ORNAMENTS: APPOGGIATURAS

By Douglas Niedt

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Preface

The first thing you need to know when deciding how to play any ornament in pre-20th-century music is that there was no "common practice." The notation and execution of ornaments varied from country to country and composer to composer. Written instructions from long ago or ornament tables (even by J.S. Bach) cannot overcome the general shortcomings of musical notation. Rigid rules, no matter where they come from, go against the very nature of ornaments—they were often improvised and, therefore, are too free to be tamed into regularity or taught by the book.

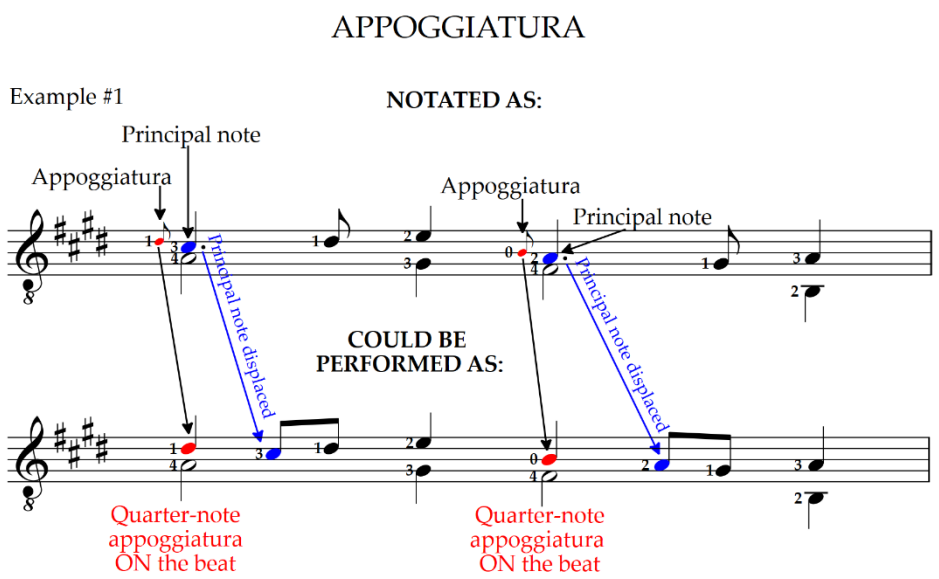
Descriptions of ornaments are only rough outlines, and many are contradictory. It's a jungle and very frustrating to try to figure out. There is simply no definitive solution to any ornament in a given situation. Therefore, be skeptical of everything I write from here on!

If you want a short answer to how to play an ornament, I say, "Do whatever you want. Do what makes the music sound best, and do what sounds best to you. In the end, that's what counts."

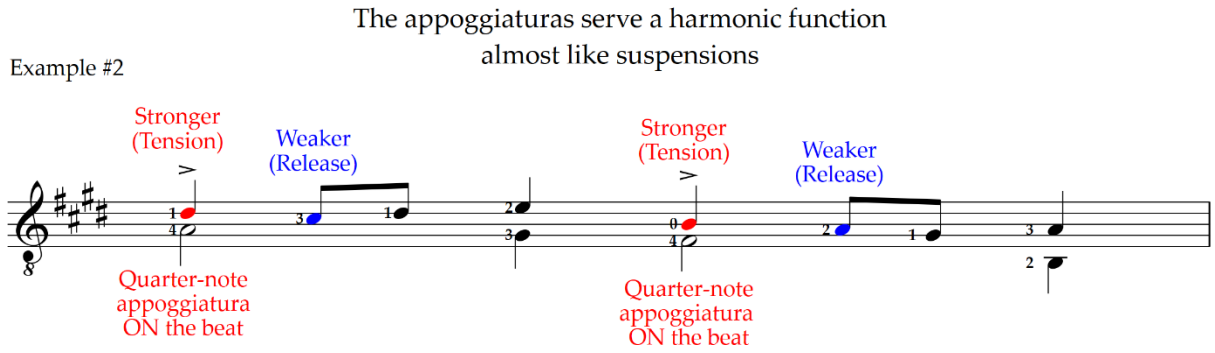
The Appoggiatura (German: *Vorschlag*; French: *port de voix)*

The appoggiatura (pronounced ah-poh-zhee-ah-TOO-rah) is one of the most important harmonic and melodic ornaments in vocal and instrumental compositions. The word appoggiatura comes from the Italian *appoggiare*, which means to lean upon.

