A Guide to Trill Choices in the Mozart G Major Concerto

by Walfrid Kujala

This article is a survey of all the trills in the first 162 bars of the solo flute part in the first movement of the Mozart G Major Concerto. The guidelines given here for developing better trill technique and for gaining a better understanding of performance practice solutions can be consistently applied to most of the trills in the rest of the concerto.

The very first trill: C - D, bar 33, 4th beat, (Example 1) is often spoiled by carelessly omitting the printed slur connecting the 3rd and 4th beats. Inevitably this causes jarring accents on both the 3rd and 4th beats, as well as on the ensuing downbeat—an effect that I characterize as “Three Blind Mice phrasing”.

A likely reason for this slur omission and its accompanying accents is the distraction caused by the sudden and awkward change of one’s right hand position in order to allow the 2nd finger to reach for the 1st trill key. Alternatively, using the 1st finger on the 1st trill key in this case results in a much more natural and efficient action. In comparing these two approaches with the help of a mirror, careful observation of one’s right hand finger activity reveals the uncomfortable splaying of the 3rd and 4th fingers when using the 2nd finger on the 1st trill key and, in contrast, the more natural clustering of the 1st, 2nd, 3rd, and 4th fingers while trilling with the 1st finger. If you still prefer the 2nd finger on the 1st trill key, try using the middle joint of the finger instead of the tip. The 2nd finger will thereby move from the E key to the 1st trill key in a more direct and efficient route. (By the way, middle joint contact with the trill keys on the piccolo is an often used technique, inasmuch as the trill keys are of necessity situated behind the regular keys rather than between them.)

Common practice calls for this C - D trill to resolve by means of a turn. If, however, you prefer ending the trill without a turn, be sure that the first violins likewise end their parallel A - B trill without a turn. Otherwise they will probably take the turn for granted. Within the normal tempo range for this movement (from 116 to 126 per quarter note), a good trill speed is seven notes per beat. This translates into the sequence, C - D - C - D - C - B - C (two trills plus a turn). There are two likely flaws that you should check for on any trill that ends with a turn (regardless of the length of the trill), the first being a sudden diminuendo before the turn followed by a “revival” accent on the turn itself, followed by a weak arrival on the downbeat resolution. The second flaw is characterized by a momentum-arresting prolongation of the note before the turn (the 5th note in the sequence). Often these two flaws com-
bine, creating a particularly unmusical interruption in the continuity and resolution of the trill.

The G - A dotted quarter trill in bar 40 (Example 2) has a tendency to be too slow, unsettling the rhythm and tempo of the rest of the measure.

This lethargy can sometimes be attributed to a misguided decision to do an upper-note trill start that turns into an appoggiatura-like note stretch, inadvertently consuming valuable trill time. To counter this slowness, think of the first two notes of the trill as very fast grace notes. That will create an almost irresistible momentum that will propel you more sparkingly through the remainder of the trill. Don’t be overly concerned if the F-sharp - E 16th notes end up being a little late and fast. The important thing is to arrive at the 3rd beat D exactly in time, take a quick breath and play the following staccato 8th notes in perfect tempo.

As with almost all of the main cadence trills in Mozart, the A - B trill in bar 43 (Example 3) should have an upper-note beginning, then end with a G - A turn figure.

However, there is a strong tendency to anticipate the first note of the trill by placing it before the beat. (I have sometimes heard performances where an exaggerated anticipation has resulted in distorting the low D into a dotted-quarter followed by an 8th note B pickup into the trill, thus completely negating the important appoggiatura function of the B.) If, on the other hand, you successfully place the first B of the trill synchronously on the beat, it is not necessary to prolong it and thus run the risk of overestimating the value of the trill and arrive too late on the downbeat of bar 44. The orchestra, meanwhile, will have obliterated your trill turn with their forte downbeat. It is surprisingly easy to perceive the underlying beat too slowly for half-note trills—or even in half-notes without trills, for that matter. Incidentally, the whole-note trill E - F-sharp in bar 90 (see Example 8) gives more room for an appoggiatura prolongation, but you must still be relentless in your counting.

The 4th beat trill in bar 66 (Example 4) is specified by the composer as an upper-note start, and of course it should be played distinctly on the beat.

A slur should join the trill into the F-sharp 16th note. The G - A trill in the 4th beat of the next bar should begin on the main note, G, and can be played either as a five-note trill, G - A - G - A - G; or as a five-note turn, G - A - G - F-sharp - G. (I prefer the trill version.) In either case, execute it very quickly, making the last note of the figure very short in order to separate crisply the following 16th note.

The A-sharp - B trill in bar 71 (Example 5) is my favorite example of “trill choice based on expressive voice-leading.” By starting the trill on the main note, A-sharp, (with a slight leaning on the first
note) one confirms the melodic importance of its chromatic contour. If one begins the trill with the upper-note B, not only is the chromatic element bypassed, but one prematurely "gives away" the note of resolution. Incidentally, this trill is easier and emits less key noise if it is executed with the A-sharp lever rather than the F key, but even more importantly, it allows for smoother control of the 16th notes, G-sharp - A-sharp. This is because the A-sharp key can be left down while fingering the G-sharp, thus ensuring a flawless and noiseless return to the A-sharp 16th note.

Again, voice-leading principles strongly suggest a main-note start on the E - F-sharp trill in bar 82 (Example 6), but the first violin must do likewise on their parallel octave trill. In fact, they have the identical phrase two bars before the solo flute comes in, and that trill obviously should be treated the same way.

The mock cadence E - F-sharp trill in bar 87 (Example 7) should begin with the upper note, on the beat, followed by the usual turn. The whole-note trill in bar 90 (Example 8) was discussed earlier. Inasmuch as the standard fingering for this high E - F-sharp trill gives a less than perfect whole-step interval, you might want to consider the following fingering which is better in tune.

