

The Harpsichord Master of 1697 and its relationship to contemporary instruction & playing

by Maria Boxall

The earliest known attempt (in England) to transmit knowledge concerning the playing of keyboard instruments by means of the printed word was made exactly a century before the publication of the *Harpsichord Master*¹. In that year (1597) there was licensed to be printed by one William Haskins 'A playne and perfect Instruction for learnynge to play on ye virginalles by hand or by booke both by notes and letters or Tabliture never heretofore sett out . . .'. Such a book would almost certainly have included some music. If so, the claim of the famous *Parthenia* of 1612/13 to be 'the first musicke that ever was printed for the virginalles' could not have been correct². It seems probable, however, that Haskins never made use of his licence, for although the book would undoubtedly have been popular, and the playing technique it presumably described - that of the English virginalists (as can be reconstructed from their manuscripts) - did not become seriously outmoded during the following century, no copies survive. Although neither *Parthenia* nor its successor, *Parthenia Inviolata* contains any instructions, the latter publication does contain some engraved fingerings, supplemented in the only surviving copy by manuscript additions. Both these are entirely in accordance with fingerings to be found in contemporary manuscripts.

From after the Restoration (1660) a flood of keyboard music began to pour upon the market, with, during the second and third decades of the eighteenth century, as many as three volumes appearing within one year. The first of these was *Mustek's Handmaid*, the earliest surviving copy of which is dated 1663, although this is known from advertisements and also from the evidence of anomalies in the index, not to have been the first issue. The subtitle announced it as 'presenting new and pleasant lessons for the virginal or harpsycon'. The publisher, John Playford, was aware of the problems of his largely amateur customers, for in the preface he wrote:

'As for Instructions for the Practitioners who endeavour to learn by the Book what they play (which is the best and surest way)³ there is a Book already published, which will be of much use

and help to them, Entituled, An Introduction to the Skill of Musick, which doth direct them to understand the Gamut, and by it the places and names of their Notes, &c. But as for the true Fingering and severall graces used in the playing of this Instrument, it cannot be set down in words, but is to be obtained by the help and Directions of Skilfull Teachers, and the constant practice of the learner, for it is the Practick part crowns the Work.'

However a later, further expanded edition of 1678 has a different subtitle: 'New lessons and Instructions for the virginals or harpsychord' and in the preface we read:

'It has ever been my opinion, that if a man made any discovery, by which an Art or Science might be learnt with less expence of Time and Travel, he was obliged in common Duty to communicate the knowledge thereof to others ...' 'Many of those who bought the former impression of Musicks Handmaid, were not well satisfied (especially such who dwelt in the Country remote from an able

Master) because she brought not with her some Rules and Directions for playing those lessons contained therein; . . . I have in this edition adventured to publish the following

Instructions;...' The instructions consist of three pages headed 'Instructions for Learners on the Virginal or Harpsichord to Play by Book'. The first page shows a picture of a keyboard of four octaves, CC - c³, without the lowest CC sharp.

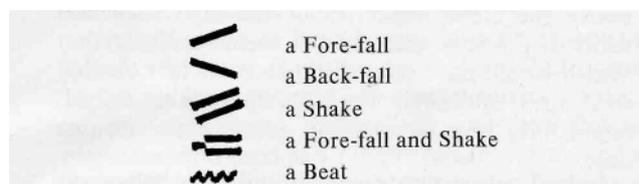
Playford answers a question often still asked today: 'The Virginal is strung with one single Course of Strings; the Harpsichord with two or more,⁴ . . .' On the next page we are told:

'The virginals according to the ancient Standard were made to contain 29 keys, but of later times they add to that number both above and below.' The third page deals with sharps and flats, leger lines, and also note values, which are explained in terms of monetary values. Playford concludes: '. . . I doubt not that by putting them (the instructions) in practice, and (with) a little assistance from an able Master, they may in a short time learn to play all these Lessons by Book;...'

The earlier issues of Musick's Handmaid used the old virginalists' double stroke through the tail of a note sign for an ornament, but some pieces added to an issue before that of 1678 (around 1668) and retained in the following editions used the same sign *above* a note, implying that some sort of change in ornamentation practice was taking place. Playford, though he may have relented on the question of theory, was evidently still of the opinion that: '... the true fingering - and the several graces ... cannot be set down in words.'

