

Old English Fingering

Author(s): M. L. A.

Source: *The Musical Times and Singing Class Circular*, Vol. 36, No. 625 (Mar. 1, 1895), pp. 152-155

Published by: [Musical Times Publications Ltd.](#)

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3364628>

Accessed: 18-01-2016 07:35 UTC

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of the Terms & Conditions of Use, available at <http://www.jstor.org/page/info/about/policies/terms.jsp>

JSTOR is a not-for-profit service that helps scholars, researchers, and students discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content in a trusted digital archive. We use information technology and tools to increase productivity and facilitate new forms of scholarship. For more information about JSTOR, please contact support@jstor.org.



Musical Times Publications Ltd. is collaborating with JSTOR to digitize, preserve and extend access to *The Musical Times and Singing Class Circular*.

<http://www.jstor.org>

was the usage of his time in the matter of musical borrowing; especially whether, under any circumstances, that procedure was regarded as void of offence; and if so, under what circumstances. The painful experience of Bononcini proves that society would not tolerate a man who, having laid hands upon another composer's work, sought to pass it as his own. Bononcini did this and could not again hold up his head in England. The fact shows the existence of a powerful public opinion and strong feeling against attempts to mislead. Why, then, if Handel robbed after the manner of Bononcini, did he not suffer in like fashion? It may be said that the German was too great a man; but the Italian was a great man also, and, what is more to the purpose, had powerful partisans in this country. Yet nothing could save him, and nothing would have saved Handel, especially with "Society" in opposition, had he offended like his rival. It is reasonable to assume, therefore, that something differentiated the cases of the two men. What was it? On the one hand, it may be replied, "Bononcini was found out and Handel was not." Let us look for a moment at that statement. The musical world of Europe in the early decades of the eighteenth century was a very small one, and the connoisseurs, amateurs and professionals, who composed it were a select body. Its members, unlike those of later times, were not overwhelmed with claims upon attention. Comparatively little was done in music and that little we may fairly take as known at least to the more active and curious spirits connected with every centre of European art. In asking the reader to grant so much, I make no unreasonable demand. How, then, could Handel, the most active and conspicuous musician of his day, as compared with whom Bach lived in obscurity—how could he, with his bold appropriations from the works of other men, escape discovery? My own belief is that his practice was very well known, and that he himself made no secret of it whatever. There are no quotation marks in music or Handel might have used them; but the probability is that the limited cognoscenti of the day did not need their help, knowing as much as Handel about Stradella, Ebers, Muffat, and the rest. It is only by considerations like these—considerations which suggest Handel's innocence of any purpose to defraud and imply the existence of a tolerant public opinion in such a case—that we can account for his immunity as contrasted with the prompt and heavy punishment of Bononcini. On the point of toleration, it may be assumed that the musical world by no means ignored the splendid use made by Handel of borrowed ideas, and that the exigencies of his arduous struggle to sustain himself against an unscrupulous and powerful opposition were not overlooked. Be this as it may, there was in England, for more than a generation, the

curious spectacle of a great composer, working in the full blaze of fame and under the observation of many eyes, some of them not too friendly, he all the time borrowing right and left, without the reprehension of the public and, for anything we know to the contrary, without a word of complaint from the living masters whom he laid under contribution. If this phenomenon can be explained in any other way than that above indicated I shall be interested to learn the process.

JOSEPH BENNETT.

OLD ENGLISH FINGERING.

WHEN turning, the other day, over the old books of MS. lute music that have long rested from active service in the University Library of Cambridge, the writer came across an interesting bit of harpsichord tablature, which may possibly prove to be of service in determining the fingering for the scale, as practised by the English in old times upon keyboard instruments.

To all conversant in the slightest degree with old music, it is known how intricate, how full of rapid scale passages and of ornament was the old virginal music of the past—of (say) the later sixteenth and the early seventeenth centuries. It is known, also, that at that time the art of keyboard music had reached a high state of development in England, that many eminent masters were engaged in composition for it, and that their compositions were so artful and elaborate in character that Dr. Burney, at the end of the last century, declared that it would hardly be possible to find a master in Europe then who would undertake, after a month's practice, to perform some of these old pieces.

