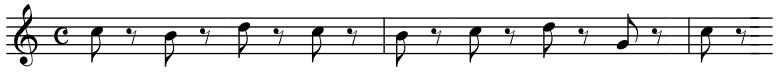
Playing notes shorter than written

In the Introduction, I proposed that economy of effort on the part of composers and copyists was an important agent in forming much conventional practice; and that, in particular, a major effect of this was to be seen in defining the length of notes — or rather, of not defining them.

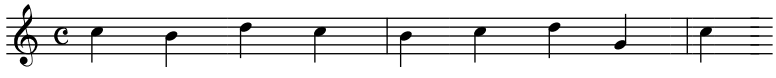
To give a simple example: a composer might choose to write a piece in 4/4 time, dominated by a subject based on a series of short notes played on the beat, like this:

Ex. 1:



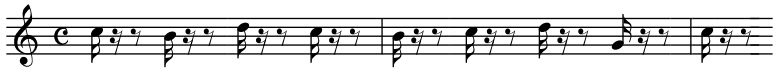
To define these notes thus, as quavers (eighths), requires two symbols each time. However, to write the notes to their full metrical value, and either give the player a wide range of options, or rely upon the player to reduce their played length to an appropriate one (where accepted practice or a particular context could suggest one), needed just one symbol:

Ex. 2:



If one multiplies this kind of shorthand by several hundreds, such as would be possible even within a single movement, the saving of human labour will be obvious. And as the intended shortness of the played note increases, so does the saving, since the number of signs required is further increased:

Ex. 3:



Of course one can easily overstate this: much Baroque music does not demand so radical an interpretation: on the whole, the length of most notes as written may not be fundamentally altered in performance; and a great deal of music after the end of the Baroque period continued to be written without the necessity of a large number of expressive rests. The comparison between Mozart's playing and that of Beethoven which was mentioned above (however much influenced by the writer's prejudices) shows how a more detached style of playing existed even in music of the Classical period than most players adopt for that music today. This implies that pianists were as a general rule playing most notes shorter than their written length. We know, in fact, from a more objective authority of Mozart's own day, D. G. Türk, that this really was the case: