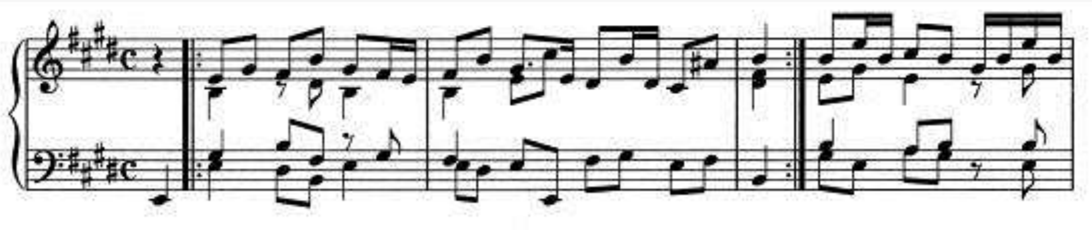
The Odd Note: a comment on Handel's most popular keyboard piece

Colin Booth

Handel's most famous keyboard piece is the set of variations at the end of his E major harpsichord suite, known as the Harmonious Blacksmith (**Note 1**).

Setting on one side the dubious origins of the piece's title (not Handel's own, and first encountered no earlier than 1819), another, more important uncertainty faces the player: What is the solitary bass E doing at the start of the piece? Could it be some kind of shorthand? Or a deliberate banality – an exercise in musical humour?

Example 1. Handel: "Harmonious Blacksmith" variations, line 1.

There are several different possible responses to this note.

1) One may simply obey the score, and play the note. This may mean playing it in time, or, if one feels doubt about the resultant musical success, it may be dwelt on to varying degrees.

2) If viewed as an invitation to improvise an introductory flourish, this might take the form of an elaborated chord, or even a whole short prelude, starting with the note in question.

3) One may (as we shall see) omit the note altogether.

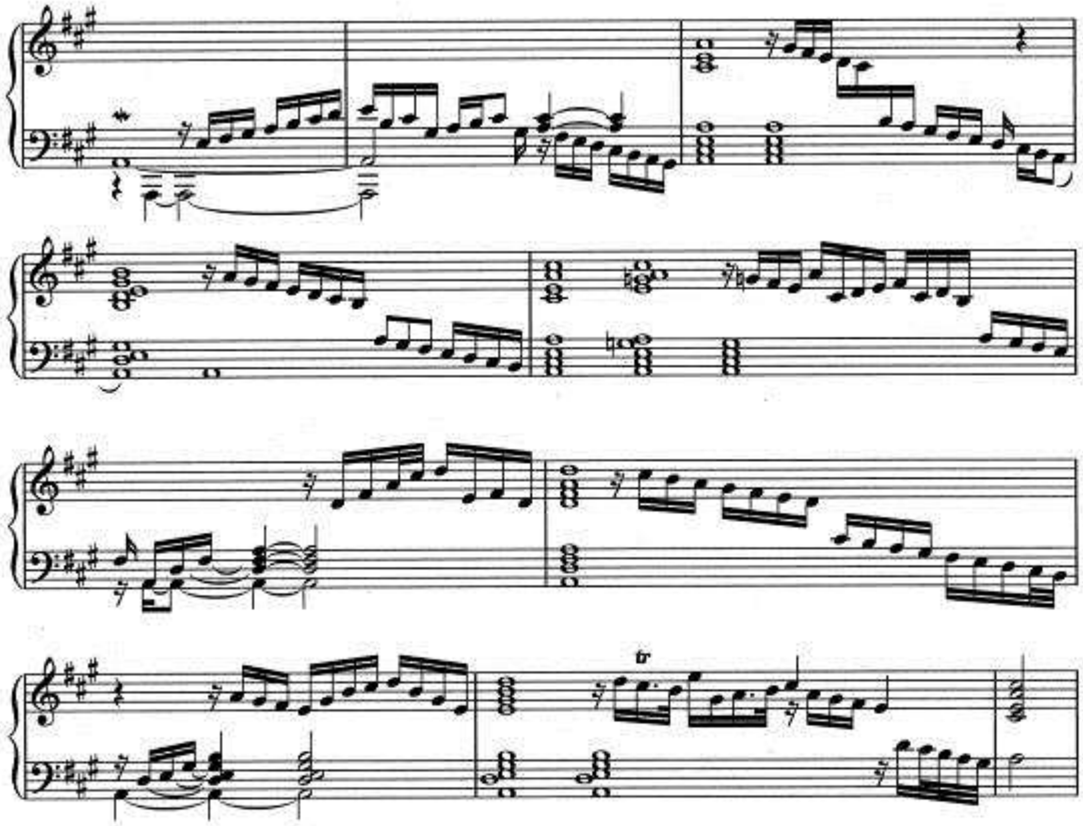
Let's examine these approaches in turn.

