Shifted Downbeats in Classic and Romantic Music

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The notated downbeats in musical compositions of the Classic and Romantic periods are more consistently in agreement with the felt downbeats than in the Baroque period.[1] In the fugues of Bach, subject statements may begin equally well on the first or second half of the measure, and cadences fall with nearly equal frequency on the first or third beats of common time.[2] With such a free approach to metrical organization as is found in Baroque counterpoint, no prevailing pattern needs to be altered or procedure abandoned to arrive at a change of "downbeat" feeling. In contrast to the Baroque style, Classic and Romantic literature seldom have notated downbeats that are out of phase with a feeling of downbeat. However, occasionally a felt

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[1]For more information on the historical development of metrical accent, see George Louis Houle, *Meter in Music, 1600-1800: Performance, Perception and Notation* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1987), which is a revision of *The Musical Measure as Discussed by Theorists from 1650-1800* (Ph.D. diss., Stanford University, 1961); and for historical references to the rhythmic organization of phrases, see Leonard G. Ratner, "Eighteenth-Century Theories of Musical Period Structure," *Musical Quarterly* 42 (October 1956): 439-54.

[2]For a direct comparison of Bach's style of rhythmic organization to Mozart's, see Edward E. Lowinsky, "On Mozart's Rhythm," *Musical Quarterly* 42 (April 1956): 162-86.

downbeat is shifted to a different part of the measure for some portion of the piece. The existence of notational disparity with the ongoing meter is well known, even in the works of the late 18th and 19th centuries.[3] The trouble is that theorists have not as yet dealt convincingly with the array of circumstances that may surround these occurrences, nor with the structural outcomes of the practice. Any of a number of changes may take meter out of phase with the bar lines, resulting in a certain rhythmic and notational peculiarity. This paper will address the use of four specific compositional techniques: (1) written-out *fermata*, (2) written-out *ritardando*, (3) unspecified change of meter, and (4) elision (i.e., overlap) of less than one measure of material.

The incongruence of meter and bar lines is especially noticeable when recurrent or parallel themes return with a difference in metrical orientation or rhythmic values. In most cases, the parallel ideas are to be performed with a similar rhythmic emphasis, regardless of their notational disparity. If the proximity of the parallelisms is close, performances maintaining a consistent reading of the themes will force a listener who is following a metrical pulse to change reference in favor of matching up the corresponding ideas. This structural change often results in a playful or subtle rhythmic transformation.

I shall focus upon specific examples taken from the works of Mozart, Mendelssohn, Schumann, Chopin, and Brahms, which exhibit a restatement of the same or similar material having a contrasting metrical placement. The identification of the source of each irregular orientation, from among the four possibilities listed above, clarifies the relationship of the notation to the perception of the metrical pulse. Reduction sketches further clarify that the effects of the shifted downbeats may be caused by adjustments in the starting position of certain middleground tonal functions. If hypermeter is present, then changes in the positioning of middleground functions cause corresponding shifts of the hypermetric pattern.

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[3]See, for example, Andrew Imbrie, "'Extra' Measures and Metrical Ambiguity in Beethoven," in *Beethoven Studies*, ed. A. Tyson (New York: W.W. Norton, 1973), 45-66.

As a first example, consider the opening of the third movement of the Mendelssohn Sonata in D major for violoncello and piano.[4] I am presenting this music as an example of metrical incongruity caused by the notation of longer rhythmic values in lieu of *fermati*. Example 1a contains a score of mm. 1-12, consisting of a grand chorale in the piano part. Aligned below in Example 1b, there is an outline of the soprano and bass lines which have been remeasured, and below this outline, in Example 1c, there is a foreground reduction sketch which has also been remeasured. Four times in Mendelssohn's original score half notes are tied to an eighth note and then followed by an eighth rest. All but one of these are outlined in the diagram at 1b as a quarter note with a *fermata*. The tie from m. 4, beat 3 into the downbeat of m. 5 is the sole exception. Since the final half note in the piano solo at the downbeat of m. 12 is also shown as a quarter note with *fermata* above, my outline of the chorale comprises only ten measures of music compared to the original twelve. Seven beats of material in the original piece are written-out *fermati*.

Before establishing the structural rationale behind my metrical reading, I will first establish the plausibility of leaving just the second hold as a dotted half note rather than making it a quarter note like all of the others. The Bach chorales are filled with phrases of mixed lengths and differing end values. Moreover, the particular rhythmic pattern shown in phrases one and two of the outline in Example 1b occurs with notable frequency in the 371 chorales.[5] Undoubtedly this is owing to the prevalence of German chorale texts opening with an eight-plus-six syllable gambit, with iambic meter as the basis.

