

The Baroque upbeat: outline of its typology and evolution

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In metrical music, any piece necessarily opens either on the downbeat or on the upbeat. To us, the distinction between these two kinds is so obvious that further investigation would seem unnecessary. Yet as late as the seventeenth century, upbeat incipits were by no means considered the norm. Observe the apparent difficulty that Monteverdi had in notating his air ‘Ecco pur ch’a voi ritorno’ in Act II of *Orfeo*; it would most simply and naturally fit into a two-note upbeat pattern in triple metre ($\frac{3}{2}$), as illustrated in Example 1.1.



Example 1.1 Monteverdi, *Ecco pur ch'a voi ritorno*

In the sixteenth century Zarlino admitted that upbeat patterns (which he termed ‘iambic’) were occasionally needed although his preference was for downbeat incipits:

It is necessary for each composition to begin and end on a downbeat (positione della mano), that is, on the beginning of the bar (nel principio della Battuta). However [...] the iambic may be set in an unequal measure.¹

Illustrations of this rule can already be found in fifteenth-century sources, such as *Mellon Chansonier*, or *Glogauer Liederbuch*; it mostly

¹ Gioseffo Zarlino, *The Art of Counterpoint*. Part III of *Le Istitutioni harmoniche* (Venice, 1558), trans. Guy A. Marco and Claude V. Palisca (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1968; revised edn. New York: Da Capo, 1983), 120.

appears in songs of triple mensuration \circ , beginning with a short upbeat in all voices, which is indicated by rest signs ($\circ \text{---} \text{---} \circ$ or $\circ \text{---} \text{---} \text{---} \circ$).² Speaking of iambic 'set in an unequal measure', Zarlino must have meant the upbeat of this kind.

Occasionally such openings are found in sixteenth-century songlike pieces or dance tunes, but they are quite rare in motet-like pieces. The 'iambic' pattern of ternary homophonic song has shown remarkable durability. It is hallmarked not only by the particular rhythmic pattern, with the upbeat shared by all voices, but often also by the archaic 'empty' notation (opening with rest signs in all parts). We find it in Janequin (see Example 1.2), Sweelinck, and even as late as the eighteenth century, in some Bach chorales of triple metre. With the introduction of bar lines, 'straightforward' upbeats (i.e. not preceded by rests) became the norm. However, the 'empty' upbeat notation is still preserved, surprisingly, in an unbarred early version of Bach's organ chorale *In dulci jubilo* (BWV 729a) as shown in Example 1.3;³ here the empty opening is required by the unbarred notation to indicate an upbeat, which can be seen as a living fossil, or residue of the notational practice of the fifteenth century.



Example 1.2 [$\circ \text{---} \text{---} \circ$] patterns in Janequin (*Las, viens moy secourir*)



Example 1.3 Bach, *In dulci jubilo*, BWV 729a

Upbeat patterns became the norm in late seventeenth- and eighteenth-century dance pieces. For certain dance types (viz. allemande,

² See *Mellon Chansonnier*, eds. Leeman L. Perkins and Howard Garey (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1979).

³ D-B, Mus.ms.Bach P 802. This copy is in the hand of J.T. Krebs.

courante and bourrée), they even became mandatory, while other dances (viz. sarabande and minuet) began on the main beat as a rule. In the early seventeenth century however, dance patterns were still much less standardised. Even different sections within the same dance could come with or without an upbeat.

Dance upbeats were usually short, comprising no more than one beat of the bar. The longer and more complicated an upbeat becomes, the more readily it acquires a life of its own, or may be even understood as a downbeat. For example, the characteristic gavotte rhythm, traditionally written with a double upbeat, extends the upbeat to the duration of a half bar. It is this metrical peculiarity that makes it difficult to perform the gavotte upbeat while clearly maintaining the character of its upbeats and downbeats.