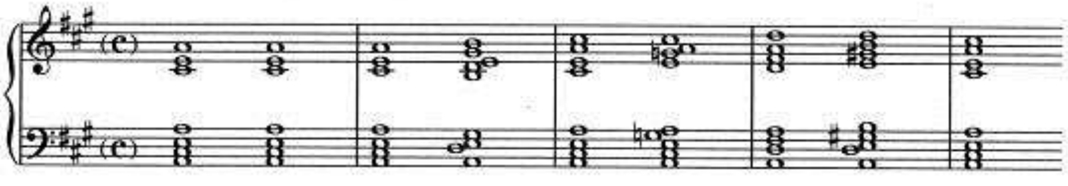
1) A harpsichord will automatically make a single note sound weaker than several notes played together, as in a chord. If the performer plays the bass E without emphasising it in some way, the next beat (which is a chord) will sound stronger, leaving the E sounding insignificant and without a meaningful purpose. Handel did not have a piano, so the option of simply playing the E louder than the following chord (had he wanted to do so), was unavailable to him. Michael Civiello decided that the note "seems to function as a tonality set rather than as an anacrusis". He recommended adding a fermata and an ornament, followed by a clean break of sound **(Note 2).**

2) As for the second option (that of elaborating the E into something considerably more emphatic), we can explore this idea at some length.

In the Baroque period, pieces of various kinds were routinely preceded by a prelude. There was a very old tradition of considering some music worthy of having some sort of introduction, and many players would have extemporised a short prelude before individual works, or groups of pieces such as a suite of dances. William Byrd and his fellow Virginalists had adopted this practice: an important extended fantasia by Byrd is offered with such an introductory prelude specified and written out by the composer, and a number of preludes survive as *exempla*, like those in the Fitzwilliam Virginal Book (**Note 3**).

During the Baroque, whole preludes by German composers, including Bach and Handel, were often presented as a series of block chords, intended for varieties of arpeggiation and elaboration. The best-known such work by J.S. Bach is his Chromatic Fantasia, where some sections are fully written out, and others left as block chords (**Note 4**). Handel offered a written-out *exemplum* of one style of preluding, at the very start of his 1720 collection. The opening suite in A begins like this:

Example 2. A major suite, first section.

According to the conventions of the time, the composer could easily have offered all of this prelude in the shorthand manner in which he left just some of it. Block chords still have a role, giving players some freedom to arpeggiate these as they choose. The version which we have was probably influenced by the music's publication. This was aimed mainly at amateurs, and, like J.S.Bach, Handel tended to present his published works in a more finished and prescriptive form. The beginning in its original form might well have looked like this, where the simple harmonic sequence is much more obvious:

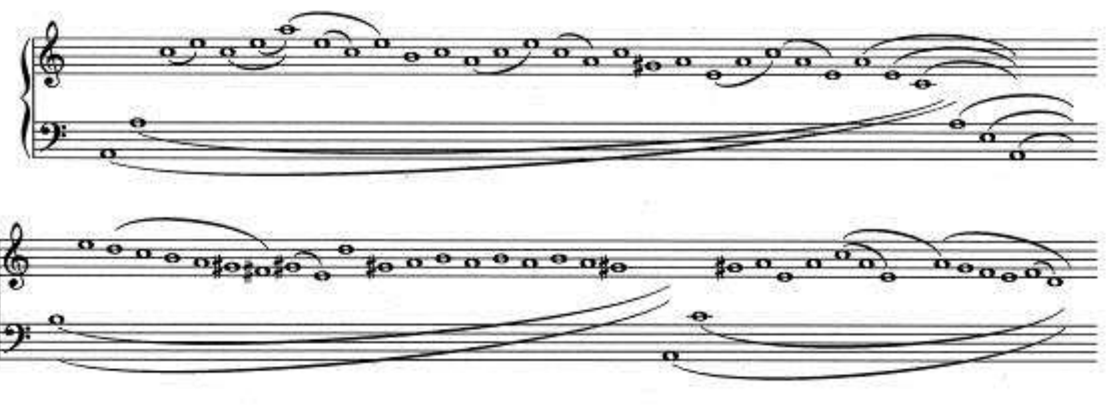
Example 3. A major suite, first section, replacing realisation by block chords.