The plausibility of hearing Mendelssohn's chorale writing in close relation to much of the German chorale tradition is a strong stylistic consideration, or at least this notion poses an attractive hypothesis. Mendelssohn certainly championed Bach's music, and it influenced

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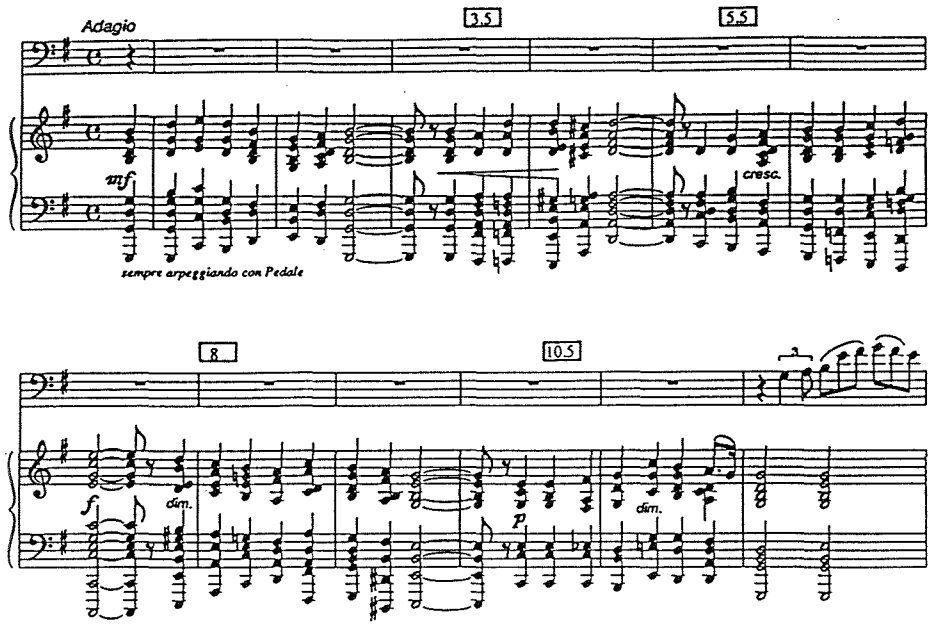
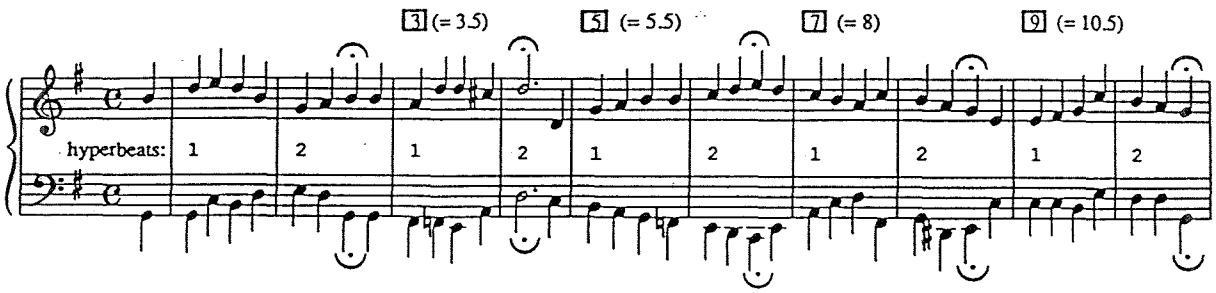
[4]See also Wallace Berry's very different rhythmic interpretation of this excerpt in *Structural Functions in Music* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1976), 332-334.

[5]Including chorale numbers 23, 42, 54, 74, 80, 89, and 98—in other words seven times within the first one hundred chorales—of J. S. Bach's *371 Four-Part Chorales* (Wiesbaden: Breitkopf & Härtel, 1899).

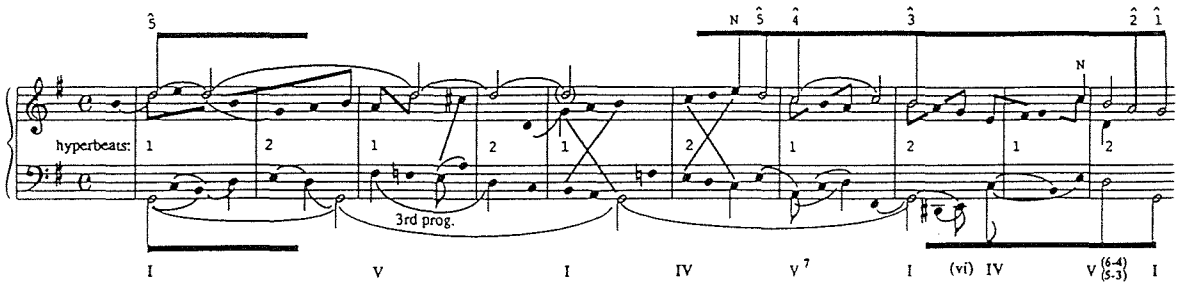
Example 1a. Felix Mendelssohn, Cello Sonata in D major Op. 58) third movement, (mm. 1-12)



Example 1b. Outline of the soprano and bass lines remeasured



Example 1c. Foreground reduction sketch of Example 1b



his own style of composition.[6] The structural evidence, however, is also pertinent; in order for the outlined metrical reading in 1b to properly take hold in the mind of the listener, it must be capable of creating a clear and sensible shaping of the downbeat positions.

