

Harpsichord & *fortepiano*

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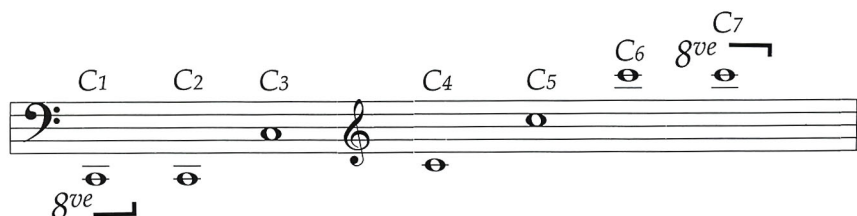
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TAIL ENDS

Pitching it right

Ever found pitch-notation confusing? In the very first issue of *Early Music*, in January 1973, Martin Davidson of Maryland (US) made a plea for the American Acoustical Society pitch-notation system which involves numbering the octaves of the keyboard rather than using a mixture of dashes, upper- and lower-case letters. In the Guidelines for Contributors to *H&F*, the Editor suggests using the 1862 Helmholtz system which is employed by *The New Grove*, since this method is now found in many different kinds of publication. **Tail Ends** would welcome readers' opinions on this vital matter. Briefly summarised, the systems are these:



In the American Acoustical Society system: C₁ C₂ C₃ C₄ (= middle C) C₅ C₆ C₇

The same pitches in the Helmholtz system: C, C c c' (= middle C) c'' c''' c''''

A third type of notation, substantially similar to the Helmholtz, is also to be found, particularly in publications on keyboard instruments: CC C c c¹ (= middle C) c² c³ c⁴

Thus, an instrument might be described as having a range: (a) F₁–F₆ (b) F, f'' (c) FF–f³

It is clear from this comparison that of the three systems the American one preferred by Mr Davidson has a number of merits: it is notationally uncomplicated; it is possible to calculate a range with great ease (the instrument referred to has five octaves: first to sixth); no different-sized letters are required, which eases the question of distinguishing between C and c especially where there is punctuation or if the former were to be written in small capitals (thus: c). Against it one might cite the fact that middle C is called 4th C (C₄), which seems bizarre until one realises that the A above (440—or 415—Hz) is A₄. In any case, middle C is not a pitch that is used very much in referring to instruments except for teaching and tuning purposes. Helmholtz and its derivative are extendible in both directions, but this is a dubious merit with regard specifically to early keyboard instruments.

I think the method found in this magazine ought to be as simple, as widely understood and as universally acceptable as possible all over the world. Mr Davidson's plea to *Early Music* was not heeded in the end, and the AAS system has never been widely accepted, except as the international standard for Braille music, as the Editor reminds me. However, I like it and apparently so does he. Let me know your thoughts—perhaps *H&F* could start a trend?

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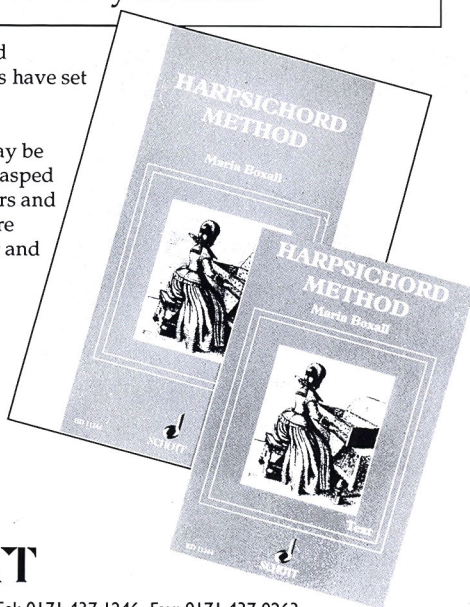
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