IN THEIR OWN WORDS

François Couperin, The Art of Playing the Harpsichord (1716)

François Couperin (1668–1733) was one of ten generations of Couperins active in musical affairs in and around Paris during a span encompassing the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Although a productive composer of vocal music and especially works for the harpsichord, as represented in his four books of harpsichord music of 1713, 1717, 1722, and 1730, Couperin was also an important keyboard pedagogue. While he served as principal harpsichord teacher to the members of the French royal family, he also had an interest in seeing that his teaching methods were accessible to all interested musicians. In 1716 Couperin published The Art of Playing the Harpsichord, an introductory method book that discusses everything from how one should sit at the keyboard to practice techniques, hand position and fingering (he still advocates the old 323232 method for running down the scale), phrasing, and ornamentation. The treatise is replete with musical examples, and toward the end the author appends eight preludes to demonstrate the various aspects of his teaching. The following extract comes from toward the beginning of Couperin’s method book, where he discusses how a teacher goes about getting a youngster started to play the harpsichord.

For children the appropriate age to begin is six or seven. This is not meant to exclude older persons. But needless to say, to mold and form hands to the practice of playing the harpsichord, the sooner the better. And because good grace is necessary, we should start by discussing the position of the body.

To be seated properly at the right height, the elbows, wrists, and fingers should be level. Thus one should sit in a chair that makes this possible.

One should place something of the appropriate size under the feet of young people, according to their height, so that their feet don’t dangle in the air but appropriately support the body.

An adult should be about nine thumb lengths from the keyboard, measuring from the waist, proportionally less for younger people.

The middle of the body should be placed at the middle of the keyboard.

At the keyboard one should turn the body slightly to the right. Don’t have the knees too close together. Place the feet parallel, but the right foot well to the [right] side.

With regard to those who make faces while playing: one can correct this by putting a mirror on top of the spinet [virginal] or harpsichord.

If a person’s wrist is too high when playing, the only effective remedy that I have found is to take a small flexible stick of some kind and pass it over the top of the defective wrist and under the other one. If the problem is the opposite [the wrist is too low], do the reverse. It is not necessary to constrict [the wrist] entirely with this stick, or it won’t be able to play. Little by little the fault will be corrected. I have found this little invention very useful.

It is better, and more decorous, not to mark time with the head, the body, or the feet. It is necessary to have a relaxed manner at the keyboard, not fixing one’s gaze on any particular object, or having an absent-minded look. When playing before a group, it is best to look at the company that has gathered, and not appear preoccupied. This advice is relevant only to those who are not playing from written scores.

During the earliest years it is best to play only on a spinet or a one manual harpsichord, and that each of these be quilled only very weakly [the crow quill plectra of the harpsichord be set to produce a very light touch]. This is a very important point. Good
execution depends much more on suppleness and great freedom for the fingers than it does on force. Consequently, if one starts off youngsters on a two-manual harpsichord the small hand of the student will be strained when trying to make the keys "sound," and from this the hands will become poorly placed and a hard touch will develop.

Smoothness of touch depends additionally on holding the fingers as closely as possible to the keys. It stands to reason (entirely apart from the fact that experience shows) that a hand that falls from a height will produce a drier blow that would one falling from close by and that the quill will draw a harder [harsher] sound from the string.

During the first lessons given to children, it is best that they not practice except in the presence of the person who is teaching them. Youngsters are not focused enough to be able to pay attention to holding their hands in the position that has been prescribed for them. When I do this, at the beginning lessons for children, I keep the key to the instrument on which I teach them so that they cannot in a brief moment undo all that I carefully instructed during three quarters of an hour.

Separate from the issue of the customary ornaments, such as trills, mordents, appoggiaturas, etc., I have always required that my students play little finger exercises, be it passage work or diverse batteries [arpeggios] beginning with the most simple, and in the most natural keys, leading them imperceptively to more involved ones and to transposed keys. These exercises can’t be too numerous. They are like supports ready to be put in place and that can be useful on many occasions. (I will give several examples at the end of the ornaments discussed hereafter, and from these others can be imagined.)

People who come to the keyboard later in life—who have been poorly instructed to the point that the nerves are atrophied or have developed bad habits—should loosen, or have loosened for them, their fingers before sitting down at the keyboard. That is to say, they should draw out, or have someone draw out for them, their fingers in all directions, which will lead to greater flexibility and freedom.

Proper fingering is very useful for playing well, but it would take me an entire volume to explain, with various illustrative examples, my thinking on the matter and what it is I teach my pupils. Here I will give only a general overview. [Couperin then goes on to discuss fingering, ornaments, and the like.] . . . . (pp. 3ff).