

# Ammerbach's 1583 Exercises

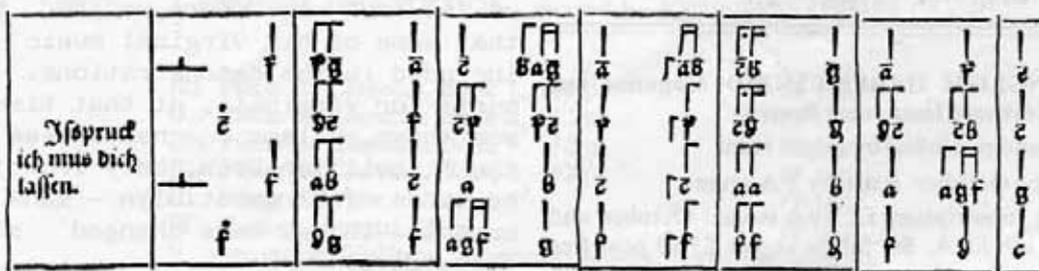
by Mark Lindley

In 1571 Ellas Ammerbach, organist at the Thomaskirche in Leipzig (where J.S. Bach was to arrive some 150 years later), published a miscellany of songs, dances and polyphonic vocal works by various composers, which he had transcribed for keyboard. He called his book *Orgel- oder Instrument-Tabulatur*, to suggest that players of any kind of keyboard instrument (and not just the organ) ought to purchase it, and to emphasize a novel feature in his method of notation. It had been the custom in Germany to write the tune in staff notation and align the other contrapuntal parts beneath in letter notation, but Ammerbach printed all the parts in letter notation (see Illustration 1 below). This idea was taken up throughout Germany, no doubt in part because Ammerbach published a sequel in 1575 (*Ein new kinstlich Tabulaturbuch*) and then in 1583 a revised and much enlarged edition, entitled *Orgel- oder Instrument-Tabulaturbuch*, of his first book.<sup>1</sup>

The preface to this work includes some rather Hanon-like exercises, with fingerings, which have not gone unnoticed by present-day students of early keyboard technique. Nearly everyone who has written about them, however, has overlooked that in 1583 Ammerbach gave a different set of exercises - more concise and better designed - than in 1571. The earlier set is available in various modern editions;<sup>2</sup> the later set is reproduced in Illustration 2 and transcribed in Example 1.

Another misconception about Ammerbach (which I once shared) is that he, like Hans Buchner (c!530) and Girolamo Diruta (1597), preferred to finger 'weak' notes 3 and 'strong' notes 2 or 4. Actually he didn't care about that, any more than did Thomas de Sancta Maria (1565).<sup>3</sup> But he did have a very simple approach to fingering. In both editions, the quick notes are nearly always taken in groups of four, and only the middle three fingers are used, except in the

Illustration 1



An inventory of configurations

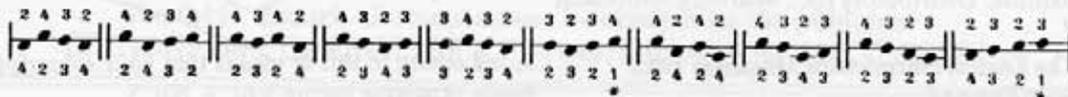


Illustration 2 Regula quarta, von den Concordanten.

**T**ertien, quarten zu beyden henden werden mit dem fordersten vnd dem dritten finger gegriffen/die quinten vnd sexten mit dem Ersten vnnnd Vierden/die Septen, Octa uen, Nonen vnd Decimæ werden zu beiden Henden mit dem Daumen vnd kleinsten finger getroffen.

Weil aber / wie oben gemeld / alle griff der Application durch Regeln mit können erklaret werden / will ich dieselbigen durch Exempel fürstellen / daraus man andere art vnnnd weise leichtlich wird judiciern können.

Folgen alhier die Exempla Applicationis  
bender Hende durch die Ziffern  
erklaret / etc.

