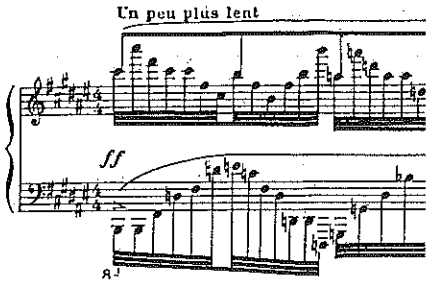
Solving the Mysteries Of Ambiguous Notation

BY JOSEPH SMITH

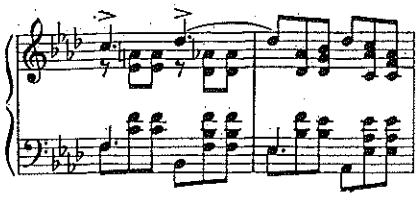
Every piece of music can be used as a step-by-step set of instructions that shows how to produce sounds. Conversely, another view of composition sees written music as a notated representation of what sounds might look like on paper. Because both of these views come into play during piano performance, it is important to understand whether a composer has written notation that should be played literally or notation that represents a composer's idea of how a piece should sound.

One notational peculiarity of the piano is that a player can sustain tones either by keeping keys depressed or by lifting the dampers with the right pedal and releasing the keys. Composers notate the duration of tones as held down by the fingers or as sustained by the pedal, but sometimes this causes ambiguities with double-stemmed notes. These usually indicate that two voices begin in unison, even though on the piano these voices are played by a single key. In many cases these two voices have different durations, with the longer note held down while the shorter moves to a different note. In piano composition, however, double stems sometimes instead indicate which notes, among many sustained by the pedal, are melodically significant. In this example from Ravel's *Gaspard de la nuit,* it is clearly impossible to keep the keys of the double-stemmed notes depressed for their full value.

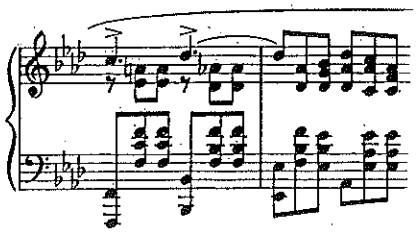


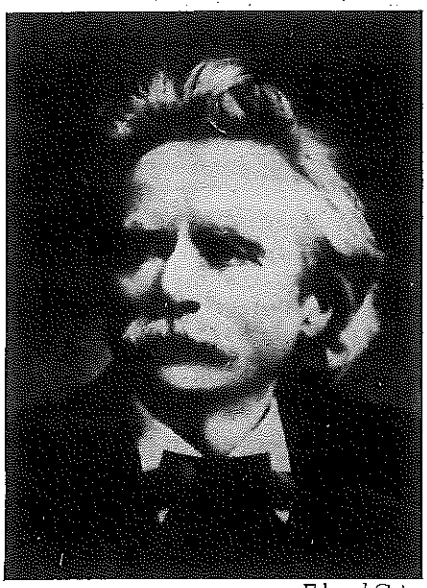
Ravel suggests that the double-stemmed notes should not be played literally, but stressed through dynamics, phrasing, or agogic lingering.

Chopin's Prelude in A, Op. 28, has double-stemmed bass notes in measures 8 and 9.



If a pianist views the double-stemmed notes as the more melodically significant pitches in the left hand, he should bring each of them out to suggest a slurred connection to the following eighth notes. In Chopin's Prelude the double-stemmed notes are consistently those that can be held down by the fifth finger during the successive incomplete chords, which indicates only that Chopin wants those bass notes sustained by the fingers to promote smoothness. Where the bass notes cannot be held down, legato should be matched by pedaling. A similar passage in measure 40 strengthens the conclusion that Chopin's double-stemming of the earlier passage does not indicate emphasis. The bass octaves on strong beats make finger connection impossible, so Chopin does not double-stem any of these notes.

