

Harpsichord & *fortepiano*

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Eloquent Fingers: indications and implications of fingering in Sweelinck's keyboard music

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Illus.1 Hand, detail from the portrait of Jan Pieterszoon Sweelinck recently attributed to Frans Hals (1606)

Introduction

When we regard Music in all its characteristics; trace its origin and power: so must we therefore be convinced that it is in perfect agreement with Grammar; and that on account of this all Rules of Rhetoric can also be applied to Music. Both have elements which are capable of awakening our senses and of setting our passions in motion. Hearing is the only sense of by which its truth or untruth must be judged... Music is a chain of Measured sounds, which are ostentiously chained together, to enable us to express our thoughts to others (Graaf, 1782).

With these wise words begins the preface of Christiaan Ernst Graaf's *Proeve over de Natuur der Harmonie in de Generaal Bas*. While compiled long after the time of Jan Pieterszoon Sweelinck (1562-1621) (illus.1), it is nevertheless an indication of an idea that had long held weight – the communicative power of music and the correlation with the spoken word and oratorical delivery. What Graaf does not mention is the power and necessity

of a form of musical grammar to convey a message through text, down to the smallest detail. The incorrect use of or lack of this 'grammar' can result in confusion and misunderstanding of a text as well as radically change the impact of the message on the reader or, in a musical sense, the listener.

While the notes, rests, ornaments and other indications such as rhythm in printed music may be relatable to grammar and communication, the use of fingering may seem slightly less obvious, but is in itself an important tool. Any reader who has had lessons on a keyboard instrument and has experienced the frustration of not knowing which fingering to use in a particular passage will be aware of how the correct fingering can make or break a musical interpretation. When we think of other instruments of the string and wind families and the use of bowing and tongue articulation, the comparison becomes more apparent. In his *Versuch einer Anweisung die Flöte traversiere zu spielen* (1752), Johann Joachim Quantz refers to articulation as:

...the means by which we give animation to the execution of the notes upon the flute...serving the same purpose as the bow-stroke upon the violin.... [the tongue] which must animate the expression of the passions in pieces of every sort, whatever they may be: sublime or melancholy, gay or pleasing (Quantz, 1752).

Modern editions of music, especially those specially designed for pianists or organists, will often contain fingering, either of the composer (if we are lucky) or more likely, added by a well-intentioned editor. Many editions of 17th and 18th century keyboard music published as an Urtext or in facsimile do not contain fingering if not originally added by the composer, and modern editors may add fingering as an aid for the player rather than as a tool for interpretation. These added editorial fingerings can present a dilemma to the performer, as it is not always apparent which fingering to use. It is important to realize that fingering often served and still does serve an educational purpose or a guide to enable the player to realize the music at hand, or was an indication or a suggestion for the experienced player. However, fingering can be very personal (depending on the musical choices of the performer), stylistically



Ex.1 Melody and text of 'Est-ce Mars'

dependent and ergonomically reliant (depending on the size and shape of the hand in question), and it should equally be recognized as a tool for interpreting music of any century, one that is often overlooked as being purely technical in nature. Robert Donington offers the following astute assessment in his *The Interpretation of Early Music*:

There is a very interesting general distinction between early systems of keyboard fingering and modern systems. The former exploits the natural differences of length and strength in the human digits, and their changes of position, as aids to good phrasing and articulation. The latter minimize these differences and changes, as an aid to facility and versatility (Donington, 1975).

Fingering goes hand in hand with interpretation, as the resulting sound has an impact not only on articulation, but also on phrasing in the form of note groupings, small or large, and therefore dynamics, tempo and interpretation. A good example is the application of text to an instrumental composition. Try adjusting the words you use or apply to a particular musical phrase and see what impact this has on the articulation you choose or the musical message you wish to convey. For example, Sweelinck took a commonly known tune with text and successfully set it for keyboard in what is now one of his most loved variation sets (ex.1).

Early fingerings reflect the smaller motivic division found in the music of the time, while later fingerings are representative of the longer lines, phrasing or musical thought in later repertoire and, of course, reflect the quest for virtuosity in keyboard repertoire after the Baroque, and practicality as well as comfort. While early, paired fingerings in scale passages can be played at a rapid tempo if practiced, there will always be a tempo limit, and completely smooth, uninterrupted musical lines should not be the intention.

Before exploring the extant fingerings in music by Sweelinck and considering how both early and modern fingering practices may impact our interpretation, a

brief foray into history is required. Multiple studies in recent years have sought to categorize extant historical fingerings and fingering schools as a way of demonstrating the evolution of technique on keyboard instrument from the 16th century up until the present day. The aim of this article is not to add to the body of knowledge on historical fingering, but to open up the discussion of fingering as an expressive, emotive tool. In order to facilitate this a short summary of what history can tell us about the subject is essential.