2123 2123 3212 1212 1212 1212 2123 3231 3231 3231 2
   
 £ 1210 3210 1212 1212 3210 3210 1210 1213 1213 1213 2

1212 3212 1212 3212 3212 3212 3212 1232 3212 3
   
 £ 3210 1232 3210 1232 1232 1232 1232 3212 1232 1

2123 2123 2123 2123 3231 3231 3231 3231 2
   
 £ 1210 1210 1210 1210 1213 1213 1213 1213 2

Nota bene, so einerley Coloratur kömpt wie folget / so werden die Exempla nur der anfang vorzeichnet / also sind die folgenden auch zuvorstehen / als Exempla gratia :

2123
   
 £ 1210

3123
   
 £ 1321

123
   
 £ 321

3131
   
 £ 1313

231
   
 £ 213

321
   
 £ 123

Example 1

The musical score for Example 1 consists of nine staves of music. The first three staves are long, each containing a sequence of notes with fingerings indicated by numbers 1-4. The first staff has two groupings: [2 3 2 3] and [4]. The second staff has two groupings: [2 3 2 3] and [4]. The third staff has two groupings: [2 3 2 3] and [4]. The remaining six staves are shorter, each containing a sequence of notes with fingerings indicated by numbers 1-4. The fourth staff has two groupings: [2 3 2 1] and [4]. The fifth staff has two groupings: [2 4 2 4] and [4]. The sixth staff has two groupings: [2 4 2 2] and [4]. The seventh staff has two groupings: [2 4 2 2] and [4]. The eighth staff has two groupings: [2 4 2 2] and [4]. The ninth staff has two groupings: [2 4 2 2] and [4].

two left-hand groups where I have placed an asterisk in the above inventory of configurations. The fingering of the first five groups is self-explanatory. In the next group, however, the left hand has 2321 (and not 3432). I suppose this was to facilitate the configuration

A small musical notation showing a four-note group with a finger number 5 below it.

which would be awkward if the semiquavers were taken 3432 (and which is much more common in Ammerbach's music than the corresponding right-hand configuration). The remaining groups show

how the three-finger principle is adapted or modified to suit a four-note compass.

The fingerings which I have marked with an asterisk are used even when the last note of the group is a B. Thus is a preliminary illustration of the scale (in both editions) we find:

Musical notation for a scale with fingerings and groupings indicated above the notes. The first staff has two groupings: [2 3 2 3] and [4]. The second staff has two groupings: [2 3 2 3] and [4].

Where these principles call for the same finger at the end of one group

and again at the beginning of the next, Ammerbach normally sees no particular difficulty; he merely uses the same finger twice in a row. Presumably the finger alone plays the first note (which is the last of a rhythmic group) whereas the entire hand may help in playing the second note (which is on the beat).<sup>4</sup> This will promote phrasing in groups of four, or perhaps 2+1+1 if there has also been a hand shift within the group. Yet if one observes Sancta Maria's general rule for playing con limpieza y distincion ('the finger which has just struck should always be lifted before another is put down'),<sup>5</sup> the effect of occasionally using the same finger twice will hardly be noticed.

Of course one must practise the exercises to master the technique. I find that phrasing each group 2+1+1 facilitates them by helping the hand to relax after the beat and then to readjust, towards the end of the group, to the best angle for going on to the next. In performance I try to steer comfortably between observing Sancta Maria's rule and introducing a trace of 2+1+1. The two approaches can be made perfectly compatible by detaching the first two notes less than the others. Once you are quite at home with the technique however, all the detachments will become fairly marginal anyway.

On a few occasions Ammerbach has fingered the first note of a group as if it were in the previous group:

For simplicity one might alter these fingerings, at first, to conform to the patterns maintained elsewhere. This will promote fluency, and then the exceptional fingerings will be easier to learn. The simpler alternatives are given in brackets in Example 1 and in the illustration of the scale shown above.

Notice that the *cambiata* is fingered as if the notes were contiguous:

This principle is extended across the beat in two of the 1571 exercises:

When one hand has two notes together, the fingerings prescribed explicitly (in both prefaces) depend entirely upon the size of the interval, regardless of the context: 3rds are to be fingered  $\frac{2}{4}$  or  $\frac{4}{2}$ , Ammerbach says; 4ths, 5ths and 6ths are fingered  $\frac{2}{5}$  or  $\frac{5}{2}$ ; larger intervals with the thumb. Thus:

In Example 2, I have applied these rules to Ammerbach's 1583 transcription (see Illustration 1) of Heinrich Isaak's 'Innsbruck, ich muss dich lassen', composed some eighty years before. The technique works very well indeed, once you become familiar

