

# Elementary Harpsichord Technique

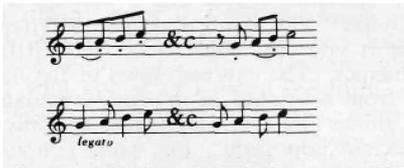
## by Roy Truby

The harpsichordist who is lucky enough to begin his keyboard study with this instrument is a rare bird. Most players make the approach via the piano and the problem of adapting a competent piano technique to the harpsichord is my concern here.

First investigate the action of the harpsichord as compared with the piano. Depress a key gently to discover the exact point at which the sound occurs, listening carefully, then repeat whilst watching the mechanism of jack, plectrum and damper. Growing familiarity with the action of the instrument will not only aid the production of a beautiful sound, but give confidence in tackling small maintenance jobs. The player who is stumped by a broken plectrum or an out-of-tune instrument should be as rare as the violinist who needs professional help with tuning!

The 'pianist-harpsichordist' gives himself away most audibly in three areas — (i) unsatisfactory articulation, (ii) lack of sustained sound and (iii) unwanted percussion effects.

(i) The sensitive pianist, largely subconsciously, shapes his phrases mainly by subtle variation of the notes within them. The need for shaping is just as vital in harpsichord playing, but the chief means is variety of *note-length* and the amount of separation from or overlap with adjacent notes. Ask a sympathetic friend to tell you (without looking) which are the accented notes in the following patterns:



- the patterns may be repeated up or down the keyboard but scale passages should be used to avoid bringing in the element of contrast of pitch

(a high note tends to sound accented, whatever the context).

Now experiment with the amount of overlap in this familiar figure: —



The difference in effect may surprise you and help to refute the 'inexpressive harpsichord' myth.

The normal touch in early music, in the absence of slurs or resolutions of dissonances, was detached, but this knowledge leads many players into playing staccato most of the time — not at all the same thing. Try playing a scale with one finger as legato as possible: this simple exercise will accustom the ear to a useful degree of detaching, and remind one that the limitations inherent in finger-groupings were used as an aid to articulation, rather than ironed out as in piano technique.

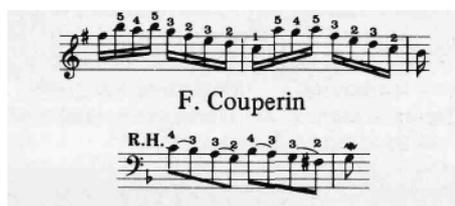
As numerous writers made clear in the period of Couperin and Bach, articulation was thought of very much in terms of small groups of notes rather than the overall legato of most nineteenth-century phrasing or the futile staccato already mentioned. Much French music shows these small units clearly by slurs or held-on notes, but in the music of other countries similar principles apply, stepwise motion lending itself well to slurred groups of notes, leaping motion to continuous detaching (unless the effect of a broken chord is intended, as in the first prelude of the '48').

Generally speaking slurred notes appear mostly in stepwise passages and in the slower or more moderate tempos.

'Gay and leaping notes must be detached and separated from one another'

A much surer guide than trusting to the instincts of those piano-trained fingers is to sing the passage in question; the ludicrous effect of slurred leaps (i.e. intervals of a third or more sung without interposing a consonant) is brought out forcefully.

When the articulation has been decided upon, choose a fingering that aids it, as for example:



By the way, certain otherwise excellent books (e.g. Dolmetsch's *Interpretation*) confuse the issue by speaking of the third finger 'passing over' the second, as though an action similar to the pianist's passing the fingers over the thumb were involved. This is not so: the sensation is much more like the one already described of moving the same finger gently to the next note.

As is fairly well known, but not so widely applied in practice, French music tended to stress the important notes (the 'good' notes of numerous early treatises) by lengthening them in performance:-

J^J^J rather than J]fi J

In this way, players could afford a more legato style than their German contemporaries, but German writers also speak of such a rhythmic 'distortion' as normal:

'... the quickest notes in every piece of moderate tempo, or even in the Adagio, though they seem to have the same value, must be played a little unequally, so that the stressed notes in each figure, namely the first, third, fifth and seventh, are held slightly longer than the passing, namely the second, fourth, sixth and eighth, although this lengthening must not be as much as if the notes were dotted...