Similar ornament signs appear in *The second part of Musick's Handmaid* of 1689, but this was conceived by Henry Playford as a musical supplement to the original volume, and carried no instructions of any kind.

For the first printed information on keyboard ornamentation we are indebted to Mathew Locke's *Melothesia* of 1673 which gives the following chart, but unfortunately without any musical explanations



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By 1696 it would appear that the Playford firm, now under Henry, had had a change of heart, for during that year they produced 'A choice Collection of Lessons for the Harpsichord or Spinnet Composed by the late Mr Henry Purcell . . . Printed . . . for Mrs Frances Purcell . . .' and this book seems to have had four pages of instructions: (i) begins:

'There will nothing Conduce more to ye perfect attaining to play on ye Harpsichord or Spinnet, then a serious application to ye following rules, In order to which you must first learn ye Gamul or Scale of Musick, getting ye names of ye notes by heart,...

This is illustrated by a keyboard with the range of four octaves and one note, BB - c³. The names of the long keys are clearly marked and correspond to notes on a six-line staff above. No attempt has been made to show sharps or flats, which would have been an interesting exercise, as the keyboard has a short key between EVERY pair of long keys, (ii) Notes on staves, the appropriate hand to each, the number of keys, leger lines, sharps and flats, (iii) Notes on time, time signatures and rests, (iv) 'Rules for Graces' and explanations of clefs, bar lines, repeat and *da capo* signs, followed by a

simple scale passage fingered for each hand. The caption to this 'Notes Ascending Notes Descending' appears just above what one might expect to be the lower limit of the plate. However the whole page has been printed on paper much taller than the rest of the book, necessitating the formation of an upwards folding flap which must have been as much of a nuisance to the original owners of the book as it is to librarians faced with the problems of its safe conservation today.

Hard on the heels of this beautifully engraved and (overlooking the silly flap and strange keyboard) near faultless publication came 'The Harpsichord Master Containing plain & easy Instructions for Learners on ye Spinnet or Harpsichord, written by ye late famous Mr H. Purcell at the request of a particular friend, & taken from his own Manuscript, never before publish't being ye best extant...'

The 'plain & easy Instructions' turn out to be none other than, word for word, the four pages from the earlier publication. Indeed, so closely do the two publications resemble each other that one can only surmise that, no two engravers being likely to produce such similar results even working from the same original, one was copied from the other.⁵ The inescapable conclusion is that Walsh, whose firm's subsequent reputation does nothing to persuade us otherwise, not only copied the instructions from Playford, but also cashed in on some extra glory by concocting a piece of advertising that bordered on the fantastic.

Despite all this, the present writer is convinced that Walsh's claims may be substantiated. Let us examine them carefully.

The second claim, that the instructions were 'never before publish't' can hardly refer to the first three pages, the content of which was generally available in the seventeenth century, so perhaps Walsh is referring specifically to the fourth page, the like of which does not indeed (barring the inadequate ornament chart of *Melothesia*) appear before 1696/7, the years of his and Playford's publications. Indeed what Walsh may well be referring to are the very instructions, those for ornamentation and fingering, which the Playford firm had previously declared impossible to put into words. The strange fact remains, however, that the instructions were eventually produced by the Playford firm, and, apparently, during the year *before* that in which Walsh's appeared. Why did the firm make such an obvious U turn - and how can one reconcile the dating of their publication with Walsh's claim?

Of the three surviving copies of Purcell's *Choice Collection* which are dated 1696 only two now have (or rather have had, for the first page of one set is lost) the four pages of instructions, and, in marked contrast to Walsh's publication, there is nothing about the title page to suggest their existence at all. However, in the *London Gazette* of 22 November, 1697, the *Choice Collection* is advertised as having 'Additions of Lessons, and Directions for Young Beginners'. The last paragraph of the anonymous note to the Broude Brothers facsimile of the book from which the above information was taken, concludes: 'It is possible that Hirsch III. 472 represents a first issue of the first edition, and that a second issue is represented by the K.L.c. 5 and New York Public Library copies, which contain additional material (the pieces on pages 61-3 and the instructions), subsequently represented as new in *The London Gazette* advertisement of the second edition'.