According to conventional practice, the appoggiatura is a relatively long, non-chordal tone, usually one-half to one step above or below the principal note, played ON the beat, displacing the principal note to a later position in the measure. Example #1:

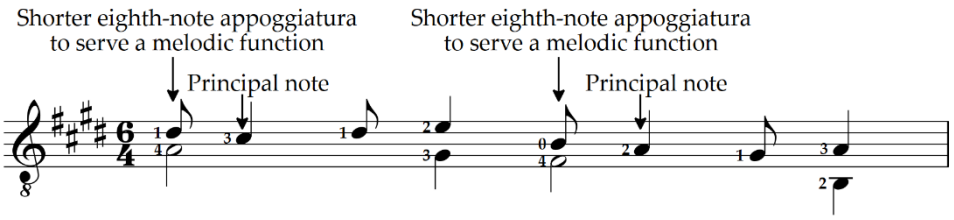


In other words, the appoggiatura steals its duration from and resolves to the principal note that follows. It produces a dissonance ON the beat, resolving up or down to a consonance on the principal note AFTER the beat. It is always stronger in volume than the principal note, creating a feeling of tension-release. In this usage, the appoggiatura serves a harmonic function, almost like a suspension. Example #2:



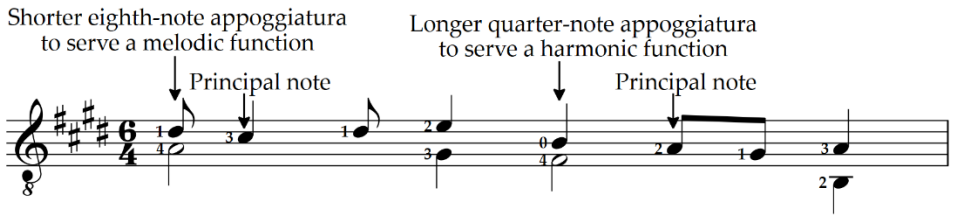
However, in the Baroque period, the appoggiatura could also serve a melodic function. In this role, the appoggiatura tends to be short. Example #3:

Example #3



Eminent musicologist Frederick Neumann points out that, in the Baroque period, even if the notation of the appoggiaturas is the same, we can play two appoggiaturas differently in the same phrase. In the following example, we can play the first appoggiatura as a short eighth note to focus on melodic and rhythmic interest. Then, we can play the second appoggiatura as a longer quarter note to strengthen the harmony for heightened expression. Example #4:

Example #4



Nomenclature and Notation of the Appoggiatura

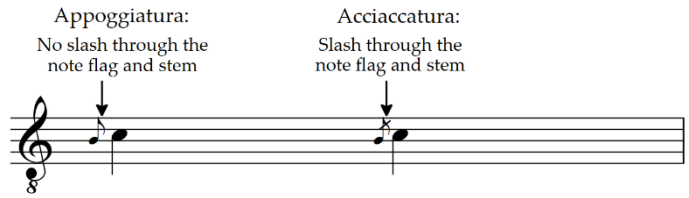
In the Baroque period, J.S. Bach called the ascending appoggiatura an *accent steigend*. Others called it a rising appoggiatura or a forefall. Bach called the descending appoggiatura an *accent fallend*. Others called it a falling appoggiatura or backfall.

In the Renaissance and Baroque periods, composers notated the appoggiatura as a small grace note before the principal note. Bach notated it most frequently as an 8th note, fairly often as a 16th note, rarely as a quarter note, but never as a half note.

It looks very similar to another ornament that today we call the acciaccatura (pronounced ah-chah-kah-TOO-rah). The difference is that the appoggiatura does not have a slash or oblique line across the flag and note stem of the grace note. Example #5:

The Difference in the Notation of an
Appoggiatura and an Acciaccatura using grace notes:

Example #5



Commentators speak of long and short appoggiaturas. Adding to the confusion, some call the appoggiatura without the slash a long appoggiatura and the acciaccatura with the slash a short appoggiatura.