Fingering Evidence

What do we actually know about early keyboard fingering? Santa Maria (1565) provides one of the earliest descriptions of applicable fingering in his *Arte de tañer fantasía*, when he advises the following fingering for a right-hand ascending and descending stepwise pattern: 343434 and 323232; and for the left hand: 121212 and 343434. Compare this with the standard modern fingering that a pianist would use on a C Major scale: RH 12312345 and 54321321; for the LH 54321321 and 12312345.

In Buchner's *Fundament Buch* (1551), we find a demonstration of some of the oldest known fingering indications for fast notes, using the second and fourth fingers for strong beats. Ammerbach's *Orgel oder Instrument Tabulatur* has also left us with two sets of fingering exercises from 1571 and 1583, in which the third finger is employed both on weak and strong notes, and the thumb ends certain groups of notes. Diruta's well-known *Il Transilvano* (1593) provides us with a more extensive indication of which fingers to use. Diruta believed that in scale patterns 3232 should generally be employed, and that leaps originating from 'bad' notes (those that are weaker harmonically) should be played with the third or thumb, or with the little finger in leaps greater than a fifth.

While Diruta clearly prefers the second and fourth as strong fingers, reserving the third for 'bad' notes, other writers on the subject, such as Banchieri, in his *Conclusioni*

nel suono dell' organo (1608) prefer the third finger on strong notes. While they may differ in their choice of strong fingers, Diruta and others associate fingerings with 'good' and 'bad' notes (in the hierarchy of beats in a bar, or as main notes as opposed to passing tones). These notes are then played by 'good' and/or 'bad' fingers. The result is an illustration or highlighting of the rhythmic or smaller motivic patterns in the music (by scale or step), in the same way as words are used in the rhythm of a text. This can in turn be compared with tonguing on a wind instrument or bowing on a string instrument, as mentioned earlier.

Here is an example of alternating tonguing on wind instruments from *Il vero modo di diminuir con tutte le sorti di stromenti* (Dalla Casa, 1584), *te* indicating a strong articulation and *re* a weak one (ex.2):



Ex.2 Dalla Casa, articulation indications (1594)

Music of the English virginalists (c.1580-1640) uniquely demonstrates the consistent application of a finger/accents system, like the authors above, as can be seen from extant fingering in the music of John Bull (c.1562-1628), for instance. By using paired fingering, the hand is given the freedom to move freely up and down the keyboard, therefore following the flow of the music (ex.3).

Coming from a pianistic school of training, many keyboardists today use the thumb as the anchor and starting point for runs and passagework, as well as chordal patterns. This approach requires holding the hand at an angle to allow for this 'leading of the thumb' and can in fact result in a slight angling of the wrist and therefore, less flexibility for the fingers. Focusing on the middle fingers 2, 3 and 4 can allow for a healthier parallel approach to the keyboard and facilitate the use of earlier, paired fingering. Diatonic fingering systems that had prevailed until the 18th century chiefly made use of these three fingers. Thumbs had a limited use, and fifth fingers were often only used at the extremes of melodic runs.

As with any technical aspect of playing on a keyboard instrument, the use of or custom of preferring one finger to the other did not change overnight, as we can see from references in the *Klavierschule* by Türk (1789) where he refers to Wilhelm Friedemann Bach, who could apparently play fast runs with 34343 'with astonishing velocity'. However, in the same period, Marpurg, writing in *Die Kunst das Clavier zu spielen* (1750) emphasizes that each finger should be equally important, and includes disparaging remarks about earlier fingering, implying that it was a handicap to use them:

...that a singer might similarly hope to improve his performance by removing part of his tongue or some of his teeth... (Marpurg, 1750).



Ex.3 Bull, Preludium (edition Stainer & Bell, K38)

One other well-known text referring to the use of the thumb is the *Nekrolog* (1754) or Obituary of Johan Sebastian Bach, compiled by his son Carl Philipp Emanuel Bach and Johann Friedrich Agricola, in which is mentioned that before the elder Bach, the most famous clavier players in Germany and other countries had made little use of the thumb:

Bach performed [his keyboard pieces] with the greatest perfection...All his fingers were equally skillful; all were capable of the most perfect accuracy in performance. He had devised for himself so convenient a system of fingering that it was not hard for him to conquer the greatest difficulties with the most flowing facility. Before him, the most famous clavier players in Germany and other lands had used the thumb but little. All the better did he know how to use it (Nekrolog, 1754).

C. P. E. refers to this new turning technique, which essentially increases the length of a musical phrase by turning the thumb under instead of lifting the hand to a new position, in his *Versuch über die wahre Art das Klavier zu spielen* (1753/1762). The result is a scale technique very much like that employed on a modern piano:

...the thumb alone is naturally adept at turning under. Flexible and appropriately short, it is the only one to be used this way... (C. P. E. Bach, 1752).

