

The 'Incy Wincy Spider'

by Maria Boxall

Readers of this magazine will be aware of the increasing interest in traditional harpsichord construction shown by many modern makers and players. On the other hand practical interest in the contemporary playing techniques has not been as keen, and several factors must be considered in attempting to explain this comparative neglect.

Until fairly recently the making of harpsichords had been following a path towards a mechanical 'perfection' in which ideas from the piano factory had taken over to such an extent that 'modern' harpsichords were no longer relevant to the music of the great composers of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. As a reaction against this piano-derived mechanical 'perfection', craftsmen of today are breaking with the more recent past and are finding inspiration through the study of earlier traditions. In a similar way the playing of harpsichords has for the past two hundred years followed a pianistic path, moving away from any relevance to renaissance and baroque music and instruments. Nowhere is this irrelevant tradition more firmly established than in the teaching institutions (with a few exceptions) where most of our performers are trained. Yet few of those responsible for that training are aware of any alternative, or they are prejudiced through reading disparaging comments in out-dated musical history books. Only recently the reviewer of a facsimile edition of Couperin's *Art de Toucher* wrote: 'The fingering of the scalic passages in particular seems quaintly historical, . . . just like the "incy wincy spider" motion that we associate with the virginalists'¹. This kind of statement will not encourage the busy professional player to take time off to think for himself. Another discouraging factor is the lack of good translations of many important sources—few musicians can cope with all the necessary languages.

From the musicological point of view, there has been much speculation concerning the 'crossing' of the fingers in pairs, which formed the basis of harpsichord technique, and its implication in terms of articulation. So far as I am aware the only detailed description of this technique occurs in Fray Thomas da Sancta Maria's *Libra Llamado Arte de Taner Fantasia* of 1565², which although partly available in a German translation³, is mostly unknown to English readers.

The fingerings Sancta Maria gives in conjunction with his technical instructions were almost standard throughout the harpsichord era, with the chief exception of a sixteenth-century German school

represented by Ammerbach and presumably deriving from Buchner and the HofThaimer organ school. This died out during the seventeenth century. Another variant was to be found in the instructions of the Italian Diruta, although Diruta was not representative of Venice or even Italy as Dolmetsch suggested. It is obvious from Diruta's own words that he was aware of the alternative, which was used by 'worthy players' as he calls them.

Another exception seems to have occurred in late seventeenth-century England, where the numerous books of lessons published in the early 1700s give the third and second fingers for the left hand ascending. As the virginalists had quite definitely used the first and second for much harder music one is tempted to wonder whether this change was inspired by some continental fashion, a suspicion strengthened by the fact that one of the earliest of these publications, the *Choice Collection* of 1700, gives instructions mentioning 'Ye 4th and 5th' (the L.H. was labelled backwards) to ascend but giving an example with third and fourth (i.e. third and second)!

The following or anticipating of the thumb by the third or fourth finger, known from the sixteenth century, and mentioned by Sancta Maria, seems to have been regarded as suitable for long runs of the very shortest note lengths, rather than as an improvement on the paired fingerings, and was probably regarded as something of a trade secret well into the eighteenth century. Towards the end of the harpsichord period both kinds of fingering were used together, as by C. P. E. Bach⁴ and Alessandro Scarlatti⁵; this persisted into Chopin's playing. Certainly J. S. Bach regarded the paired fingerings as basic, as may be seen in his fingerings for an early version of No. 1 of book two of the *fortyeight*⁶.



The rather extreme hand position given by Sancta Maria is typical of the fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries, and beautifully depicted by the Van Eyck brothers in the famous Ghent Altarpiece. Readers may prefer the flatter Baroque version, more like that depicted on the cover of No. 1 of this magazine, remembering to keep the knuckles flat.

It is to be hoped that someone somewhere is slaving at an elegant and reliable English translation of Sancta Maria's torturous prose. Meanwhile, here are some unscholarly notes on what he has to say concerning the 'crossing' of the fingers, together with some useful pieces to try them on. (With kind permission of the British Library.)

In chapter XIII, beginning on folio 36v, Sancta Maria outlines the eight rules to be observed if one is to play well. Neither the last three, concerning fingering, nor the first, an admonition to play in time, need concern us here.

Chapter XIV (second rule), holding the hands in the correct position, is divided into three points. Firstly, the hands are to be held hooked, like a cat's paw, with no hump between the hand and the fingers (i.e. the knuckles flat) and the wrist lower than the fingers. This makes the fingers more flexible, so that the notes sound more spirited, the tone is improved, and the player looks good.

Secondly, the hands are to be kept well closed up, second, third, fourth and fifth fingers close together, especially the second and third, which is easier to do with the right hand than the left. The thumb is to drop lower than the other fingers, and to be bent somewhat inwards under the palm, as is the little finger, which helps to attain the closed hand position. If the fingers are spread out one cannot play properly, for it is as if the hands were 'tied' (i.e. the tension caused by stretching the fingers out sideways interferes with the purely vertical movement implied by a still hand-arm position, see below).

Thirdly, the second, third and fourth fingers must always be over the keys, whether striking them or not, and the second finger lifted a little higher than the others, especially in the right hand.

Arms and elbows must be kept close to the body, except in long scale passages.

Chapter XV (the third rule), on striking the keys well, is divided into six points.

