

Bach and the Beaming of Small Note Values

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The grouping of eighth, sixteenth, and smaller notes through beams is an element of notation taken for granted by many musicians. Music editors typically allow beaming to be determined by modern convention—or, increasingly, by software algorithms. Yet beaming, like other notational elements, has a history, and at least some composers have used it, consciously or unconsciously, in ways that suggest meaningful distinctions in the way notes are grouped or left ungrouped. Johann Sebastian Bach is one such composer, and editors of his music have sometimes made conscious decisions about the beaming of small note values in his works. Whether those decisions reflect Bach’s own beaming or have been imposed editorially, and whether or not the distinctions between various types of beaming are meaningful, are the subjects of this paper. The discussion opens with some theoretical considerations, continuing with the examination of beaming in several other repertoires (placing Bach’s notation in a historical context), and closing with some observations about actual beaming in Bach’s music. Along the way the author offers perspectives gained from his work as a contributor to an ongoing edition of the music of Bach’s second son Carl Philipp Emanuel.

One of the few scholars who have paid even glancing attention to beaming was Heinrich Schenker. Early in the twentieth century he observed several instances in which Mozart and Beethoven seem to have used beaming to reflect what he calls units or unities (*Einheiten*). For instance, in a passage from Mozart’s second G-minor symphony, Schenker asserts that the beaming in the autograph manuscript clarifies the resolution of a dissonance, that is, a 7–6 progression (ex. 1).¹ In the preface to his edition of Beethoven’s piano sonata op. 101, Schenker lists elements of notation visible in that composer’s autographs. Among these is what Schenker calls “the deeply meaningful play of the beams, which announce to the eye what is leading the notes from within, the tendency of some to be connected and of others to be separated.”² The post-Romantic vitalist language is typical of Schenker, who personifies the notation as an extension of the composer’s mind. Bach scholars do that too, incidentally, when they view Bach’s fluidly drawn notes and beams as reflections of his personality.

Schenker is more objective in writing about a passage from Beethoven’s piano sonata op. 109. Here he claims that “the way in which the left hand is notated . . . reminds one of the notation of Sebastian Bach, who also takes care to give a common beam to notes . . . in order to give visible clarity to their belonging together” (ex. 2).³ Schenker’s assertion is that Bach as well as Beethoven used beaming to

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- 1 Schenker refers to the joining of b-flat to a in the second measure of the example (the beam is broken in the *Neue Mozart-Ausgabe*). “Mozart’s Symphony in G Minor, K. 550,” trans. William Drabkin, *The Masterwork in Music*, ed. William Drabkin, vol. 2 (Mineola: Dover, 2014), p. 84.
 - 2 “das tiefsinnige Spiel der Balken: sie künden dem Auge, was im Inneren der Töne vorgeht, den Willen zur Zusammengehörigkeit bei diesen, Trennungszwang bei jenen” (*Beethoven: Die letzten Sonaten: Sonate A Dur Op. 101*, “kritische Einführung und Erläuterung von Heinrich Schenker,” ed. Oswald Jonas, Vienna: Universal, 1972; originally published 1921), p. 4.
 - 3 “Der Schreibart der l. H. . . . erinnert an die Schreibart Sebastian Bachs, der durch einheitliche Funktion ähnlich gedeckten Tönen zur optischen Verdeutlichung der Gemeinsamkeit auch einen gemeinsamen Balken zu geben pflegte.” *Beethoven: Die letzten Sonaten: Sonate E Dur Op. 109*, “kritische Einführung und Erläuterung von Heinrich Schenker,” ed. Oswald Jonas, Vienna: Universal, 1971; originally published 1913), p. 30.

Despite Schenker, there seems to be no evidence that Beethoven, Bach, or other composers consciously used beams in this way. Nor do there appear to be any historical treatises before that of Türk to give unequivocal indications that beaming patterns might reflect anything that was expected to be done in performance.⁴ What may be the only mention of beaming by a writer known to Bach occurs when Quantz, in chapter 5 of his *Essay on flute playing*, mentions that triplets are normally grouped together (ex. 3).⁵ Indeed, in his music Quantz always notates each group of triplets on its own beam, even when the entire group is worth only an eighth or sixteenth. Sebastian and his pupils followed the same convention, as in a concerto composed by Emanuel Bach at Berlin in 1738, that is, during his father's lifetime (ex. 4). Both composers also tend to notate groups of very small note values in fours, regardless of where the beat might lie.