Excepted from the rule, is quick passage-work in a very fast tempo in which the time does not permit unequal execution, and in which length and strength must therefore be applied only to the first of every four notes.'

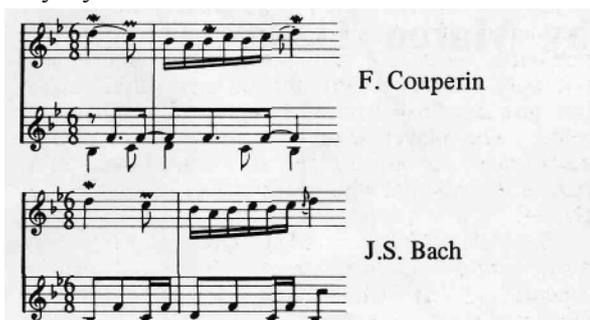
This quotation is from Quanta's *On Playing the Flute* - probably the most useful single book on the performance of baroque music. (The title is misleading: only a small proportion of the book is concerned solely with the flute). In fact, together with Couperin's masterly little *L'Art de Toucher le Clavecin* and C.P.E. Bach's *Essay on the True Art of Playing Keyboard Instruments*, it could well form the basis of the harpsichordist's library.

If all this detail concerning articulation seems too daunting one might at least make a start by

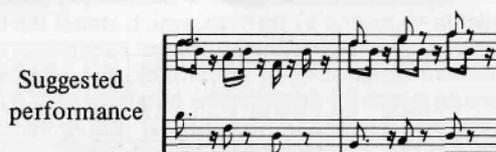
resolving never to slur from a weak beat to a stronger one unless so marked by the composer (as it is sometimes by Couperin, but hardly ever by Bach), (ii) The maxim 'The pedal is the soul of the piano' needs translating into harpsichord terms too. The 'pianist-harpsichordist's' right foot can sometimes be seen working away at an imaginary sustaining pedal. The need to sustain every available note to give added resonance is at least as great for the harpsichord as for the piano, but it must be accomplished by the fingers alone. Here again, the more precisely notated French music often shows this clearly e.g.



and authors such as St. Lambert<sup>3</sup> described the technique in detail. But C.P.E. Bach speaks of it too, and the fact that it was widely taken for granted can be seen, for example, in J.S. Bach's version of Couperin's *Les Bergeries*. Bach is assuming, of course, that the player will hold on the notes anyway.



Try out the technique on a simple piece, such as the Minuet from the first Partita:-



(iii) Often the instrument is blamed for its noisy action when in fact the noise is merely a symptom of the pianist's failure to adapt to the harpsichord, —the result of his attempts to make dynamic accents.

Some other percussive noises can be avoided by the skillful spreading of chords. Eventually the player needs to master a wide variety of speeds of spreading, but for the moment try a rather deliberate arpeggio with evenly spaced notes. This will avoid giving the impression that the notes of the chord were sounded not quite together by accident.

The quality of the instrument does influence the sound greatly too, of course, and there is now a wide range of harpsichords more or less faithfully modelled on 17th or 18th Century instruments: but the quality of the player has an even greater influence, and an understanding of the techniques I have out-

lined will open up a new world of musical experience.

**Notes**

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| 1. C.P.E. Bach | <i>Essay on the True Art of Playing Keyboard Instruments</i> | Eulenberg          |
| 2. Quantz      | <i>On Playing the Flute</i>                                  | Faber              |
| 3. St. Lambert | <i>Les Principes du Clavecin</i>                             | Minkoff Reprints   |
| 4. F. Couperin | <i>L'Art de Toucher le Clavecin</i>                          | Breitkopf & Hartel |

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