

Harpsichord & *fortepiano*

Vol. 6, No. 2 November, 1997

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Musical Instrument Research Catalog
(MIRCAt)

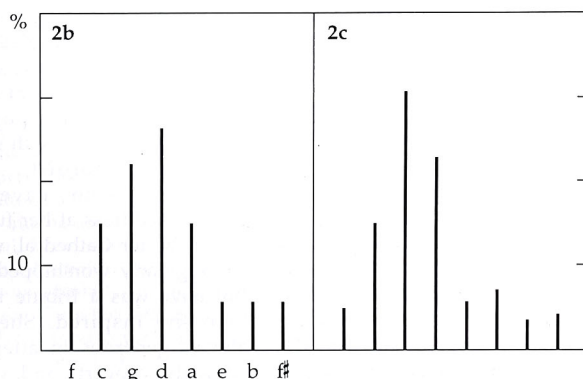
Handel's Temperament – A Revised View

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The following should be read with reference to the article in the Oct. 1995 issue, p.17. It will be remembered that the argument proceeded from the conviction that D. Scarlatti used regular meantone, and inferences were drawn from the similarity of the key distributions, particularly of the minor keys, in the Essercizi and Handel. Figures 2b and 2c are reproduced here.

THE LOW INCIDENCE of A minor in both the *Essercizi* and Handel is puzzling. In normal meantone, with notes from E^b to G^{\sharp} , the only minor keys with no false notes are G, D and A, and one would expect all three keys to be well represented. A more convincing explanation for the dearth of A minor than the poor chromatic major chord on II is that a composer writing either for publication or for many different patrons¹ would tend to avoid A minor in order to accommodate players whose tuning used a divided wolf with a raised G^{\sharp} , or even a true A^b .

Another problem was the low proportion of major to minor keys in the *Essercizi* and Handel compared to that in the Scarlatti corpus. I suggested that this constituted a reason for thinking that the first two collections were written for strict meantone, where major triads would be at a disadvantage compared to minor because the lowest triple of almost unison harmonics in the major triad is too high to ameliorate the $1/4$ -comma fifths, considered of dubious quality by some². This argument is weak for several reasons: the *Essercizi* are so thin in texture that triads are scarce to begin with, K 19, in F minor, being a notable exception; on purely physical grounds, it is only in certain positions of the first inversion of minor triads that the lowest and strongest set of beats is affected by the triple of harmonics, and it can be shown further that if the major third is true, the beats from the triple may or may not be weaker than the corresponding beats from the fifth alone, depending on the phases of the two identical harmonics.³ The reason for the low



Minor-key distributions in *Essercizi* (2b)
and Handel (2c)

concentration of major keys must thus be sought elsewhere.

Accordingly, the possibility that Handel wrote for regular meantone, with allowance for one or two variants with altered G^{\sharp} , is evidenced by the similarity between Figs. 2b and 2c, especially as regards the high incidence of G and D minors, and by the key ambits generally, which, due to the absence of E^b major, are more stringent than those of Gasparini and the Scarlatti corpus. Any attempt to specify the size of fifths is likely unwarranted.

¹ T. Best, 'Handel's keyboard music', *Musical Times* 112 (1971): 845-848

² J. d'Alembert, *Eléments de Musique* (Paris, 1752), 1666 reissue: 48

³ The third JSV reference describes the reverse situation in which the major third is tempered and the fifth true.