Example 3. Johann Joachim Quantz, *Versuch einer Anweisung das Flöte traversiere zu spielen* (Berlin, 1752), *Tabula 2*, figs. 7–8 (examples for chap. 5, para. 15): separate beaming of triplets and other small figures



4 Daniel Gottlob Türk, *Klavierschule* (Leipzig and Halle, 1789), 345, gives an example of the type of broken beaming illustrated below in BWV 971, 538, and 1001 (modern edition only!). He explains that this is to indicate an *Einschnitt* (phrase division), which is made perceptible (*fühlbar*) by drawing the finger (*abheben*) from the key (p. 346).

5 *Versuch einer Anweisung die Flöte traversiere zu spielen* (Berlin, 1752), published simultaneously in French as *Essai d'une méthode pour apprendre à jouer de la flûte traversière*, chap. 5, para. 15. The German expression is *zusammengestrichen* and the French is *lié*, which in this context cannot mean slurred.

Example 4. Carl Philipp Emanuel Bach, Concerto in G for keyboard and strings, W. 4, mvt. 1, mm. 57–71, from Brussels, Conservatoire Royal de Musique, Bibliothèque, 5887 MSM (keyboard part). I am grateful to Mary Oleskiewicz for furnishing high-resolution photographs of sources from the Brussels library.



It is often asserted that beams, or the lack of them, may have something to do with articulation.⁶ Certainly the presence or absence of beams can seriously affect the *appearance* of eighth notes and smaller note values, and arguably this could influence how one might sing or play them. In keyboard music from around 1600, one sometimes finds groups of small note values beamed together, at other

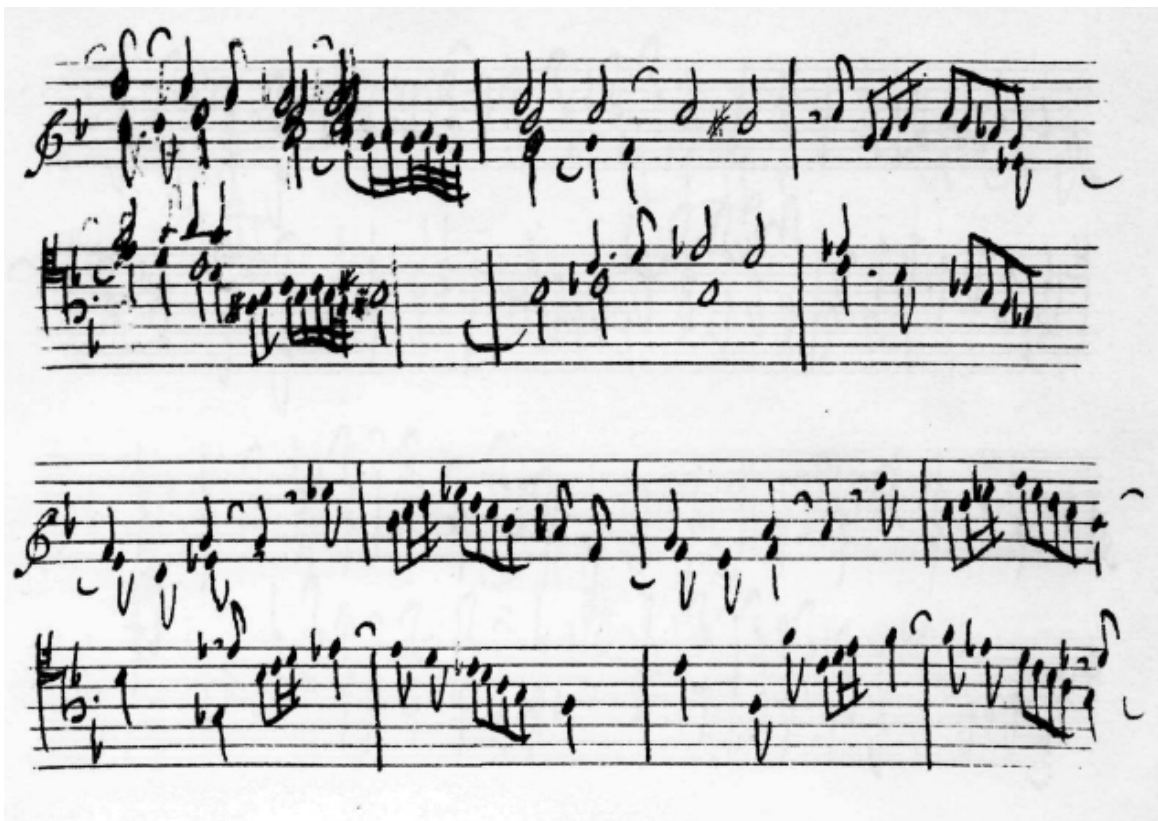
6 E.g., by Etienne Darbellay, *Le toccate e i capricci di Girolamo Frescobaldi: Genesi delle edizioni e apparato critico*, supplement to volumes 2–4 of *Girolamo Frescobaldi: Opere complete* (Milan: Suvini Zerboni, 1988), 27, quoting the “Remarques” in Michel de Saint-Lambert, *Principes du clavecin* (Paris, 1702), 61 (p. 130 in the edition seen here [Amsterdam: Roger]). Saint-Lambert in fact argues against a rule given by “people” (*des gens*) according to which beamed eighths are played *inégalement*, those lacking a beam (*trait*) *également*; from the context it is clear that Saint-Lambert refers to rhythm, not articulation. Darbellay is one of several writers cited by Yo Tomita, “Reading Soul From Manuscripts: Some Observations on Performance Issues in J. S. Bach’s Habits of Writing His Music,” in *Essays in Honor of Christopher Hogwood: The Maestro’s Direction*, ed. Thomas Donahue (Lanham: Scarecrow Press, 2011), 13–40 (cited: 14). Tomita has subsequently refined his argument in “Deciphering the Performance Hints Hidden in J. S. Bach’s Quaver Beams,” *Early Music* 44 (2016): 89–104.