In eighteenth-century French repertoire such as François Couperin's *Pièces de clavecin*, there is a remarkably rich variety of *extended* upbeats, longer than the half-bar gavotte type, an example of which is given in Example 1.4. These upbeats may be extended up to a whole 'long' bar (three or four subdivided beats in moderate or slow tempo). The apparent reason for this is that phrases with long upbeats tend to be *end-accented*, whereas phrases opening on main beats (or with a short upbeat) are *head-accented*. For Couperin and other French composers of his time, end-accented phrases are, perhaps in analogy to the French language, most natural and obvious. One can see this in the way in which he writes his rudimentary scale exercises in *L'Art de toucher le clavecin*: here an upbeat of seven beamed notes is clearly distinguished from the accented flagged quaver placed at the beginning of the following bar, as shown in Example 1.5a. Similar scale figures, with the accent on the last note, are found as early as 1665, in the [Premier] *Livre d'orgue* by Guillaume-Gabriel Nivers.⁴

Comparing this with an exercise for beginners by J.S. Bach—*Applicatio* from the *Clavierbüchlein* for W.F. Bach—one would notice a stark difference between the French and German way of rhythmic thinking. As shown in Example 1.5b, Bach maintained a regular head-accented phrasing throughout.

4 Quoted in Appendix B (p. 112) to Saint-Lambert's *Principes du clavecin (Principles of the Harpsichord by Monsieur de Saint-Lambert)*, trans. and ed. Rebecca Harris-Warrick (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984).



Example 1.4 Couperin, *La Régente* (III^e Livre, 15^e Ordre)



Example 1.5 (a) Couperin, *L'Art de toucher*; (b) J. S. Bach, *Applicatio*

Couperin's frequent use of the *extended* upbeat—longer than a half bar—deserves further examination, for gavotte-like half-bar upbeats were common also outside France, the gavotte being in vogue all over Europe. In Couperin's *Pièces de clavecin* however, the longer upbeats—taking anything up to a complete bar—are even more common than the gavotte-type upbeats.⁵ It is surprising, therefore, to find these long upbeats almost exclusively in French repertory. Couperin is one of the last French composers to have shown a consistent predilection for the extended upbeat, his followers using it much less often.

Extended upbeats were already common in the seventeenth century, long before Couperin, as even a cursory survey shows. Their origins go back to early seventeenth-century French music, notably in the repertory for lute. One of the earliest sources for the frequent use of long and complex upbeat types is Jean-Baptiste Besard's *Thesaurus harmonicus* (1603).⁶ Besard's lute anthology contains, beside his own works, music by many other authors.⁷ A similar variety of upbeats is found, for example in the passamezzi and galliards by Charles Bocquet as published in

5 Counting the incipits in Couperin's four books of *Pièces de clavecin*, 76 pieces open with extended upbeats, 60 with gavotte-type (half-bar) upbeats, 62 with shorter upbeats, but only 43 open on the mainbeat.

6 For a modern edition of his works, see Jean-Baptiste Besard, *Œuvres pour luth seul*, eds. André Souris and Monique Rollin. Corpus des luthistes français (Paris: CNRS, 1981).

7 Prominent among the 21 composers represented in the *Thesaurus harmonicus*, besides Besard, are Valentin Bakfark, Charles Bocquet, John Dowland, Alfonso Ferrabosco, Vincenzo Galilei, and Mercure d'Orléans.

Besard's *Thesaurus*.⁸ Later examples of elaborate upbeats may be found in Ennemond Gaultier ('le Vieux Gaultier', 1575–1651),⁹ but they are absent in Denis Gaultier's (1603–72) *Rhétorique des Dieux*.¹⁰

Besard's rhythmic eccentricities—as given in André Souris' table of the rhythmic patterns of his allemandes, which is shown in Example 1.6—are not limited, of course, to this dance type. They characterise all the pieces in the fifth book of the *Thesaurus*: nine passemezzi, pavana and bergamasco. One must remember that the early sixteenth- and seventeenth-century dances usually had no fixed upbeat (or main beat) incipit patterns. In Arbeau's *Orchesographie* (Lengres, 1589) they were written without upbeats. In the *Fitzwilliam Virginal Book*, the same dance may come either with or without an upbeat; but the usual pattern of the common dance types (e.g. pavan, galliard and gigue) is main beat. In Besard we see an opposite trend however: the normal pattern of most dance types starts with the upbeat, which becomes more varied, extended and complex, compared to any other music of the time. Thus Besard is one of the 'chief suspects' who introduced the long, complex, and idiosyncratic upbeat patterns into French music. In Bach's works there are only two instances of the extended upbeats: (a) in the Aria 'Seufzer, Tränen, Kummer, Noth' in the cantata *Ich hatte viel Bekümmernis* (BWV 21); and (b) in the ostentatiously French *Fantasie über ein Rondeau* (BWV 918), shown in Example 1.7.

