

## The Life Aquatic

### Deeper depth in the Treasury market microstructure

- The rapid withdrawal of HFT in March contributed significantly to the spike in intra and inter-day volatility
- Although markets have recovered, fragility in market depth is an acute concern going forward, particularly in light of the connection to Fed interventions
- In particular, liquidity has still not returned to 'normal' at the ultra-long end of the curve and bears watching as Treasury contemplates more coupon supply in late-20 and 2021
- Whereas our previous work has focused on the closest positions in the order book to the market mid, we widen the lens here to observe the contours of depth as move along the queue...
- ... this data helps show the extent to which HFTs remove themselves from the market altogether during large vol spikes, versus moving back in the queue for more moderate ones
- The breadth of the order book has gradually improved and appears far less volatile now than several years ago

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#### US Fixed Income Strategy

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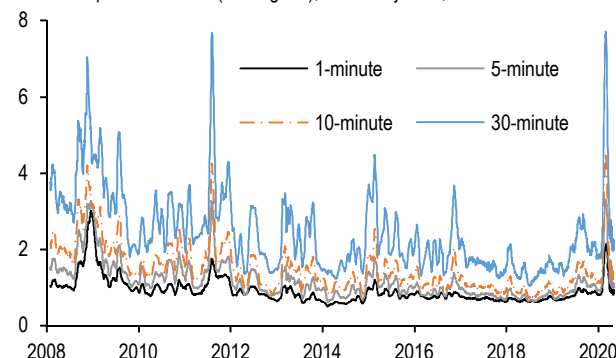
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Much of our recent work on market structure has focused on the role of high frequency traders (HFTs) in contributing to market depth in the central limit order book. Over the past few years, their role as market makers has become a cornerstone of fixed income market functioning—increasing from 35% of liquidity provision in the aftermath of the 2008 crisis, to 65% in 2015, and more than 76%, on average, in the two months preceding the COVID-19 market panic. **Their rapid withdrawal from market making contributed significantly to the spike in volatility during March, including some evidence of short-lived but violent price action evoking the events of October 15, 2014** (see [Did US rates markets just experience a mini “flash rally”?](#), J. Younger & H. St John, 3/7/20). As a result, their contribution to the depth of the order book is a key component of our index of fixed income market functioning (see [Almost back to ‘normal’](#), J. Younger & H. St John, 4/14/20).

**This fragility is an acute concern going forward, particularly in light of the connection between Fed interventions and these measures of market functioning.** It also remains notable that HFT activity, and liquidity in general, has still not returned to ‘normal’ at the ultra-long end the curve (see [Wild at Heart](#), H. St John et al., 4/30/20), and this is also true of more top-down level indicators, such as RMSE and dealer positions (see [Treasures: After the flood](#), J. Barry et al., 5/8/20). As the Treasury begins to lean more heavily on longer maturities to fund the widest budget deficit relative to the size of the economy since the Second World War, including a newly relaunched 20-year benchmark, these microstructure considerations are an important consideration for the joint agencies who oversee the Treasury market, as a robust and healthy Treasury market ensures smooth and stable functioning of financial markets.

**Exhibit 1: Intraday price volatility spiked in mid-March, in some instances reaching all-time highs ...**

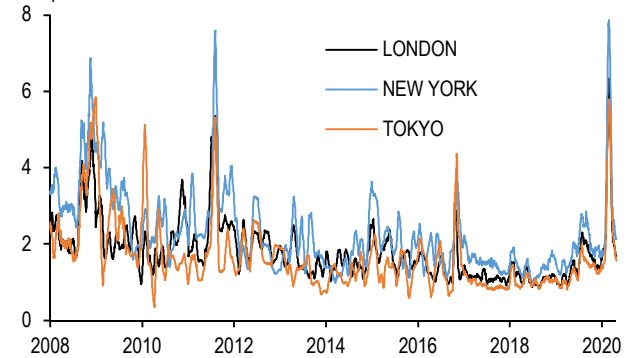
Price volatility in the Volume Weighted Mid Price (VWMP) for US 10-year Treasuries per unit of time (see legend), PVBP adjusted; ticks/time-interval



Source: J.P. Morgan, BrokerTec

**Exhibit 2: ... and it was also notable that price action was most disorderly during the New York session**

Rolling 2-week order book VWMP volatility for 10-year Treasuries, PVBP adjusted; ticks per 30 minutes



