

# RESOLVING THE HISTORICAL DOTTING DEBATE: HOW EMPIRICAL INVESTIGATIONS MAY INFORM PERFORMANCE PRACTICE

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## Background

The performance of dotted rhythms has received considerable scholarly attention among researchers of 18<sup>th</sup> century performance practice. The controversy is based on different interpretations of descriptions found in historical treatises and instrumental tutors. The question at the heart of the debate is whether dotted rhythms should be played literally or with an altered dotting ratio and how this might affect musical character. In a previous study we found that the *perception* of dotting depended on an interaction between articulation, tempo and dotting ratio. If perceived dotting was influenced by perceived musical character, in addition to physically measurable dotting ratio, then the debate may be resolved by realising that when performance practice researchers discuss dotting they really mean dotting as a kind of musical character.

## Aim

To find out what performance parameters contribute to the perceived musical character of a baroque composition where dotted rhythms are prominent.

## Method

Listeners rated the character of thirty-four recordings of Variation 7 from Bach's *Goldberg Variations* by using a modified version of Hevner's adjective list. The physical parameters of the performances were measured with audio analysis

software and by subjective judgement. The subjective and objective measurements were then compared.

## Results

We found that an interaction of articulation, tempo and dotting influenced the perceived character of a performance with the *dotting ratio* being the *least significant* element because various ratios were found within each expressed character cluster. On the other hand staccato articulation and faster tempo tended to create a 'happy' mood, while legato playing and slower tempo a more 'calm' effect. That is, dotting ratio did not contribute to the character of the piece as much as tempo and articulation, contrary to assertions made by historical musicologists.

## Conclusions

It is more fruitful to discuss the performance of dotted rhythms from the perspective of desired musical character (as many historical sources do) and to emphasize the interaction of several performance features than to debate whether altering the dotting ratio is appropriate or not (as 20<sup>th</sup> century researchers tend to do). Consistent with our previous research, dotting ratio does not seem to necessarily correspond to dotting perception. The present study strengthens this view because dotting ratio is supposed to affect musical character, but in practice it may be one of the weakest contributors.