Play the first F-sharp with:

\[
\begin{array}{cccc}
\circ & \circ & \circ & \circ \\
\end{array}
\]

Then switch to the "enhanced" harmonic fingering:

\[
\begin{array}{cccc}
\circ & \circ & \circ & \circ \\
\end{array}
\]

(It's like trilling the fundamental A to B, but with the 2nd trill key kept down for better resonance).

The first two beats of bar 125 (Example 9), E and D-sharp, have the effect of a 4-3 suspension in the solo flute and second violins, and the E - F-sharp trill is therefore more appropriate with a main-note start.

Another advantage of a main-note beginning for a short trill like this is that a 7-note trill figure (including the turn) fits in perfectly at a normal tempo. An upper-note-start trill figure of six notes would feel too slow, and an upper-note-start trill figure of eight notes would be too difficult for most flutists to play quickly enough to fit neatly into one beat, the consequence being that the first note of the trill, F-sharp, probably would be anticipated (played before the beat), thus threatening the rhythmic integrity of the 8th note pickup E. One additional point: despite the fact that our right hand first finger is usually very agile and reliable (as for example when trilling F-G), unfortunately in the case of the E-F-sharp trill the same finger has a tendency to "freeze up" on the fifth note, E, just before the D-sharp-E turn, thus marred the evenness of the trill figure. This is because, in anticipation of the D-sharp, the first finger suddenly wants to stay too close to the F key, not allowing it to come up all the way for the second
F-sharp, thus creating a momentary paralysis. This is the kind of psychological quirk that can be easily remedied by careful observation and practice in front of a mirror.

By the way, the many dotted 8th trills in the first and third movements of the Mozart D Major Concerto (as for example the opening D - E trill on the second beat of bar 32) can also benefit from a pragmatic approach regarding upper-note or main-note starts. For the more normal tempos between 116 and 126 a main-note-start trill figure of seven notes (D - E - D - E - D - C-sharp - D) gives a satisfying result. However, if the tempo is at a relatively relaxed 100-108, an upper-note-start trill figure of eight notes (including the turn) would be just right, or if the tempo were at a brisk 132+ (as it often is), an upper-note-start trill figure of only six notes would also be apt. But in any upper-note-start one should always be on guard against the strong tendency for the first note to jump in ahead of the beat, thereby setting up a chain reaction of unevenness for the rest of the trill.

The most controversial trills in the first movement occur on the 8th note pick-ups in bars 127, 129, 131, and 133 (Example 10). There are essentially three ways of realizing them. The first two methods use the "turn" approach. For instance, the D-sharp - E trill in bar 127 can be played as a 5-note turn, D-sharp - E - D-sharp - C-sharp - D-sharp, or as a 4-note turn, E - D-sharp - C-sharp - D-sharp. The third way is based on "mordent" style (Example 11), a quick 3-note figure, D-sharp - E - D-sharp, with a slight separation, or lift, between the "mordent" and the following downbeat.

The 5-note turn is risky because of the likelihood of slowing down the tempo. A 5-note turn being really the equivalent of 10 notes per beat, is virtually impossible for all of us mortals to fit in without some blurring of notes. Even a 4-note turn (equivalent to 8 notes per beat) is borderline too fast unless we slightly anticipate each entrance. However, a more important criticism of the 4-note turn happens to be a musical one, in that the leading tone function of each of these four pickups becomes obscured by the upper-note start.

The simpler 3-note mordent becomes a preferred choice because it conveys the essence of a trill but without the rhythmic or technical risks associated with the turn style. Also, with less distraction from unnecessary complications, one can concentrate better on the formidable musical and technical demands of this celebrated 8-bar virtuoso section. It is important, however, not to dilute the mordent character of these pickups by playing them as even 16th note triplets. They should sound more like three 32nds followed by a 32nd rest, preserving that minuscule but all-important upbeat lift.

The C-sharp - D trill (C-sharp - D - C-sharp mordent) in bar 131 usually needs special attention to avoid the danger of omitting the first note, C-sharp. We tend to anticipate the depressing of the trill key before the first C-sharp has had a chance to sound. One reason for this is that, contrarily, the other three trills are executed by lifting a finger, whereas the C-sharp - D trill is executed by depress-
ing a finger—an important thing to consider when starting any trill involving the trill keys (as for example in the Ibert Concerto, 1st movement, bar 42). For the G-sharp - D trill in bar 131 I would also highly recommend using the 1st finger on the 1st trill key for the same reasons given in the second paragraph of this article.

Finally, for voice-leading reasons, it would be best to apply main note starts to the dotted quarter note trills in bars 135 and 137 (Example 12). The F-natural of 135 and the E-flat of 137 each embody a special harmonic tension that an upper note start would tend to weaken.

REFERENCES

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WALFRID KUJALA, a member of the Chicago Symphony since 1954, joined the Northwestern University faculty as Professor of Flute in 1962. Previously he was a member of the Rochester Philharmonic and taught at the Eastman School, where he received his B.M. and M.M. Mr. Kujala has been a frequent soloist with the Chicago Symphony Orchestra and premiered Gunther Schuller’s Flute Concerto, which was dedicated to him, in 1988. Mr. Kujala authored a textbook, The Flutist’s Progress, and his latest book, The Flutist’s Vade Mecum of Scales, Arpeggios, Trills and Fingering Technique (Progress Press) was a winner of the 1996 National Flute Association Newly Published Music Competition. His teachers include Joseph Mariano and Parker Taylor. Mr. Kujala is a past president of the NFA, and received the NFA Lifetime Achievement Award in 1997.