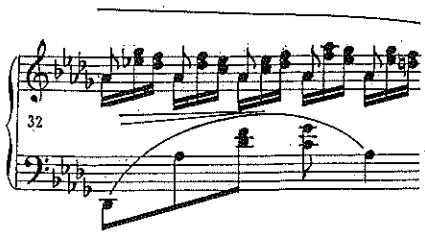




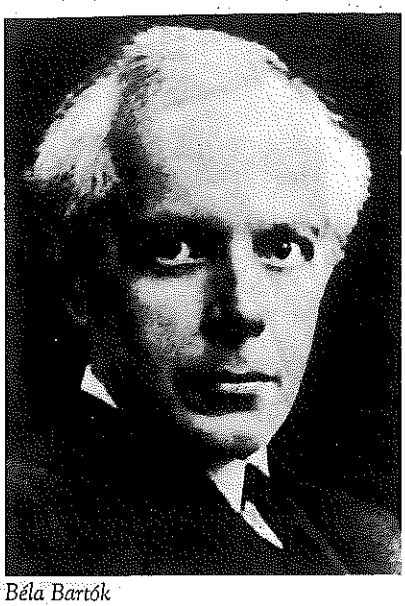
Edvard Grieg

To connect the double-stemmed notes with dynamics or slurring would be contrary to the composer's intentions.

In Chopin's *Berceuse,* Op. 57, both types of double-stemming occur. In measure 32 it seems unlikely that the composer intended the repeated double-stemmed A♭s to dominate over the moving melodic thirds above them.



Instead, Chopin suggests holding the thumb on A♭ to anchor the hand to produce a legato sound. In measure 39 the wide intervals of the figuration hamper the playing of the upper notes with a literal finger legato; Chopin



Béla Bartók

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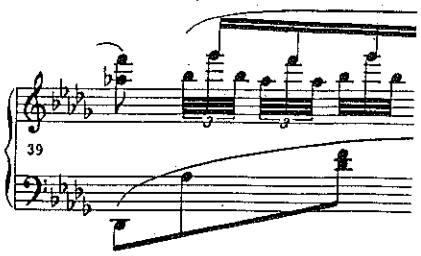
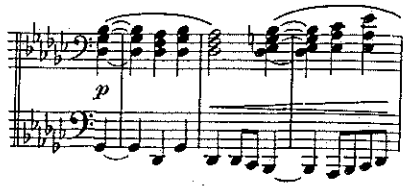
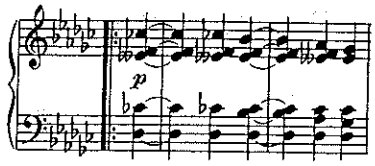
emphasizes the upper voice of the broken sixths, already implied in measure 38, through the use of double-stemmed notes and hemiola.



A pianist will approach meters differently, depending on whether he considers notation to be instructions or a representation of the music. In Schumann's *Grillen* from *Fantasiestücke*, Op. 12, the time signature is $\frac{3}{4}$, but the ties in the first half of the G♭ trio section suggest a $\frac{3}{2}$ meter.

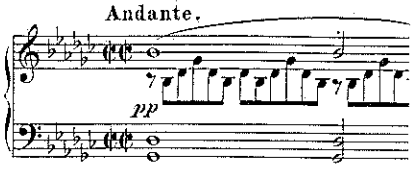


On the other hand, the second half of the trio sounds like $\frac{3}{4}$, but the meter is staggered by a quarter note anticipation of the written meter; the perceived downbeats are consistently on the written third beat, and the written downbeats often fall on ties.