Source: J.P. Morgan, BrokerTec

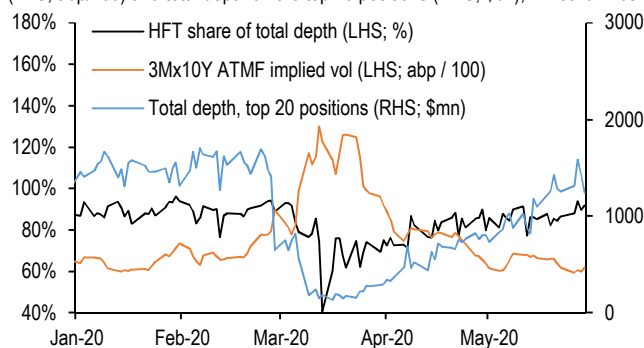
**The extent of the breakdown in market structure in the first few weeks of March can scarcely be understated.** One way to highlight this is by focusing on intraday volatility on incrementally small time-scales on the passive side of the market. The average volume weighted mid-price (VWMP) per minute for 10s was at its highest level since 2008, and average volatility in the VWMP per 5 minutes actually reached its highest level on record this past March (**Exhibit 1**). **An interesting characteristic of this order-book price volatility is that the spikes**

were highest during the New York trading session. Even more striking, this high-frequency volatility was at its peak during New York trading, when liquidity is typically at peak for a typical day: in March, VWMP volatility was 6.5 ticks/30-minutes during New York trading hours, compared to 5.2 ticks and 4.9 ticks/30-minutes for London and Tokyo, respectively (**Exhibit 2**). Though we saw comparable price action in prior crises—including the fall of 2008 and summer of 2011—increased reliance on HFT activity meant that market microstructure was more brittle with respect to very short-term volatility than during those prior episodes.

We have made this point before, of course (see [Interest Rate Derivatives](#), *US Fixed Income Markets Weekly*, 4/17/20). But so far, our analysis of market depth has tended to focus on the most active region of the order book—i.e., prices closest to the traded level. When we refer to HFT participation, it often relates to their share at the best three prices on the bid and ask side of the stack. **However important these positions are to price discovery, they represent a relatively small fraction of total liquidity provision at any given time:** for example, on average in recent years the top 10 and 15 positions on both sides tend to represent approximately 50% and 82% of the market in 10s, respectively. **In focusing on just the most active region of the order book, what might be missed is the extent to which HFT participants tend to reposition themselves in the queue, rather than retreating from the market altogether.** This can carry significant implications for overall liquidity conditions: in one case, HFTs respond to elevated volatility in quantity space, reducing total depth across the entire order book, in the other, they are still willing to supply liquidity to the market, but at wider prices relative to market mid.

**Exhibit 3: Total depth across the top 20 positions on both sides of the market dropped significantly in March, consistent with HFTs dissipating from the market altogether...**

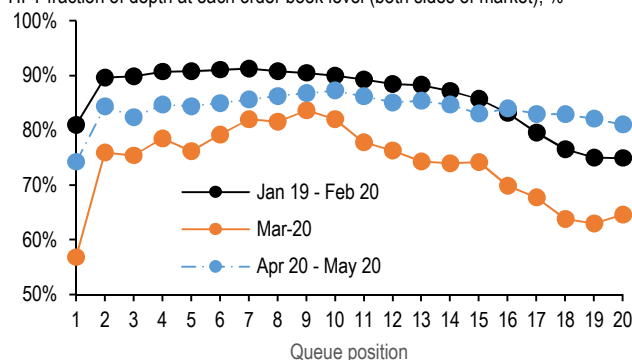
HFT share of total depth (top 20 positions, LHS; %) and 3Mx10Y ATM implied vol (LHS; abp/100) and total depth on the top 20 positions (RHS; \$bn), in hot-run 10s