As a first reference, consider the changeable location of the beginning upbeat functions in each phrase of the original composition: the first phrase begins on beat four, the second phrase on beat two, the third phrase on beat two again, the fourth phrase on beat four, and the fifth and final phrase starts on beat two. Example 1b, on the other hand, shows the upbeat of every phrase starting on the fourth beat. The starting beat would provide less convincing evidence if the phrases were constantly changing in length; yet here all but the second phrase are composed of seven quarter-note chords followed by a longer chord and rest (if one excuses from consideration the sixteenth-note anticipation at the ending). All but the second phrase would have eight syllables if it was a chorale with text. Thus, the metrical organization shown in 1b is simpler and more consistent than is directly shown by Mendelssohn's notation.

Since each phrase in Example 1b is interpreted to be precisely two measures in length (with a *fermata* on the final tone), an additional level of metrical organization falls into place. A pattern of hypermeter is established within the two-measure level of structure, based upon the periodicity of the interpreted structure given in both 1b and 1c. The duple hyperbeat structure is indicated between staves of the sketches in both 1b and 1c. The downbeats notated in Example 1b function as such not only at the level of the time signature, but they become part of an alternating strong-to-weak metrical pattern at a higher level.

Circumstances of greater metrical simplicity and higher-level metrical function support the readings in 1b and 1c, but these alone cannot suffice as determinants of the metrical incongruity in the

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[6]Mendelssohn conducted an important revival performance of the *St. Matthew Passion* at Berlin in 1829, and was a founding member of the Bach Society, organized in 1850, which then began the process of compiling and publishing the complete works of Bach. Aside from a general affinity for contrapuntal writing, especially exhibited in his choral works, Mendelssohn's three Preludes and Fugues for organ clearly display the influence of Bach's writing.

original. Although the structural interpretation is coherent on those grounds, this reinterpretation of the meter must be supported by nonrhythmic functions as well. The tonal structure sheds additional light upon the subject and is clearly supportive of the interpolated *fermati*. Two observations should suffice:

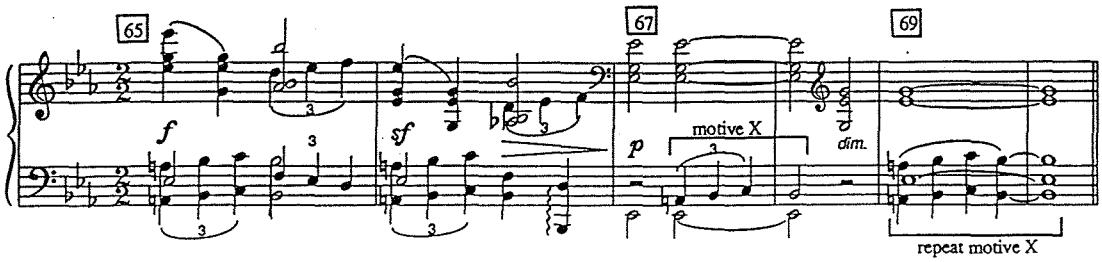
(1) In mm. 3-4 (as numbered in 1b and 1c), the prolongation of D^5 in the soprano line and the third progression in the bass line begin on a downbeat. These would have to begin syncopated in the middleground in order to be felt according to the orientation notated in the original score from the middle of m. 3 to the downbeat of m. 5.

(2) In mm. 5 and 6 of Examples 1b and 1c, two voice exchanges occur between the soprano and the bass, starting on the notated downbeats. In addition, the rising line in the soprano in mm. 5-6 is complemented nicely by its subsequent descent in mm. 7-8, which forms two unfolding thirds. Mendelssohn's notation has this rising line beginning in the middle of m. 5, and his notation does not show any metrical association between the rising and falling patterns or the prolonged harmonies.

The question remains as to why Mendelssohn might notate *fermati* in this way. Presumably, this gave him greater control of the precise length of each hold. I can cite two more possible reasons. One advantage of his notation is that the climactic note E^5 and the C^2 in the bass fall on the downbeat of m. 7 instead of in the middle of the measure. Psychologically, this fact gives much greater weight to the arch of the lines. More significantly, the final cadence at the downbeat of m. 12 in the original score must become a downbeat in any reading. An elision here provides an impetus for the start of the cello line. The notation of written-out *fermati* avoids either remaining one-half measure out of phase for the rest of the piece or having to write a half measure into the score at what would have been m. 10 of my interpretation.