If this conjecture is correct, we might assume that Walsh was first with the instructions, and that by the end of the year in which his publication appeared, the Playford firm (which was by then under Henry, not John who was responsible for the original negative attitude) had decided to jump on the bandwagon and produce instructions too, without troubling to alter the date on the title page of their publication. Comparison of the two sets of instructions tends to confirm this theory. The most obvious difference is that Walsh's engraver has got the illustration of the keyboard right,⁶ which he might well not have done if he had been working from Playford's exotic example. Various small abbreviations in the Playford example, the use of 'ye' where Walsh has 'the', and '&' instead of the full word, seem to betray the copyist, who would naturally tend to abbreviate rather than elaborate. Very occasionally Playford has 'the' for 'ye' or 'and' for '&', but the over-whelming majority of examples point the other way. In Playford 'marked' becomes 'mark'd'; 'explained', 'explain'd'; 'allwayes', 'allway's'; 'straine' 'strain'; 'sett', 'set'. Just for once 'Rond O' becomes 'Round O'. Missing from the Playford version are a full stop and following capital letter, and several commas. On page iii his engraver has added a redundant V to the word 'minum' despite the fact that the text does not require it and Walsh does not give it. Walsh's strange explanation of the battery is even stranger in Playford's version. Furthermore, the plate size of page iv was exactly that used for Walsh's subsequent *Harpsichord Master* books two and three - indeed page iv of

the 'instructions' in these volumes was printed from the very same plate as that used for book one. It would seem that Walsh, thinking about the 'instructions' after the music plates had already been prepared, and realizing that Purcell's text would not fit onto four normal sized pages of his rather small book, ordered the preparation of the larger plate to go ahead with the next publication already in mind. Playford, when copying Walsh, would have had little option but to retain the larger page, as, like Walsh, he was working to a set of four plates. What Playford could not have copied without a great deal of further expense and trouble was the fingered prelude attributed to Purcell, which is the first piece in Walsh's book.

All in all the discrepancies between the two versions are those that one might expect to arise if the Playford text was modelled directly on Walsh's, and not the other way round.

The possibility remains that both versions were copied from the same original, but as mentioned above the close similarity of the layouts would seem to preclude that, and it seems unlikely that Walsh would have passed his precious text on to a rival firm, although Purcell's 'particular friend' might have been involved in some sort of double deal.

Indeed, some mystery surrounds the behaviour of this gentleman - or lady - and, in fact, the claimed origin of the instructions. Why should this person entrust his/her precious papers to a newcomer to the London music printing scene, and not to the well-established publisher of a friend's widow? Was he/she perhaps ignorant of the proposed publication of the *Choice Collection* or did the Playford firm, unbelievably, stick to their guns as to instructions on ornamentation and fingering (they were proud of their theory instructions) and turn down an offer, only to realize their mistake subsequently?

Even more puzzling is the fact that the fingerings of Walsh's publication (contrary to what modern commentators have assumed) are not those of the English virginalists whose tradition we might reasonably have expected Purcell to inherit. The right hand, to be sure, behaves in the expected manner, but the fingering for the left hand ascending, which uses the 3rd and 2nd fingers alternately, is different from that of the virginalists (and indeed from that found in manuscripts of their successors and Purcell's contemporaries) who almost invariably use the thumb and second fingers. The question arises therefore as to whether these really are Purcell's fingerings at all.

Now the one difficulty with the thumb and 2nd finger technique is its awkwardness if the thumb happens to fall on a short key. This was avoided by the virginalists by the use of the 3rd finger on such keys. The fact that this gave rise to the crazy looking pattern suggested by this example did not seem to worry them at all:



Perhaps Purcell wanted to get over the problem once and for all by perpetually using the 3rd finger instead of the thumb, thus giving rise to the pattern which appears in Walsh's publication. There seems little reason why he should have done this, however, as his music is singularly lacking in the kind of rapid passage with accidentals in the course of which the problem might occur. Indeed in the evolution of fingering in general, the thumb and second finger technique seems to have been a later development which took over from the original 3rd-2nd finger technique (first adopted as an exact mirror version of the right hand descending) and was finally suggested and used as an improvement for the right descending by two French authors in the early eighteenth century.⁷ Rather than viewing the Walsh fingerings as adapted English fingerings, it is better to consider them *in toto*, for as such they are easily recognizable as the fingerings given by three Italian sources, two published in Bologna, Banchieri's *L'organo Suonarino* of 1611 and Lorenzo da Penna's *Li Primi Albori Musicali* of 1672, and a manuscript - Bartolomeo BisMantova's *Compendia Musicale* of Ferrara, 1677⁸.

