

# The Fall of It All



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## ORNAMENTATION

How to use trills, grace notes, mordents, scoops, and other flourishes to dress up melodies. BY JON CHAPPELL

**W**hen learning a new melody, a musician's first order of business is to master the pitches and rhythms. Then, once you have a certain confidence with the notes, you can add a little expression—varying the tempo and applying dynamics and articulation. But those expressive techniques don't actually alter the notes of the melody. If you *really* want to take the next step and experiment with the notes themselves, you can inject *ornaments*—extra notes and quick flourishes that don't complete-

ly change the melody, but which make it fancier and more exciting. Ornaments are the musical icing on the melody cake.

The use of ornaments began informally; musicians improvised little variations as they played an established melody. Soon, composers began writing down these little extras and including them in their scores. Today, there is specific notation for various ornaments that tell musicians how to embellish the notes written on the staff.

You can hear ornaments in all kinds of music. In pop music, slow ballads by

virtuosic singers will typically use a lot of them. At sporting events, you'll often hear singers add ornaments when performing our National Anthem because the song is performed slowly and the performer hopes to bring a sense of style and energy to a traditional melody by improvising some well-chosen additions. The trick when introducing ornaments to a melody is not to overdo it: It is the melody that must shine through—not the technique of the singer!

Musical ornaments include a whole range of devices that help performers enhance a melody. Most ornaments can

## Techniques: Ornaments

be applied over a variety of musical styles, tempos, and rhythms. Let's take a look at some of the more popular ornamental devices and see how they're written and used.

### Trill Seeking

The *trill* is perhaps the most common ornament of all. It's the rapid alternation of two notes, usually starting on the main, or *principal*, note (the one appearing in the score), and moving to the note immediately above. In a trill, the upper note is the one that's next highest in the scale or key. In other words, if you're in the key of C and you see an E with a trill symbol, you alternate E with the F one half-step higher. But if you're in the key of G and you see an E with a trill, the note you trill with is F#, which is a *whole* step higher. Example 1 shows how a trill is written compared with how it's played.

### State of Grace

A *grace note* is a little note, both graphically and musically, that appears before the principal note. When you see a grace note, you should sound it, but then sort of "slip off" of it quickly into the main note. In a score, a grace note is notated as a small note (or group of notes) to the left of the principal note, often with the stem going in the opposite direction, as shown in Ex. 2. Sometimes grace notes come in groups of two or three, as shown in beats 3, 4, and 5. A grace note is not accented, and is traditionally played directly on the beat. But modern-day practices sometimes allow the grace notes to come before the beat, as shown in Ex. 3.

### Taking Turns

A *turn* is a musical ballet move, the equivalent of a pirouette on a note. In a turn, you start with the note above, then play the principal note, then the note below, and finally the principal note again (see Ex. 4). In a *held turn*, you perform this flourish at the very end of the beat, just before the rhythm runs out and you have to play the next note. The longer you wait, the faster you have to play the turn, as Ex. 5 shows!

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### Example 1: That's Trilling

Written: *tr* or *tr* 

Played: 

A trill is a rapid alternation between the principal note and the note immediately above.

### Example 2: A Graceful Melody

Written: 

Played: 

Grace notes are written as small notes with or without slashes, connected to the main note by slurs. The traditional way to play them is on the beat, subtracted from the value of the principal note, as shown in bar 2.


### Example 3: Grace Races Ahead


Written: 

Played: 

Nowadays grace notes can be played on the beat (as in the previous example) or slightly ahead of the beat, as shown in bar 2 here. Note that sometimes the grace note is actually part of a different measure than the principal.

### Example 4: Turn It Up

Written: 

Played: 

A turn (see the symbol over the third note in the first measure) is the surrounding of the principal note by its upper and lower neighbor, starting with the upper note.

### Example 5: Turning on a Dime

Written: 

Played: 

A held turn means you play the principal note first, and then sometime before the next principal note, you execute the turn. The longer you wait, the faster you have to perform the turn. Note how the symbol appears *between* the notes.

### Example 6: Appoggiaturas and Acciaccaturas

In classical music, appoggiaturas and acciaccaturas were often written as grace notes, but performed differently, according to their harmonic function.

### Example 7: Less Is Mordent

Mordents and inverted, or lower, mordents are quick, two-note flourishes and are less demanding than trills.

### Example 8: What's the Scoop?

A scoop is a bend upward into a note from the note below.

### Example 9: Go for the Glissando

Downward glissandos can be notated several different ways, but in this example only (c) is a fall-off.

### Example 10: Rhapsodic Ornaments

A famous 20th-century example using ornaments: the clarinet solo that opens George Gershwin's *Rhapsody in Blue*.