times all notated with separate flags. This can occur even within a single piece in a single source (ex. 5). But there is no documentation that this has anything to do with intended articulation. Another supposed use of broken beaming is to indicate phrase divisions, as in many works of Bach. Even if this is true, however, one must take care to consult primary sources in order to know the composer's view on the matter. Broken beams in the last movement of the Italian Concerto divide certain phrases between the two manuals and are found in the original print (ex. 6).⁷ Johann Gottfried Walther used similar notation to clarify manual changes in his copy of the "Dorian" Toccata for organ, for which no autograph survives (ex. 7). Comparable beaming can be seen in the fugue from the first solo violin sonata, where it sets off statements of the principal subject. But this occurs only in modern editions of both the original version and the organ arrangement (ex. 8a). It has no basis in the autograph (ex. 8b).⁸

Example 5. Girolamo Frescobaldi (?), Toccata 3 from Rome, Vatican Library, Chigi 25, ff. 68r-v (continues on next page)



- 7 No autograph manuscript for this piece exists, but Bach presumably took care in preparing the *Stichvorlage* for his printed editions, as documented by the survival of an autograph *Abklatschvorlage* for the Augmentation Canon from the *Art of Fugue* (Berlin, Staatsbibliothek, Mus. ms. Bach P 200/1, fascicle 1, online at https://www.bach-digital.de/receive/BachDigitalSource_source_00001072).
- 8 Another instance of broken beaming present in editions but not in the sources occurs in the prelude of the Second English Suite, where the nineteenth-century *Bachgesamtausgabe* left certain eighth notes in mm. 3, 4, 19, 20, etc. unbeamed in order to show phrase divisions (visible online: <http://ks.petruccimusiclibrary.org/files/imglnks/usimg/a/a8/IMSLP02095-BWV0807.pdf>).



Example 6. Johann Sebastian Bach, Italian Concerto, BWV 971, mvt. 3, mm. 21–35, from *Zweyter Theil der Clavier Übung* (1735)



Example 7. J. S. Bach, “Dorian” Toccata, BWV 538/1, mm. 11–13, from Berlin, Staatsbibliothek, Mus. ms. Bach P 803/21 (Johann Gottfried Walther)



Example 8. J. S. Bach, Violin Sonata no. 1 in G minor, BWV 1001, mvt. 2, mm. 13–18, (a) from *Johann Sebastian Bach: Werke*, vol. 27 (1879), and (b) corresponding passage from autograph (P 967)

(a)



(b)



In the first of two lucid articles on this subject, Yo Tomita reminds readers that vocal music from Bach’s time breaks beams between notes that are sung to different syllables.⁹ This relates beaming to articulation in the literal sense that pronouncing a new syllable usually involves the articulation of a consonant. But in turning to instrumental music, I cannot agree with the manner in which Tomita

⁹ “Reading Soul,” 15.

relates what he calls “default beaming” to a so-called “beat-unit.” The problem is that this begs the question, as the meaning of a beat is undefined. How, for example, should we understand the long beams on certain eighth notes in the courante from Bach’s D-major partita (ex. 9)? This is an example of what Tomita calls “extended” beaming. It is not an isolated example from Bach, who uses similar beaming almost regularly in certain meters (ex. 10). The violinist Stanley Ritchie claims that “all music is in one,” that is, to be played with one beat per measure,¹⁰ and these examples might seem to prove it. In most music, however, there is a hierarchy of beats, and beaming could reflect subdivisions of beats as well as their grouping into larger units. This is especially true in duple and quadruple meter, where eighths might be gathered into groups of two, four, or higher powers of two.