How could have Italian keyboard playing influences come to affect the young Purcell? It is impossible to give a precise answer. Charles II had at least two Italian makers in his service; in the Calendar of State papers of 1668 there is a petition by one Andrea Testa of the king for a pension:

'as formerly granted to Gerolamo Zenti, Harpsicall maker, whose place he supplies, being sent over by Zenti, who went to Paris, and died in the French King's service.'⁹

There were often also, Italian keyboard players in London during the seventeenth century, and not least during Purcell's lifetime. Indeed it would seem that half the keyboard players in London during the last part of the 17th century were Italians. There was Signor Baptista Draghi, organist, after the death of Mathew Locke in 1677,

to Queen Catherine of Braganza, and music master to her nieces the Princesses Mary and Anne. Also working in London was Giovanni Sebencino, who attended the Queen's Chapel with Draghi, Francesco Galli, a performer on the harpsichord, and Bartolomeo Albrici the teacher of Mary, daughter of John Evelyn. None of these, however, could have had such an influence on the young Purcell during his formative years, between 1666 - when he might have begun his studies, and the end of 1673 when his voice was 'changed' - as the Master of the Children of the Chapel Royal, Captain Henry Cooke. Although three organists were appointed to the Chapel Royal at the restoration, and the names of various gentlemen appear in the records as virginalists in the King's Musick, there is no record of these people teaching.¹⁰ On the face of it would seem that it was Cooke himself who was paid for 'learning the children on the organ'. That he taught the virginal is clear from his will of 1672 which states that he was owed a sum of money for:

'teaching the boys the lute and virginals, there stringing and penning...'

However it is evident from the Lord Chamberlain's records that some of the non-musical teaching for which Cooke was responsible he contracted out (1661-2, March 24):

'Warrant for the payment of £45 to Henry Cooke, Master of the Children of his Majesty's Chapel Royal, by him expended to masters for teaching the said children to write and to learn and speake Latine...'^

Indeed it would be surprising if Cooke would have been expected, or even able, to see to all the educational needs of his twelve charges personally, and entries which imply otherwise may well be best interpreted simply as records of payment for work done. There are other records of Cooke receiving money on behalf of other musicians.¹³

Entries regarding organ teaching are variously and ambiguously worded, sometimes seeming to imply that Cooke did the teaching himself, at other times not. Probably he took a chosen few boys personally, delegating others to see to the lessons of the remainder, and to take over when he was away on his talent-scouting duties.

Henry Cooke was apparently the son of a bass singer, and himself became in Evelyn's estimation the best singer 'after the Italian manner' in England.¹⁴ It has often been assumed, presumably on the basis of this remark, that he had studied in Italy. This would explain how he might have acquired an Italian keyboard technique, but it must be remem-

bered that his own youth at the Chapel Royal was not without its Italian influences, most notably in the shape of Walter Porter, a pupil of Monteverdi. All that can be said with certainty is that the link between Italian keyboard playing and the fingerings of Walsh's publications could well have been through Captain Cooke.

The *Harpsichord Master* ran as a series, the last, No. XXIV, appearing in 1734. Around 1720 the format which had been established by No. II, (already increased in size from that of I as noted above) was again increased in size, and the original four plates all squashed onto two pages, together with 'Rules for Tuning the Harpsichord or Spinnet' and the fingered prelude. The change in notation from six-line to five-line staves, which happened so far as Walsh's firm was concerned between the issues of No. II in 1700, and No. III two years later, passed unremarked for two decades until the above changes took place, when 'All lessons . . . are prickt on six lines' from the original issues was changed accordingly.

The instructions from *The Harpsichord Master*, apart from being borrowed by Playford, were also used in Trimbrel's *The Divine Musicke Scholar's Guide*, which first appeared in the mid twenties and was reissued with varying musical contents over the next two decades, but with always the same instructions from the same plates. In this version the original four pages are crammed into three small untidy ones. In 1731 a rival fingering system was published by Peter Prelleur in *The Modern Musick Master*. Ironically it was described as 'the Italian manner of fingering', though it was in quite a different style from that of Purcell and the seventeenth-century Italians. From then on *The Divine Musick Scholar's Guide* was advertised as having 'the famous Mr Henry Purcell's Directions for playing on ye spinnet, Harpsichord or Organ'.