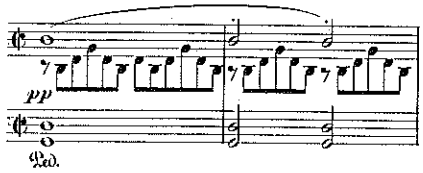


If a pianist wants to convey the tension between the written and the implied meters, he might sink into the keys on tied notes, even though projecting the notated meter to the audience may be impossible. If a pianist maintains that it is only the sound that counts, not the notation, he will allow the rhythmic ambiguity of the passage to trick the listener into accepting the implied meter as real, until a short measure, or, as in measure 68, a real measure disorients him. This interpretation produces the effect of changing meters, rather than syncopation against regular meter.

Schubert's Impromptu in G♭, D. 899, #3 has the unusual time signature of ¢ ¢ . [See "Schubert's Impromptu in G♭" by Nigel Nettheim in this issue.]



If the piece had been in $\frac{4}{4}$ with the note values halved, the piece would appear less tranquil, even if the tempo markings were slower. Written in $\frac{4}{4}$, or in ordinary cut time, with the original note values unchanged, each of Schubert's measures become two measures.

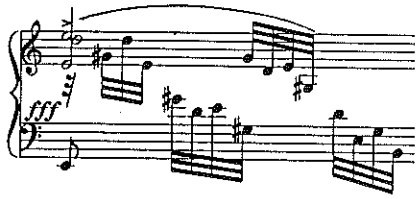


Robert Schumann

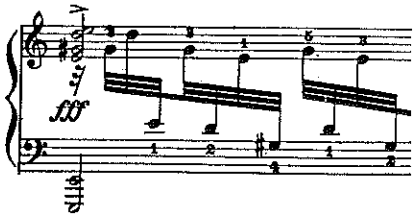
This is how Schubert's publisher presented the piece in its posthumous first edition. The more frequent bar lines in this corrupt edition not only make the piece appear choppy and less coherent, but also obscure the difference between the stronger first beats and weaker third beats of the original meter. However, Schubert's original is difficult to read because the long measures compel a pianist to remember accidentals longer than the altered notation does. This reading difficulty is compounded by the key of G♭ major. The unusual meter is certainly a better representation of musical meaning, but for a player of average musicianship, the text in cut time is more likely to promote an accurate reading of the accidentals.

Pianists often debate the question of redistributing written notes between the hands. If a pianist assumes that a composer's notation should be followed strictly, he sees black and white: notes in the upper staff should be played with the right hand, and notes in the lower staff, by the left. On the other hand, a pianist who looks at notation from a larger perspective, as a visual representation of sound rather than a map of hand movement, will divide the music between the hands as he pleases, while keeping the result intended by the composer in mind.

Percy Grainger's edition of Grieg's piano concerto is full of editorial changes that show his interpretation of Grieg's unwritten intentions. In this passage from the first movement cadenza, Grainger finds that the original division of hands makes it difficult to match the massive sonorities of the preceding measures.

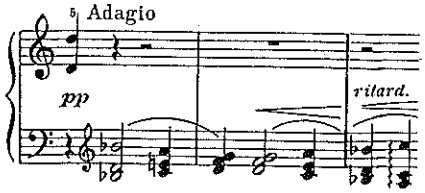


Grainger's redistribution enables a pianist to flood the piano with rapid *martellato* strokes.



Some pianists might argue that this is inaccurate editing of the piece, but Grieg did not find it so; he planned to include many of Grainger's interpretive and notational ideas in future editions of the concerto. Because Grieg often expressed his disapproval when a performer distorted his music – and even balked when his publisher, C.F. Peters, published some of his piano pieces with unauthorized fingerings – his approval of Grainger's changes is significant. Rather than alter the passage, Grainger changed the notation to help pianists accomplish Grieg's intention.

Sometimes a composer's notated hand distribution reflects musical meaning. During the first movement of Schumann's *Fantasie* in C Major, Op. 17, rich textures gradually disperse, arriving in measure 77 at a pianissimo series of three-note chords in the piano's middle range, written in treble clef but in the lower staff.