In an effort to force unequal fingers into uniformity, countless young pianists are put through the torture of Hanon etudes, scales, and other studies as a means of acquiring this equality, and therefore a complete lack of individuality and little means for an expressive use of the hand. Fingering is a very personal thing and depends greatly on the size, structure and use of this important extremity. Even when approaching early fingering, discussions can entail as to what is correct or appropriate to a given situation, and often even the experts disagree.

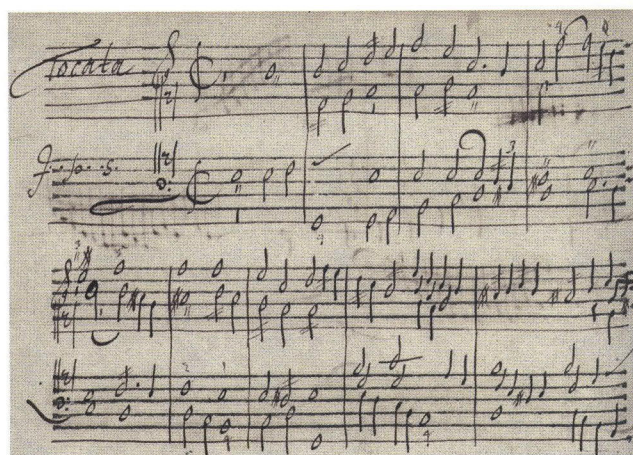
Is there a certain moment in music history when one style of fingering changed or should be abandoned? Probably not, as even in the music of J. S. Bach there are places where earlier fingering can be used to great benefit. In fact, when playing this music on another instrument than those in use during Sweelinck's life, an awareness of historical fingering and minor motivic phrasing can be used in a more modern interpretation and create clarity and nuance in this detailed repertoire.

History of extant Sweelinck keyboard music

Some early keyboard fingerings that seem incredible when first tried, later prove, when we have the knack, to be very worthwhile (Lindley, 1989).

A modern keyboardist currently has access to several, complete collections of the keyboard music of Sweelinck, including those works found in the Fitzwilliam Virginal book, recently made available in an elegant new edition from Lyrebird Music. In total there are five complete editions of Sweelinck's keyboard music, differing in contents and authenticity, the earliest modern version having been compiled by Max Seiffert in 1894, in which he collected all pieces attributed to Sweelinck at that time. Unfortunately, no manuscript by the composer is presently known, although we do have the Lynar A1 manuscript (Berlin) containing 81 pieces, 27 of which are by Sweelinck, written in Anglo-Dutch notation (see below, illus.2). This manuscript is by a single scribe and the first three pieces of Sweelinck are with fingerings.

While the origin of this manuscript is still the subject of debate, Sweelinck scholar Pieter Dirksen thinks this manuscript is a direct copy of the original, which would imply that the fingerings could possibly come from Sweelinck himself.



Illus.2 Toccata (18), Lynar A1 manuscript

In the modern editions by Seiffert and by Leonhardt et al., extant fingerings by Sweelinck have been included. Seiffert was the first modern editor to take interest in these fingerings, which had long been considered as part of an earlier, more primitive evolution of music. Since the early music revival of the 1960s, organists and harpsichordists have started to try out the effect of these early fingering on articulation and expression. However, even now there are different camps of professional musicians who either apply these early fingerings to

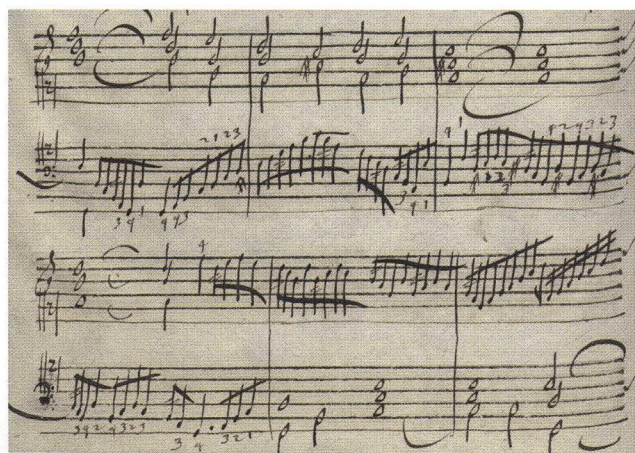
repertoire of the 16th and 17th centuries or choose not to do so, attempting to use more modern fingering to achieve an earlier sound, or losing sight of the small, motivic divisions in the music entirely.