Now, perhaps because we never can believe that our forefathers ever did anything—not better than, but equal to ourselves, these old virginal MSS. continue to excite our surprise. We stumble over their notes as we try them, proficient as we are in pianoforte music; we wonder how the old masters played them, how they instructed those royal and noble maidens who were their pupils in the art of playing such catchy intricacies upon the virginal. To be sure, they approached their point of proficiency by a totally different method from ours. Yet whatever stray light we are able to snatch from early printed work or MS. as to the nature of those methods, only magnifies our wonder. How could they compass difficulties by methods seemingly most difficult in themselves?

It is only lately that the old modes of performance have been at all looked into. The masters who practised them, indeed, held them secret, the secret being divulged in return for payment of instruction, as was the way with most other arts and trades. An instruction book

for the harpsichord was not printed until a full century after all the Elizabethan masters of the virginal had been dead, and their "school" of composition had become practically extinct. Only an odd, scamped Arabic figure here and there over the notes (and even these, we fear, sometimes may have been added by a later scribe!) suggest to us how the hand was disposed of old for the execution of the piece.

Of course, the old German method has been known with more certainty. For doughty old Ammerbach, who published instructions for all keyboard instruments (organ, virginal, clavicord, gravicembalo, &c.) in 1571, expressly laid down rules for the scale. These practically excluded the use of the thumb and little finger, no doubt because of their shortness; for it had not seemingly been discovered that the shortness of the thumb, which permits of its passage *under* the long digits, is the grand factor of smooth and fast scale performance. Ammerbach's scale is very well known, but for convenience is repeated here. It runs thus—using, as he does, the figure 1 for the index finger of both hands, and the cipher for the thumb: Right hand—1, 2, 1, 2, &c., to the top, where it finishes 1, 2, 3; and returns, 3, 2, 1, 2, 1, to the bottom. The left hand runs, 3, 2, 1, 0, 3, 2, 1, 0, &c., to the top, where it finishes 3, 2, 1; and returns, 1, 2, 1, 2, 1, 2, to the bottom. This curious way of climbing the scale on the keyboard by two fingers only must, I imagine, have emanated from the older lute playing, to which it is better suited. Man is vastly imitative; he learns a new form of instrument by applying to it the methods of an older one. As he had fingered his ancient open strings, so he would finger at first his new wooden or ivory keys. It required not only genius to discover the use of the short thumb (useless on open strings) upon the keyboard, but a revolutionary spirit to throw open the door of development that hinged upon its very shortness. Without that revolution our modern pianism certainly had not been.

The German method was therefore roughly known. But in some minds there has crept a curiosity as to whether the English composers fingered and performed their pieces in the same way. They undoubtedly (we may surely venture to say in consideration of the MS. tomes of virginal music we fortunately still possess) developed the art more freely than did men of other nations. Did they pursue this (seemingly) handicapped mode of execution? Did they discard their best finger-friend and renounce their thumb?

The subject, which becomes of interest as soon as the fine old virginal music is scanned, has never, so far, been thoroughly examined. A recent writer drew attention to it in a valuable article on "Fingering," which appeared in *THE MUSICAL TIMES* not long ago. In this he showed that the English had originally used the figures 1, 2, 3, 4, 5 to express the digits, and not +, 1, 2,

3, 4, as is generally supposed, which is but a late fashion borrowed from the Germans; and in citing the evidence of the "Choice Collection of Ayres for the Harpsichord or Spinett," published in 1700, for the fingering of the scale, he called attention to the extraordinary fact that here the fingers of the left hand are numbered the reverse way to our own—that is to say, the little finger is called 1 and the thumb 5; both hands, therefore, in this method of fingering, counting from left to right, 1, 2, 3, 4, 5.

However, in that edition of Purcell's "Choice Lessons for the Harpsichord or Spinett," which was engraved on copper for Mrs. Purcell in 1699 (and of which a copy exists in the Durham Cathedral Library), there is not only a fingered scale to be seen, but the numbering of the left hand fingers is precisely the same as the later instance above-quoted. This fact was known to the writer of the article "Fingering" in *Grove's Dictionary*, who quotes Purcell's method of fingering the scale. But the question of the numbering used for the fingers is only touched upon at the close of the article, when describing the German change from their old style, +, 1, 2, 3, 4, to the Italian mode, 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, about the time of Bach, when he says (presupposing the English mode as +, 1, 2, 3, 4): "The same (Italian) method came into partial use in England for a short time." "Purcell also adopted it in his 'Choice Collection' quoted above, but with the bewildering modification that whereas in the right hand the thumb was numbered 1, in the left hand the little finger was called the first and the thumb the fifth."