Example 9. J. S. Bach, Partita no. 4 in D, BWV 828, courante, mm. 1–13, from *Clavier Übung* (1731)



Example 10. J. S. Bach, Organ Sonata no. 5 in A minor, BWV 529, mvt. 2, mm. 1–8, from autograph (P 271)



¹⁰ *The Accompaniment in “Unaccompanied” Bach: Interpreting the Sonatas and Partitas for Violin* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2016), 66.

There remains, moreover, the question whether beaming reflects anything that a performer might do. There are at least two alternatives. The groups of notes defined by beaming might simply be compositional or conceptual, like Schenker's motivic unities. Or they might arise as natural consequences of the way individual notes line up in harmony, reflecting how a listener might perceive the music but not requiring any active response from the singer or player. Beats in Bach's music as actually experienced are products not of notation but of note duration and harmonic rhythm—that is, the rate of change in the formation of structural consonances between upper and lower voices. These structural consonances involve not the notes in the musical surface, that is, the written-out melodic embellishment on the page, but rather tones in an underlying foreground structure. For this reason, the location of beats is always a matter of interpretation. Identifying a beaming pattern as “default,” “short,” or “extended” is by no means always obvious. By the same token, identifying motives or figures that might be grouped together by beaming involves subjective discovery procedures.

In the example from the violin fugue, it is easy for us to identify the upbeat of three repeated notes as a recurring motive (see ex. 8 above). But Bach and his contemporaries did not have a concept that corresponds precisely with our idea of a motive. Rather they spoke of *Figuren* (figures), which, as illustrated by Printz, Quantz, and other writers whom Bach knew or knew of, are typically embellishments of individual notes or arpeggiations of single harmonies (ex. 11). Such figures are comprised of small notes that begin on the beat, and as such they are often notated with a single beam—but not always, as Quantz shows in this example.

Example 11. Quantz, *Versuch*, Tab. 9, fig. 2: variations on c''–d''–e'' and implied harmonies



If we seek its origins, we find that beaming is either absent or extremely rare in mensural notation before the sixteenth century, when larger note values tended to be favored. Beams probably originated as shorthand for individual flags, perhaps regarded only as a sort of abbreviation, not signifying grouping or anything else. In some traditions, such as that of the Elizabethan virginalists, it is unusual to find notes of different values beamed together. On the other hand, one can find very long series of the same note value on one beam (ex. 12a). In this example, some of the beam breaks seem to be coordinated with motivic distinctions or subdivisions of the beat. But it is unclear whether this beaming can be traced to the composer; an independent copy of the same piece beams some of the figures differently (ex. 12b).

Example 12. William Byrd, Harding's Galliard, conclusion, from (a) London, British Library, Roy. Mus. 24.d.3 (Will Foster's Virginal Book), and (b) Cambridge, Fitzwilliam Museum, Mu. MS 168 (Fitzwilliam Virginal Book)

(a)



(b)



Some copyists seem to have enjoyed stringing as many notes as possible along the same set of beams, which extend right over barlines. The copyist's enthusiastic beaming in Example 13 makes the general melodic shape of the running passagework very clear. This beaming also emphasizes the distinction between passagework comprised of many notes of the same value and figuration that combines notes of different values. On the other hand, it is impossible at a glance to line up the small notes played by one hand with the larger ones sounding simultaneously in the other.

Bach may not have known any Elizabethan keyboard music, and his acquaintance with related music by Sweelinck and Scheidt also cannot be assumed. If he did know any keyboard music by either of those two, it might have been transmitted in tablature. German keyboard tablature, although written in letters, includes signs that are analogous in some ways to beaming, as in Bach's autograph tablature of the *Fantasia* BWV 1121, an early work (ex. 14). Horizontal lines indicate the octave registers of notes, and comparison with a transcription shows that these lines are broken at points where we would place bar lines. Small note values, moreover, are grouped by rhythmic signs that look somewhat like beams and stems without noteheads. These signs actually represent quarter and half notes as well as smaller values. This notation makes it clear that in mm. 2 and 3, the six quarter notes fall into two groups of three, something that is not explicit in the transcription in score notation. It is possible that early experience with tablature notation conditioned Bach's use of beaming to reflect metrical groupings in his scores. Certainly Bach's score notation, unlike that of earlier traditions, does normally use beaming to reflect metrical groupings of small note values.

