrepresented in the edition published by Schott in 1983.

Ex. 1. Anon., "Galliard," *Mulliner Book* (GB-Lbl Add. 30513, fols. 4-4v)⁶



pairs is possibly to distinguish the sign from a correction sign; it also suggests that the implied embellishment should be realized within the interval graced.

The Double Stroke

The few double strokes in the music recorded in the *Evesham Abbey Bible* appear to be indicators of embellishment and in each instance the sign is probably an abbreviation for an oscillating figure in the form of a shake. In later 16th-century sources the sign was used as an abbreviation, possibly for more than one form of embellishment. An association with a form of shake, however, was probably well

⁶ *Musica Britannica (MB)* 1, no. 2.

established by c1570. Double-stroke signs occur in combination in the *Dublin Virginal Book*: pairs of double strokes grace RH thirds. In the passage quoted in Ex. 2 six consecutive thirds are graced thus, possibly implying a rapid alternation of the graced notes in a form of shake.

Ex. 2. Anon., [Variations on the romanesca], *Dublin Virginal Book* (E-Dtc 410, fol. 10)⁷



The Triple Stroke

This sign is given in only one of the 16th-century manuscripts, the *Mulliner Book*, but it appears to function as a grace sign only at the beginning of the first "Gloria tibi Trinitas" setting by Blitheman (see Ex. 3). Although it might be assumed that the triple stroke implies a more elaborate embellishment than the double stroke it could be argued that the addition of a stroke is analogous with the addition of a tail to a note-value; i.e. it may have durational significance, implying a short, crisp grace.

⁷ *The Dublin Virginal Manuscript*, ed. John Ward (Schott, 1983), no. 9.

Ex. 3. Blitheman, "Gloria tibi trinitas", *Mulliner Book*, fol. 88v.⁸

1591 - c1650

A gap exists between the sources dating from around 1570 and the next source of English keyboard music, *My Ladye Nevells Booke*, which is dated 1591. Although the single stroke continued to be used as a correction sign, correction ceased to be its primary function; and, whereas in the *Mulliner Book* and the *Dublin Virginal Book* the sign was used only in combination with at least one other single stroke to indicate embellishment, in *Nevell* and later sources it functions as a grace sign in its own right.⁹ It would appear that the signs were positioned in accordance with a recognized convention. They are drawn through the stems of minims and notes of lower value. On breves and semibreves the signs are placed either above or below the notes, depending on the context (a sign gracing a note in the higher or highest part notated on the staff would be placed in superscript position, one gracing a note in the lower or lowest part in subscript position), or may be drawn through the note-heads. Positioning at variance with this convention can sometimes be attributed to careless copying or lack of space. Nevertheless, positioning which is unusual may be applied in such a way, or with a degree of consistency, which suggests that some special meaning may attach to it. In addition, there are in certain sources unusual signs which appear to relate to embellishment.

⁸ MB 1, no. 91.

⁹ For a detailed examination of the application in *Nevell* see Desmond Hunter, "My Ladye Nevells Booke and the Art of Gracing," in *Byrd Studies*, eds. Alan Brown and Richard Turbet (Cambridge University Press, 1992), 174ff.

The Single Stroke

Benjamin Cosyn made considerable use of this sign in two manuscript collections, and there is a remarkably high percentage of single strokes in *Duncan Burnetts Virginal Book*. This is exceptional, however. In many sources the sign is not used at all and in others occurrences are rare. In *Parthenia*, for instance, it is used in only two of the twenty-one pieces. There is evidence associating the single stroke with realization as a slide (from the third below the graced note), in Edward Bevin's idiosyncratic "Graces in play" (c1630) and in Roger North's account of Prendcourt's interpretation of graces (c1700).¹⁰ Retroactive consideration of the symbols used from around 1650 for the fore-fall (/) and back-fall (\), signs which would seem to be descendants of the virginalist single stroke, suggests that the virginalist sign was probably associated also with one-note graces. Furthermore, an examination of the application in virginalist sources confirms that it was associated with upper- as well as lower-note embellishment. In this connection an important factor to be taken into consideration is melodic direction: a grace sign on a note approached from below may normally indicate lower-note embellishment, one on a note approached from above, an upper-note grace.¹¹ Occasionally other factors come into play: in Ex. 4, for instance, any form of lower-note embellishment is ruled out by the location of the middle voice.