The image displays twelve rhythmic patterns for Besard's allemandes, arranged in three rows of four. Each pattern is shown on a single staff with a treble clef and a common time signature. The patterns are numbered as follows: Row 1: No. 31, 32, 33, 34; Row 2: 35, 43, 44, 36, 37, 38; Row 3: 39, 40, 41, 42. The notation includes various note values (quarter, eighth, sixteenth notes), rests, and bar lines, illustrating the complex and varied nature of the upbeats.

Example 1.6 Rhythmic patterns of Besard's allemandes, after Souris (xxxvii)

⁸ *Œuvres des Bocquet*, eds. André Souris and Monique Rollin. Corpus des luthistes français (Paris: CNRS, 1972).

⁹ *Œuvres du Vieux Gaultier*, eds. André Souris and Monique Rollin. Corpus des luthistes français (Paris: CNRS, 1966).

¹⁰ Denis Gaultier, *La rhétorique des dieux*, ed. David J. Buch (Madison: A-R, 1990).



Example 1.7 Bach, Fantasie über ein Rondeau (BWV 918)

The after-beat

Very often in Bach's works we encounter those pieces which open neither on a main beat nor with a regular upbeat, but with a short rest (usually $\frac{7}{8}$ or $\frac{7}{4}$), thus leaving the first main beat empty. Such opening bars should neither be confused with vestiges of the old 'empty' notation, nor with the French long upbeats (although the latter too have the appearance of a *nearly* complete bar). We shall see below that they differ from the latter by more than formal notation (i.e., opening with or without a rest sign). Unlike upbeats, bar 1 in Example 1.8 does not prepare the next bar, but has its own metric and rhythmic weight. Such incomplete bars with a silent downbeat—somewhat similar to the French *contretemps*—are in fact, independent and cannot 'prepare' anything. The accent here is not shifted (as in syncopations), but lends special stress to the incipit, and, paradoxically, to the opening rest. The paradox of the accented silent beat is explained by the fact that the after-beat is often accompanied (or 'stressed') by the accompanying chord in the bass on the downbeat, as in the opening of Bach's Italian Concerto. This device became so self-evident in Baroque musical language that it is often expected (or imagined) even if not actually played. It may be present in one version of the same piece and absent in another.¹¹



Example 1.8 Bach, Fugue in C minor, BWV 575

The after-beat is quite different, structurally and historically, from the fore-beat. Though common in Bach and his German predecessors, it was at first an 'international' device, a Renaissance vestige within Ba-

¹¹ A well-known example is the Prelude from the E-major Partita for unaccompanied violin (BWV 1006/1) which opens with a quaver rest; both the lute solo version (BWV 1006a) and the orchestral versions (BWV 29/1) open with a bass note (or chord) on the main beat.

roque (including the French) style. Its beginnings can be traced back to a rhythmic contraction current in the early sixteenth-century chanson and madrigal. After-beats often arise from contracting the so-called ‘chanson rhythm’ $\circ \circ \circ | \circ$ by a rest to $- \circ \circ \circ | \circ$. They were subsequently adopted by the instrumental polyphonic genres of canzona and ricercar in the forms $\cdot \cdot \cdot \cdot$ and $\gamma \cdot \cdot \cdot \cdot$.

This rhythmic contraction was initially text-engendered, as the following study shows. Example 1.9a is an extract from Lassus’ *Monsieur l’Abbé* [1576]. The opening figure—the stereotyped ‘chanson rhythm’ $\circ \circ \circ \circ$ —is repeated nearly exactly, but with different texts (marked here as A and B):

Example 1.9a Lassus, *Monsieur l’Abbé* (1576), Superius

Example 1.9b Implied overlapping, bb. 6–8 (Superius, bb. 6–8)

A:

*Monsieur l’Abbé et monsieur son varlet,
Sont fais egaux tous deux comme de cire,*

B:

*L’un est grand fol, l’autre petit follet:
L’un veut railler, l’autre gaudir et rire:*

Had these repeats been given to different voices, the result might have looked like Example 1.9b, where the first note of each new entry would overlap the last note of the former. However, the restatements of the opening figure are all in the same voice. In order not to lose a syllable, either at the end of the former entry or at the beginning of the next one ('*comme de ci-re | L'un est grand fol | L'un est grand fol*'), the minims at the middle of bar 7 and the beginning of bar 8 are split into two crotchets. Thus the second and third entries of the figure are delayed, or contracted, to ♪ ♪ ♪ | ♪.

