

The Position of Grace Signs in MS. Sources of English Virginal Music

by Desmond Hunter

Improvised embellishments must have played an important part in the performance of English Virginal music, yet the virginalists' vocabulary of grace signs was very limited. Only two signs had wide application: the double-stroke (\equiv), which occurs in every source which I have consulted, and the single-stroke (\nearrow), which occurs with less frequency and not in all sources. A triple-stroke sign (\equiv) is rare and occurs in only a handful of sources, the principal ones being The Mulliner Book and Benjamin Cosyn's Virginal Book. A quadruple-stroke (\equiv) is very rare and may not in fact have been used as a grace sign.¹

Important contemporary treatises, such as Morley's 'A Plaine and Easie Introduction to Practicall Musicke', fail to tell us anything about the grace signs. Nevertheless, various bits of contemporary and near-contemporary information enable us to identify probable meanings of the signs: and most writers on the subject agree that a 'slide' is at least one meaning of the single-stroke and a shake (of variable duration) the most likely meaning of the double stroke. One can go further: source fingerings suggest that the single-stroke invariably indicates lower-note embellishment and the evidence of written-out shakes considered al-

1 In the Mulliner Book, for example, it appears to have been used to indicate the crossing of parts.

ong with source fingerings suggests that the double-stroke could indicate either an upper-auxiliary shake or an undershake. These are only very general guide-lines: it goes without saying that varying contexts require different treatment. A comparison of works by Bull and Gibbons as recorded in Cosyn's Virginal Book with concordances in other sources may prove instructive in this respect; Cosyn's rewriting of other composers' works may, to some extent, represent a written manifestation of an improvisatory art.

One aspect of the subject which hitherto has received little attention is the positioning of the grace signs. A common practice appears to have existed but, contrary to the impression given in modern editions, this was not always adhered to. We must acknowledge, of course, that unusual positioning can sometimes

2 Evidence for the slide interpretation of the single-stroke can be found in Add. 31403, f.5 ('Graces in play'/Edward Bevin) and in Add. 32531 f.24 (Prencourt's 'Musicall Rules', edited by Roger North). The fact that the Virginalists' positioning of the double-stroke sign continued to be used occasionally to the end of the seventeenth century and can be found even in some pieces included in The Harpsichord Master, Parts 2 and 3, suggests that its meaning differed little, if at all, from the meaning attached to the sign by the Restoration composers.

be attributed to careless copying; also, lack of space would appear to have occasionally prevented normal positioning of the signs. Sometimes, however positioning which is unusual was applied in such a way or with a degree of consistency which suggests some special meaning.³

Referring to unusual positioning of the double-stroke sign in Byrd's 'The Carman's Whistle', as given in Clement Matchett's Virginal Book, Thurston Dart noted that

"In the right-hand part ..., bars 22, 46, 50 and 62 (second note in each bar), the ornament is carefully placed below the note in the manuscript."⁴

In the bars referred to the right-hand parts contain the same music. The graced note in question is a blackened semibreve and is in the treble part where one would normally find superscript positioning of the grace sign. Bar 22 is as follows:⁵

Ex.1 Matchett F.4v
Dart⁶ No.3, bar 22

The image shows a musical score for two staves. The top staff is in treble clef and contains a single note with a grace sign (a double-stroke symbol) positioned below it. The bottom staff is in bass clef and contains a single note. The number '4' is written below the treble staff. The title 'Ex.1 Matchett F.4v Dart⁶ No.3, bar 22' is printed above the staves.

³ It should be noted that generally copyists seem to have taken some care over the placing of grace signs; this is evidenced by the not infrequent cancelling and repositioning of signs.

⁴ See Clement Matchett's Virginal Book (1612), ed. Thurston Dart (2nd revised edition, Stainer and Bell, 1969), Editorial Note.

Bars 46, 50 and 62 follow the same pattern. The consistent subscript positioning here would therefore appear to be of some significance. In two of the four bars referred to by Dart (bars 46 and 50) the positioning in the version in Will Forster's Virginal Book concurs with Matchett. As the note is approached from below it is possible that the implication of the gracing is a shake involving alternation of the main-note with the lower-auxiliary. In the first of these bars the version in 'My Ladye Nevells Booke'¹ has a single-stroke sign on the second note. It has already been noted that the single-stroke was probably associated with the lower-note embellishment so the evidence from Nevell would appear to provide some support for the suggested realization of the unusually positioned signs in Matchett and Forster.