Handel's elaborated version showed the kind of treatment he hoped for when similar pieces were notated more simply. One must surely sympathise with someone even of Handel's calibre, when deciding to try to notate a free, improvisatory passage like this. However detailed, the prescriptive version (which attempted to some degree to obey the rules of notational grammar) could never be more than a rather inaccurate approximation of what was in his mind.

This shorthand presentation indicated by simple block chords had a long history. A parallel from nearly a century earlier is this passage by the German composer Jacob Froberger, who inherited the tradition from his teacher Frescobaldi:

Example 4. Froberger, Toccata in A minor (1649), line 1.

The opening chord stands alone, unconnected either rhythmically or thematically with what follows. It does not make much musical sense to play it simply, and even arpeggiation would probably have been seen as inadequate. In fact, we have a clue to what Froberger himself might have done with the chord. One of his greatest admirers was the French harpsichordist and composer Louis Couperin. The most substantial of Louis' famous "unmeasured" preludes is titled "In imitation of Mr. Froberger". It contains at least one quotation from the Froberger toccata in ***Example 4,*** and its whole first line is an elaboration of a chord in A minor, in a style presumably known to have been used by Froberger himself:

Example 5. L. Couperin, A minor prelude "À L'imitation de Mr. Froberger". Start.



While this tradition of elaborating opening chords, or of improvising a short prelude even where no indication was given by the composer, was both widespread and well-known, when we look at the start of the "Harmonious Blacksmith" variations, there are good reasons to doubt that Handel had this sort of thing in mind here. It's a memorable piece, and one might argue that it deserves some sort of introduction. On the other hand, the suite itself, in its final published form, presents a short set of movements, beginning with a prelude of some complexity **(Note 5)**. Following the prelude, the suite steadily increases in intensity and pace as it moves towards the final variations. There is no slow sarabande to interrupt this progress, and the courante (really an Italianate corrente) is vigorously rhythmic: its lively tempo creates a tension for which the theme of the concluding variations is designed to provide a release. It is unlikely that Handel desired anything which would delay the start of the variations.

To support this, we can note that:

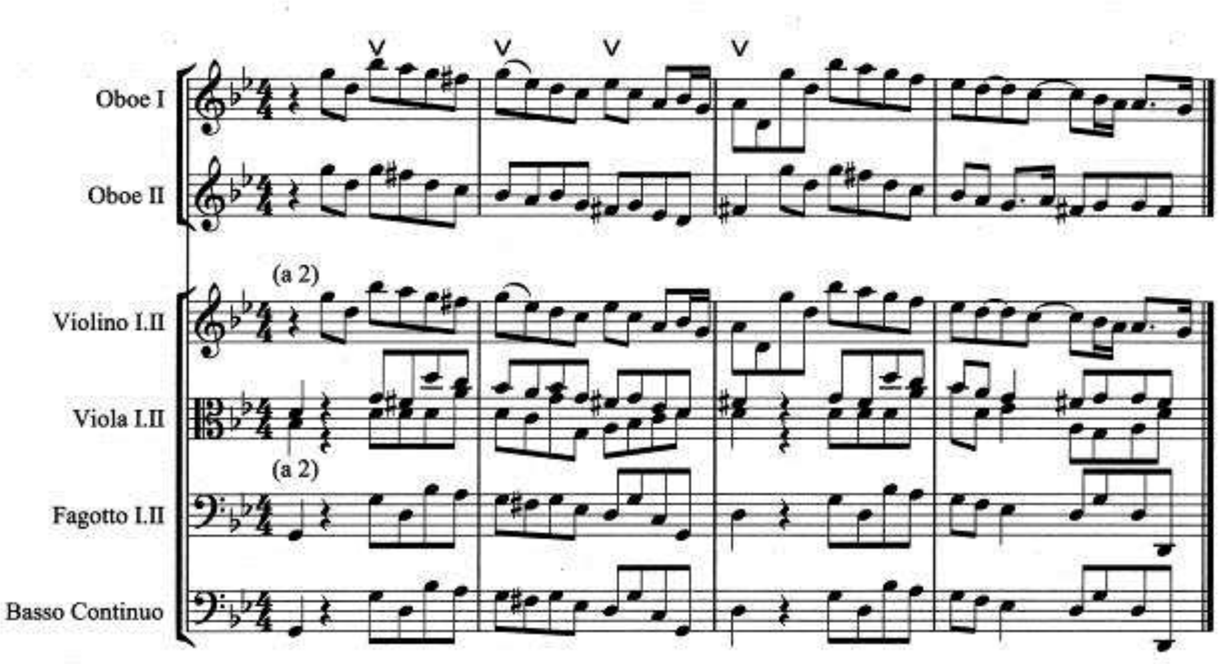
a) The customary invitation to arpeggiate or improvise was a chord. We have here a single note.