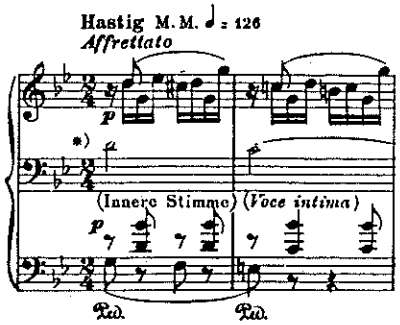


For some pianists placement of the chords in the lower staff indicates that the left hand alone should play them. Using the opposing view that the notation represents only voice leading and not hand division, one could simplify the difficult voicing of these chords by assigning the top voice to the right hand. However, a ritardando and arpeggiation occur just where the intervals widen, suggesting that a left-hand solo is Schumann's way of visually emphasizing the expression of the passage. Interestingly, Schumann disapproved of composing a piece for one hand in the following quote:

> It is not quite so bad as someone wanting to study dancing with one foot, but it always remains funny and somewhat foolish when the right hand remains idle and appears to say, "If I only were willing to work a little, you would not have to struggle so hard."

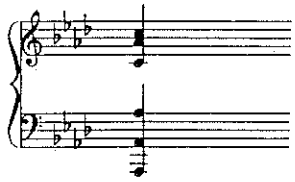
Moreover, Schumann's notation gives the passage an exposed appearance that would have been lost had he divided the chords between the staves.

Schumann's taste for unusual but expressive notation appears in the *Hastig* section of his Humoreske, Op. 20, with an inner voice notated on a third staff.



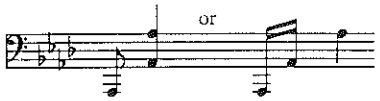
This voice is not intended to be played and represents a voice implicit in the right hand's shadowy filagree, appearing at irregular points among the fleeting right-hand sixteenths. Touch and rubato can suggest the inner voice.

In a letter to Moscheles, Schumann explained the notational ambiguity of a chord in *Carnaval*, Op. 9 in which the notes in the bass clef cannot be struck simultaneously.

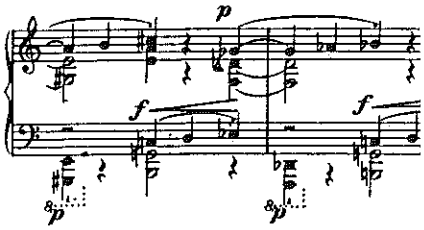


Schumann wrote that if he arpeggiated the chord, it would have produced "a very different effect," suggesting a misplaced emphasis on the uppermost A♭,

which Schumann wanted to "echo very softly." Because Schumann did not notate exactly how to perform the chord, a pianist has the responsibility of deciding how to break the chord.



At the end of the second movement, *Sostenuto e pesante*, of Bartók's Piano Sonata, are bass sixths that are so low that the bottom notes do not exist on pianos, except for Bösendorfer models with extra bass keys.



Bartók offers no alternative reading in a footnote or *ossia*, making a literal reading impossible in most performances. Presumably, he was thinking, "to convey the structure of this movement, in which bass sixths play a crucial motivic role from the beginning, I must write these chords. While I know that the sonata will not be played exclusively on the Bösendorfer, in practice, the pitches are too low to be heard with great clarity anyway. Figure out something." Even though Bartók does not compromise the music, he gives pianists the responsibility of compromising it for him. The pianist Gyorgy Sandor, who studied with Bartók, did not discuss this specific point with his teacher, but advises substituting the lowest A to preserve the passage's faint, clangorous sonority. According to Sandor, Bartók "was quite open-minded about most ambiguous situations and left the solution to the performer."

Because notation in some cases is an instruction and in others is a representation of the music, performers and teachers should be alert to both possibilities, instead of always reading it one way. In ambiguous cases, we can only rely on open-mindedness, intuition, and knowledge of a composer's works for guidance. □

Continued from page 19

music, just as the shaping of phrases does. At the highest level, the satisfying shaping of a piece may result from a firm grasp of its entire contents; and because composers do not notate all the nuances in their music, analysis can point to a worthy interpretation.

