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PRACTICE MATTERS

Preparing the performing score to ease communication between the notes, the brain and the fingers

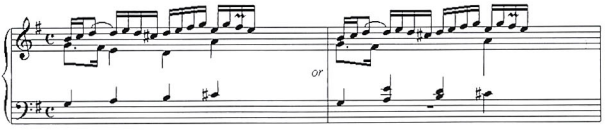
by Penelope Cave

In my weekly adult harpsichord class at Morley College, I aim to cover a lot of repertoire each term and my pupils are expected to start learning a new piece, on average, every two weeks and therefore the faster they can initially read, understand and get the notes under their fingers, the more can be achieved in the class and the faster they will progress. It is, of course, stating the obvious to point out that hesitations are caused when the brain fails to process the notes on the page quickly enough to send the right messages to the fingers; hence the need for the many excellent sight-reading manuals that are available.

The printed text is the primary source of information, but if the actual layout of the score hinders our immediate perception of the music's technical requirements then the brain cannot assimilate it in time to obey it. In other words, what you see is what you get, so although excellent sight-readers will have less problems in overcoming convoluted passages, even they will find more difficulty in learning the content securely, if they misread it the first time or if their speed of recognition is impeded on subsequent readings because of the way it looks on the page. I observe that, in general, we prefer notes which are to be played by the left hand to be printed in the lower stave and vice versa.

Other reasons for 'reading it wrong' can of course include the addition of unsuitable fingerings, unnecessary accidentals and other such editorial interference; immediate emending of the score for these irritations is standard practice and needs no recommendation here. In the same way as one fingering sometimes suits one hand better than another, and plays an important part in aiding the chosen articulations, each individual will want to distribute his hand-positions, like these other preferences, as best suits himself, but whatever he emends on his own score he will still benefit from seeing it in the composer's layout first (if such is available). Criticism is therefore not aimed at the editors of the given examples, neither are they named. The editor of the publication may have quite correctly followed the composer's autograph or chosen how to best clarify the counterpoint, but the resulting score is not necessarily what the player wants or, in some cases, is physically able to encompass, and this is where, having personally found the recommendation unsatisfactory, we need to 'doctor' our score, as in the following example where the alto part would suffer if played by the right hand and one option is given for encompassing it more comfortably.

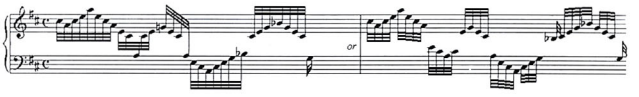
Buxtehude Toccata in G WV164



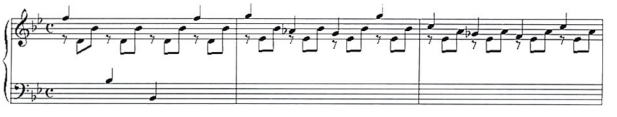
Richard Troeger suggests dividing a fugue subject "with a strong rhythmic profile" between the hands on its first appearance, in order to better characterise that rhythm; if a pupil chose to do this, I would recommend making it obvious on the score, so that the same scheme is followed every time. One may also have a preference for the best way to share notes within a run; either for ease of execution, or to aid articulation. In the next example, from Bach's fifth Brandenburg concerto, the semi-demi-quavers are beamed into groups of 8 + 5 + 4 + 7 + 7 + 1 which does little to aid the mental division into four beats

(whether you would wish to articulate this or not), and again what follows it is only one possible solution:

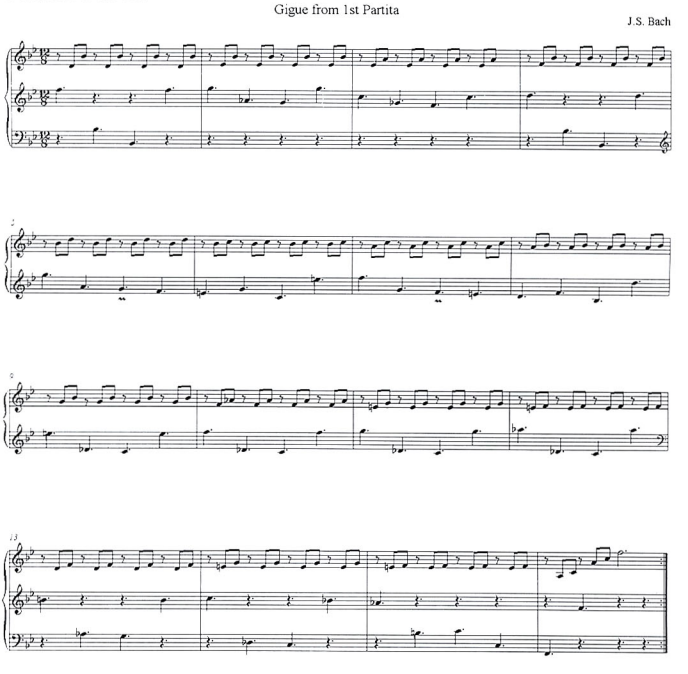
Bach Brandenburg V, 1st movement Cadenza, bar197



The musical examples in this article constitute a random selection from the hundreds which have cropped up in the course of 25 years of teaching both piano and harpsichord, and are included only as an indicator of the sort of way in which tiny irritations might be overcome. However, it was the rewriting of the layout of a complete piece which spurred me on to share these thoughts more generally. Below is the first section of the Bach Gigue from the first Partita which I wrote out last year, not for a pupil, but for myself; to see if, after many performances of it as printed, I would find it easier to read if I could see the hands laid out separately. Not that I ever had played it 'as printed', for I had always used the left hand for the crossing crochets and the right hand for the quaver accompaniment; this I admit with shame, because ignoring the markings on any score is a particularly poor practice (and one I would discourage in pupils), for it is likely to lead to missing the very fingerings one might require to get through a tricky passage. As I was not playing completely from memory, the purpose of the new layout was specifically to act as a map which would give me my bearings when I looked up at the score, but for a pupil, learning it for the first time, I hope it may also be helpful in untangling the hands and seeing the wood for the trees. First a brief reminder of how the score more usually appears:

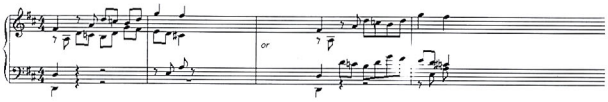


Bach Gigue from Partita 1 in Bb



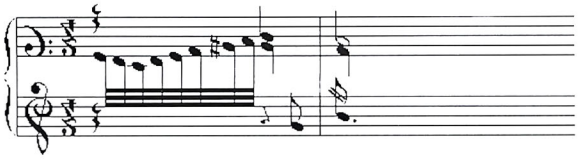
As we all know, one of the reasons that contrapuntal music is difficult to play on the keyboard is the managing of a number of independent parts. In fugal pieces a clean score is all the more essential , and maybe we actually need two layouts: firstly a clear indication of the activity of each individual voice (the best solution might be an open score), and secondly a performing score, for displaying the distribution of notes between the hands, and which would be personally fingered and marked up, but perhaps less cluttered with rests, as in the option in the next example:

Bach Fuga V from Book 2 of the 48



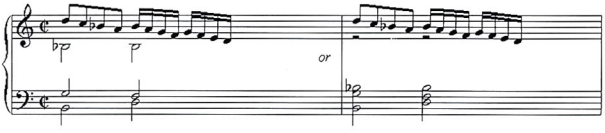
It can be that the tiniest alteration can make all the difference in directing the hand to its next position. In the following example where the right hand plays the demi-semi-quavers, the minute alteration of whiting-out the stem of the crochet F# would encourage the left hand to play the crochet third and enable the right hand to use the quaver rest for moving up into the treble clef. I would probably also add 2 & 4 fingering in the LH part to hammer the point home!

Farnaby Fantasia 3



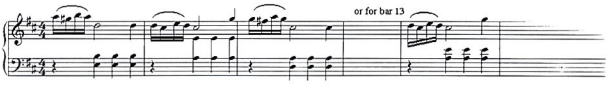
The next example illustrates how the right hand can be freed to articulate the solo line when the distracting presence of the alto part is removed to the lower stave:

Cabezon La Dama le Demanda bar 21



I have personally found that the time taken making the alterations is less than the time spent remembering not to play the score as written, then forgetting (thus embedding it into the memory more deeply), and then correcting and repeating the passage until it seems secure. The inelegant Scarlatti example below almost shouts at you, and the pupil who stumbled over bar 13 had already noticed when she was practising that it was just another fifth in the left hand, and was consequently so angry with herself for being caught out again for relying on her memory instead of stopping to take out her whiting pen to alter it in such a way as you see below.

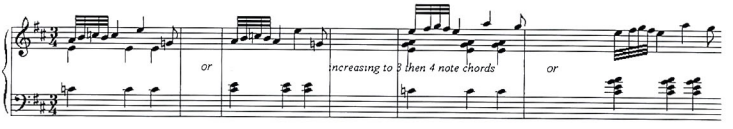
Scarlatti sonata K308 bars 12-14



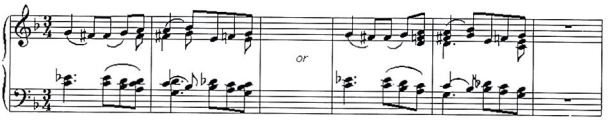
It is worth noting, perhaps, that Scarlatti or his copyist appears to have taken seriously the choice of which hand to use, and often it is specified within the sonatas.

The following bar-long excerpts from a long passage in a Soler sonata illustrate how much more difficult it is because of the division of notes between the staves in what is basically, like the Scarlatti example, a tune with a strummed accompaniment for the left hand, which increases from two notes in bar 16 to three and finally four in bar 24.

Soler sonata R86



The slight disadvantage in the solution above does of course mean reading more complex chords when familiar thirds and triads are likely to be easier than those including a dissonance; with this in mind, the redistribution of notes in the following bars from the second movement of Mozart's K350 sonata may well look and sound better if they enable more fluent phrasing:



I do urge any reader who recognises this frustrating scenario to any degree to identify his own problem passages at the first opportunity and to invest the short amount of time it requires to make his own score do the job of imparting information quickly and efficiently. As Donington said, "An edition, good or bad, is only one man's working solution. It is never final; it can always be changed."

On a practical level, the existing beams of stems can often be utilised; obviously the less you scrub out and rewrite, the cleaner your copy will be and it is common sense to erase nothing until you have inked it in its new position! In some less common cases, such as clef-changing, a piece of manuscript stuck over the top may be clearer, and the Soler example above might well be further improved by avoiding the leger lines so that the lower stave utilises the treble clef for the chords in the left hand. If you are loath to damage your expensive urtext edition, photocopy the whole piece and work on that.

It is rare that you need to rewrite a whole section, but it is worth considering it when there are continual problems; confidence in the score gives you much more confidence in yourself. Improvements can encompass sorting out page-turns and photocopying a rondo theme, to avoid having to search back (or, worse, to turn the page back). Any removal of unnecessary stress can only enhance our playing. There are usually enough opportunities for criticising one's own performance, so at least let us desist from giving ourselves black marks for the minor memory slips which are actually avoidable: invest in a whiting pen!