

# Harpsichord & fortepiano

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# CHRISTOPH BENJAMIN SCHMIDTCHEN

## and his Small Keyboard Tutor

Gwilym Beechey

**O**ne name that seems to be missing from the dictionaries and reference books on music is that of an 18th-century amateur German musician who was the author of a short and neat keyboard tutor. The tutor may be his only surviving work, and copies are now evidently extremely rare. Perhaps the copy in the British Library, press mark e.368.c (10), is unique. The title page of the volume is as follows:

Kurzgefasste/ Anfangsgründe/ auf das/ Clavier/ für Anfänger/ aufgesetzt  
von einem Liebhaber der Musik, / M.

Christoph Benjamin Schmidtchen/  
Leipzig/ ...1781. (24pp)

The chief interest in this short tutor is the information it provides in its tables of ornaments. Chapter 5 (pp. 8-11) gives directions for the performance of the ornaments that are most commonly encountered in keyboard music of the period. It is entitled *Von den gewöhnlichen Manieren*, and a summary of the more important materials that it contains are tabulated and defined in Ex. 1. The examples there have been grouped under the letters a) to k).

Ex.1.

a) *Die Bebung (Tremolo), oder Schwebung. 2) Vorschlag*



c) *Doppelschlag*



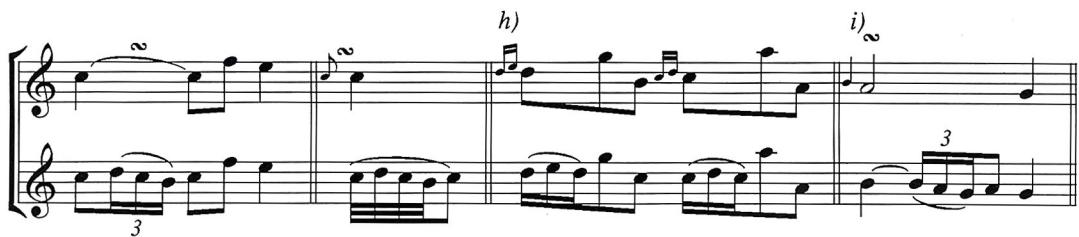
d) *Schleifer*

e) *Rolle*

f) Schneller



g) (Turn)



h) i)



k) Schleifer mit dem Doppelschlage

The first ornament is the *Bebung*, the clavichord player's vibrato. It is perhaps surprising that Schmidtchen should have introduced it at the head of his list, but not perhaps so surprising if it should turn out that his chief interest was the clavichord rather than any other keyboard instrument. He would have been familiar with the sets of published keyboard sonatas that C. P. E. Bach issued between 1742 and the late 1770s and 1780s and also the composer's keyboard tutor and the set of *Probestücke* that were issued as a supplement.<sup>1</sup> The *Probestücke* were specifically conceived and designed to illustrate performing techniques on the clavichord, and in one movement there is an abundance of indications for the use of the *Bebung*. This passage occurs in the unbarred cadenza of the D major slow movement of the fourth sonata, which begins as follows<sup>2</sup>:



### Ex.2.

Schmidtchen's *Bebung* is interestingly defined in that the number of dots under the slur may indicate the precise number of vibrato effects that it is appropriate to introduce. This seems to be the case very often in C.P.E. Bach's clavichord music as well. In the cadenza of the 1753 sonatas shown in Ex. 2, for instance, the number of dots under the slurs in the *Bebung* indications is either five or six, and it seems appropriate to observe these requirements precisely in performance before sustaining the semibreves.

A more elaborate use of *Bebung* effects

may be found in the first movement of the F major sonata in the first collection of sonatas *für Kenner und Liebhaber* which Bach published in Leipzig in 1779 (Wq 55 No. 2, Helm 130)<sup>3</sup>. Here, for instance, there are crotchets tied to quavers (sometimes with one or two dots) which contain sixteen or seventeen dots under the *Bebung* slur. Other passages show a *Bebung* being required in both hands simultaneously. In view of the harmonic language of the movement this effect seems designed to give the passages in question a good deal of emotional excitement and tension. A short passage from this *Andante* movement is shown in Ex. 3.



### Ex.3.

This sonata was composed in 1758 and remained unpublished for just over twenty years. Its date of composition can be determined by reference to the composer's *Nachlass*.<sup>4</sup> Another striking feature of the work is the way the first two movements were joined together by a link passage that leads to a *Larghetto* in f minor in 9/8 time. This passage also

contains some examples of *Bebung*, and is a good example of the way in which improvisation at the clavichord could influence written composition.

The *Vorschlag* (Ex.1b) is an appoggiatura, and this ornament had been dealt with very extensively and interestingly in Part I of C. P. E. Bach's tutor.<sup>5</sup> Schmidtchen's

illustration bears out Bach's view that certain appoggiaturas "have been notated of late in their real length." This is often easily appreciated when it may be seen that a semiquaver often really means a semiquaver, even when triplets are introduced as a result, and the rhythmic interpretation of the passage in question results in a rhythmic modification or alteration of the music. This is an essential point to grasp in the interpretation of 18th-century ornaments. It means that when they are included in the music with precise notation, their use is *not* optional. They should not be omitted or modified in any way. They are an essential part of the music's conception and structure and of the composer's idiom and phraseology.