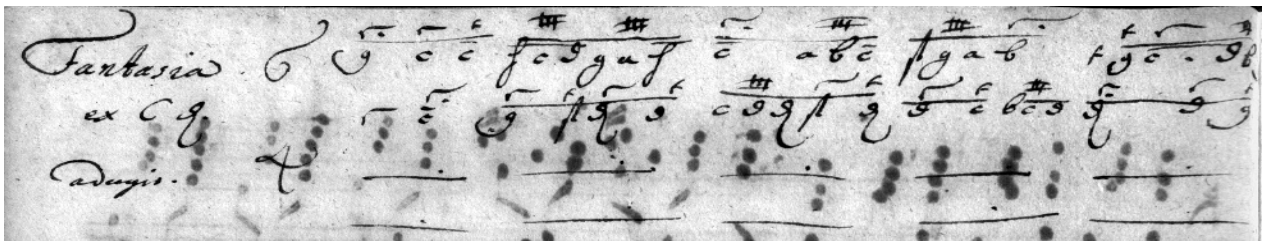
One early Baroque work that Bach definitely did know is Frescobaldi's *Fiori musicali*. Published in 1635, it was printed in score from moveable type without beams (ex. 15a). Bach's manuscript copy has

Example 13. John Bull, Les Buffons, from London, British Library, Add. ms. 23623 (Guglielmus à Messaus's Book)



Example 14. J. S. Bach, Fantasia in C minor, BWV 1121 (Anh. 205), opening, from (a) autograph (Leipzig, Musikbibliothek, III.8.4, Andreas Bach Buch) and (b) *Neue Bach-Ausgabe*, vol., IV/11 (2005)

(a)



(b)



been lost since World War II, and there are no certain copies made from it, so we cannot be sure how he dealt with the occasional unbeamed small notes in this source. How he did so is suggested by other copies in a group of manuscripts made in the later eighteenth century (ex. 15b). These manuscripts contain *ricercars* from the *Fiori musicali* as well as similar pieces by Frescobaldi's pupil Froberger. The copyists beam together the occasional eighth notes that bear individual flags in the original print. These manuscripts, incidentally, are similar in format and appearance to Bach's autograph of the *Art of Fugue* (ex. 16). Unfortunately, these examples tell us little about beaming except that Bach and later copyists followed much the same notational conventions we use today, grouping small notes into beats usually equal in value to a half note.

These conventions were already in place at least a century earlier, for by 1649 Froberger was using what looks like modern beaming in his autograph scores. So too do the earliest printed editions of his music, which date from the 1690s.¹¹ Unfortunately, the few pieces by Froberger that we can be reasonably sure Bach knew are written mainly in large note values. These are the fantasias and *ricercars* that were copied into the same family of late manuscripts that contain the Frescobaldi pieces.¹² The handful of variants in these copies that involve beaming are inconsequential. On the rare occasions when Bach and his contemporaries had to make conscious decisions about beaming, as when they were copying old keyboard music printed from moveable type, they must have applied what they considered the common-sense shorthand of grouping notes into beats, usually understood as half notes. In short, looking at older repertory sheds no light on how or why Bach beamed notes as he did in his own music.

Later repertory, from the circle of Bach's sons and students, may be slightly more useful for understanding his own practice. The notation of certain compositions, including several early keyboard concertos by Emanuel Bach, suggests that the latter sometimes made deliberate distinctions in the ways eighths and sixteenths were beamed. In a solo episode from his G-major concerto of 1738, eighths in the left hand are sometimes grouped in twos, sometimes in fours; mm. 61 and 63 are virtually identical, yet the lower part is beamed differently (see the fifth and seventh measures in ex. 4 above). This seems inconsequential, in part because there is a single D-major harmony through each of the two measures. But later in the passage the eighths of the left hand are again grouped in twos, reflecting the busier rhythm of the upper part as well as the accelerated harmonic rhythm, with the harmony changing on every beat.

11 The only significant difference in the few pieces common to the two available Froberger autographs and the early prints is that the rare groups of eight thirty-seconds in the autograph tend to be broken up into groups of 4 + 4 notes in the prints. This might reflect the difficulty of drawing long parallel beams in an etched or engraved print, but it is musically inconsequential, as such groups were surely meant to be played as quick *tirate* regardless of the notation.

12 Further discussion and identification of these pieces in the present author's "Expression and *Discretion*: Bach and Froberger," in *Bach Notes: The Newsletter of the American Bach Society*, no. 26 (Spring 2017): 5–8, online at <http://www.americanbachsociety.org/Newsletters/BachNotes26.pdf>.

