

Newly-Rediscovered Manuscripts Talking about Seventeenth-Century French Harpsichord Pedagogy

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Abstract : The development of seventeenth-century French harpsichord music is enigmatic in several respects. Although little is known about the formation of this style before 1650 (we have names of composers, but no surviving music), the style has attained a high degree of refinement and sophistication in the music of the earliest known masters (e.g. Chambonnières, Louis Couperin and D'Anglebert). In fact, how the seventeenth-century musicians acquired the skills of their art remains largely steeped in mystery, as the earliest major treatise on French keyboard pedagogy was not published until 1702 by Saint Lambert. This study fills this lacuna by surveying some twenty recently-rediscovered manuscripts, which offer ample materials for revisiting key issues pertaining to seventeenth-century harpsichord pedagogy. By analyzing the musical contents, the verbal information and explicit notation (such as written-out ornaments and rhythmic effects), this study provides a rich picture of the process of learning at the time, with engaging details of performance nuances often lacking in tutors and treatises. Of even greater significance, that creative skills (such as continuo and ornamentation) were taught alongside fundamental knowledge (solfèges, note values, etc.) at the earliest stage of learning offers fresh challenge for modern pedagogues to rethink how harpsichord pedagogy can be revamped to cater for our own pedagogical and aesthetic needs.

Keywords : French, harpsichord, pedagogy, seventeenth century

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