b) This note is only a crochet (quarter), not the usual semibreve (whole note) which would often invite an elaboration of unspecified length. This suggests that its length is defined, and that it is structurally linked to what follows. Grammatically, in fact, it is a substitute for the closing chord of the first half of the theme.

c) While the vertical line which separates the E from the following material might encourage us to treat it as a separate musical entity, this is to misinterpret the meaning of the line, as we shall see.

3) Let us turn to the third option: is it permissible to dismiss the note entirely, as not relevant to the success of the music?

This suggestion at first seems to have considerable justification, since several early versions of this piece exist in manuscripts and editions which do omit the note, and substitute a crochet rest instead **(Note 6)**. To decide whether this makes option (3) a valid choice when playing from a score where the note appears, it will help to examine parallels. Here, perhaps, is one:

Example 6. Handel: Concerto Grosso Op.3, no.1 in B flat. Final movement, line 1.

This compositional technique for starting a piece does not occur elsewhere in Handel's Concerti Grossi, perhaps being found unnecessary as his mastery of this form increased. The "bottom half" of the orchestra gives a strong first beat, which offers the rest of the band something to "bounce off". It is far easier for them to do this, than to enter in the absence of any such chord. They can then instinctively move forward to the next strong beats - the first one being the half-bar, and the next (more important) the start of bar 2. These beats don't call for any exaggerated emphasis; they should simply be in the players' subconscious, and in the eighteenth century they would have been.

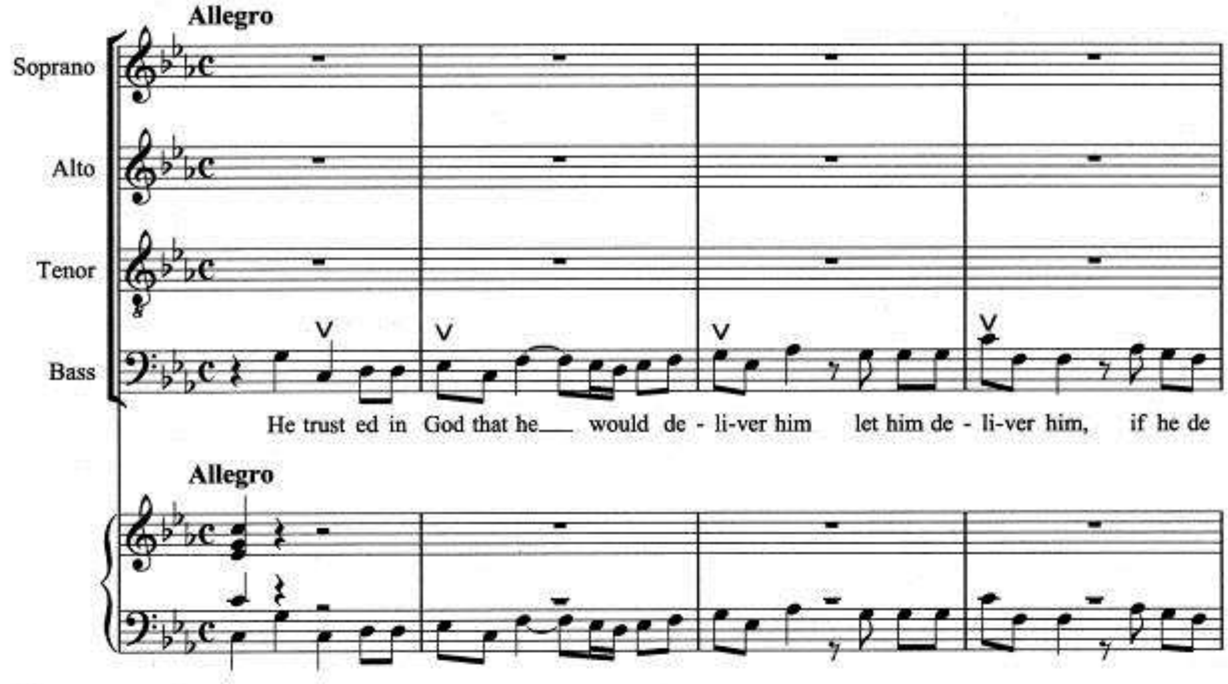
Some readers may welcome a clarification of this: the idea of the Hierarchy of the Measure (what Bruce Haynes calls "beat hierarchy") is not one which has survived in musicians' training to our own day. It was, however, deeply rooted in the minds of eighteenth-century musicians. It concerned the relative importance of the different beats within a bar, underlying the structure and forming, as it were, a skeleton which the music itself would flesh out **(Note 7)**. It could be used to quasi-automatically stress certain notes or beats, or to cause surprise when the emphasis in the music departed from the norm. The norm, in a piece using a time signature of 4/4, was this:

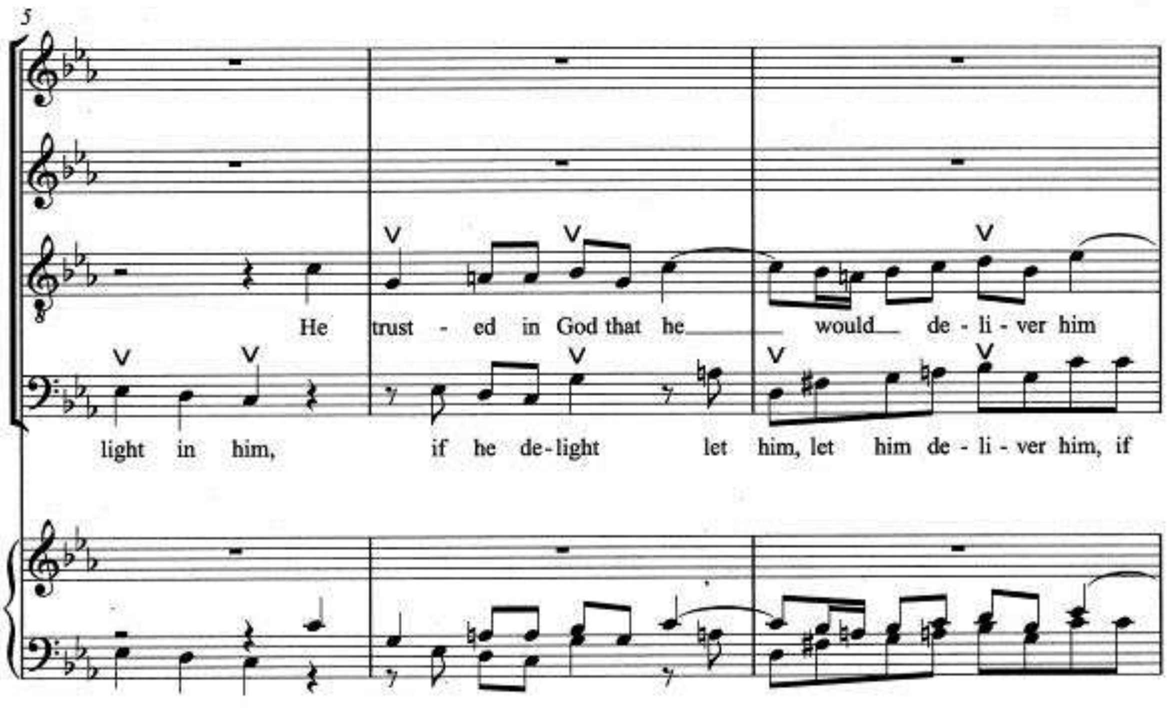
The first beat was the most important; the second most important was the third. The second beat was normally the least important, and the final beat could be either equally unimportant or not, depending on the context.

Hence the provision of a strong chord on the first beat of ***Example 6*** is more interesting than it appears, and not just a crude device to help the violins.

Two telling instances of this technique can be found in Messiah. The opening of the dramatic chorus "He trusted in God" is one of these. It begins with a similar, even more arresting chord from the band, from which the bass singers can take their cue. But see how the words are automatically given the correct stresses. These are here indicated by wedges. The relative importance of the syllables is clear:

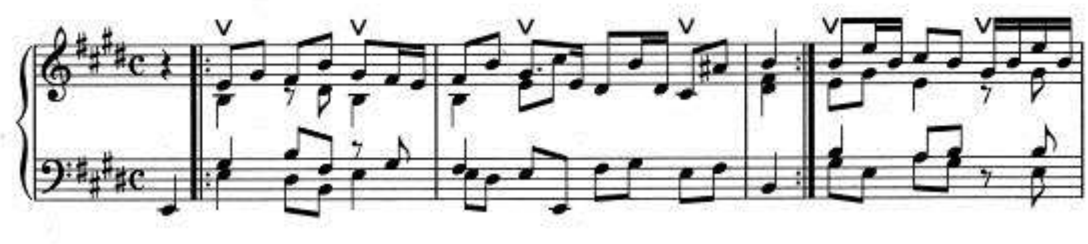
Example 7. Handel: "He trusted in God" opening line.

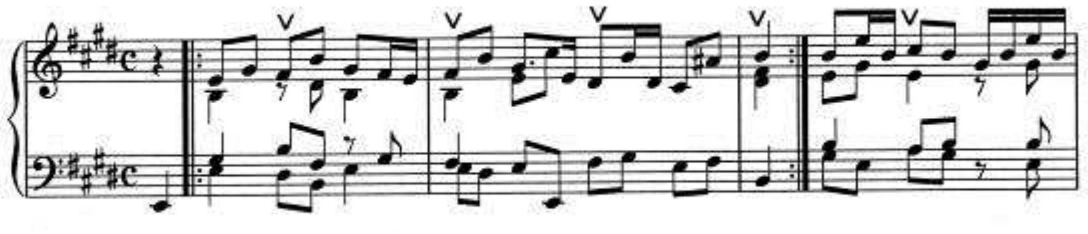




In the "Harmonious Blacksmith", if the same method is being used, we have no words, so we must identify beats which call for greater stress than others. This is easy to do, since Baroque music stressed dissonances, and almost invariably we find these placed upon strong beats (**Note 8**).

Many players give weight to the "wrong" notes, whether they play the solitary bass E or not. If the first chord is allowed to bear the stress, this lies on the second beat. If it is played as if it was the first beat of the bar, and the pulse continues from it, the effect of the musical line is banal: the dissonance in bar 2 is ignored, and the first three principal strong beats fall on chords of the home key of E major. Here's how it usually sounds:

Example 8. Handel: "Harmonious Blacksmith" line 1 - wedges over the weak beats.

If the introductory note is observed and "bounced off" as in ***Example 7***, the whole subject is made more interesting: emphasis is taken away from the home key, and the important dissonance is subtly stressed. The entire subject is propelled forward in a more convincing manner:

Example 9. Handel: "Harmonious Blacksmith" line 1 - with "correct" stresses indicated.

It's perfectly possible for a harpsichordist, not just to "feel" these strong and weak beats internally, but to make them audible to listeners. The effect on a harpsichord will nevertheless be quite subtle - but the result is very different from what we are used to hearing. The idea can be carried through the variations too, even to the final one, although it will be less noticeable as the piece progresses. It is quite likely that Handel intended the whole set of variations to be played continuously, with no pause between each one, so that not just the momentum, but the structure under investigation here, would persist.

As for that vertical line after the bass E: it does look like a bar line, which encourages a player to begin the piece on the beat which follows it. It is not a bar line, however, but simply an indication of the point at which the repeat of the first half should start. In several sources, including the best-known, it looks very different from the heavy double line offered in modern editions, and far less significant **(Note 9)**.

Whether the bass E is played or not, or even if it does not exist in the player's score, it, or the rest which is there instead of it, occupies the place of the first beat. The next beat (the opening chord) must be made weaker than the next beat (the third). Only then will everything fall into place as Handel intended.

It is therefore theoretically irrelevant whether the note is present or not. If it is, and if the instrument being used has a weak bass, it might be permissible to add a chord or octave to it for reinforcement. If it is not present in the source being used, the player could play the line "correctly" even without it. But it makes a listener's task harder - perhaps the player's, too. Was Handel instinctively aware of this himself? One must not expect total consistency from geniuses, and Handel's use of conventions is a case in point. He may have been ambivalent about the importance of the bass E under discussion. At the same time he was happy, as we have seen, to present chords for arpeggiating, as a convenient shorthand - some of the time - and his notation of rhythm has for decades offered scholars and performers unlimited opportunities for contrary opinions (**Note 10**).