The *Doppelschlag* is a trill or shake (Ex. 1 c), although it has usually and normally been defined as a turn, even in Apel's *Harvard Dictionary of Music*.<sup>6</sup> Schmidtchen demonstrated and defined this ornament with various signs, including *tr* and the cross sign commonly used in French music. The *Schleifer* (Ex. 1d) is a slide which Apel grouped under various types of double appoggiatura.<sup>7</sup> In Schmidtchen's tutor the *Doppelschlag* does not extend its reiterations through the full extent of the note over which it appears, and the *Schleifer* also is played with a brief break in its continuity in cadential contexts. The two ornaments are here also considered as one, the *Schleifer mit dem Doppelschlage* (Ex. 1k), although the ornament sign that is used here is the turn rather than the trill or shake. The examples that Schmidtchen gave of this are rhythmically complex, and illustrate the interpretation with short note-values whose total length is a crotchet, but again it is the *last* note in the group which has the *longest* value in time.

The *Rolle* (Ex. 1e) was an 18th-century term for the turn, and was defined as such by Türk in his *Clavierschule*, published in 1789 in Leipzig and Halle. In Schmidtchen the word was used to indicate a mordent in descending phrases in compound time. The interpretation that was given shows an accentuation that emphasised and prolonged the *first* note of the beat at the expense of the note over which the ornament was indicated. C.P.E. Bach also illustrated this ornament in patterns of descending phrases.<sup>8</sup>

The *Schneller* (Ex. 1f) or mordent was defined by C. P. E. Bach as "an essential ornament which connects notes, fills them out, and makes them brilliant. It may be either long or short."<sup>9</sup> J. S. Bach's famous d minor organ *Toccata* (BWV 565) may as well start with a "long" ornament as with a "short" one, as may also the great g minor organ *Fantasia* (BWV 542). It may be argued that the grandeur and dignity of the latter is enhanced and enlivened when the right-hand ornament is repeated over the sustained chord in the first bar.

The turn (Ex 1 g and i) is normally an easy ornament to appreciate in terms of the notes required in performance, whether it occurs over a note or between two notes. Schmidtchen's first example, however, is surprising in that intermediary notes between F and G are AGF rather than GFEF. The position of the turn and its rhythmic interpretation may and should be varied according to the context and musical sense. C. P. E. Bach discussed this, and gave examples of the suggested interpretation at various different tempi.<sup>10</sup> At the slower speeds the last note is lengthened at the expense of the early ones. The third example (Ex. 1i) in Schmidtchen is, according to C. P.

E. Bach, the "turn with the short trill,"<sup>11</sup> although the effect of Schmidtchen's ornament and its interpretation is of a trill with a short turn at the end. Schmidtchen's final third example (Ex. 1g) shows a turn between two notes of the same pitch. There are a good many examples of this sort in C. P. E. Bach's music, including some that may be found in the two sets of sonatas already referred to. In the A major movement in the *Probestücke* (Sonata 3/i) this feature is a thematic element at the start (see

Ex. 4) and there are many examples too in the third movement (*Allegro assai*) of the F major sonata that was published in 1779.

The ornament at Ex. 1h is a kind of two-note appoggiatura where the interpretation causes an even triplet to emerge. This shows that such ornaments are *not* played particularly rapidly on

#### Ex.4



or before the beat, but that they can join the main note to which they are attached in a well-defined rhythm. The same principle was applied by C. P. E. Bach in a similar context, and shows that the ornamental notes take up much of the space and value of the main note to which they belong.<sup>12</sup> This is another important general point about the interpretation of 18th-century ornaments which is not observed in modern performances very often these days.

Schmidtchen's small keyboard tutor, like many others of its day in Germany, was designed for beginners at the clavichord and harpsichord, and the question at once arises as to how much beginners of the day were expected to absorb and apply in their early lessons and studies.

It looks as though they were often expected to absorb a much wider and more extensive range of basic information about the interpretation of music than is or has been the case in the present century when the music of the 18th century is studied in early keyboard lessons. This is a lost tradition, and with its loss many basic elements of the melody of music have been undermined and missed. Eighteenth-century ornaments are not optional in keyboard music, and should never be simplified or eliminated to make music easier to play.

It looks as though 18th-century keyboard tutors expected and demanded a great deal of imaginative improvisation from young players right from the start.

## NOTES

1. Part I of the *Versuch, the Essay on the True Art of Keyboard Playing*, appeared in 1753, and Part II in 1762. It was reprinted in 1780. English translation by W. J. Mitchell. London. 1949. The 18 *Probestücke* were issued with Part I in 1753. Modern edition by E. Doflein. 2 vols. Schott 2353-4. Mainz. 1935.
2. The sonatas are not sonatas in the normal sense, as they were simply grouped in six three-movement works for convenience. All 18 movements are in different keys. The movements of the fourth sonata are in b minor, D major and f sharp minor.
3. Modern edition by C. Krebs. Leipzig. 1895. Revised by L. Hoffman-Erbrecht. 1953.
4. The *Nachlass* was compiled by Johanna Maria Bach, the composer's widow, and published in Hamburg

in 1790. It has been reprinted in the *Bachjahrbuch XXXV-XXXVII passim* (1938-1948).

5. See W. J. Mitchell. *Op cit* pp. 87-112.
6. W. Apel. *Harvard Dictionary of Music*. Harvard College. 1944. London. 1951. Page 215. See also H. Ferguson. *Keyboard Interpretation*. London. 1975. Page 120.
7. W. Apel. *Op cit*. Page 44.
8. See W. J. Mitchell. *Op cit*. Page 104, Figure 96.
9. *Op cit*. Page 127.
10. *Op cit*. page 113, Figure 118.
11. *Op cit*. Pages 121-3, Figures 131-4.
12. For an illustration see *Op cit*, page 80, Figure 74.

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