There is a general belief that Handel’s music is better performed these days than it was 50 or 100 years ago, when ideas about Baroque style were at best vague. In many ways the belief is well founded: performers today regularly over-dot the French overtures, ornament melodic lines in slow movements and the reprise in da capo arias, and use small forces, original scoring and original instruments. Obviously enormous progress has been made in the search for a true Baroque style since the pioneering work of Dolmetsch nearly a century ago.

Yet many difficult problems remain as we strive to rediscover how Handel intended his music to sound. One of the most troublesome and contentious is the question of how to interpret the written rhythms in the many passages where dotted notes are found juxtaposed with phrases written in even values. Traditionally, these apparent inconsistencies have been dismissed as examples of Handel’s ‘casual notation’ or ‘inadventure’, to quote Donington,¹ who, like other authorities, has no hesitation in recommending a regularization of such rhythms, so that the music is to be played as if it were uniformly dotted. This approach is widely practised by performers today. An extension of this principle is the custom of using dotted rhythms in passages and even whole movements which are written entirely in even notes; French notes *inégales* are cited in support of the practice.

The subject of rhythmic alteration is undoubtedly a complex one. Some aspects of it, particularly over-dotting, have aroused much fierce controversy in recent years, with important contributions from Neumann, Fuller and Pont,² which in different ways take up the issue from the original position expressed by Dolmetsch, Dart and Donington.³ The present essay does not attempt to compete with these investigations, but offers some reflections prompted by close contact with the sources over many years’ experience of editing Handel’s music and some conclusions drawn from the clear evidence of the composer’s own manuscripts.

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¹ S. Sadie et al. (eds.), *Handel*
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How far does Handel’s notation represent the actual rhythms he intended in performance? It is of course common knowledge that in much late Baroque music there were rhythmic subtleties introduced in performance which were not, or could not, be indicated in the notation. This phenomenon occurs in all periods of musical history but reached an extreme stage in the French music of the late seventeenth century. We have abundant evidence that in entrées, or ouvertures, dotted rhythms were consistently sharpened (or ‘over-dotted’); a more elusive mannerism was that of notes inégales, the playing in an uneven manner of notes written in even values, especially quavers in conjunct motion. That these traditions were widespread in French music is unquestionable, but the French themselves acknowledged that these devices were not to be found in the music of other nations. One of the most frequently quoted treatises on the subject, François Couperin’s L’art de toucher le clavecin, says very clearly and unequivocally:

In my opinion there are faults [défauts] in our way of writing music, which correspond to the way we write our language. We write differently from what we play; which causes foreigners to play our music less well than we play theirs. The Italians, on the other hand, write their music in the true values in which they have imagined it. For example: we dot several consecutive quavers moving conjunctly; and yet we write them as equal; our custom has enslaved us, and we go on with it.⁵

One cannot resist the impression that Couperin is being apologetic about notes inégales; he seems to regard the inexactitude of notation more as an undesirable aberration (‘défauts’) than as a vital principle of flexibility concerned with greater expressiveness in performance, and he implies that only habit prevents them from doing away with it. The reference to Italian music could not be put more clearly: there was, in this matter at least, a sharply defined difference between the French and Italian styles, and it was almost certainly a problem about over-dotting in a French overture which caused the famous dispute between Handel and Corelli, leading to the Italian musician’s despairing (or sarcastic) remark, ‘But, my dear Saxon, this music is in the French style, which I do not understand’.⁶

However, except when he was writing overtures, which seem to have had their own set of conventions, Handel’s style was predominately Italian rather than French, and I am sure that the late Thurston Dart was right when he said to me many years ago: ‘In a whole lifetime devoted to this subject, I have never found a shred of evidence that notes inégales are applicable to Handel’. Recent discoveries of mechanical instruments of the period give powerful support to this thesis: among them is an organ-clock made by the famous Charles Clay (d 1740), which I examined and recorded on tape in 1973. The clock plays arrangements of pieces by Handel; there is no trace of notes inégales, apart from a few fleeting moments of unevenness which are so random that they are more likely to be due to instability of the mechanism than to deliberate intention.