

3.3 Italian Style - alignment of mixed note values

Italian music also demands rhythmic alteration on occasion. A common rhythmic device in Italian-style music is the use of triplets coinciding with dotted rhythms in time signatures 2/4, 3/4, 4/4. It should not be assumed that these mixed rhythms should always be aligned: Quantz instructs the performer to keep the two rhythms accurate and distinct:

You must not strike the short note after the dot with the third note of the triplet, but after it. Otherwise it will sound like six-eight or twelve-eight time.

(1752) tr. Reilly, p. 68

He emphasises the different affects the two possible renditions would have: the tripletized version 'very lame and insipid' and the preserved dotted version 'brilliant and majestic'. However, earlier in the century it is apparent from Brossard's dictionary entry 'Giga' and from the Corelli musical example following, that combined time signatures in Italian compound time dances were performed uniformly:

The Italians usually indicate the movement of the gigue in 6/8 or 9/8 time for the violins and sometimes with the sign of C or quadruple measure for the bass. The bass is played then as though it were dotted.

(1702) tr. in Little, p. 176.¹⁴

In mixed simple/compound time signatures, pairs of equal notes are usually tripletised.



Ex. 3.3.1: Corelli, Concerto Grosso op. 6 no. 3, Allegro

In the final allegro of Corelli's *Concerto Grosso* opus 6 no. 3, the concertino group are marked with the time signature 12/8, and the ripieno C. Where the 2nd violin parts are in unison (bar 3 of the above example), the rhythm is shown tripletised in one and even quavers in the other. The obvious solution in performance is for the ripieno player to tripletise the pair of quavers.

If the following movement had been written in 6/8 it might be played at a faster speed than Corelli intended:

¹⁴ See also Little, pp. 175-184 'Gigues notated in duple meter'.

Ex. 3.3.2: Corelli, Concerto Grosso op.6 no.4

Several writers (including Neumann, 1978) have pointed out that no notation was available in the 18th century to accommodate the required triplet rhythm in simple binary time signatures. The dilemma forced upon the performer when confronted with this problem seems to have been solved in modern times by the habit of automatically aligning the two differently notated rhythms.

Ex. 3.3.3: J. S. Bach, Brandenburg concerto no. 5, Allegro

Normally it is assumed that the semiquaver will line up with the third note of the triplet, but the dotted figure, if consistently using a leaping interval (as in ex. 3.3.3) may be given a more sprightly character than the more linear triplets, making a contrast between the two figures which does not offend, and may result in the two figures being not 100% aligned. The dotted figure should not sound 'lame and insipid' even if it is aligned.

Differences in the two rhythmic elements are easier to preserve at a slower tempo; at a faster tempo, compression of the rhythms becomes inevitable. The overall affect and tempo of the movement are major factors when deciding on degrees of alignment. A lilting happy allegro movement with gig-like tendencies calls for complete tripletisation, while a more serious contrapuntal movement with distinct themes containing the two rhythmic elements might ask for the integrity of the two separate ideas to be maintained, as in the following movement:

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Ex. 3.3.4: J. S. Bach, Sonata for violin and harpsichord in E major, Allegro



Ex. 3.3.5: J. S. Bach, Sonata for violin and harpsichord in C minor

In ex. 3.3.5, it might be assumed that the semiquavers are tripletised. However, there is a case for altering the length of the little note slightly according to the affect and harmonic implications. As the movement progresses, the harmony becomes more tortured, and altering the length of the semiquaver is an effective tool of expression. Towards the end of the movement, the harmony becomes more peaceful, and the semiquaver may resume its triplet character.

It is important that any written 3-note triplet figures are preserved accurately when used as a foil to the duple element. If these two elements appear in separate passages in the same movement, and are never aligned it may be more convincing to retain the written rhythmic characteristics, and in doing so the triplets will be heard in contrast to the dotted material. Quantz suggests stressing the first of triplet groupings:

You must take care to make the triplets quite round and equal, and must not hurry the first two notes in them, lest they sound as though they have yet another crook; for in this fashion they would no longer remain triplets. Thus the first note of a triplet, since it is a principal note in the chord, may be held slightly, so that the tempo is not forced, and the execution in consequence distorted.

(1752) tr. Reilly, p. 131

Two-against-three written rhythms must be preserved, and can be found throughout Bach's works often giving an underlying excitement and life to the accompaniment. A mixed time signature (C 12/8) is a sure sign for tripletisation and appears often in the works of J. S. Bach and Handel.

In the opening bars of J. S. Bach's Brandenburg Concerto no.1, it is part of the essential character and special effect of the horn calls that they maintain the triplets as a foil against the semiquaver and quaver patterns in the rest of the orchestra.

It could be argued that the triplets in ex. 3.3.6 are merely decorating the basic duple movement, but this would be very difficult to maintain in practice, and it is inevitable that the single quavers will become tripletised.

There is no rule or formula to solve the problem of mixed rhythms and if, after consideration of the above points a solution does not appear to be obvious, then it probably does not matter which route is chosen. Experiment with tempo and articulation to guide you to a workable solution.

The image displays two systems of a musical score for Handel's Concerto Grosso op. 3 no. 2 [Gavotte]. The first system consists of five staves: Ob I, Ob II, Vln I & II, Vla, and Bass. The second system consists of five staves: Violoncello, Double Bass, Violin I, Violin II, and Bass. The score is written in G minor (three flats) and 3/4 time. The first system shows measures 1 through 4, with a repeat sign at the end. The second system shows measures 5 through 8, also ending with a repeat sign. The notation includes various note values, including eighth and sixteenth notes, and rests, illustrating the alignment of mixed note values in the Italian style.

Ex. 3.3.6: Handel, Concerto Grosso op.3 no.2 [Gavotte]