Example 15. Girolamo Frescobaldi, Recercar dopo il Credo, from (a) *Fiori musicali* (1635), (b) Berlin, Staatsbibliothek, ms. 30142

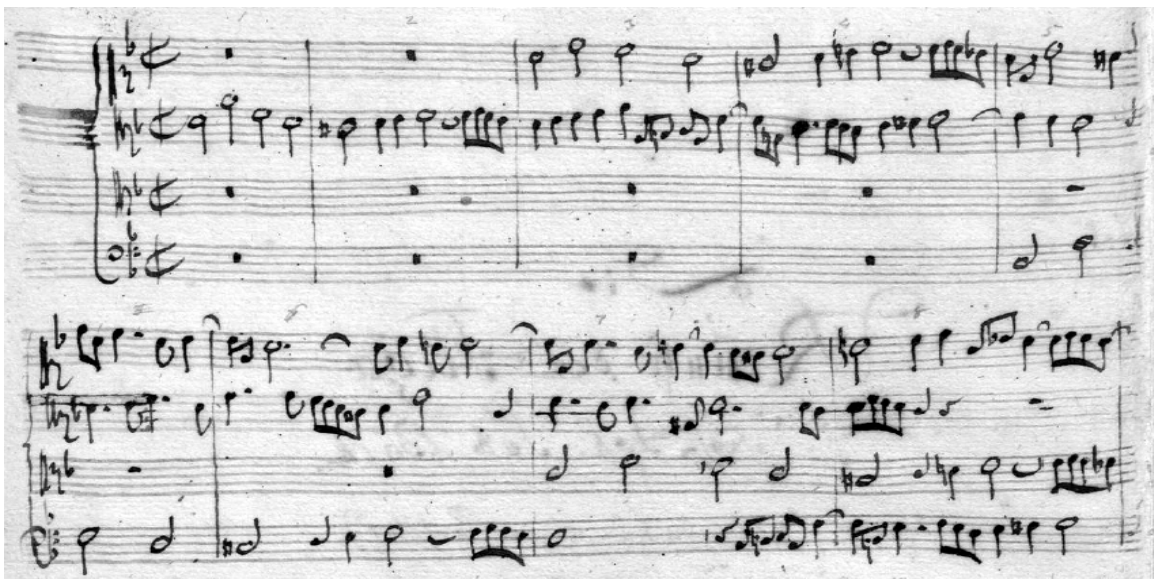
(a)



(b)



Example 16. J. S. Bach, *Art of Fugue*, Contrapunctus 1, BWV 1080/1, autograph (P 200)



The manuscript shown in example 4 is a copy, not an autograph.¹³ But the same alternation between groupings of eighth notes in twos and in fours occurs in the composer's autograph scores of other works originating from the same period (ex. 17). Unfortunately, modern editions of this repertory often regularize the notation of such passages; the author's own edition of this work was published without the apparently purposeful distinctions in beaming found in the sources (ex. 18). The governing editorial policy, at least at the time this edition appeared, was not to "preserve the inconsistent beaming often found in the sources, unless it bears on performance. In the first movement, given its quick tempo, we would beam the 8th notes in groups of 4."¹⁴

There are several problems with this, apart from the intentional disregard for the composer's notation. First, it assumes knowledge of how beaming relates to performance. More fundamentally, it suggests that relevance for performance is the chief or overriding criterion for beaming, although the latter might be relevant to how one understands the motivic or harmonic structure of the music, without necessarily having any bearing on performance as such. There is, in addition, an unfounded presumption that an Allegro movement in 2/4 is quick enough that beaming in twos is somehow misleading or inappropriate; in fact the reverse, that such a grouping of eighth notes is preferable here, is at least equally likely to be true.¹⁵

13 Details on sources for this and other works by C. P. E. Bach discussed below in the author's edition of *Carl Philipp Emanuel Bach: Keyboard Concertos From Manuscript Sources II* (W. 4–6), Carl Philipp Emanuel Bach: The Complete Works, vol. III/9.2 (Los Altos: Packard Humanities Institute, 2009).

14 Personal communication to the author from the editorial office of the Packard Humanities Institute.

15 For a strong argument in favor of 2/4 time during the first half of the eighteenth century as deliberate in tempo, with two well-defined beats to each measure, see Peter Williams, "Two Case Studies in Performance Practice and the Details of Notation: 1: J. S. Bach and 2/4 Time," *Early Music* 21 (1993): 614–22.

