

The Half-Note Level in Early-Eighteenth Century Instrumental Music

Lauren Irschick (Eastman School of Music)

In much early-eighteenth century music composed in “compound” 4/4 meter, beats one and three may carry equivalent metric accentuation (Grave 1985). Cast in modern terms, such compositions lack a whole-note level in their metric hierarchies. In this paper, I investigate whether the half-note level may similarly be weak, variable, or absent altogether by analysing four instrumental works by J. S. Bach. I begin by studying the metrical effects of fugal subject entries shifted by a quarter note from their normative metric positions. In the D major fugue from Book II of the *Well-Tempered Clavier*, shifted entries are treated as dissonances against a stable and consistent half-note level. In contrast, shifted entries highlight the flexibility of the half-note level in the C major fugue from Book I, which comes into focus at points of cadential articulation, and fades in strength during developmental passages. Next, I show how instrumental groups in the third Brandenburg Concerto carry distinctly individual and conflicting metric profiles, drawing on Temperley and Bartlette’s (2002) “new information” rule to support my argument. In this work, “out-of-phase” half-note levels weaken the overall half-note level, but serve to articulate the individuality of distinct polyphonic groups. Finally, I speculate whether it is possible to suppress the quarter-note level of the metric hierarchy in a reading of the sixth Brandenburg concerto.