Thus the matter of English fingering has stood in a state of surmise and surprise, and may perhaps so stand for some time longer. Meanwhile, let us examine such evidence as to the English rule of the scale and the style of numbering as is furnished by some interesting bits of old MSS. in Cambridge. These push the matter farther back in date, and, indeed, suggest an entirely new view of old English left hand fingering.

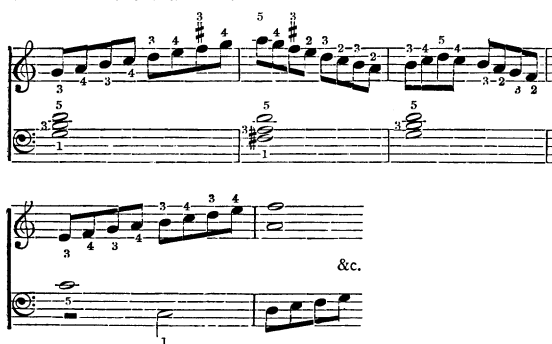
The first record of English scale practice in print stands, I believe, in Purcell's book. The fingering runs, quoting the numbers there used—Right hand: 1, 2, 3, 4, 3, 4, 3, 4, &c., to the top, when it finishes 3, 4, 5; returning, 5, 4, 3, 2, 3, 2, &c., finishing 3, 2, 1. Left hand: 1, 2, 3, 4, 3, 4, 3, 4, &c., to the top, 3, 4, 5; returning, 5, 4, 3, 2, 3, 2, 3, 2, &c., to finish 3, 2, 1.

Now, as will be seen, this is not quite Ammerbach's fingering, for the main digits of the right hand in play are, in the German method, the first and second long fingers ascending; in the English, the second and third, and there is a similar difference in the descent. But both climb and descend the scale practically by means of two fingers only, and while the German permits a strange leaning to the use of the thumb in the left hand, the later

English version restricts that use severely to the turning-point of the scale, while permitting it equally, at that turning-point, to both right and left hands. We may remind the reader that this strange hop-scotch method of playing scales would not have, upon the old instruments, the objection that would accrue to it on the modern pianoforte; for as these instruments, by their structure, were incapable of sustaining sound, beyond the second that the wire was struck or plucked, there was no need for the performer to sustain his touch; the fingers might start from the keys and dance over them like bees about already honey-robbed flowers, without any injury to the sound. The question is: was Purcell's scale the accredited English scale?

We now come to the evidence of our manuscript. This Cambridge University MS. is numbered Dd. iv., 22. It consists of a book of lute tunes, mostly in dance measures—almains, courants, and the like, which are signed by such names as Robert Johnson, John Dowland, Richard Allison, Daniel Bachelor—all of them eminent lute performers and composers of the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries. The library catalogue describes the MS., which is bound up with a very similar one, as "A small folio, about 1620." This may be possibly slightly pre-dated.* But, from the character of the book and of the music, it cannot be much later; and the only question is, whether the page here quoted has been written in subsequently or not. This may be so, yet no latitude would bring it outside the seventeenth century, I think, or reduce its value as evidence of old scale practice.

It is the last page of music in the book, is written in the old virginal or spinet notation on two staves of six lines each, with F, C, and G clefs written above one another. After a rehearsal of the old names of the notes of the scale—the "Gamut," as it was called—follows this "Preludium":



It will be seen that the fingering here—3, 4, 3, 4 in ascent, and 3, 2, 3, 2 in descent—is Purcell's, or the English scale, and not Ammerbach's, or the German scale; though, as

* I am sure this is the case with another MS., which contains a composition (amongst many others) of Charles Coleman's, and yet has been called "latter end of sixteenth, or early part of seventeenth century."

it is probably of earlier date than Purcell's, the thumb is not admitted for the start. Unfortunately, the corresponding passage for the left hand is not fingered at all; and I have noticed this neglect of the left hand in a slightly fingered MS. specimen of notation that exists in the British Museum.

But what fingering there is for the left hand touches a most interesting point, and may prove that neither the order of left hand fingering given in the 1700 "Choice Collection," nor in the Purcell that preceded it, was an anomaly or eccentricity of the moment, but simply the genuine old English method that had not yet died out. For it is clear that when this MS. example was written, the numbering of the left hand fingers began with the little finger as 1, and that the thumb was 5, as the chords of the left hand show.

