

Mark Boxall

Harpsichord Method

Based on 16th- to 18th-century sources

ED 11244
ISAN 979-0-2201-0900-3

PREVIEW
Low Resolution

PREVIEW

'To Na

whole
half
quarter
eighth note
sixteenth note
measure

ED 11244
ISMN 0 901 938 55 6
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Preface

The present revival of the harpsichord has inspired several authors to write fine books on the history and construction of the instrument, and many worthy players have set down advice for the would-be harpsichordist. A book for the ordinary beginner, however, has not yet appeared – at least, not in the modern sense of ‘beginner’. The instructional books of the 16th to 18th centuries would seem to have been written for a race of geniuses, who, having absorbed a vast amount of information on clefs, note values, fingerings and ornaments, were considered fully equipped to tackle a simple or complex piece which appeared on the following page.

The 20th century has done nothing for the beginner, for our harpsichordists have generally been trained in musical studies on the piano and see no need for basic instruction.

This volume is an attempt to fill that gap, and may be used by anyone sufficiently interested to grasp the rudiments of notation and a little theory. Both amateurs and students should find it useful, and it is hoped that the instructions are based, to the best of the author’s knowledge and understanding, on the methods of the men who wrote for and played the harpsichord, virginal and spinet in the 16th to the 18th century.

Interpretation – tempo, rhythm, ornamentation, etc. – is dealt with only superficially, but is not affected by the technique described. Plenty of information on these problems is available in the many books on the subject.

May the study of the letter shed light upon the spirit in which the harpsichordists of the past approached their art.

Acknowledgements

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Pieces nos. 44, 51, 52 and 53 have been transcribed from the collection of the Fitzwilliam Museum, Cambridge, and no. 57 by permission of The Government of the Channel Islands.

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The Instrument and its Action

The harpsichord in its simplest form, like the virginals and spinet, consists of a series of strings of graduated length stretched over a soundbox. When the keys which project from one side of the instrument are depressed, the strings are made to sound by means of the simple mechanism illustrated (Figure 1).

The front end of the key being depressed, the back end rises, carrying with it a small rod called the jack. From the jack, just below the level of the string when the key is at rest, projects a small piece of quill called the plectrum. The plectrum, which should be long, thin and flexible, is carried upwards until it touches the string. The string is thin and the tension light, so it is lifted slightly while the plectrum continues upwards to slide from underneath. The jack is carried well above the now vibrating string.

As the plectrum is now held by the string, a pivoted tongue which forms a check returns the jack to its original position without interfering with the vibrating string. The tongue is pivoted on the front of the jack and returns to its original position as the jack is carried further upwards. Some harpsichords are equipped in various ways to give the player a variety of effects.

Most harpsichords have an *ornamental* register, which is a set of keys which project from the front of the instrument. The jack of each of these keys is raised slightly above the level of the string when the key is depressed, so that they do not all pluck together. This would make the touch very hard, but it is necessary to obtain two plucking positions from a single string, one weak, one strong, for *piano* and *forte* effects. This is not an advantageous arrangement, as the dynamic level at which a stop sounds at its best affords too little scope for *varietum* if the tone is not to be spoilt. The same may be said of the touch.

Often one set of strings is shorter than the others and sounds an octave higher – this is called *double* as opposed to the normal *single* register. Occasionally, sixteen-foot strings (the normal pitch) or two-foot strings (one octave above normal pitch) are included. A *stop* which plucks near the top of the string, making a nasal sound, is called *nasal*. A stop is a set of felt pads which may be made to touch a set of strings, causing a dry, muffled sound.

Changes in the position of the keys or the plectrum, made in this way different effects. A *lute* register, which gives a quality of tone may be obtained. A *lute* register is the loud untruncated register and a four-foot register, which is available on the eight-foot, while the *lute* register is available on the eight-foot register. There is usually some means of changing the register from the top eight-foot register to the bottom register. The lowest possible register is the two eight-foot registers and one four-foot register.

For a beginner, a spinet, or single-manual harpsichord is much the best. The control of phrasing, articulation and dynamics, which is the foundation of good playing, can only be learnt using a single stop, away from the temptation of easy effects and the difficulties of mastering the finger touch needed to overcome the resistance of strings.

In the 18th century the early pianos were made in the shadow of the harpsichord, so many 18th century harpsichords are made under the influence of piano makers and players who generally do not wish to adjust their techniques to the making and playing of the harpsichord. The recent appearance of a few makers who believe in the old traditions is very encouraging, and the serious student would be well advised to seek them out when purchasing an instrument.

Contrary to general belief, the thin casework and light bracing of the old type of harpsichord does not add to the difficulty of keeping such instruments in tune; this impression has often been caused by the over-heavy stringing of antique instruments in modern times.