J. S. Bach's Notation of the Appoggiatura

In the table of ornaments written for his son Wilhelm Friederich ("*Explanation of various signs, intimating the way of gracefully rendering certain ornaments*"), J.S. Bach notates the appoggiatura with a symbol resembling a left parenthesis. For the ascending appoggiatura (what he calls the *accent steigend*), he places the symbol to the left and a little below the principal note. Example #6:

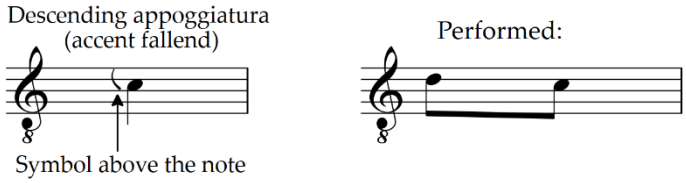
J.S. Bach's notation of an ascending
appoggiatura using a symbol

Example #6

For the descending appoggiatura (what he calls the *accent fallend*), he places the symbol to the left and a little above the principal note. Example #7:

J.S. Bach's notation of a descending appoggiatura using a symbol

Example #7



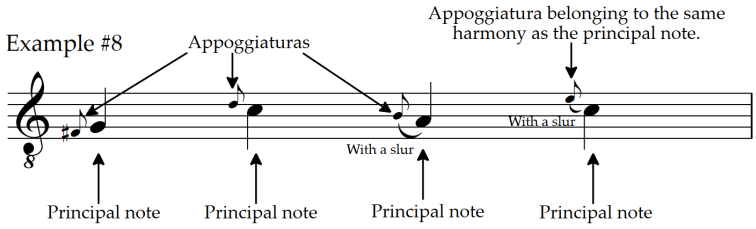
However, as eminent musicologist and ornamentation expert Frederick Neumann points out, Bach wrote the table as an introduction to ornamentation for a ten-year-old. Therefore, it was a situation that called for over-simplification. Also, the table only refers to keyboard ornaments.

Neumann also points out that any table of ornaments, especially in the Baroque period, is trying to rigidly document something that, by its very nature, is improvisatory and capricious depending on its context and that musical notation, because of its limitations, cannot always capture. Furthermore, tables are abstract because they must refer to any and all contexts. They cannot capture the infinite variety of contexts and nuances we encounter in performing music.

Additional Information About the Appoggiatura

The appoggiatura usually is one or one-half step above or below the principal note. Or, if it is a wider interval, it usually belongs to the same harmony as the principal note. Composers may notate them with or without a slur connecting the two notes. Example #8:

1. The appoggiatura usually is one or one-half step above or below the principal note.
2. If it is a wider interval, it usually belongs to the same harmony as the principal note.
3. Composers may notate them with or without a slur connecting the two notes.

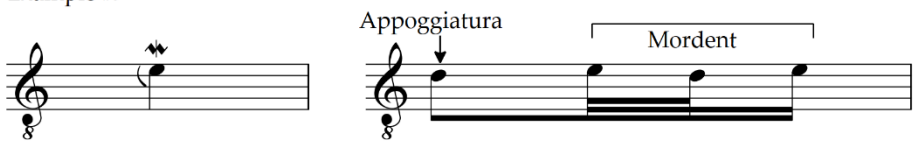


By the 19th century, composers began doing away with notating ornaments with grace notes and symbols. Instead, they wrote them out as standard notes in precise rhythmic notation.

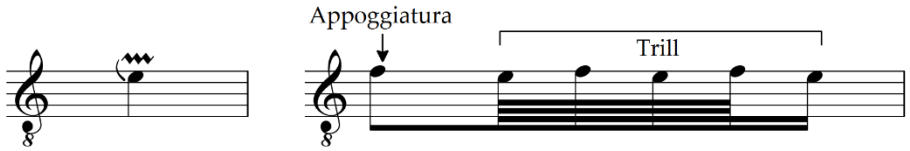
In the Baroque and post-Baroque periods, composers and performers often appended an appoggiatura to the beginning of a mordent or trill. For more information, see Compound Trills. Example #9:

The appoggiatura can be added as a prefix to a mordent:

Example #9



The appoggiatura can be added as a prefix to a trill:



HOW LONG IS AN APPOGGIATURA IN J. S. BACH'S MUSIC?

In the music of J. S. Bach, no precise rules determine the exact length or speed of the appoggiatura. When Bach wrote an appoggiatura as a grace note (instead of a symbol), he usually wrote the duration of the grace note as an 8th or 16th note. However, the duration value of the grace note did not indicate how long to hold the appoggiatura or how fast to play it. In practice, the note value of the appoggiatura varied according to the passage's tempo, the length of the principal note, what precedes and follows the appoggiatura, what is happening in the other voices, and the desired effect.