We see both forms—the full canzona-figure and the contracted rhythm—coexisting in countless polyphonic pieces of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, vocal as well as instrumental, including canzoni, ricercari, fugues, etc. They rarely occur however in the openings of dance pieces. Both variants are treated as equivalent within the same piece but with one condition: in the first stage the contracted form is not used as an *incipit* of a piece or a section. The next development would be the 'emancipation' of the contracted after-beat form, ♪ ♪ ♪ | ♪, now occurring in its own right, not merely as a variant of the unabridged rhythm but independent of textual situations. We see frequent occurrences of after-beat incipits (i.e. in the contracted form) later in history, most prominently in late seventeenth-century German music, for instance in the works of Pachelbel and Buxtehude; twenty-one out of Pachelbel's ninety-five *Magnificat Fugues*, for example, open with an after-beat.

The most reliable criterion for distinguishing a 'canzona-engendered' after-beat from other types is to study the rests, as the canzona type is marked by a *simple short rest* (♯ or ♮). Another after-beat type, less common than the canzona-type, opens with compound rests (♯ ♮). The best-known examples are the E major fugue from the Well-Tempered Clavier I, F-sharp minor fugue from Well-Tempered Clavier II, the A major Fughetta on *Allein Gott in der Höh' sei Ehr* (BWV 677), and the first movement (marked *Arioso*) of the *Capriccio sopra la lontananza del fratello diletto* (BWV 992). Since this 'compound' after-beat is not very common in Bach's music, one may ask whether he simply followed an old-fashioned notational tradition, or used it for an intended 'special effect'.¹² As with the examples presented above, the opening rests of the *Arioso* result in an end-accent of the entire phrase. The difference be-

12 One precedent is Johann Kuhnau's 'Sonata quarta' from *Frische Clavier-Früchte* (Leipzig 1696) ed. in *Denkmaler deutscher Tonkunst*, iv (1901/R).

comes clear if we compare the original notation with a rebarring of the same phrase as illustrated in Example 1.10.

The image displays two musical staves, (a) and (b), representing different rhythmic interpretations of a phrase from Bach's Capriccio BWV 992/1. Both staves are in a common time signature (C) and feature a treble and bass clef. Staff (a) shows the original notation, where the phrase begins with a rest on a weak beat, followed by a series of eighth notes and sixteenth notes. Staff (b) shows the same phrase with a shifted rhythm, where the rests are moved to strong beats, creating a different rhythmic feel. The notation includes various note values, rests, and dynamic markings such as accents and hairpins.

Example 1.10 Bach, Capriccio BWV 992/1 – (a) original rhythm; (b) shifted rhythm

The end-accent of the first phrase may have been Bach's main intention in opening the piece with rests; but also other important events, such as the pedal point (bar 5, second crotchet), the perfect cadence (bar 16, third crotchet), and the final chord (bar 17, third crotchet), all fall on weak beats. The difference between a full bar and half bar in this movement—as in many slow *c* pieces—is not completely clear; a $\frac{2}{4}$ metre could have served here just as well. However, perhaps following the conventions of his time, Bach seldom used the relatively modern $\frac{2}{4}$ signature for adagio movements.¹³

Apart from the important aspect of notational tradition, it seems that Bach's focus was to convey a certain poetic effect, associated with longing, or with some similar 'non-assertive' affects, beginning the piece from mid-air, as it were. The entire *Arioso* closes in the same way, with the final chord on mid-bar.

¹³ See Peter Williams, 'Two case studies in performance practice and the details of notation: 1. J.S. Bach and 2/4 Time', *Early Music*, xxi/4 (1993), 613–22. According to Williams, $\frac{2}{4}$ time was relatively modern at the time of young Bach, who began to use it in the Weimar period, much later than the time when this Capriccio was composed (shortly after 1700). Bach's slowest (and considerably later) pieces in $\frac{2}{4}$ time are found in the Goldberg Variations, viz. Variations 2 and 15 (*Andante. Canone alla Quinta*, G minor).

