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Pedal Technique

Author(s): C. F. Abdy Williams and Herbert F. Ellingford

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Jerusalem. Where I am stationed there are only about thirty-five native Christians, but I have the pleasure of presiding at the (American) organ every Sunday morning. The music of the hymns, &c., is all printed backwards to correspond with the Arabic words, and as I generally transpose, it adds a new thrill to hymn-playing.

For secular purposes I have an excellent old Brinsmead, with a quantity of good music, partly my own property, partly the property (with the pianoforte) of an English doctor who lived here before the War. There are some fine violinists in Jerusalem, with whom I am getting into touch, and possibly one will visit me here shortly.

Hebron, Palestine,
June 18, 1918.

Yours &c.,
T. L. MARTIN
(Lieut.).

PEDAL TECHNIQUE.

SIR,—I have read with much interest and appreciation the suggestions made by your contributor, Mr. Herbert F. Ellingford. I gather that in principle he would use the heel on a more definite system than obtains at present, and thus avoid much extra exertion and bodily movement.

On two remarks I would comment. Mr. Ellingford says: 'The tyranny of the all-toe pedalling method . . . was, I consider, the outcome of the early straight boards.' Surely, Sir, the prevalence of the 'all-toe' system is due to historical facts of far greater antiquity than the introduction into England of the straight pedal-board. We were the last country to give pedals to organs, and pedal technique was developed years before us on the continent: *e.g.*, Buxtehude and Bach in Germany, Frescobaldi in Italy, Le Bègue in France, who wrote trios for two manuals and pedals (he died in 1702), to say nothing of the Dutch and Belgian organists.

In the course of my travels I have seen and played on many old organs; and on none of them, so far as I remember, has heel-playing been possible. The instrument on which Bach played at Arnstadt, where he began to make his wonderful reputation as an organist, was considered quite up-to-date in its day. Its console, bellows, and a few of its pipes are reverently preserved in the Rathaus of that town. It had two keyboards and a pedal organ of five stops, 16-, 16-, 16-, 8-, and 2-feet. I tried it with the help of the custodian, who blew for me. Its pedals were so short that heel-playing was quite impossible, and had evidently not been thought of.

In Spain I was invited to try the large organ of the Cathedral of Malaga, built, regardless of cost, in 1781. Its pedals (five stops) consist of twelve little wooden projections, five or six inches long, all on the same level, the sharps being coloured black to distinguish them from the naturals. Heel-playing was impossible.

In Italy I have played on many old organs that are still in full use. The pedals were invariably very short, and even when long enough for the heel were often placed at an angle rising from back to front similar to the angle of harmonium blowing pedals when at rest. Here again the heel was out of the question.

As a student I played Bach's Toccata in F on the old four-manual organ of the Nicolai Church, Leipsic, with its eighteen pedal stops. (This organ has now been replaced by a modern instrument.) Its pedals had the compass of thirty keys, not often met with in those days in Germany, and they were long enough for the heel. But the springs were so strong that it required great force to depress the keys anywhere behind the toe place, and I doubt if the heel was much used. My master did not encourage it.

I have also had access to modern organs in Germany, Italy, and Switzerland: in several instances I noticed that the pedals were radiating, or concave, or both, showing that the builders were influenced by the new English developments. It seems as if we English often lag behind other nations, and then go ahead of them when once we make a start: *vide*, for example, our aviation.

Mr. Ellingford, speaking of the pianoforte, says: 'With the five digitals of each hand a recognised system of fingering scales and arpeggios has held good for over a century.' Exactly so. But the finger-board arrived at its present form some four centuries ago. Yet it took nearly three centuries before a universally recognised system of

fingering was adopted. In my opinion the precise form of the pedal-board is not yet settled, though European nations, following the lead of England be it noted, appear to be gradually arriving at a consensus. When such a development has arrived, and has been in use a century or two, probably we shall agree to adopt some general system like that universally in use for scales and arpeggios on the pianoforte. Meanwhile I think it possible that Mr. Ellingford has made what may prove to be a valuable contribution towards this desirable consummation.

Yours, &c.,
C. F. ABDY WILLIAMS.

SIR,—My article on 'Pedal Technique' was based on analyses of the standard organ-playing and pedalling works published during the latter part of the 19th and the first fifteen years of the 20th century. At the time these works were being compiled the pedal-boards with which these works were concerned were, as they are even to-day, of varying scale, pattern, and compass; but none, I venture to think, were of such obsolete construction that heel-playing was impossible on them.

I quite agree with Mr. Abdy Williams, in his valued comments on my article, that 'the prevalence of the all-toe system is due to historic facts of far greater antiquity than the introduction into England of the straight pedal-board.' But my remark that 'the tyranny of the all-toe method is the outcome of the early straight boards' does not infer that the prevalence of that system is due to the introduction of the straight board into England.

The traditional manner of the predominating use of the toes was handed down by Bach and his predecessors; and that tradition was so strong that the 19th-century authors referred to evidently could not throw it off.

This is why I contend that it is difficult to understand why the study by those authors (whether of English or other nationality) of the splendid Bach pedal passages did not disclose some form of systematisation, and also why it did not disclose the obvious use of the heels on the long keys as a natural law of pedalling.

Mr. Williams, in his comment on the pianoforte, says that 'the finger-board arrived at its present form some four centuries ago.' This is quite true. But did not Bach almost completely cover the whole gamut of pedal-work in his wonderful organ compositions, even as our own Shakespeare entirely traversed the whole gamut of human thought and feeling in his historical plays, comedies, and tragedies, at a period when the medium of producing these works (Bach on the organ, Shakespeare on the stage) was so utterly inadequate?

The 19th-century authors of organ-playing had pedal-boards on which the performance of Bach's pedal-passages could have been greatly simplified. The 19th-century actors and tragedians grasped to the fullest extent the more modern means of stage-production which they possessed; but I contend that the old tradition of pedalling proved too strong for the 19th-century organ-playing authors.

I quite agree with my commentator in his opinion that the pattern of pedal-board is not yet definitely settled. This point I have already discussed with eminent organ-builders, and I hope to give practical evidence of this in the future. But I cannot agree with Mr. Abdy Williams that we need wait a century or two before arriving at some general system of pedalling formulae.

My Primer of 'Pedal Scales and Arpeggios' is designed for the pedal-boards in general use to-day (and there are many types); and my article on 'Pedal Technique' was written to prove the undesirability of the appalling chaos which still exists in the pedalling of scales and arpeggios.

I hope, Sir, you may be able to find room for this letter, so that I may not only answer Mr. Williams, but also thank him for his practical and courteous comments.—Yours faithfully,

HERBERT F. ELLINGFORD.

MR. CHASTEY HECTOR says: 'May I be allowed to express my thanks through you to Mr. Ellingford for his splendid article on "Pedal Technique." No doubt many students will be most grateful for his excellent advice.'