The gracing in the alto part of a passage from Byrd's setting of 'The woods so wild' as given in Forster's Virginal Book is also unusual, super-script positioning being favoured where one would expect subscript positioning:

Forster was by no means an infallible copyist and, but for the fact that his positioning is supported by evidence from another source, one might conclude that this is yet another example of his carelessness. However, in the first two bars of this passage as given in Add.30485 double-stroke signs are positioned above and below the notes; the lower signs have been scored out and it would seem, therefore, that the super-script positioning and the concurrence with Forster is of some significance. The implication would appear to be upper-note realization, possibly ensuring an upper-auxiliary rather than a main-note start to the embellishment. In contexts where one would expect superscript positioning subscript positioning often appears to indicate lower-note embellishment. Consider the following instances:

Examples 3 a - d

Ex.2 Forster p.122: MB⁷ xxviii, No.85, from bar 57

5 All passages quoted are copied from the sources and each one is identified by its location in the source and, where possible, in a modern edition.

6 Modern edition (see Footnote 4)' 84

Ex.3a. from 'Sellingers Round'/Byrd FVB
p.123: Dover^ No.64, bar 159



Ex.3b. from 'The 3d French Coranto'/Byrd
Forster p.18: MB xxvii, No.21c, bar 1



Ex.3c. from 'Grounde'9/Byrd



Forster p.131: MB xxvii, Wo.36, bar 29

In connection with Ex.3a it should be noted that under-shakes are occasionally written out at ends of strains (see, for example, 'Praeludium'/Farnaby, FVB p.358, Dover No.246). Source fingerings frequently suggest lower-note realization of the double-stroke, as in Ex.Sc (see left hand parts in Exs. 8 and 10). The strokes in 3d are drawn at a more acute angle than any found in the English sources. Geminiani's positioning of the sign, to indicate-^ an under-shake, is very similar. It may be significant that lower-note realization of the graces to which attention has been drawn in Ex.3 would involve semitone alternation. The position of the semitone, where applicable, may be a factor to be considered; it will not have gone unnoticed that the majority of written-out shakes involve semitone alternation.

8 The Fitzwilliam Virginal Book, edited by J.A. Fuller Maitland & W. Barclay Squire, 2 vols'. (reprint of 1899 edition Dover 1963)

9 Forster' title for "The Carman's Whistle"

10 See Francesco Geminiani, A Treatise of Good Taste in the Art of Musick, 'Examples of the Element of playing and singing in a good taste'.

Ex.3d. from 'Bonni swet Robin'/Bull
 Lynar MS Ly.A1 p.264: MB xix, No.65, bar 1



It seems likely that the single-stroke grace occasionally implies pre-beat realization, and indeed, sometimes follows the double-stroke in contexts which suggest a continuity of embellishment in the form of shake plus termination. The following is a case in point:

Ex.4 from "A Voluntary"/Gibbons
 Add.31403 f.12: MB xx, No.13, bar 57



An interesting and, I think, revealing instance in this respect is found in the following example:

Ex.5 'Worster
 from Braules' Tomkins

FVB p.312
 Dover No.207, bar 3



Clearly, the simultaneously occurring single-strokes across the bar present a problem. However, if the lower grace sign is realized as the termination of the shake implied by the double-stroke sign on e" then the problem disappears.

John Harley has drawn attention to the fact that the single-stroke sign was not always drawn through the stems of minims and shorter note-values; ² it was sometimes placed at

11 A point which Alan Brown also makes in connection with Parthenia; see Alan Brown, 'Parthenia - Some Aspects of Notation and Performance', The Consort, No.32 (1976), p.181.

12 See John Harley, 'Ornaments in English Keyboard Music in the seventeenth and early eighteenth Centuries', Music Review, vol.xxxi (1970), p.178.

the ends of stems (J). A further the Fitzwilliam Virginal Book.¹⁴ On positional variation, represented by one page of Bull's 'The King's Hunt'¹ the detaching of the sign from notes we find the single-stroke sign in with stems,^{1-^} was used by Tregian in three different positions:

Ex.6

FVB p.251: Dover No.135, from bar 18

The image displays three systems of musical notation for a piece from the Fitzwilliam Virginal Book. Each system consists of two staves: a treble clef staff on top and a bass clef staff on the bottom. The notation includes various note values, rests, and accidentals. The first system shows a treble staff with a single-stroke sign and a bass staff with a double-stroke sign. The second system shows a treble staff with a double-stroke sign and a bass staff with a double-stroke sign. The third system shows a treble staff with a double-stroke sign and a bass staff with a double-stroke sign.

Attention should be drawn to the have been used with a degree of syn- single-strokes through quaver stems onymity with the double-stroke.¹⁵ in the first bar of Ex.6. These fol- The detached positioning would app- low a double-stroke used in the same ear to be quite deliberate and not context and there is a suggestion easily attributable to careless cop- here that these single-strokes may ying; the possibility that the app-

13 Similar positioning occurs in Ly Al.

and 10 single-stroke sign in the FWB is at the end of the stem.