Frederick Neumann presents his own table of notation and execution for the appoggiatura but presents a *range* of possibilities that one can adopt in ever-changing contexts. In addition to including the traditional on-the-beat examples, he includes appoggiaturas as "pre-beat" or before-the-beat "grace notes."

Based on eminent musicologist Frederick Neumann's table, here are the suggested lengths of appoggiaturas in the music of J. S. Bach *in the Baroque period*:

1. If the principal note is a quarter note, you can play the appoggiatura on the beat as a 16th note (short appoggiatura) or 8th note (long appoggiatura).

2. If the principal note is a dotted quarter note, you can play the appoggiatura on the beat as a 16th note (short appoggiatura) or 8th note (long appoggiatura).
3. If the principal note is a half note, you can play the appoggiatura on the beat as a 16th note (short appoggiatura) or 8th note (long appoggiatura). It was rare for J. S. Bach to use a quarter-note appoggiatura in this case. Later composers did use that execution.
4. If the principal note is a dotted half note, you can play the appoggiatura on the beat as a 16th note (short appoggiatura) or 8th note (long appoggiatura). J. S. Bach did not use a half-note appoggiatura.
5. If the principal note is a dotted eighth note, you can play the appoggiatura on the beat as a 16th note or ahead of the beat as a short pre-beat grace note. Bach did not use an 8th-note appoggiatura in this case. Later composers did use that execution.
6. In addition to these conventional on-the-beat examples, scholar Frederick Neumann maintains that in certain situations, where the function of the appoggiatura is melodic or rhythmic instead of harmonic, the performer can play the appoggiatura BEFORE the beat as a short pre-beat grace note.

HOW LONG IS AN APPOGGIATURA IN MUSIC AFTER J. S. BACH?

In his landmark publication, *Essay on the True Art of Playing Keyboard Instruments,* J. S. Bach's second son, Carl Philipp Emanuel Bach, gave us a systematic explanation of how to execute appoggiaturas post-J. S. Bach.

C. P. E. Bach notated his appoggiaturas as grace notes with specific note values (unlike his father, who always used either an 8th or 16th note in every situation). These specific note durations of the grace notes determined how to perform the appoggiaturas.

Here are the rules to determine the length of an appoggiatura in music AFTER J. S. Bach:

RULE #1: If it is possible to divide the principal note into two equal parts, the appoggiatura receives half the value of the principal note. Play the appoggiatura (the little grace note) ON THE BEAT. Example #10:

RULE #1: If it is possible to divide the principal note into two equal parts, the appoggiatura receives half the value of the principal note.

Here, the principal note is a half note.
We can divide a half note
into two quarter notes.

Example #10 Notated:

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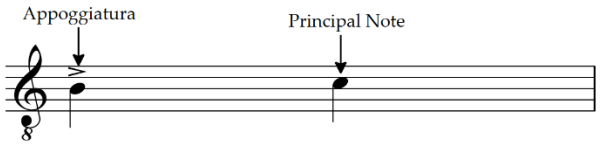
Therefore, this appoggiatura B is a quarter note
because it receives 1/2 of the value of the the
principal note C which was originally a half note.

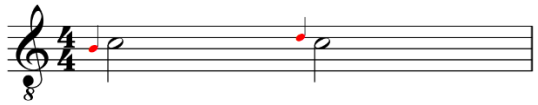
Performed:



Notice that we play the appoggiatura ON the beat.
We displace the principal note to beat #2.

Here is an example with the principal notes as half notes in 4/4 time

Notated:
(note colors added for clarity)



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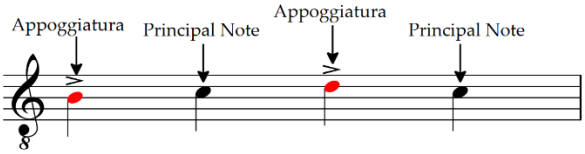
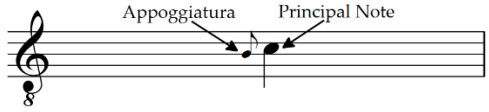
Performed:



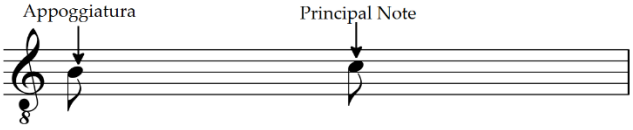
In this example, the principal note is a quarter note.
We can divide a quarter note
into two eighth notes.