First, the keys must be struck with the flesh of the fingers, not the nails, and this is ensured by keeping the wrist low.

Secondly, the keys must be struck firmly.

Thirdly, the hands must strike together, and with equal force.

Fourthly, the fingers must be kept close to the keys, not striking from a distance, which is noisy and time consuming. Only the fingers may move, and the keys are to be struck at the ends.

Fifthly, when playing the clavichord the keys

must not be pressed so hard that the notes go sharp.

Sixthly, after the keys have been depressed they must be held down neither too tensely nor too slackly.

Chapter XVI (the fourth rule), has two hints on playing clearly and distinctly. The chief of these is that *the finger which has just struck should always be lifted before the next is put down, or cacophony will result (my italics)*. Each finger should be lifted slightly after striking, but not right off the key.

In chapter XVII Sancta Maria comes to the fifth rule, in which he describes the 'crossing' of the fingers, which he divides into four points.

Firstly, the hands must be kept well closed up, as explained above.

Secondly, the hands must be turned a little in the direction of the run, especially in the case of quavers and semiquavers.

Thirdly, when the right hand ascends, as it most commonly does with the third and fourth fingers, the third finger is to be lifted higher than the fourth, and hit the inside of the keys. The fourth strikes the outside edge of the keys, and must only be lifted enough to release the key. The same instructions apply to the left hand descending.

When the right hand descends with the third and second fingers in the usual way the third is held higher than the second, and strikes the insides of the keys, while the second strikes the outside, being only lifted high enough to release the key.

When the left hand ascends in the usual way with the first and second fingers, the second is lifted higher than the first, striking the inside of the keys while the first strikes the edge, again only being lifted enough to release the key.

• It is of the utmost importance that the second and third fingers be kept close together.

Fourthly, when running up and down only the middle three fingers are used. (Presumably he has forgotten the left hand thumb.)

As a postscript it may be remarked that nowhere does Sancta Maria appear to be aware of what are now considered to be the chief attractions of the clavichord—the possibilities of dynamic variation (the instruction to play evenly would seem to rule this out) or 'bebung'.

1. Lillian Ruff in *The Consort*, No. 30, 1974.

2. Facsimile of copy with contemporary annotations published by Gregg International Publishers Limited.

3. By Eta Harich Schneider and Ricard Boadella, Lippstadt 1962.

4. See C. P. E. Bach, *Sechs Sonaten*, Schott 2353/4.

5. Reproduced p. 189 in *Domenico Scarlatti* by Kirkpatrick.
6. See the Appendix to Dolmetsch's *Interpretation of the Music of the XVIIth and XVIIIth Centuries* (Washington Paperbacks)

Maria Boxall has made a special study of the technique of playing early keyboard instruments. In 1970 the F.T.C.L. diploma by research was awarded to her for her thesis on "Keyboard Technique in England up to the Death of Purcell". Her Harpsichord Method, based on this, is now in the press.

Preludium (1)

Musical score for Preludium (1), consisting of four systems of two staves each (treble and bass clef). The score includes various musical notations such as notes, rests, and ornaments. Fingerings are indicated by numbers 1-5, and accidentals are shown in brackets. The piece concludes with a double bar line and the name 'DR. BULL' printed in the right margin.

Preludium (2)

Musical score for Preludium (2), consisting of two systems of two staves each (treble and bass clef). The score includes various musical notations such as notes, rests, and ornaments. Fingerings are indicated by numbers 1-5, and accidentals are shown in brackets. The piece concludes with a double bar line and the name 'DR. BULL' printed in the right margin.

Fingerings and accidentals in brackets are editorial
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We reproduce two of the preludes from B. M. Add MS 31403 here with the original fingerings; three others are held over to our October issue.

Two more Preludes from B.M.AddMs 31403 (continued from April, 1975). A circle round a sharp (or flat) indicates that repetitions of the accidental have been omitted.

Preludium (3)

The musical score for Preludium (3) is presented in six systems, each with a treble and bass staff. The piece is in 3/4 time and features a variety of rhythmic patterns and fingerings. The notation includes numerous slurs, ties, and dynamic markings. Fingerings are indicated by numbers 1-5. Some notes are circled, indicating that repetitions of the accidental have been omitted. The piece concludes with a final cadence in the bass staff.

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This musical score consists of two staves. The upper staff is in treble clef and contains a series of eighth-note runs with fingerings: 4 3 2 3 5, 2 3 4 5, 3 4, 5, 2 3 4 5, 3 4, 5, 2 3 4. The lower staff is in bass clef and contains a few notes with fingerings: 2, 1, 4. The piece concludes with a double bar line and a repeat sign.

Prelude (4)

Edward Bevin

This musical score is divided into three systems. The first system has a treble staff with eighth-note runs and fingerings: 3 4 3 4 5, 3 3 4, 5 4 3 2, and a bass staff with notes and fingerings: 1, 2, 4. The second system has a treble staff with notes and fingerings: 3, 6, and eighth-note runs with fingerings: 3 4 5 5 4 3 4 5, 5 2 5 4, and a bass staff with eighth-note runs and fingerings: 3 2 1 2 3 4. The third system has a treble staff with notes and fingerings: 3, 2, and a bass staff with eighth-note runs and fingerings: 5 4 3 5, 2 2 1 4 4 1 2, 3 2 3 4. The piece concludes with a double bar line and a repeat sign.