15 A point which could be made in connection with the single-strokes

14 The most usual position of the in bars 9 (left-hand part) of 'Pavana'¹/Bull, FVB p.63, Dover No. 34.

lication of the signs here indicates that the notes are to be held cannot be overlooked. The detached position-
 Ex. 7
 from 'The K. Hunt'/Farnaby

ing occurs elsewhere in the FVB, one of the most intriguing examples being the following passage:

FVB p.98
 Dover No.53, from bar 1



It has already been noted that the single-stroke sometimes follows the double-stroke in contexts which suggest a continuity of embellishment in the form of shake plus termination. This form of realization seems probable in Ex.7, between the final right-hand note of bar 3 and the first note of bar 4, where the signs are conventionally positioned. Indeed, this realization also seems likely in Ex.6, between the first two treble notes in the third bar of strain 2; this would solve the problem presented by the simultaneously occurring signs on the second beat. In six other places in Ex.7 we encounter the consecutive occurrence of a double-stroke and a single-stroke but each time the single-stroke is placed in a detached posi-

tion. The presence of two signs on the seventh right-hand crotchet is puzzling. If one is a correction then it is surprising that Tregian did not cancel the other one. Indeed, it may be significant that it is the first detached sign which, occurs in combination with a sign conventionally positioned. If one qualifies the meaning of the other the same qualification *may* apply to the remaining five detached signs.

The placing of more than one grace sign on the same beat was not unusual. In The Mulliner Book we find right-hand triads with each note graced with a single-stroke whilst others have a combination of single- and double-strokes (not reproduced in MB i). In later sources the most frequently occurring combination is

of two double-stroke signs; and often, but not always, the signs grace two right-hand notes a third apart. However, it is unlikely that this gracing implies a double shake. In one of the vary simple pieces in RCM 2093, a piece which from its appearance and numerous fingerings was clearly used for teaching a beginner, 16 two double-stroke signs grace the same beat:

Ex.8
 from 'A preludium' RCM 2093 f.3
 anon. Boxall¹⁷ No.1,
 from bar 15



It is inconceivable that a beginner would have been expected to cope with simultaneous shakes in one hand and, therefore, some other explanation is required. We have acknowledged already that the presence of more than one sign on the same beat may modify the meaning which the signs have in other contexts. Consider the following passage from the Fitzwilliam Book:

Ex.9

16 An anonymous piece in Add.36661 f.51v entitled 'An Easy one for a New Baginer' is nothing like as simple (see Ex.10).

17 Harpsichord Studies, edited by Maria Boxall (Schott, 1980)

Ex.9 FVB p.329
 from 'Corranto'¹ Dover No.224, bar 5
 anon.



It is possible that the strokes through the lower stem confirm a lower-note embellishment, i.e. an undershake. This example seems to add weight to the argument that additional signs on the same beat may have been used as qualifying signs. Viewed in this light the combination of double-strokes in Ex.8 could be interpreted as indicating an undershake on e", the lower sign qualifying the meaning of the upper (or more prominently positioned) one. This is a solution which the fingering would support.

Many questions remain, not least a satisfactory explanation for the unusual application of qualifying signs, if that is indeed what they are, in Add.30485. Nevertheless, the evidence presented suggests that we should not dismiss all instances of unusual positioning of grace signs as examples of careless copying. Taking all the sources into consideration, it seems that the signs indicated a variety of embellishments. The fact that a composer or a copyist may have positioned a sign in a certain way to indicate a particular form of embellishment should not surprise us. The question is complicated by the fact that the signs may not have been used with similar intent in different sources. In the case of composers' workbooks we must

acknowledge that the signs may have been used in a somewhat idiosyncratic way; Cosyn, for example, appears to have occasionally used the single stroke through the note heads of semibreves as a visual aid.¹⁸ It does seem clear that the Virginalists either modified or qualified the meaning of a sign by adding other signs on the same beat. This is evident particularly in the case of simultaneously occurring signs in right-hand parts. It would be wrong, however, to assume that the presence of more than one sign on the same beat always indicated modified embellishment. It is probably true in the case of the signs in Ex.8 but in the following, realization of the simultaneously occurring double strokes as shakes appears to be the obvious solution:

Ex.10 Add.36661 f.51v
 from 'An easy one for
 a New Beginner'/anon.



The lack of contemporary written instructions concerning the interpretation of the grace signs is perhaps not surprising. Few Grace Tables as such may have existed. Those that did were probably written by theoreticians like Bevin. It seems

¹⁸ See Cosyn's Virginal Book (RM 23.1.4), f.42v, 'Ut re me fa sol la¹/Cosyn, where every right-hand semibreve in the first seven strains is thus graced.

likely that the virginalists adopted an attitude similar to that of the contemporary lutenists who advised students to hear the graces performed by a good player.

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