Source: J.P. Morgan, BrokerTec

**Exhibit 4: ... While this effect was acute closest to the front price, it was felt all the way along the stack**

HFT fraction of depth at each order book level (both sides of market); %



Source: J.P. Morgan, BrokerTec

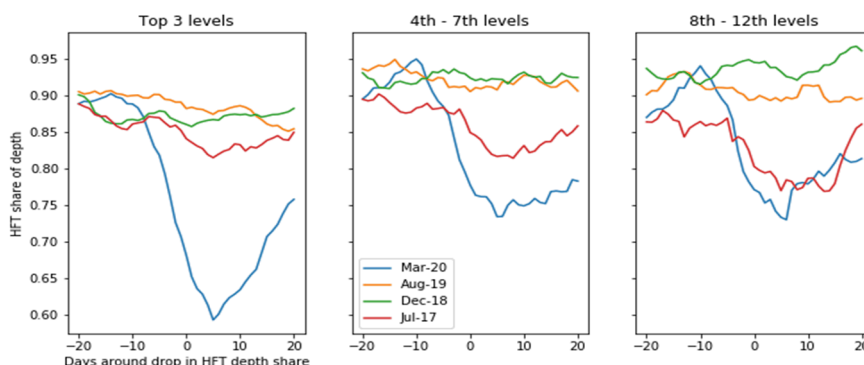
Evidence suggests that a large share of HFTs withdrew completely from the market in March. Total depth at the top 20 levels on both sides of the market collapsed, with a fairly staggering peak-to-trough decline of 92%. The HFT fraction of this far larger slice of the order book similarly collapsed, falling to as low as 41% in late March, from an average level of 88% over the previous year (**Exhibit 3**). As we noted in our analysis of the new 20-year Treasury, **the structure of HFT participation along the order book stack in 10s is remarkably stable.** The share tends to peak out around the 2<sup>nd</sup>-4<sup>th</sup> positions in the queue, on average, during low volatility periods, but with a very gradual tailing off as you move further from the market mid (**Exhibit 4**). In March, the curve did “steepen” somewhat, with the share

of HFT participation dropping most precipitously at the front of the queue than the back, consistent with these participants moving their orders to reflect a fatter-tailed distribution of expected price outcomes.

Was the experience of March different from prior volatile episodes? Looking back over the past few years, **we find only partial evidence at best to suggest that HFT participation repositions down the stack, rather than withdraws entirely.** In other words, when volatility rises, HFTs tend to reduce their activity altogether. In the cases of year-end 2018 and the drop-off in liquidity in late summer of last year, we did see stability, and in some cases improvement, in HFT participation further out the order book (**Exhibit 5**). More generally, correlation of HFT participation across different segments of the order book tends to rise as volatility rises, but is almost always in positive territory (**Exhibit 6**).

**Exhibit 5: We see some evidence that for smaller deteriorations in liquidity, HFT participation further back in the queue rises modestly**

Fraction of total depth at each queue position around recent periods in which HFT share of depth has declined; %



Source: J.P. Morgan, BrokerTec

**Exhibit 6: More generally, HFT participation across the queue tends to become more positively correlated as vol rises**

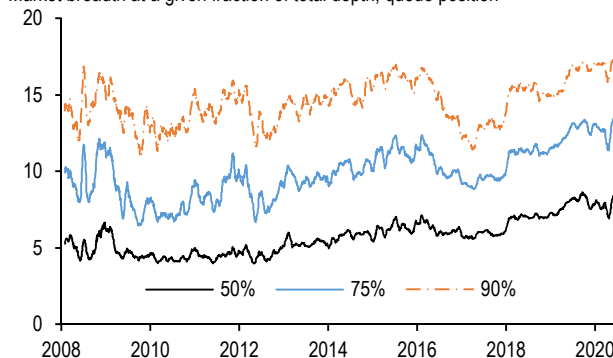
Correlation of HFT share of queue positions with the HFT share of the top 3 queue positions, average by volatility bucket\*; %



Note: Vol buckets defined as the standardized intraday realized order book volatility during the New York session. See Exhibit 2 for detail.  
Source: J.P. Morgan, BrokerTec

**Exhibit 7: The breadth of the order book has gradually increased over time, suggesting depth is more dispersed away from the mid-price**

Market breadth at a given fraction of total depth; queue position



Note: Queue position at which this percentage of total depth is reached. E.g. on average, 90% of total depth is cumulatively filled at the 15<sup>th</sup> position.  
Source: J.P. Morgan, BrokerTec

**One complementary characteristic to note is that the breadth of the order book appears to have trended steadily higher for several years now.** We find that the number of positions it takes to reach 90% of total depth on both sides of the order book is now around 16, an all-time high (**Exhibit 7**). This breadth appears to be

notably consistent when we move down to smaller fractions of total depth, suggesting the build-out in depth across queue positions has been fairly stable in 10s, consistent with the steady fraction of HFT participation at these latter queue positions as well. It tends to be the case also that during periods in which liquidity has become temporarily impaired over the last decade, the breadth of the order book has tended to widen, meaning that a greater share of total order book volume has been pushed back on average 1-2 positions.

What are we to conclude from this exercise? In March, **increased reliance on HFT liquidity provision has once again proven to be an accelerant for disorderly price action**—this is neither surprising nor a new observation. What is notable is the extent to which they pulled back across the stack, rather than simply repositioning to reflect higher levels of intraday volatility. Though this was more acute in March than other recent episodes, it appears to be a rather uniform reaction to stressed market conditions. If anything the recent experience could cause some of those HFT participants to reduce their tolerance for intraday volatility, particularly if volumes are relatively light as well. Thus, while liquidity appears to have improved along a range of indicators, we believe it remains quite brittle.

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