The construction of this piece can be usefully compared with that of pieces by Handel which are superficially similar. It proves to be unusual, both in having the bar structure presented in this way - and in the presence of dissonances within the theme. These two factors are clearly linked (**Note 11**).

Perhaps the bass E exists in more mature versions of this piece, including the most acceptable versions of the 1720 publication, because Handel came to think that it made things clearer, encouraging a natural emphasis of the dissonances which make the music more memorable than his other offerings in this genre. Judging by today's performances and even some scholarly advice, this would not appear to have generally succeeded - at least in an age when the tradition of "beat hierarchy" has yet to be fully revived.

Before ending, it is helpful to point out that this method of composition was clearly a convenient one in Handel's time - in certain kinds of piece. J.S. Bach found it natural to start a large number of fugues within the Well Tempered Clavier on a weak beat, in order to exploit beat hierarchy as a basic element in the rhythmic structure (**Note 12**).

Where a fugal subject was not involved, Bach would often start a piece by striking a strong bass note on the first beat, in order that the following material could "bounce off" it. In many cases, one can experiment by omitting this note. The result is a more ambivalent opening, where beat hierarchy is less effectively established (**Note 13**).

In the Harmonious Blacksmith, then, it should not matter whether that bass E exists in the score or not. If it does, then the note is there to be played - in time. It offers performers assistance to give the music the right shape, similar (albeit less emphatic) to that given in the Concerto Grosso to the string players, and to the singers of the bass line in Messiah. If the note does not exist in the score, a performer should recognise where Handel expected stresses to be applied, and make these audible to themselves and to any listeners present.

Notes

1. G.F.Handel: Eight Great Suites (publ. Walsh, London 1720). Suite 5 in E major.

2. Civiello, Michael. Handel's Suites of 1720: Analysis and Performance. Kerman, Calif. (P.O. Box 105, Kerman 93630-0105: M. Civiello, 1990, p. 43.

3. Byrd: Prelude and Fantasia: Musica Britannica Vol. XXVII, nos.12 and 13. Preludes in the Fitzwilliam Virginal Book (ed. Fuller Maitland and Barclay Squire): for example Vol I: nos. XXII, XXIII, XXIV, XXV, XLIX, XCIX, CVI.

4. For example, Handel: Klavierwerke IV nos. 25 - 28 (Hallischen Handel-Ausgabe, publ. Barenreiter BA 4223); J.S.Bach: Fantasie und Fuge A moll BWV 944; Chromatische Fantasie BWV 903.

5. Not only the Variations under discussion, but the suite as a whole, underwent a number of changes during its development. These have been analysed in detail in the Critical Commentary, Hallische Händel-Ausgabe: Handel, George F. Hallische Händel-Ausgabe: Im Auftrag Der Georg-Friedrich-Händel-Gesellschaft. Kassel: Bärenreiter, 1955, pp. 51, 58-59, 70-72.

6. The earliest versions of the Variations seem to have been in the key of G, using the title Chaconne or Aria, rather than Air. These omit the bass note, and use a rest instead (HH-A, pp.106, 109).

   The 1735 edition by Gottlieb Muffat (ed. Christopher Hogwood) also omits the E. Handel, George F, Gottlieb Muffat, and Christopher Hogwood. 8 Suites for Keyboard, 1720, Hwv 426-433. Bologna: Ut Orpheus, 2007.

   Versions which include the bass E include:
   1720 London edition by Cluer, later re-issued in 1735 by Walsh;
   The Amsterdam edition (ed. Le Cene);
   The Paris edition (ed. Leclair);
   The much later Handel Gesellschaft edition.

7. The Hierarchy of the Measure is the subject of an article by George Houle: "Meter and Performance in the Seventeenth and Eighteenth Centuries"; in Historical Performance, Spring 1989.

   It is called "beat hierarchy" by Bruce Haynes: Haynes, Bruce. The End of Early Music: A Period Performer's History of Music for the Twenty-First Century. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007, passim.