This new point, I think, may be substantiated from the Fitzwilliam Virginal Book, which lies, as everyone knows, in the Museum at Cambridge. This splendid collection of virginal music is now pronounced to have been probably copied out in the third decade of the seventeenth century. It can scarcely be earlier, from several indications to be found in its pages. But whatever the date of its copying, there is no ambiguity about the date of the compositions themselves. The lives of many of the earlier masters who wrote them shine clear in the light of fame, and the careful copyist has often inscribed the date at which the particular piece was written, as William Byrd, 1590; Philips, 1580; Tallis, 1562, &c.

Now I have found just a few marks of fingering in this MS., which were most clearly done by the original copyist's fine pen. Indeed, in one place the finger-figure comes between the note and its adjacent sharp, and, therefore, could not have been added later. It is interesting to notice that the majority of these few examples occur in Dr. Bull's compositions, because in one fine British Museum MS., wholly devoted to his keyboard music, there are also just a few examples of fingering too. We must suppose, therefore, that this fingering is the celebrated master's own; for if it had been due to the copyist he would have added more, or more indiscriminately.

To go now into particulars of this fingering: The examples given are the only ones—except two small marks—that have been gleaned in a glance through the thousands of bars which that close-packed MS. of 418 pages shows. Some puzzling discrepancies or faults appear, but a close copy has been made, so that the reader may judge of the rendering for himself:—



Examples of musical notation showing various fingering techniques, numbered 2 through 12. The notation includes notes, rests, and specific fingerings indicated by numbers 1-5. Some examples include '3a' and '&c.' markings.

No. 1 is from a "Galiarda" of Dr. Bull's, on p. 35. It proves that there is, as Solomon said, "nothing new under the sun"; and that when the great pianist, Hans von Bülow, pronounced the importance of a figure that is repeated in composition being taken invariably by the same fingers, he had probably no idea that an old Englishman had discovered it before him and had practised it at the close of the sixteenth century. By the light of our English scale knowledge we conjecture this passage to start with the fingers 3, 4, 3, 4, and the notes marked with an asterisk to be likewise achieved by a similar hop over. This was too simple a rule for Dr. Bull to inscribe.

No. 2 is from a piece strangely inscribed "Praludium. El. Kidermister." It shows that

the advantage of change of finger on repeated notes was fully understood and practised of old, and that the thumb and little finger were used for extended passages. Indeed, the reserve about the thumb is here broken down; it is frankly numbered.

In No. 3, taken, like all the remaining examples but one, from the "Pavana" of Dr. Bull, on pp. 63 and 64 (No. 34), it is not so; for though it is quite clear that the thumb must be used for the lowest notes of the two chords in arpeggio, it is not marked. In 3a the arpeggio is executed with a skipping, closed hand.

No. 4 looks staggering at several points, but doubtless the finger 4 should be followed by the 3, as usual; the upper bound E, if seized by finger 3, would present a bit of descending scale; but the master, to save the thumb falling on the lowest note, gives 4 instead of the usual 3, as the skip over. The following 2 is only explicable on the supposition that the upper note is again attacked by finger 3.

No. 5 has its reasons self-evident. It shows not only the composer's adhesion to the repeating figure theory, but the way in which the virginal performer's hand was wont to skip about the keys. The next example, as well as the short ones following, are most interesting as showing fingering for the left hand; and they are in general only intelligible on the supposition that 1 stands for the little finger and 5 for the thumb. In No. 7 the B flat is taken by our (in latter-day parlance) first finger, here numbered 4. Example 8 is a quiet, scholarly bit of imitation, carried out in fingering too. In No. 9 the thumb clearly passes under the first finger on B flat to reach A.

No. 10 is extracted from one of Bull's fine structural passages of bass accompaniment. Its close imitation causes one to think that the copyist wrote 5 for 3 in the third bar. No. 11 appears, whether from error or not, quite inexplicable.

In No. 12, too, taken from Giles Farnabie's "The K. Hunt," p. 98, the quantity of fives in the left hand, though clearly meant each time for the thumb, is slightly bewildering. Doubtless, however, there is light under them could we get the clue. For, from the evidence only of these suggestive fragments of old handwriting in Cambridge, we surmise that Purcell's "bewildering modification" was not his own idea or a modification at all, but apparently an old English classical method; and that the scale practice of our forefathers, though allied to the German, was national and idiosyncratic too.

M. L. A.

FROM MY STUDY.

THE career of "Jenny Lind" is so well known, and was so fully discussed, not long since, in connection with her biography, that a sketch of it in this place would hardly interest the reader. I shall do better, perhaps, to seek