Once acquired a harpsichord should be kept at as even a temperature as possible. Any loss of moisture from the air caused by central heating must be rectified by use of a humidifier, which will also benefit the rest of the furniture as well as the occupants of the house.

It would be superfluous to deal here with problems arising from the regulation of the touch or renewal of quills, as these have always varied in detail from maker to maker.



Most reputable makers will supply a maintenance manual with a new instrument; this should also give advice on

tuning. Those who cannot cope can always use the services of a professional.



Preliminaries

Seating

The player should sit about a foot from the keyboard, so that middle C is within equal reach of both hands. On some instruments this may lead to a greater number of keys being situated to one side of the player. The slight feeling of lopsidedness so caused is infinitely preferable to the disorientation caused by not always having the middle notes in their usual places. The height of the stool or chair must be adjusted to allow for the arm and hand positions described below. A small person on a high chair must have some support under his feet, so that he is not tipped forward onto the instrument. When using a two-manual instrument a compromise must be reached between the correct positions for both manuals.

Position of arms and hands

The upper arm should hang loosely from the shoulder, the lower arm sloping down slightly from the shoulder to the wrist. The hand must slope downwards a little, and be held in such a way that a straight surface can be drawn from the wrist to the point of the fingers. In playing the tips of the fingers should be used to touch the keys.

The motion of the arms are... The lower arm... The wrist may... must be... lower arms... over the... the...

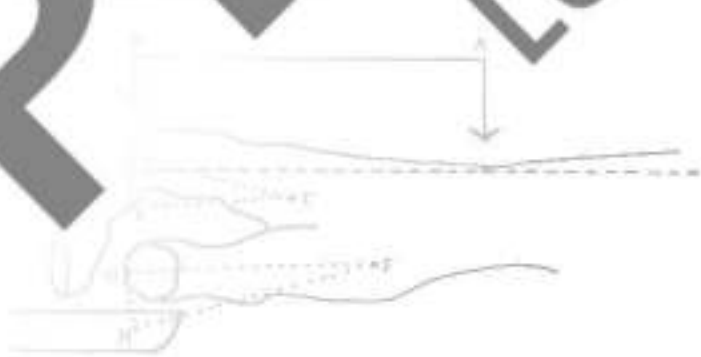


Fig. 2

The motion of the fingers and thumb... Figure 2 shows... the keys, ready to play... and... from position... in the diagram... movement... the arcs DE and



Fig. 3

Figure 3 shows the position of the hand if all the fingers and the thumb are lowered together. This is very nearly that of the hand when the arms hang naturally by the side of the body. The keys are depressed and held down chiefly by the weight of the fingers.

The thumb, being positioned at right angles, as it were, to the rest of the hand needs the complex co-ordination of several muscles to move it up and down in imitation of the fingers. For this reason, and also because it is so much shorter than the fingers, its use is generally avoided whenever a practical alternative fingering is available.



Fig. 4

Figure 4 shows the tendons on the back of the hand. These connect the muscles, which move the fingers and are situated in the forearm, with the bones of the fingers, to which they are connected by ligaments. It will be noticed that while the index finger is fairly independent, the others are linked in various degrees. This is the cause of the varying degrees of agility of which the fingers are capable. Although with practice, the tendons will loosen, and the fingers become more independent, it was contrary to the early virtuosos' philosophy to make any drastic changes in the fingers' natural capabilities. Rather, they took the fingers as they found them, and allocated to each the tasks for which it was found to be best suited.

In the lower surface of the arm there is a corresponding set of muscles and tendons, the ones that bend the fingers when the fist is clenched. A small amount of effort is required from these when the fingers are lowered, for although the fingers drop by their own weight the resistance of the upper muscles which hold them up in their raised position must be overcome.

The tension required for the unnatural straightening of the hand A-B represents a sophisticated method of ensuring a precise control of the timing and speed of raising of each key after it has been struck. Modern research has shown that the sudden contraction of a muscle (the case that is responsible for raising the finger) requires a definite and conscious signal from the brain. The 'normal' finger position, which itself requires a certain tension in the muscles involved, need for an exercise of the consciousness of effort to be raised.

In the early stages of playing a sharp or a flat, in the region of the shaded area, the student should exercise moderation in the use of force.

Articulation

The 'crisp' movement of the fingers, which is essential for a clear and distinct articulation of notes, is a result of the player's release of the key after it has been struck. The fingers are held in a position which allows them to move quickly and smoothly. The notes which are sounded are the key-contrasting notes, which are the notes which are sounded in the first few pieces of the book. The notes which are sounded in the first few pieces of the book are the notes which are sounded in the first few pieces of the book. The notes which are sounded in the first few pieces of the book are the notes which are sounded in the first few pieces of the book.