From the other examples mentioned above, I shall limit myself here to the case of the F-sharp minor Fugue from the Well-Tempered Clavier II, as illustrated in Example 1.11). Notice that only the last note of the fugal theme, on the fourth bar, falls on an actual downbeat. Thus the ‘compound’ after-beat lends this theme a particularly ‘hovering’, or syn-copated feeling. Explanation of the other cases may be related with an intended ‘hyper-measure’ effect, but unlike the canzona-type, each instance of a compound after-beat needs its own exegesis. I do not see here any ‘generic’ explanation that will cover all instances of compound after-beats, as in the case of the canzona-engendered one.



Example 1.11 Bach, Fugue in F-sharp minor, the Well-Tempered Clavier II

As we have already seen, the extended fore-beat, a characteristically French device, is practically absent in the works of Bach and Handel; but on rare occasions they too try to convey an end-accented phrasing (although with different notational means from the long fore-beat of the French). One may also find attempts to achieve *Les Goûts Réunis*, i.e. combining both upbeat traditions. We shall examine here two examples:

1. The tune of Handel’s Air in E major (commonly known as the *Harmonious Blacksmith*) might well be written squarely as a main-beat bipartite song, as shown in Example 1.12a; Handel inserts at the beginning a beautiful E *tasto solo* in the bass, shifting the entire piece one crotchet forward. Thus the piece becomes end-accented throughout, *à la Couperin*, although it begins on the main beat, as shown in Example 1.12b.
2. Bach’s E-flat major Sinfonia (BWV 791) displays a relatively complex French fore-beat in the upper voices, while the bass opens in an Italianised (or Germanised) manner. Ignoring the bass for the moment, the rhythm of the two upper parts of this Sinfonia becomes identical with that of Couperin’s *L’Atendrissante* (*Livre III, 18e Ordre*). The comparison of both pieces, as shown in Examples 1.13 and 1.14) may be illuminating.

Example 1.12 consists of two musical staves, (a) and (b), each with a treble and bass clef. Both are in G major (three sharps) and common time (C). Staff (a) shows a piece starting with a head-accented rhythm. Staff (b) shows the original version, which is end-accented, indicated by a double bar line and repeat sign at the beginning.

Example 1.12 Handel, *The Harmonious Blacksmith*: (a) head-accented; (b) end-accented (original version)

Example 1.13 is a piece by Couperin titled "Doulouusement". It is written in bass clef with a 3/4 time signature. The music features a series of chords and melodic lines with slurs and accents, characteristic of a slow sarabande.

Example 1.13 Couperin, *L'Atendrissante* (III^e Livre, 18^e Ordre)

Example 1.14 is a piece by Bach in E-flat major. It is written in treble and bass clefs with a 3/4 time signature. The music features a series of chords and melodic lines with slurs and accents, characteristic of a slow sarabande.

Example 1.14 Bach, *Sinfonia* in E-flat major

Couperin's piece, in the character of a slow sarabande, is constructed in symmetrical four-bar phrases throughout. In his *Sinfonia* Bach uses the same rhythmic figure and the same phrase structure as Couperin; he however uses a procedure similar to that of Handel, adding an Italianate *basso ostinato* with a Germanised after-beat *before* the French rhythm of the upper voices. Thus all phrase endings are shifted one bar forward, and the four-bar phrase is maintained throughout (one bar [b. 29] is added, apparently for tonal reasons). In terms of the amalgamation of styles (concerto and overture forms with the German chorale), Bach has accomplished much here, grafting an Italianate continuo with a German

after-beat onto a dotted and ornamented French *dialogue*-like polyphony. This too is a remarkable achievement in style unification, in the spirit of *Les Goûts réunis*.

To conclude, although each of the various upbeat types discussed has its own different musical history and significance, those of Baroque types—the French fore-beat and German after-beat—eventually shared a common fate. In the following Classical era, both became obsolete, sacrificed on the altar of the rising wave of ‘natural simplicity’. The prevailing upbeat became again the old simple short one, known since the fifteenth century.