In certain sources, single-stroke gracing of relatively long notes, in contexts in which a shake seems to be required, is common. The fact that a concordant source-reading may provide a corresponding double stroke suggests that the signs were used analogously.

¹⁰ Bevin's table is quoted in Wulstan, *Tudor Music*, 130. For North on Prendcourt see GB-Lbl Add. MSS 32549, fol. 11v and 32531, fol. 24.

¹¹ An interesting parallel may be drawn with Ammerbach's references to *mordanten* in *Orgel Oder Instrument Tabulaturbuch* (1571/1583), ed. Charles Jacobs (Oxford, 1984), lxvii and lxxxvii, and Santa María's discussion of quarter-note *quiebro*s in *Libro llamado arte de tañer fantasia* (Valladolid, 1565; facs., Farnborough, 1972), fols. 46vff.

Ex. 4. Byrd, "Fantasia" (GB-Lbl Add. 30485, fol. 85)¹²

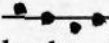

The positioning of the single stroke is subject to variation. The purpose seems to have been to attempt to clarify the form of grace implied in a particular context. Unusual subscript positioning of the sign in Ex. 5, for instance, possibly indicates that the implied lower-note grace should begin on an auxiliary note.

Ex. 5. Byrd, "The Carman's Whistle" (Nevell, fol. 149)¹³

¹² MB 28, no. 62.

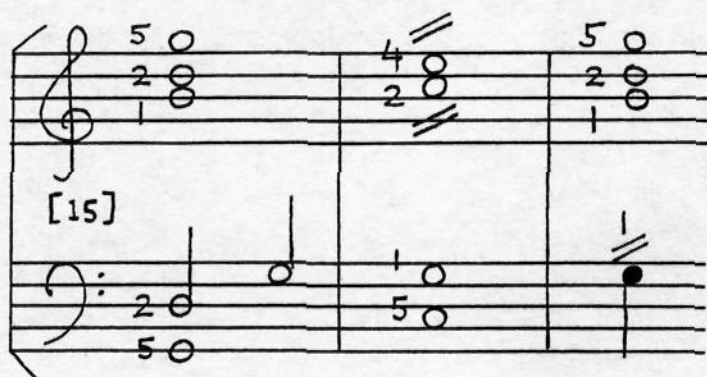
¹³ MB 27, no. 36.

The Double Stroke

Often a double-stroke sign in one source corresponds to a written-out cadential shake in another (occasionally there is a similar correspondence between the triple stroke and a written-out shake). Furthermore, the various forms of prefix to a cadential shake sometimes precede notes graced with double strokes in contexts suggestive of cadential embellishment. Other forms of embellishment which seem to substitute occasionally for the shake (the turn  and broken turn ) may also be associated with the double stroke. In the so-called "Weelkes" manuscript seven double-stroke signs are each accompanied by an additional sign in contexts in which a cadential shake would be appropriate.¹⁴ This would seem to be an indication that the double stroke on its own, at least in this source, was associated with a form of embellishment which would not necessarily continue for the duration of the note graced, particularly where the note-value concerned is relatively long.

Double strokes in pairs, first encountered in the *Dublin Virginal Book*, occur occasionally in 17th-century sources. Indeed, the application is found on a notated third in a simple piece designed for a beginner (Ex. 6).

Ex. 6. Anon., "A preludium" (GB-Lcm 2093, fol. 2v.)¹⁵



¹⁴ For a discussion of unusual application in this source, GB-Lbl Add. 30485, see Desmond Hunter, "The Application of Grace Signs in the Sources of English Keyboard Music, c. 1530–c. 1650," Doctoral diss. (National University of Ireland, 1989), 108ff.

¹⁵ *Harpsichord Studies*, ed. Maria Boxall (Schott, 1980), no. 1.

It seems inconceivable that a beginner would have been expected to cope with simultaneous graces in one hand. A possible meaning of this form of application would appear to be rapid alternation of the graced notes, as suggested already in connection with similar gracing in the *Dublin Virginal Book*. Although there is not one instance of a written-out shake with a third or a larger interval in the virginalist sources, oscillating quaver and semiquaver figurations involving thirds, fourths, fifths, and sixths are notated occasionally (e.g. in "Les Buffons" by Bull). It is possible, therefore, that a more rapid variety is represented by a pair of double-stroke signs. Ganassi refers to a shake made with a third in his *Opera Intitulata Fontegara* (1535).¹⁶

Triad gracing, first encountered in *Mulliner*, may involve one sign, occasionally two, exceptionally three; this tends to occur at the beginning or end of a strain and the implication would appear to be elaborate arpeggiation of the triad.