The use of wedges (=) above and below notes in the first few pieces is an attempt to provide a rough visual guide for the student.

Preliminary exercises

If using a harpsichord, begin on the bottom manual with only a single eight-foot stop. This will suffice for all the pieces in this book.

It is useful to acquire the habit of reading harpsichord music from the bass up, especially in the early stages of the continuo. The exercises should be practised with the fingers in the position shown in Figure 4. These who are less familiar with the harpsichord should be practised with the fingers in the position shown in Figure 4.

The fingers to be used are: index finger 2, middle finger 3, ring finger 4, and little finger 5. Any original fingering in the score has been translated into this system.

Exercise 1. Take care to play the notes with the fingers in their proper position.



The notes of the fourth and fifth, should be played with the fingers in their proper position, as also the notes of the sixth and seventh, as also the notes of the eighth and ninth. The notes of the tenth and eleventh, should be played with the fingers in their proper position, as also the notes of the twelfth and thirteenth, as also the notes of the fourteenth and fifteenth. The notes of the sixteenth and seventeenth, should be played with the fingers in their proper position, as also the notes of the eighteenth and nineteenth, as also the notes of the twentieth and twenty-first. The notes of the twenty-second and twenty-third, should be played with the fingers in their proper position, as also the notes of the twenty-fourth and twenty-fifth, as also the notes of the twenty-sixth and twenty-seventh. The notes of the twenty-eighth and twenty-ninth, should be played with the fingers in their proper position, as also the notes of the thirtieth and thirty-first, as also the notes of the thirty-second and thirty-third. The notes of the thirty-fourth and thirty-fifth, should be played with the fingers in their proper position, as also the notes of the thirty-sixth and thirty-seventh, as also the notes of the thirty-eighth and thirty-ninth. The notes of the fortieth and forty-first, should be played with the fingers in their proper position, as also the notes of the forty-second and forty-third, as also the notes of the forty-fourth and forty-fifth. The notes of the forty-sixth and forty-seventh, should be played with the fingers in their proper position, as also the notes of the forty-eighth and forty-ninth, as also the notes of the fiftieth and fifty-first. The notes of the fifty-second and fifty-third, should be played with the fingers in their proper position, as also the notes of the fifty-fourth and fifty-fifth, as also the notes of the fifty-sixth and fifty-seventh. The notes of the fifty-ninth and sixtieth, should be played with the fingers in their proper position, as also the notes of the sixty-second and sixty-third, as also the notes of the sixty-fourth and sixty-fifth. The notes of the sixty-seventh and sixty-eighth, should be played with the fingers in their proper position, as also the notes of the seventieth and seventy-first, as also the notes of the seventy-second and seventy-third. The notes of the seventy-fifth and seventy-sixth, should be played with the fingers in their proper position, as also the notes of the seventy-eighth and seventy-ninth, as also the notes of the eightieth and eighty-first. The notes of the eighty-second and eighty-third, should be played with the fingers in their proper position, as also the notes of the eighty-fourth and eighty-fifth, as also the notes of the eighty-sixth and eighty-seventh. The notes of the eighty-ninth and ninetieth, should be played with the fingers in their proper position, as also the notes of the hundredth and hundred-first, as also the notes of the hundred-second and hundred-third.

After a little practice the nine notes of Exercise 1 should sound absolutely equal, devoid of any suggestion of rhythm or dynamics and capable of notation as shown in Exercise 1a.

Exercise 1a



Exercise 2 shows how rhythm is introduced by lengthening the sounding lengths of the metrically more important notes in the bar.

Exercise 2

Exercise 2 consists of three systems of two staves each. The left hand (L.H.) is in the bass clef and the right hand (R.H.) is in the treble clef. Each system shows a sequence of notes with wedges indicating fingerings or accents.

Remember that the wedges are only intended as a rough guide. Listen carefully to determine whether the results produce the rhythmic patterns intended. A tape or cassette recorder can be an invaluable aid, even at this early stage.

Exercises 3a, b, c and d are intended to accustom the player to using his fingers in any order within the normal hand position. They must be practised slowly, with accuracy and without looking down at the hands. This is very important in acquiring a good set of fingerings and geography so necessary for competent sight-reading.

Exercise 3
(a)

Exercise 3(a) consists of two systems of two staves each. The left hand (L.H.) is in the bass clef and the right hand (R.H.) is in the treble clef. The notation includes fingerings (1-4) and accents.

Now practise these exercises with the right hand.

Exercise 3(a) right hand only, showing a single staff with fingerings (2, 3, 2, 4, 4, 3) and accents.

When thoroughly at home with Exercises 1 to 3, practise similar patterns in E minor, D major and F major.