Example 2 is taken from the last six measures of the contrasting

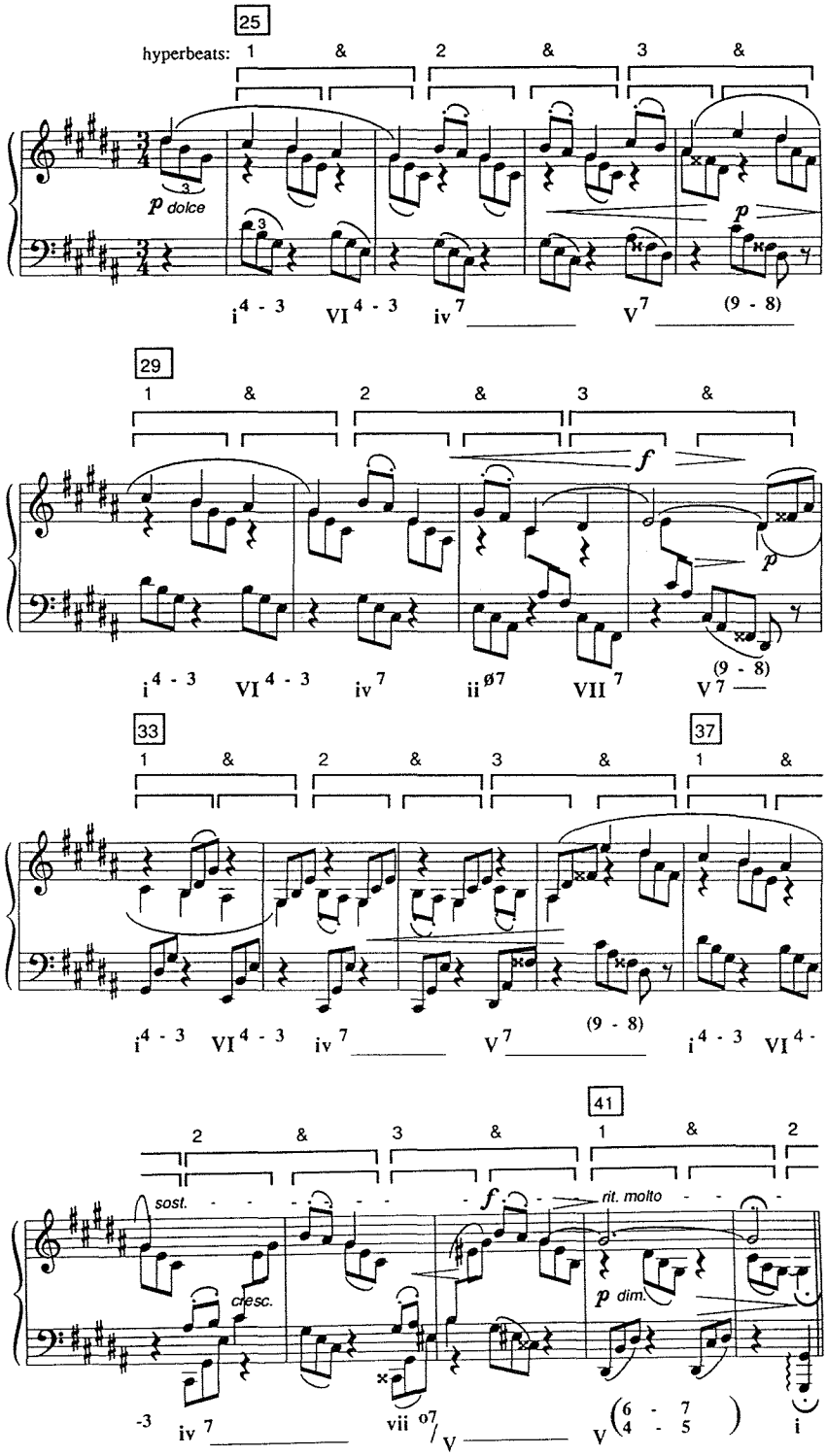
Example 2. Johannes Brahms, *Capriccio* in G minor (Op. 116, no. 3), mm. 65-70



section of the Brahms *Capriccio* in G minor, Op. 116, no. 3. In the final two measures before the Tempo I (mm. 69-70), there is the apparent use of a written-out *ritardando*, or more accurately in this case, a *ritenuto*, which would imply a sudden slowing of the tempo. These two measures repeat material heard in the tenor voice of mm. 67-68, which is bracketed and labeled as motive X. Motive X follows a strong pattern of triplet figures, which was articulated in various ways throughout the entire middle section. The metrical feeling of mm. 69-70 should match the established pattern of the previous X motives, which also maintains the same metrical orientation throughout the preceding section. The difference this last time is that Brahms notated straight quarter notes in place of a triplet. The last X motive should just sound like a slower triplet. Thus, in performance the B♭ octave notated by Brahms on beat four of m. 69 and tied into the final measure of the section should be attacked as if it were metrically accented. On the basis of parallelism and motivic repetition, the notation moves out of phase with the perceived meter by one beat at the end of m. 69.