Example 17. C. P. E. Bach, Concerto in A, W. 7, mvt. 1, mm. 6–14, autograph (P 352)



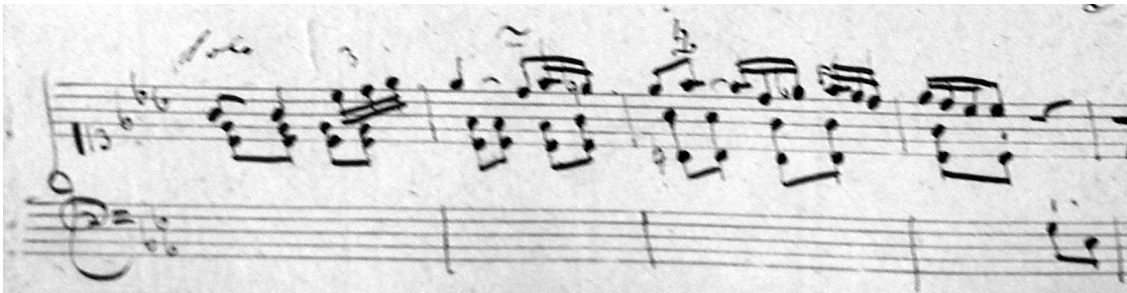
Example 18. C. P. E. Bach, Concerto in G, W. 4, mvt. 1, mm. 58–70, from *Carl Philipp Emanuel Bach: Complete Works*, vol. III/9.2 (2009)



Given the tendency of editors and publishers to favor consistency, it is understandable that some might prefer to apply a rigid rule to what they understand to be a meaningless notational detail, such as the beaming of small note values. Yet one might suspect that *something* is signified by beaming when a source consistently beams parallel passages in some distinctive way. Identifying parallel passages, however, is not always straightforward. In two passages from another early concerto by C. P. E. Bach, the left hand is initially beamed entirely in twos; subsequently the copyist uses shorthand that apparently groups the eighth notes in fours (ex. 19). Obviously the two passages begin similarly, save for transposition. But by the third measure there is a distinction in harmonic rhythm, and it becomes clear that the later passage is a sequence. This might not be enough to explain the difference in how the two passages are notated, but their parallelism is only superficial. Nevertheless they appear in the modern edition with identical beaming, with regular groups of four eighths.

Example 19. C. P. E. Bach, Concerto in C minor, W. 5, mvt. 1, (a) mm. 41–44 and (b) 150–156, from Brussels, Conservatoire Royal de Musique, Bibliothèque, 5887 MSM (keyboard part)

(a)



(b)



In music by J. S. Bach we find the same types of apparent inconsistencies in the beaming of eighth notes, especially in bass lines at cadences or where there is busy or rhythmically complex counterpoint in another part.¹⁶ On the whole, Sebastian seems more consistent than Emanuel in grouping eighth notes in fours, probably because his music is more homogeneous in rhythm than Emanuel's. For instance, in the first movement of Sebastian's E-major harpsichord concerto the bass moves chiefly in

¹⁶ Tomita (both articles) also points to numerous instances of "short" beaming at cadences in J. S. Bach's autographs.

eighths beamed in groups of four. In the middle or B section, however, a number of passages group these notes in twos (ex. 20). Conceivably this has something to do with the suddenly more incisive (or at least explicit) articulation of the right hand, where the sixteenth notes are slurred in twos. There is another version of this movement, however, in the opening sinfonia of Cantata 169. There, in the corresponding passage, Bach continues to group the eighth notes mainly in fours (ex. 21).

Example 20. J. S. Bach, Concerto in E, BWV 1053, mvt. 1, mm. 67–75, autograph (P 234)



Example 21. J. S. Bach, *Gott soll allein mein Herze haben*, mvt. 1, mm. 67–71, autograph (P 93), without oboes (top three staves)



Both autograph scores are probably copies of a lost original that Bach was adapting as he wrote, one version for organ, the other for harpsichord. It could be that the more frequent grouping of eighth notes in twos in the concerto is related to Bach's addition of embellishment to the solo part in that version (visible in ex. 20). Perhaps, too, Bach's embellishments are meant to lead a player to think in smaller metrical units, therefore articulating each quarter-note beat a little more distinctly. But this cannot be argued convincingly on the basis of Bach's notation alone. Nevertheless, there is little reason for an editor to depart from Bach's beaming in either version, despite the inconsistencies, which cause no problems of legibility and are not confusing. But do they mean anything?

It is clear from other contexts that Sebastian at times did use beaming to signify one thing or another. Already mentioned is his occasional use of broken beams to coincide with changes of manual or dynamic level. Another use is to distinguish notes within a line that must be divided between the hands or, occasionally in organ music, between the left hand and pedals. This type of distinction is normally reinforced by a change in the direction of the note stems, as at the beginning of the E-minor partita (ex. 22a). The same movement later turns to fugue, and within statements of the the subject Bach makes a fairly consistent distinction between beaming of eighths in fours and then in twos, the latter being used for a cadential figure at the end of the subject (ex. 22b).