Example 2, transcription of 'Innsbruck, ich muss dich lassen'

This image shows a musical score for the piece 'Innsbruck, ich muss dich lassen'. The score is written for a single melodic line, likely for a lute or guitar, and is organized into five systems. Each system consists of a single staff with a treble clef. The notation includes various rhythmic values such as eighth and sixteenth notes, rests, and bar lines. Fingerings are indicated by numbers 1 through 5. The piece begins with a circled number '3' at the start of the first system. The music concludes with a double bar line and a repeat sign at the end of the fifth system.

with it. I suppose Ammerbach used it even in such passages as the following, from the last of a set of passamezzos that he published in 1583:



Example 3 is the setting which he published of the 'Passamezo nova' (so he spelled it. Like 'Greensleves' this is based on the following eight - bar skeleton of treble and bass:



I have supplied the fingering, with brackets for some alternative possibilities and for a few instances where I depart from Ammerbach's principles of fingering as here reconstructed.<sup>6</sup> The following suggestions may be of use to players unaccustomed to 16th-century techniques:

Tackle the first half first. Simplify at the outset by ignoring the right hand's dotted rhythms in bars 2-4 and by altering the left-hand part to something innocuous, such as:



(In the piece itself I have suggested here a slight simplification -tying the two Gs - to be retained in performance) The dotted rhythms when

restored should be played without mathematical precision but with the kind of triplet-like looseness which conservatory teachers rather dislike (The piece is anyway better suited to a party than to an academic recital.) Play the entire left-hand part as comfortably as possible; facilitate the tune (particularly after you have learned the fingering well enough to take on the dotted rhythms) by such devices as slanting the right hand, straightening the fingers as much as you like (after all, the right thumb and little finger are not obliged to reach the

keys) and playing with the wrist as high as you like. Play with enough freedom to bring out the underlying treble-bass skeleton as shown above.

In bars 10-12 the right hand should play the main notes (at the beginning of the bar and halfway through) more vigorously than the quick notes, which will sound best if played rather lightly. Trill on the fourth note of bar 4, if you like, and fill out the final chord of the piece.

In place of a conclusion -the only proper one would be a performance- I might comment on the fact that Ammerbach has occasionally been described as a significant figure in the history of tempered tuning. Actually the preface never mentions temperament; but at the end it does prescribe that the notes be tuned in a certain order, starting from F:

Example 3

PASSAMEZO NOVA

Ammerbach, 1583

The musical score for 'Passamezzo Nova' by Ammerbach, 1583, is presented in four systems. Each system consists of a treble clef staff and a bass clef staff. The treble clef staff contains a highly rhythmic and melodic line, often featuring sixteenth and thirty-second notes. The bass clef staff provides a steady accompaniment with chords and single notes. Fingerings are indicated by numbers 1 through 5 above or below notes. Ornaments are marked with 'O' and a vertical line above notes. Trills are marked with '[A]'. The piece concludes with a double bar line.



- G. Diruta 1597 *II transilvano*, i (Venice)
- A. Dolmetsch 1915 *The interpretation of the music of the xvii and xviii centuries* (London)
- M. Lindley 1982 'An introduction to Alessandro Scarlatti's *Toccata prima*' (*Early Music*, x)
- M. Lindley 198- 'Stimmung und Temperatur', in *Geschichte der Musiktheorie*, vii (Berlin, forthcoming)
- J. Paix 1583 *Ein schon nutz unnd gebreuchlich Orgel Tabulaturbuch* (Lauingen)
- R. Parkins 1983 'Keyboard fingering in early Spanish sources' (*Early Music*, xi)
- J. Ruhling 1583 *Tabulaturbuch auff Orgeln und Instrument* (Leipzig)
- B. Sachs and B. Ife 1982 *Anthology of early keyboard methods* (Cambridge)
- T. de Sancta Maria 1565 *Arte de taner fantasia* (Valladolid)
- B. Schmid (d.A.) 1577 *Zwei Bucher einer neuen kunstlichen Tabulatur* (Strasbourg)
- L. Venegas de Henestrosa 1557 *Libro de cifra nueva* (Acala i)
- W. Young 1962 'Keyboard music to 1600, I' (*Musica Disciplina*, xvi)

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