Example 3 is also a middle section from one of the Op. 116 piano pieces of Brahms, the *Intermezzo* in E major (no. 6), which is the last of the set. The example illustrates Brahms's use of an unspecified change of meter to shift the metric pulse away from the notated downbeats. This entire section is in a hemiola rhythm (in groupings of two quarter notes, as shown by the first set of brackets above the

Example 3. Johannes Brahms, *Intermezzo* in E major (Op. 116, no. 6), mm. 25-42



score), but the hemiola rhythm is not set against the pulse of the notated meter in any voice. The section can be effectively played and projected in 2/4 meter. Performance of the section as if in duple meter produces a charming contrast to the opening and closing material of the piece. Considering both the scope of the section and the lack of a three-beat pulse, this passage produces a feeling of metrical change that is left unspecified by the notation.

The phrases notated as four measures of triple time are heard as—or at least can be heard as—six measures of duple time. The arpeggiations occur in half-note spans. In mm. 25-32 and mm. 37-38, each arpeggiation begins one beat before the accent of a half-note pulse, while in mm. 33-36 and mm. 38-42, they begin right on the half-note accents. The latter instances are normative, since the rising arpeggios begin with a solid bass tone, while the falling arpeggios create a more ethereal rhythmic and tonal quality. The frequent striking of accented passing tones and appoggiaturas at the point of the half-note accents dramatically emphasizes the feeling of the metrical shift as well. (See the figured-bass symbols 4-3, 9-8, etc. below the staff.)

The half-note metrical pattern does strike in phase every two notated measures; however, the grouping of half-note pulses into pairs negates the possibility of emphasizing a simple six-beat pattern. The pairings of half-note pulses produce whole-note pulses instead, which align themselves with a notated bar line only after four measures! These points of alignment come at the downbeats of mm. 25, 29, 33, 37, and 41, as marked in Example 3. The alignments occur only at the beginnings of the phrases and at the final cadence of the section.

The outcome of this interpretation indicates that the phrases contain six hypothetical measures in duple meter that would most logically divide into 2+2+2 measures on the basis of their tonal organization. The 2+2+2 bar grouping is indicated by the second set of brackets above the score in Example 3. The main criterion for this reading is the harmonic rhythm. For instance, the iv^7 and V^7 chords are prolonged for four beats against the notated meter in mm. 26-28. Of course, Brahms's original notation maintains a prevailing triple meter, which leads one to a strong sense of coming into and going out of phase with the bar lines. Aside from the contribution that his notation

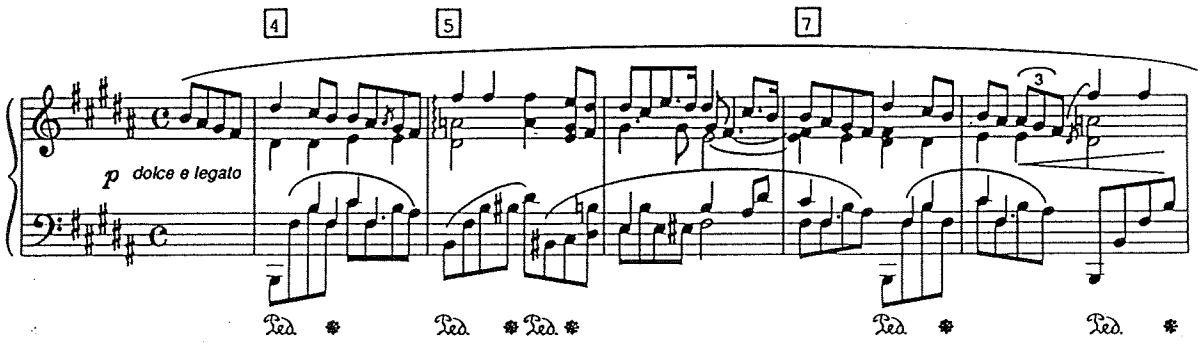
makes to the ethos of the section, Brahms's notation retains the lingering possibility of interpreting the metrical orientation of this section in still other ways.

The Chopin *Nocturne* in B major, Op. 62, no. 1, mm. 3-8, furnishes an excellent excerpt for consideration of the final type of incongruity, and a score and analytical graph are provided in Example 4. The Chopin Nocturne provides a prototypical example of just how an elision of one-half measure enables the reemergence of a theme using a new metrical orientation. A direct parallelism exists between material beginning at m. 3, beat 3, and material beginning at m. 7, beat 1. The half-measure notational discrepancy certainly does not preclude the rendition of a consistent metrical reading, but the linear analysis confirms that a new orientation is caused by an elision.