8. As an particularly effective example of this tendency, the reader is asked to examine the C sharp minor fugue from Bach's Well Tempered Clavier, Book I. As the piece progresses, the ever-increasing use of dissonance on strong beats racks up the tension to an extraordinary degree.

9. According to the modern edition of Gottlieb Muffat's version of 1735 (ed. Hogwood), there seems to have existed from that time a tendency to use a heavy double vertical line after the E, resembling a bar line, and to add repeat marks which were often omitted in early editions. This resembles modern practice, and has been adopted by recent transcribers / setters of this piece, and by computer-based setting techniques. I suspect that Hogwood's edition might have mistakenly followed this "traditional" practice too.

   This method is used in the early versions given in a modern setting in the HHA. I suspect these may not reflect the originals either. In the 1720 London edition there are two simple vertical lines after the E – one for each stave, and no repeat marks. This method is also followed in the Amsterdam edition. The Paris edition has no lines at all.

It is likely that the standardisation of musical notation since Handel's time has resulted in the misleading use of the heavy double line, which so resembles a bar-line.

10. In the performance of Handel's keyboard music, for example, the intended execution of inconsistently presented dotted pairs still divides authorities. See a discussion in Booth. Did Bach Really Mean That? Soundboard, pp.237 - 238 and passim.

11. Amongst Handel's surviving keyboard music a number of pieces exist whose structure may be compared with the Harmonious Blacksmith. The following examples reveal the composer's customary placement of the first and last notes of thematic material, and the use, or non-use of dissonances. It demonstrates that Handel was quite happy to end such themes within a bar rather than on a first beat, and that where dissonances were rare or non-existent, he would start such themes on a strong first beat.

1) G 34-36 (Suite) in B flat. The Allegro starts on the first beat of the bar and ends on the third beat.
2) Aria with variations from the same: ditto.
3) Great Suite in D minor. Air and Variations. ditto.
4) Great Suite in F major. Allegro. ditto.
5) Partita in G major G211 -217. Allegro. ditto.
6) Partita in G major. Aria (Presto). ditto.
7) Air and Doubles, HHA Vol IV no. 32. This starts on the half-bar, leading to endings on the first beat. Harmonies are simple and discords largely absent. The stress is designed to apply to the first beat of the bar.
8) Aria con variazioni, No. 1, HHA VOL II (1733 second set). One of the most valuable comparison-pieces for the Harmonious Blacksmith, this begins on the first beat, has simple harmonies, ends on the third beat, and implies stress on the first and third beats. Dissonances are absent.

Handel's most frequent method for an Air with variations, or for other non-dance movement pieces in 4/4, was to begin on the first beat and end on the third. It was rare for dissonances to be present in these pieces. Had he wished for the dissonances within the Harmonious Blacksmith **not** to attract stress, and for stress to be heard where it usually is today, he could have written this piece in the same way. In fact he presented this particular set in an unusual way, because the theme contained dissonances, and he wished - or needed these to coincide with strong beats.

If we wish to know how rapidly the importance of Beat Hierarchy declined after Handel's death, an interesting insight can be gained from a setting of the theme of the Harmonious Blacksmith, published by Thomas Taylor (a composer of Chester, in north Wales) around 1815. The tune is used for a Christmas Carol: "Hymning Seraphs Wake the Morning". The word setting makes it clear that Taylor's feelings about the relative emphasis of the beats, were the same as that of most of today's performers. The piece is performed by Psalmody and the Parley of Instruments, on the CD "While Shepherds Watched". Hyperion CDA66924.

12. Examples are:
J.S. Bach: WTC Book I. Fugues in C major; C minor; C sharp major; D major; D minor; E major; F minor; F sharp major; F sharp minor; G minor; A flat major; G sharp minor; A minor; B flat major; B major; B minor.

13. Examples are:
J.S. Bach: WTC Book I. Preludes in D minor; E flat major; WTC Book II. Preludes in C major; D major; E major; E minor; F major; G minor; B flat major; B major.

The English harpsichordist Colin Booth is a player for whom notation, and the conventions underlying it, has long provided a particular fascination.
His major contribution to this field of study - and performance - is his book *Did Bach Really Mean That? Deceptive Notation in Baroque Keyboard Music* (Soundboard 2010). More recently he has published articles on rhythmic "hints" within Mattheson's Suites of 1714 (The Consort, spring 2015), and Bach's use of single-note ornaments in The Goldberg Variations (OUP Early Music, spring 2014).

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