

Harpsichord & fortepiano

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Musical Instrument Research Catalog
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TAIL ENDS

The text and nothing but the text?

I was in the British Library the other day looking at the newly acquired manuscript of Purcell keyboard pieces, open at the C major prelude (printed in *H&F* in the last issue). The handwriting is big and bold, so that the piece fills a whole page of what is really quite a small book. It came to my attention that the left-hand fingering is back-to-front, apparently common in the 17th century: the little finger is numbered 1 and the thumb is 5. Add to that some tricky clefs and a six-line stave and you've got a hard job trying to play from it. I hope that the Purcell Society, when it publishes the book's contents, is going to give us a sensible edition with all mod-cons like five-line staves and normal treble clefs. Fascinating though Mr Purcell's handwriting is, I'd prefer to see it in the British Museum rather than on the music-desk of my harpsichord.

At this point I should come clean: I have a serious problem in dealing with facsimile editions. Composers' manuscripts and early printings abound in the early music world and even popular publishers like Dover are producing them now.

My main problem is simply trying to read the things: some composers have dreadful handwriting and some of the early printed editions are not much better, with poor engraving, or what is worse, cheap movable type. Stave-lines have disappeared; in chords, seconds often come out looking like Stockhausen clusters instead of being displaced to the side as in modern practice, and some printers thought it necessary to put a semibreve in the middle of a bar so that it did not line up with the other notes. This makes sightreading these scores impossible.

On the plus side I have to concede that if you are playing from a manuscript you get a feel for the spirit of the music and of the composer's attitude to it. The trouble is, I wonder if some composers didn't hate the piece they were writing, seeing how careless their script has turned out. Wrong notes, crossings-out (even Mozart seems to have been prone to that on occasion), illegible ornament signs and, for goodness' sake, where is that slur *supposed* to be? Don't get me wrong: I venerate these scores. I couldn't possibly write anything into a facsimile copy—it would be like writing on the original manuscript. I like to know about other readings of a contentious passage, though. A properly edited score tells you all about the different versions, which a facsimile cannot do.

A distinct advantage of copies of old scores is that the music-desk you are using is usually designed for landscape-format books and page turns in these are often arranged quite pragmatically, even if turning wide pages can be difficult at speed and creates a bit of a draught. They are very noisy if you are recording and producers get quite shirty about rustling pages. That surely *ought* to add to the authenticity but few producers I know are convinced by that argument.

In the end I like to be able to read what I am supposed to be playing. Let us keep the manuscripts in our libraries, to study when we need them; let us perform from good, clean, legible, modern scores.

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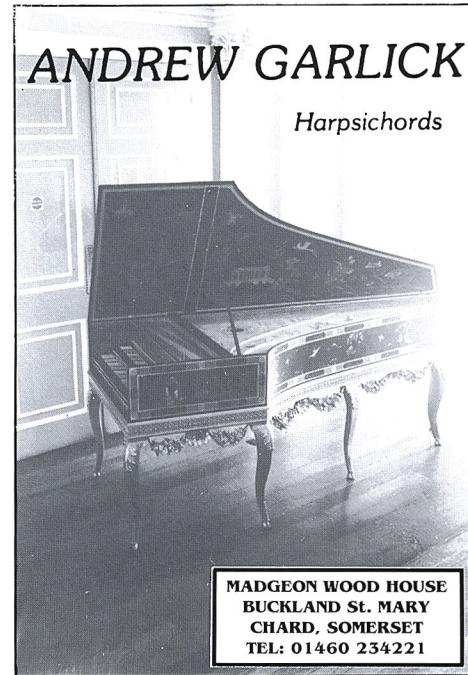


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