Two other texts related to that of *The Harpsichord Master Book I* should be mentioned here. The second of these was cheekily called *The Harpsichord Master Improved* and was published by Daniel Wright and John Young in 1718. The 'improvements' consisted of providing 'directions on 5 lines for learners', updating the sign for the beat to '^p' (it still began on the lower note however) and confusing the battery a bit more. Some of the text was slightly re-worded and the whole squashed into three pages. More important was the publication of *A Choice Collection of Ayres* published by John Young in 1700. Only one copy of this now survives¹⁵ and this appears to have had several pages of

instructions, the first of which is now missing. The second page, numbered 3 begins:

'When you have perfectly learnt your Gammut,

Observe these further Directions.' The rest of the page, though covering the same ground as Purcell's page II can be seen as an independent text - or perhaps disguised? The next page, numbered 5 is almost identical to Purcell's page III, but the examples are to the left rather than the right of the text. The final page is also numbered 5, and at first glance can be seen to be a copy of Purcell's page IV. There is one very significant difference however, for although the fingering for the left-hand scale ascending is identical to Purcell's, the text which accompanies it reads:

'Left hand the Fingers to ascend are ye 4th and 5th.'

The '4th and 5th' in the numbering of the virginalists and all the publications mentioned above, except *The Modern Musick Master*, signify the second finger and thumb. Young's instructions are thus contradicting themselves, the music example saying one thing, the text another.

It remains a strange fact that the fingerings of the famous Mr Purcell do not appear in any manuscript sources, only in the printed ones which were all derived from the *Harpsichord Master Book I*. If it were not for the evidence of the printed sources one would conclude that Englishmen went on happily playing in the old style - they were for ever copying out old preludes with the old fingering - until the 1730s when a real change triggered by the new virtuoso style of Babel, Scarlatti and others, forced them to adopt new ways. In fact, they could happily have done so, for the difference between Purcell's italianate fingering and that of the virginalists is minimal, both probably being derived from the same original technique. With the fashion for all things Italian, Purcell's fingerings would have fitted admirably in the eyes of any publisher. (The dedicatee of the *Choice Collection*, Princess Anne, had an Italian teacher as mentioned above). Whether the fingerings were ever taken up by English folk away from the bright lights is very doubtful indeed.

Footnotes

1. The leader in this field seems to have been Goncalo Baena's *Uma obra e arte pera longer* of 1536, which, if ever printed is now lost. Several others source from the 16th century Iberian peninsula survive, the most important being Tomas de Sancta Maria's *Libra Llamado Arte de Taner Fantasia* of 1565. From Venice there is Diruta's *// Transilvano* of 1593 and from Leipzig, Ammerbach's *Orgel oder Instrument Tabulatur*.
2. Music for domestic keyboard instruments was printed

on the continent from 1517 onwards. In contrast to other musical publications, very little of it found its way to England, probably because of the problems of the unfamiliar notation systems involved. 3. We may deduce from this remark and from Haskin's title quoted above that playing by ear was not uncommon and this is confirmed by Richard Mulcaster: 'the young learner to play reasonably well . . . though not at first sight, whether by the ear, or by the book ...' (W. L. Woodfill, *Musicians in English Society*, page 215).

5. This view is also taken by Howard Ferguson in the editorial notes to *Six Suites* by John Blow, Stainer and Bell.
6. The more usual short octave tuning of the lowest note to GG and of the C and D sharps to AA and BB which made available bass notes required by the music of the time is not mentioned, perhaps so as not to confuse beginners.
7. St. Lambert: *Les Principes du Clavecin*, 1702; Dandrieu: *Pieces Courtes et Faciles*, ca. 1705.
8. For a discussion of these sources and Italian 17th century playing see Maria Boxall: 'Girolamo Diruta's *II Transilvano* and the early Italian Keyboard Tradition', *English Harpsichord Magazine* Vol. 1, No. 6 and 'New Light on the Early Italian Keyboard Tradition' *E.H.M.* Vol. 2, No. 3.
9. Lafontaine: *The King's Mustek*, page 465.
10. The names of these are all English. Foreigners were mainly freelance or attached to the queen's household.
11. *Op. cit.*, p. 246.
12. *Op. cit.*, p. 143.
13. *Op. cit.*, p. 235.
14. John Evelyn, diary entry 28th October 1654.
15. Now in the British Library.



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