Musical Examples with fingering suggestions

Using the modern editions most keyboardists will currently have at home, Seiffert (Dover reprint), Leonhardt et al. (Vereniging voor Nederlandse muziekgeschiedenis) and Dirksen (Breitkopf & Härtel), we can list the following numbered Sweelinck pieces with fingerings of passages of varying lengths:

- 14 Echo Fantasia
- 15 Toccata
- 18 Toccata
- 19 Toccata
- 21 Toccata
- 22 Toccata

Fingering indications in the toccatas demonstrate different aspects of applying early paired fingering and to different situations or types of passages. These include: keeping the hand in one position – sometimes crossing under with the thumb, but not under and not in order to create a long, unbroken line. Also, in combination with ornaments (illus.3, ex.4).



Illus.3 Toccata (18), Lynar A1, with fingering that well illustrates the use of paired fingering in Sweelinck



Ex.4 Leonhardt et al, a modern version of the same Toccata

In these examples we see evidence of fingering for playing leaps and repeated notes:



Ex.5 Toccata (19)



Ex.6 Echo Fantasia (14)



Ex.7 Toccata (22).

In ex.7, fingerings help the player to finish one position or motivic idea, and then move on to another. Here, for comparison, is one small selection from *Mein Junges Leben* as a study. While we do not have this work extant with fingering by Sweelinck, it is often played and available in a modern edition with added fingerings reflecting a more pianistic approach (ex.8a):



Ex.8a Edition *Anthologie des Maîtres Classiques de l'Orgue* (1956)

Here is a suggestion of the articulation that will result, indicated with slurs (ex.8b):



Ex.8b Implied articulation of ex.8a (Cok)

The same example is shown with the articulation now indicated by early fingerings (ex.8c):



Ex.8c Early fingerings (Cok)

Conclusion

The subject of fingerings, early, modern, historical or personal, is one that is often the subject of research and discussion. What this article hopes to achieve is the inception of an awareness of the importance of fingering in connection with the creation of gestural content, and therefore musical phrasing, in this detailed repertoire. This interpretive and expressive idea is often missing in the current historical discussion, which tends to mainly focus on the origin and development of this keyboard technique, including extant examples in text or in music, printed or manuscript. Or it is disregarded as an outdated or unnecessary practice, even by informed players. It is

clear that fingering can be used to great effect as a means to clarify or create rhythmic groups. Keyboard players who have yet to explore this aspect of early repertoire are encouraged to think differently about the tools available to them, if they have not already applied paired fingering to the music of Sweelinck and contemporaries. In the music of Sweelinck, these small motivic or rhythmic groups are the key towards understanding and unlocking the poetry of his keyboard music.

Dr Kathryn Cok pursues a varied career as a harpsichordist, fortepianist and academic on both sides of the Atlantic. She lives in The Hague, where she teaches at the Royal Conservatoire, and works regularly as a soloist and continuo player with the Amsterdam Baroque Orchestra and many other early music ensembles in Europe. She is co-founder of the Caecilia-Concert and of Concerto Delaborde.

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Notes

- 1 See Pieter Dirksen, *Jan Pieterszoon Sweelinck - De Orpheus van Amsterdam* (Culemborg, 2021).
- 2 Christiaan Ernst Graaf, *Proeve over de Natuur der Harmonie in de Generaal Bas* ('s-Gravenhage, 1782).
- 3 Johann Joachim Quantz, trans Edward R. Reilly, *Versuch einer Anweisung die Flöte traversiere zu spielen* (London, 1966).
- 4 Robert Donington, *The Interpretation of Early Music* (London, 2/1975).
- 5 Tomás De Santa Maria, *Arte de tañer fantasía* (Valladolid, 1565).
- 6 Hans Buchner, *Fundament Buch* (1551).
- 7 Nikolaus Ammerbach, *Orgel oder Instrument Tabulatur* (Leipzig, 1571).
- 8 Girolamo Diruta, *Il Transilvano* (Venice, 1593).
- 9 Adriano Banchieri, *Conclusioni nel suono dell' organo* (Bologna, 1608).
- 10 Girolamo Dalla Casa, *Il vero modo di diminuir con tutte le sorti di stromenti di fiato & corda, & di voce humana* (Venice, 1584).
- 11 Daniel Gottlieb Türk, *Klavierschule oder Anweisung zum Klavierspielen für Lehrer und Lernende mit kritischen Anmerkungen* (Leipzig & Halle, 1789).
- 12 Friedrich Wilhelm Marpurg, *Die Kunst das Clavier zu spielen* (Berlin, 1750).
- 13 Mark Lindley, *Early keyboard fingerings : a comprehensive guide* (1989).
- 14 Rudolf Rasch, 'The Canon of Sweelinck's Keyboard Music', *Tijdschrift van de Koninklijke Vereniging voor Nederlandse Muziekgeschiedenis*, lxxviii (2018), pp.37-69.
- 15 Pieter Dirksen, 'New Perspectives on Lynar A1', Christopher Hogwood (ed), *The Keyboard in Baroque Europe* (Cambridge, 2003), pp.36-66.