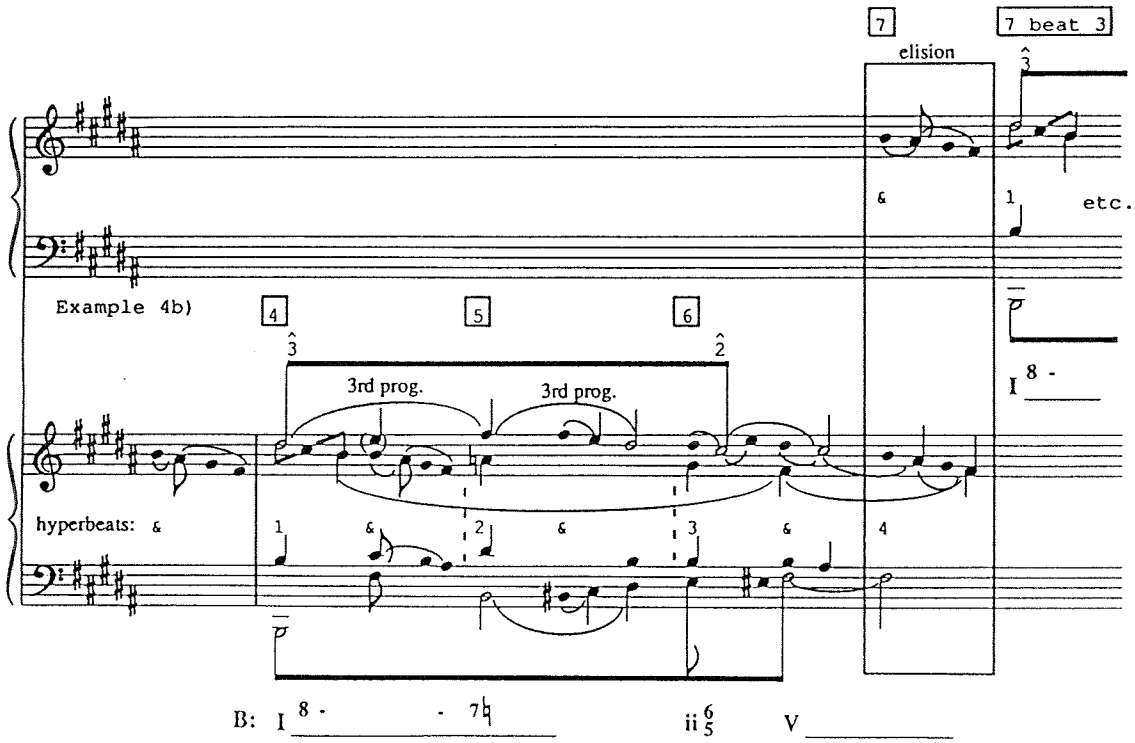
The perception of an elision centers upon the reinterpretation of the melodic figure first found in m. 3. The four-note figure of descending eighth notes (B^4, $A\sharp^4$, $G\sharp^4$, $F\sharp^4$) functions as an anacrusis to the structural tone $D\sharp^5$ when leading into the downbeat of m. 4, which is the first full measure of Example 4a. In the first half of m. 7, the same melodic figure is used to conclude the prolongation of the cadential dominant. This scalar figure fills in the downward arpeggiation of the dominant chord to prolong the supertonic scale degree. However, since the second half of m. 7 maps directly onto the first half of m. 4, it means that the four-note figure must simultaneously serve as an anacrusis, the way it did in the latter half of m. 3.

Elisions of this sort provide not only an overlapping of tonal functions, but a dualism of rhythmic meaning and structure as well. Thus, the downbeat feeling shifts to the middle of m. 7. The four-note figure in the first half of m. 7 not only completes the prolongation of the cadential dominant from a linear perspective but rhythmically completes a balanced hypermeasure. The counting of the four-measure hypermeasure is shown between staves in the graphic analysis of Example 4b. An aural reinterpretation of the meter cannot reasonably be made until the structural tone is reached again in the middle of m.7. Since the analysis is retrospective, the performer should make no attempt to break the rhythmic flow before the downbeat of m. 7, but

Example 4a. Frederic Chopin, *Nocturne* in B major (Op. 62, no. 1), mm. 4-8



Example 4b. Graphic analysis



rather let the musical surface remain continuous in the face of the elision. The smoothness of the metrical transformation is especially noteworthy in this Chopin Nocturne.

A second example of elision comes from what surely must be the world's most analyzed movement: the first movement of the Mozart Piano Sonata in A major, K. 331. This movement is remarkable because the notation actually ends out of phase by one-half measure. A score containing m. 125-end is found in Example 5a. A Schenkerian analysis of the same passage is shown in Example 5b.[7] The crucial moment of elision comes in the middle of m. 128 and is marked by a sudden decrease in rhythmic motion.[8] An actual division of the melodic material is possible in this particular example of elision, because the soprano of the new phrase in the middle of m. 128 comes after the structural bass note. I have shown the point of division with a separating bracket over the score. The rhythmic separation of soprano notes from their structural bass notes in mm. 128-132 is kept in the graphic analysis and the relationship is shown with displacement lines.