Notated:



Therefore, this appoggiatura B is an 8th note
because it receives 1/2 the value of the principal
note C which was originally a quarter note.

Performed:

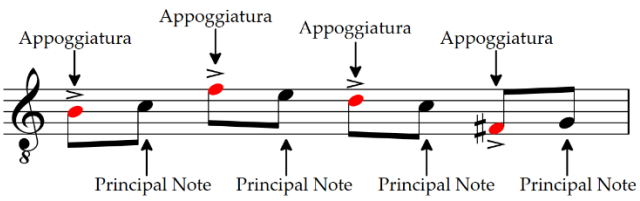


Notice that we play the appoggiatura on the beat.
We displace the principal note to the "and" of beat #1.

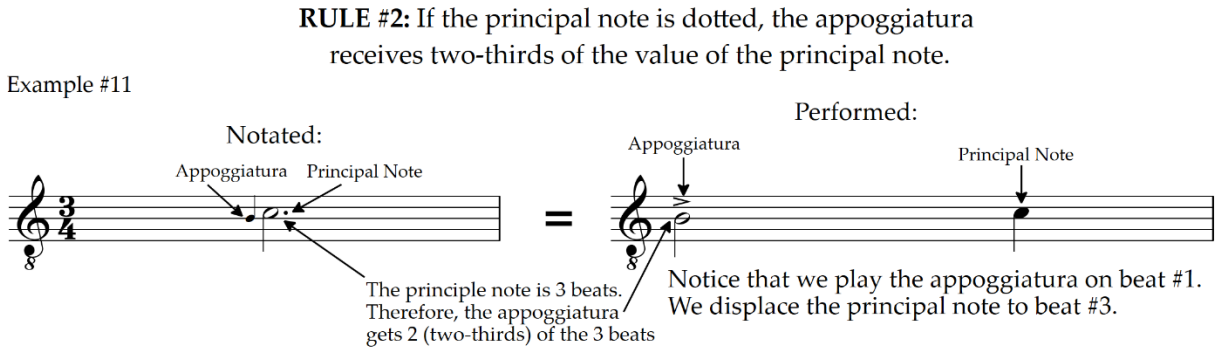
Here is an example with the principal notes as quarter notes in 4/4 time

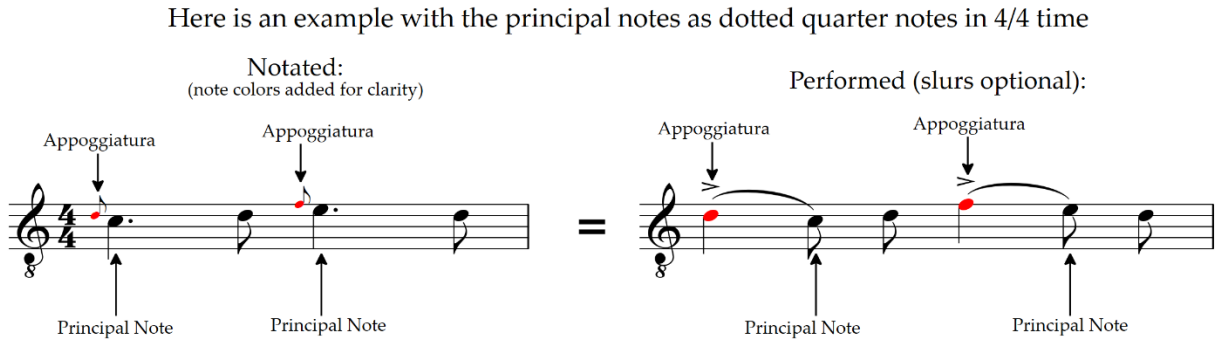
Notated:
(note colors added for clarity)

Performed:

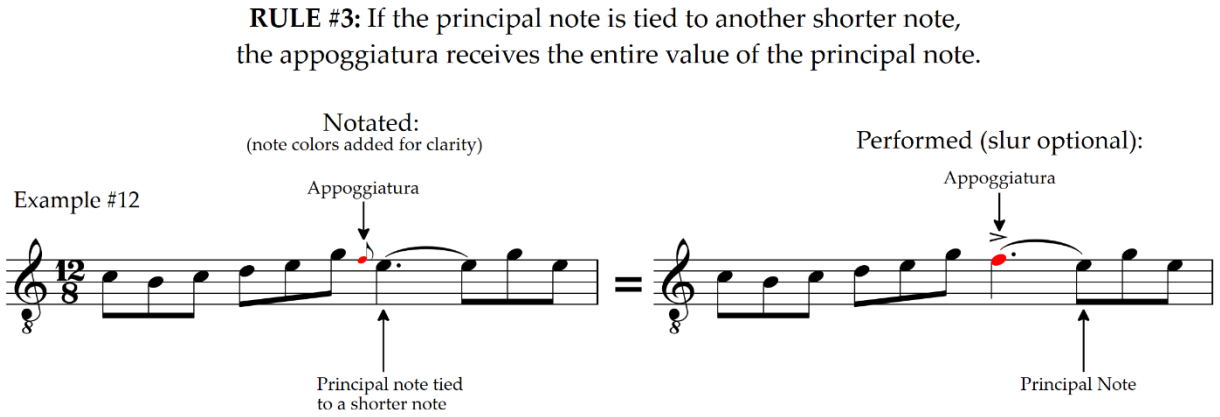


RULE #2: If the principal note is dotted, the appoggiatura receives two-thirds of the value of the principal note. Play the appoggiatura (the little grace note) ON THE BEAT. Example #11:





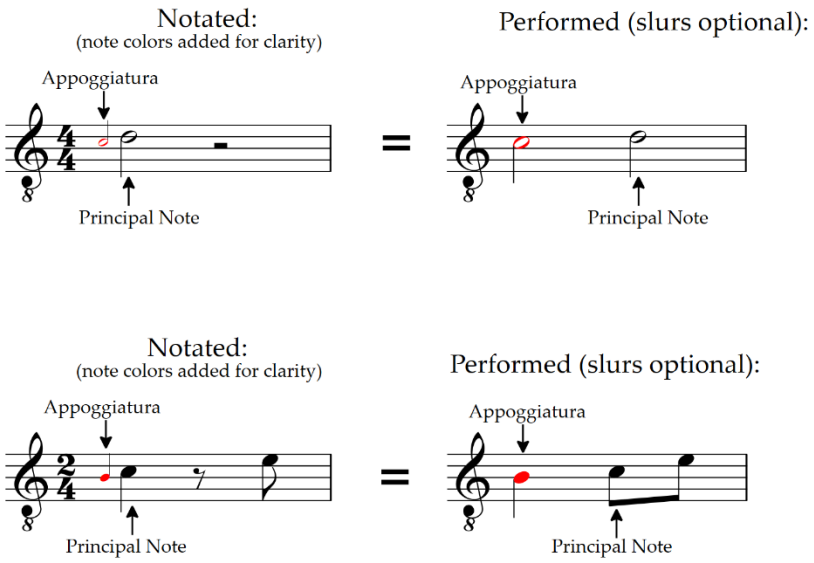
RULE #3: If the principal note is tied to another shorter note, the appoggiatura receives the entire value of the principal note. Play the appoggiatura (the little grace note) ON THE BEAT. Example #12:



RULE #4: If a rest follows the principal note, the appoggiatura receives the entire value of the principal note. Play the appoggiatura (the little grace note) ON THE BEAT. Then, play the principal note where the rest was and give it the value of the rest. Example #13:

RULE #4: If a rest follows the principal note, the appoggiatura receives the entire value of the principal note. Play the appoggiatura (the little grace note) ON THE BEAT. Then, play the principal note where the rest was and give it the value of the rest.

Example #13



Caution: THE ABOVE RULES DO NOT APPLY TO THE MUSIC OF J. S. BACH or his contemporaries or predecessors. They DO apply to the *Galant* and later styles.

How Should Guitarists Execute Appoggiaturas?

All the preceding rules of execution of the appoggiatura in the music of J. S. Bach and music after Bach apply to guitarists. In addition, depending on the length of the appoggiatura and tempo of the passage, the guitarist can slur (hammer-on or pull-off) from the appoggiatura to the principal note or pluck both notes.