Three of the alternatives to analysis are: instinct, metaphor, and advice. A few pianists may have such strong musical instincts that they do not need to analyze a piece consciously. Artur Rubinstein, for example, described how he benefited from conscious analysis in his book, *My Many Years*:

> The compositions which I chose to prepare for concerts were immediately clear to me through my born musical instinct. The music simply spoke to me. But when I heard the same composition played by a pupil whose performance did not convince me, I had to gather my thoughts to explain the construction of the work; to show him the climax and the way to grasp the composer's intentions. After my down-to-earth explanations, I invariably played the work much better myself by adding to my instinct the clear knowledge of what the work was made up of.

Many teachers use metaphors to describe a piece of music. Kathleen Dale, in *The Music of Schubert* edited by Gerald Abraham, described Schubert's Impromptu as "the placid flow of a stream whose purling is only occasionally mildly disturbed by a distant roll of thunder." Metaphors certainly direct the performer to a suitable mood, but they can hardly deal with all the details that make up a performance, and should be considered as assisting, rather than replacing, analysis.

Teachers frequently offer such advice as "play slower here," "emphasize this chord," and "bring out the lower voice," without justifying their comments with an analysis. When this happens students are not likely to understand the advice and lack the knowledge to use the information in other circumstances. The fact that the music sounds better is not a sufficient explanation. Josef Hofmann, in *Piano Playing*, supports this view in a description of his teacher, Anton Rubinstein:

> Rubinstein . . . explained, analyzed, elucidated everything that he wanted me to know; but, this done, he left me to my own judgement, for . . . the conception of tone-pictures obtained through the playing of another gives us only transient impressions; they come and go, while the self-created conception will last and remain our own.

Rather than resort to instinct or rely on metaphors or unsupported directives, analyzing music to better understand it can lead to moving performances. Interpreting a piece calls for many ideas, and some of them may not easily be expressed in words. The analysis of a piece is far from dry. Indeed, it contributes to the pianist's convictions about the music and how it should be performed. □

Music Scholarship

A Furman University graduate has given the school an anonymous gift of $500,000 to endow a music scholarship to honor the career of the late Lennie Lusby, a former violin teacher at Furman and one of the founders of the Greenville Symphony Orchestra.

Composition Commission

The 1996 Barlow International Competition will award a $10,000 commission for a composition to be performed in the 1997-98 season by a consortium of string quartets: the Cassatt Quartet from New York City, the Cuarteto Latino Americano from Mexico City, and the Muir Quartet from Boston. For an application write Barlow Endowment, Harris Fine Arts Center, Brigham Young University, Provo, Utah. All entries must be postmarked by July 1 and received by July 10, 1996.

Movie Music

Hal Leonard Corporation has published band, orchestra, and choral arrangements of Michael Kamen's music for the film *Mr. Holland's Opus*. The movie has become a rallying cry for music educators with its dramatization of how reduced school music budgets affect music programs. The cornerstone of the movie is a composition called *An American Symphony*, the opus around which the movie centers. Kamen also composed the score for the movie *Robin Hood, The Prince of Thieves*.

New Year's Day Concert

AmeriCare sponsored a New Year's Day concert for the people of Bosnia featuring Canadian pianist Jon Kimura Parker performing Beethoven's "Emperor" Concerto with the Sarajevo Philharmonic Orchestra. Parker flew into Bosnia on an airlift with over $1 million in food and medical supplies for Sarajevo. The concert, which was televised across Bosnia, was a gift to the people.

Conservatory Faculty Named

The New England Conservatory named four new faculty members effective September 1996, including pianist Margo Garrett, who has performed with many artists in instrumental, chamber, and vocal recitals. A recording of Garrett's performance with Kathleen Battle of her Carnegie Hall debut won a Grammy Award in 1992.