The reading of an elision derives from consideration of both the linear analysis and the completion of symmetrical two-measure groupings. The cadence in the middle of m. 126 closes the fundamental line, but is underplayed in importance by its position in the middle of a measure (especially if one *feels* as though it is the middle of a measure). It is also weakened by the employment of a *subito piano* mark. An eight-measure coda, or perhaps a cadential extension, ensues. The primary tone E^5 is reestablished and embellished by neighboring motion in mm. 127 and 128. The return to E^5 from the neighboring tone in the middle of m. 128 is required both as a resolution of the six-four chord and as a completion of the hypermeasure.

The middle of m. 128 serves equally as the start of a descending

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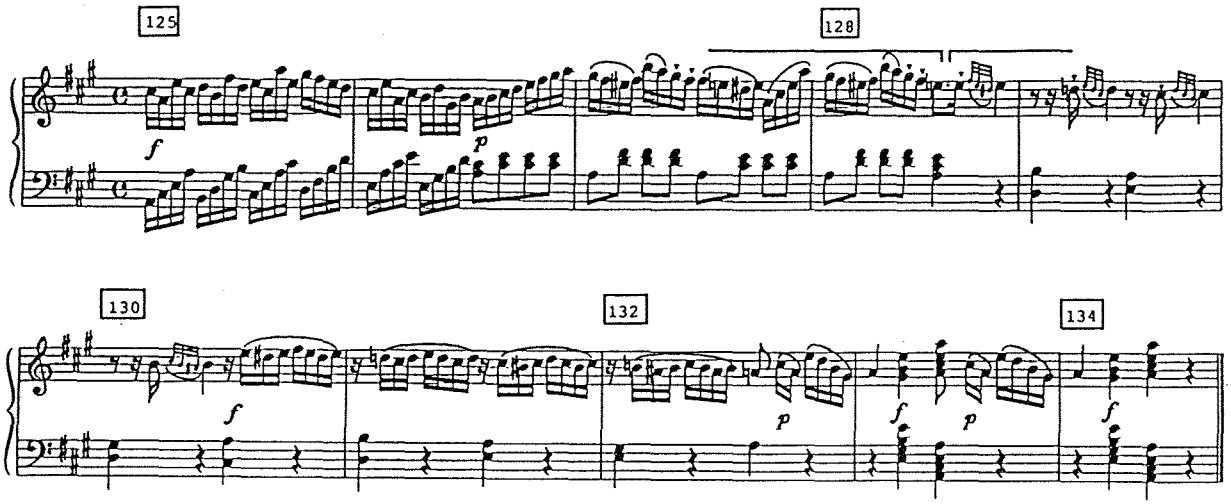
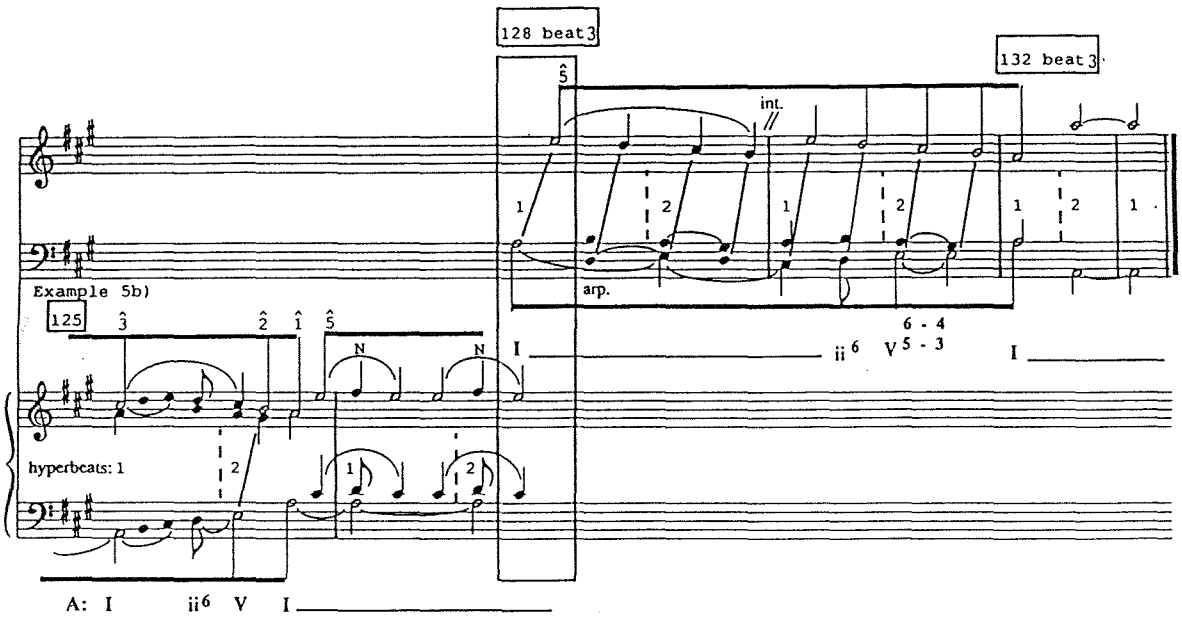
[7]For the sake of clarity, I have omitted a first ending and a repeat mark from this example. They would have fallen between mm. 125 and 126.