## The Italian Influence

Besides being one of the most beautiful words in music, *appoggiatura* (ah-pah-jah-toor-ah) is the term for playing a non-harmonic tone (one outside a given chord or implied harmony) on a rhythmically strong beat and then falling back to the principal note on a weak beat. An appoggiatura can be thought of as a type of grace note, but it's a very specific one that produces anticipation or an unsettled feeling, because of its harmonic role—emphasizing a note that's not part of the current key and *resolving* (or moving) to the expected note that relieves the tension (see Ex. 6, bars 1 and 2). An *acciaccatura* (at-cha-ka-toor-ah) is the counterpart to the *appoggiatura*, and sounds more like a sneeze than a melodic embellishment! But if the bolder statement of an appoggiatura is too much, an acciaccatura usually provides a nice alternative. For this ornament, the non-harmonic tone still precedes the principal one, but in a shorter, less rhythmically substantial way that doesn't take on such an important role in the harmony (see Ex. 6, bars 3 and 4).

## Mordents, Downtown and Uptown

A *mordent* is sort of a "training trill," a quick, one-time alternation of the principal note and the note immediately above it. It's notated with a squiggly line directly above the note head (see Ex. 7). A *lower mordent* has a vertical line running through it and indicates that the principal note alternates with the note immediately *below*. Mordents are popular for keyboard music, because keyboardists can't sustain notes like wind and string players can, and mordents help "extend" notes without drawing attention to themselves the way a trill does.

## Ornaments Today

In pop music, the most common of the traditional ornaments are the trill, the turn, and the grace note. If you're writing arrangements for instruments or voice, you can trust that most qualified performers will not only recognize these ornamental symbols in your score, but



Guitarist Steve Vai uses his lightning fingers to execute a trill.

also be able to execute the techniques in the appropriate manner. If you're reading a piece of music, be aware that a written ornament may behave differently depending on the musical context. For example, the rhythm of a trill will be slower if the symbol appears over a quarter note than if it appears over an eighth note. Genre can also influence how an ornament is expected to be played. In slow swing jazz, for example, a trill may be played in a relaxed manner; that same figure appearing in the fast movement of a Baroque dance suite would be executed crisply.

In jazz, there's an additional ornament called the *scoop* (Ex. 8), a sort of grace note achieved by sliding into the principal pitch from a note below—usually a half-step lower than the principal, regardless of the song's key. For example, if the target note is F, you start playing on E; if the target note is G, you'd approach from an F#, etc. The performer can play the scoop as either a bend or a grace note. While it can be more difficult to play the bend (horn players must use their lips, or embouchure, to do so, while guitarists must stretch a string to a new pitch—both

techniques take a lot of practice to master), that's often what sounds more appropriate. Generally, if the desired scoop is a whole step or larger, the starting note is written as a grace note.

The counterpart to the scoop is the *fall-off*: a continued trailing off in pitch after a note ends (indicated by a downwardly slanting straight line to the right of the note head). Fall-offs are usually accompanied by a fading in volume as well as pitch, so that it sounds like the note is naturally dying away—the way a train whistle gets simultaneously lower in pitch and quieter as it passes you. For brass and woodwinds, it's best to bend the pitch down rather than finger the fall-off notes, but sometimes that's not possible. Note that in Ex. 9, there are three versions of a *glissando* (*gliss*, for short): a continuous glide from one pitch to another. The first measure shows a gradual, two-beat gliss to the note A. Next is a more specific version of bar 1 with a held quarter note and then a one-beat gliss to A. The last measure shows a true fall-off of indeterminate pitch.

Composers using ornaments must take into consideration the capabilities of the instruments that are to perform them. Some, such as woodwinds and brass, have

a *break point*, a division between registers or positions, which makes some combinations of notes hard to execute.

For a good example of how ornaments can take full advantage of an instrument's capabilities, check out the clarinet solo at the opening of George Gershwin's *Rhapsody in Blue* (Ex. 10). As written, it starts with a trill between F and G, then does an ascending 17-note glissando up to the high B $\flat$ . But most performers play it the way it was originally done by Ross Gorman (the clarinetist who debuted the piece), finishing the gliss with a long, bluesy bend from the F up to the B $\flat$ .

The composer heard Gorman's interpretation at *Rhapsody's* premiere and stated that the passage should forever be played that way: as a lip gliss—or scoop—up from below (see the alternate notation in the example, beginning from the fourth-line F in bar 1). Note the grace notes in bars 2 and 4 and the quick trills in bar 6. Gershwin wrote these ornaments into the score because he wanted this passage to sound highly expressive, even improvised. The irony was that to make it appropriately jazzy and loose-sounding, he had to carefully calculate every note—including the ornaments! **T**