Where fingering indications are provided, these can be helpful in determining the form of a grace. LH1 is the most common fingering indication on notes graced with the double stroke, confirming a form of lower-note embellishment, probably an undershake. In the RH, 3 is the most common indication.

The position of the semitone, where relevant, may be a factor to be considered in determining whether a grace implied by a double stroke will involve upper- or lower-note embellishment, particularly where a shake seems to be implied (most written-out shakes involve semitone alternation). Occasional unusual positioning of the sign may convey a particular meaning. In Ex. 7 both the position of the sign and the fingering indication would appear to qualify the meaning of the grace sign, confirming lower-note embellishment. The positioning may seem unnecessary in that in view of the context (the beginning of a strain) an undershake involving semitone alternation would seem to be required. It must be considered, however, that a possible meaning of this application is to indicate a lower-note start of the implied undershake.

¹⁶ Sylvestro Ganassi: *Opera Intitulata Fontegara* (Venice, 1535), ed. Hillemarie Peter (Berlin-Lichterfelde, 1959), 87; see also Frederick Neumann, *Ornamentation in Baroque and Post-Baroque Music* (Princeton, 1978), 287.

Ex. 7. Byrd, "The Carman's Whistle," *Will Forsters Virginal Book* (GB-Lbl R.M. 24. d. 3, p. 131)¹⁷



The consecutive occurrence of signs may suggest continuity of embellishment. Where a single stroke follows a double stroke, realization of the former as a slide before the beat, providing a termination to the shake implied by the latter, may have been envisaged (see Ex. 8). This raises the possibility that in other instances realization of graces before the beat may occasionally be implied.

Ex. 8a. Byrd, "Pavan" (*Forster*, p. 114)¹⁸



¹⁷ MB 27, no. 12.

¹⁸ MB 28, no. 71a.

Ex. 8b. Gibbons, "Fantasia" (GB-Lbl Add. 31403, fol. 14v.)¹⁹***The Triple Stroke***

Benjamin Cosyn appears to have been responsible for the reintroduction of the triple-stroke grace sign. The contexts in which the sign is used by Cosyn are mainly cadential and this would suggest realization as a cadential shake. However, the sign was not necessarily associated with an extended embellishment. Any form of elaborate realization in the passage quoted in Ex. 9 would be inappropriate. The significance of the additional stroke may be that it implies an auxiliary-note start to the grace. In support of this it should be considered that the sign is in fact a combination of a single stroke and a double stroke and that the most usual meaning of the former is subsumed in the latter.

Ex. 9. [Cosyn], "Allmaine" (F-Pn Rés. 1185, p. 172)²⁰

¹⁹ MB 20, no. 12.

²⁰ *English Pastime Music, 1630-1660*, ed. Martha Maas, *Collegium Musicum Yale University*, 2nd series, vol. iv (A-R Editions, 1974), no. 88.

The combination of single and double strokes in *Anne Cromwell's Virginal Book* may be analogous with Cosyn's triple stroke. In *Cromwell* the implication is probably an undershake commencing on the lower-auxiliary note (see Ex. 10).

Ex. 10. Anon., "Simphony" (*Anne Cromwells Virginal Book*, fol. 17)²¹



In drawing attention to the fact that the triple stroke may represent a form of embellishment which is associated with both the single- and double-stroke signs, one further point needs to be underscored. Single- and/or triple-stroke signs occur as indicators of embellishment only in addition to the double stroke. To some extent therefore the former may have functioned as qualifying signs, isolating and identifying forms of embellishment which were also associated with the "all purpose" double stroke.²²

²¹ *Anne Cromwell's Virginal Book*, ed. Howard Ferguson (Oxford University Press, 1974), no. 24.

²² One further valuable source of reference is John Harley's study of the application of the signs in "Ornaments in English Keyboard Music of the Seventeenth and Early Eighteenth Centuries," *Music Review* 31 (1970), 177-200.