[8]Possibly the elision could be heard to take place at the *piano* marking in the middle of m. 126, which would set the six-four chords in the first half of mm. 127 and 128 in an unaccented position. This alternate interpretation was suggested to the author in a conversation with Dr. Allen Winold.

Example 5a. Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart, Piano Sonata in A major (K. 331), mm. 125-134



Example 5b. Schenkerian analysis

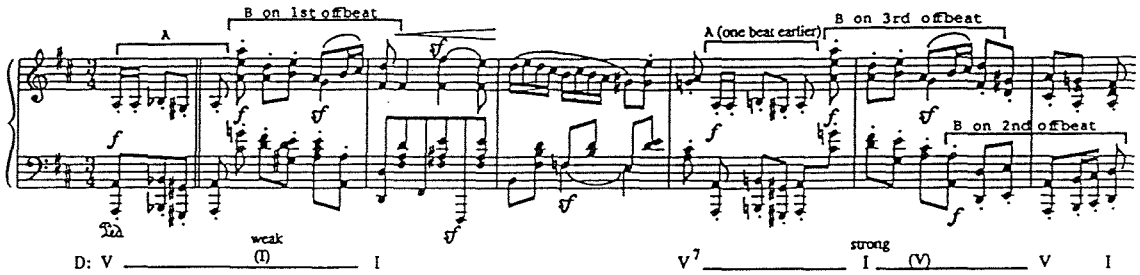


fifth progression, which mirrors the pattern of the fundamental structure. I have graphically displayed the start of the descending line in a separate visual plane, not because the linear progression is at a higher level in the middleground, but because it might otherwise be confused with the previous neighboring prolongation. Besides the origination of a middleground progression on the third beat of m. 128, there is further evidence of the shifted downbeat. The placements of the cadential six-fours in the original score are on the third beats of mm. 129 and 131, and their resolutions fall on the downbeats of mm. 130 and 132, respectively. It would be extremely uncharacteristic to hear cadential six-fours in that context.

One final observation in the Mozart example must be made. The placement of the ending cadence is notated on the third beat of m. 134. My reading of the metrical structure interprets this cadence as instead falling upon an enormously strong position; it is not only felt as a downbeat, but as a hypermetrical downbeat as well. The irony is that the theme and all of the previous variations contain final cadences in the middle of a measure, but none of them feel like downbeats, let alone hypermetrical downbeats.

As my final illustration (Example 6), I choose to make the point that one need not always interpret the same melodic and harmonic figures with the same metrical feeling. The Schumann *Novelette* in D major, Op. 21, no. 5, is a playful and daring illustration of just how the same melodic and harmonic material may be reinterpreted metrically. I suggest that every different positioning of the theme in this piece should be played and heard according to the meter precisely as notated. For instance, the clever repositioning of the *a* material from the first incomplete measure to a place one beat earlier in m. 4 changes the entire sense of the prolongation in m. 5 when compared to that of the first full measure. In addition, the primary melodic line marked *b*, which begins by leaping down from the dominant to the tonic degree, is situated in no less than three different metrical positions in the space of the first five measures. I have bracketed them and labeled the starting offbeats for quick reference. The technique used is essentially a contrapuntal approach to writing, and the free metrical effects are the result of what I see as simply a more Baroque conception of line.

Example 6. Robert Schumann, *Novelette* in D major (Op. 21, no. 5), mm. 1-6



The Schumann piece indicates the viability of older stylistic traits undergoing a new twist, but it does not negate the analyses of the previous examples. Armed with first-hand evidence of at least four ways to shift meter away from the notated downbeats, we can predict that "there must be fifty ways to leave your bar-lines." These situations only underscore what we constantly try to convey as theorists: that thinking deeply about and listening carefully to music can improve interpretation.

Classic and Romantic composers adhered to the notational practice of showing a consistent number of beats per measure throughout a section or movement. This practice did not acknowledge the presence of shifting metrical accents, yet the literature contains numerous instances of shifted downbeats in the feeling of the music. Recognizing the use of metrical shifts, categorizing the source of the shifts, and creating performing strategies for projecting the interesting metrical nuances are the beginning steps along the path toward understanding and appreciating the music more fully.