Yet this distinction was eliminated when Bach had the piece engraved and printed (ex. 23). Moreover, the print employs extended beams for a syncopated passage that appears somewhat differently in the autograph (ex. 24). The elimination of rests from the upper part in this passage suggests that Bach wanted the latter to be played as legato or sustained as possible. Perhaps this is confirmed by the beaming. But there is an inconsistency within the engraving, which breaks the beam in m. 49 but not in m. 50. This might seem insignificant, but the passage is more legible with the beam broken in the middle of the measure. After seeing m. 49, however, a player is better prepared to read m. 50, despite the unbroken beam. So the inconsistency may not in fact be arbitrary, although I doubt it is meaningful. If intended, it was meant merely to improve legibility.

Example 22. J. S. Bach, Partita no. 6 in E minor, BWV 830, mvt. 1, (a) mm. 1–3 and (b) mm. 24–32, from autograph (P 225)

(a)



(b)



Example 23. J. S. Bach, Partita no. 6 in E minor, BWV 830, mvt. 1, mm. 24–33, from *Clavier Übung*



Example 24. J. S. Bach, Partita no. 6 in E minor, BWV 830, mvt. 1, mm. 48–50, from (a) autograph (P 225), and (b) *Clavier Übung*

(a)



(b)



One final use of beaming worth mentioning is to indicate changing subdivisions of a measure in compound triple meter. This is really a special case of what we might call metrical beaming, and it brings us back to Schenker's comments about Beethoven and Bach (see ex. 2). One instance occurs in the second courante of Bach's First English Suite, which underwent a change of title when Bach revised it, making it the second of two doubles or variations. There is no autograph, but copies of both versions are consistent in their use of beaming to reflect hemiolas, that is, the distinction between duple and triple subdivisions of the measure (ex. 25).

Although belonging to what we call the English Suites, this is one of very few courantes that Bach wrote in the true French style, with recurring hemiolas that are distinguished by how the eighth notes are beamed together.¹⁷ Somewhat comparable is the courante of the Fourth Partita, most of which, however, is metrically quite ambiguous. This might be why in many measures the eighth notes are beamed in "extended" groups of twelve (see ex. 9 above). The main theme of this movement can be understood as being simultaneously duple and triple, that is, in $3/2$ and in $6/4$. By notating the eighth notes as he does, Bach denies us a clue as to which is the "true" meter.

¹⁷ Another example is the courante of BWV 819, although the edition in the *Neue Bach-Ausgabe* (vol. V/8) disregards the distinctive beaming of eighths as shown in copies by both Bach's pupils Gerber and Kayser. Actual French courantes by, e.g., François Couperin, rarely show this distinction because eighths are infrequent in triple measures (those in $3/2$ as opposed to the more common $6/4$); a few instances occur in the Première Courante of Couperin's *Cinquième Ordre*, which Bach probably knew from the printed edition of 1713 (in the sarabandes of the Second and Third English Suites he imitates Couperin's notation of *agrémens*).

Example 25. J. S. Bach, English Suite no. 1 in A, (a) early version, BWV 806a, courante 2, mm. 1–4, from P 803 (Walther), and (b) late version, BWV 806, double 2, mm. 1–4, from Berlin, Staatsbibliothek, Amalienbibliothek ms. 489

(a)



(b)



In the overture of the same partita Bach also uses extended beams for several long scales. There are similar passages in the opening movement of the Fifth Partita as well (ex. 26a). The same movement shows some apparently meaningful distinctions between groups of four, eight, and twelve semiquavers (ex. 26b). These distinctions, which reflect differences in motivic shape, might also reflect distinctions in intended articulation. But it is unlikely that long beams always indicate legato or unarticulated performance. A syncopated dotted rhythm in the corrente from the Sixth Partita is beamed in long groups of seven notes (ex. 27). But the same rhythm in a late, autograph oboe part of Cantata 82 is beamed mostly in twos, with a slur over each pair of notes (ex. 28).

Example 26. J. S. Bach, Partita no. 5 in G, BWV 829, praeambulum, (a) mm. 20–25, (b) mm. 54–60, from *Clavier Übung*

(a)



(b)



Example 27. J. S. Bach, Partita no. 6 in E minor, BWV 830, corrente, (a) mm. 12–20, from autograph (P 225), and (b) mm. 14–20, from *Clavier Übung*

(a)



(b)



Example 28. J. S. Bach, *Ich habe genug*, mvt. 1, oboe, mm. 33–50, from Berlin, Staatsbibliothek, Mus. ms. Bach St 54 (autograph)



The conclusion seems unavoidable that in his use of beams, as in so much else, Bach was constantly inventive, never falling into routines. We can adduce certain principles that will explain some of his notational choices, but for every conclusion we reach, an exception or an alternate explanation will soon appear. Whether we work as editors, performers, or listeners, our natural urge to follow regular procedures and easily stated rules will always be frustrated by music whose composer avoided such things.

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