

Reviews

BOOKS

Frank Mento, *Harpsichord Method*, 10 vols. (2019)

The publication of a 21st-century harpsichord instruction method is a *magnus opus*, worth marking with a serious review. Frank Mento's self-published work (although via Amazon, in paperback, and also in a digital version for those who prefer to use their tablets), has many precedents in the late 18th century. Pedagogical keyboard composers, such as Bemetzrieder, Malme, Barthélemon, Callcott, Kollmann and Dale, all initially published instruction books at their own expense. Mento has not yet produced any accompanying audio material, but has stated that he is prepared to consider it. It is clear that he has some practical pedagogical experience with children, as well as being Professor Emeritus of Harpsichord at the Paris Conservatoire and Organist Emeritus at Saint-Jean de Montmartre Church. He also has an international career in performance.

A book a year

This ten-part initiative is to be hugely admired, and although I have some reservations about the method, derived from my own considerable experience of harpsichord and piano teaching, it goes a long way towards fulfilling a need. Mento's intention is that his ten volumes will each cover a year of lessons. The lengths of each vary considerably between the super-slim 27 pages of the second year and the huge volumes 8 & 10 which are two hundred pages longer; whether with a teacher or not, this is study-material for a whole decade. It is not, perhaps, wise to buy the 'complete set', if you are just beginning to learn a new instrument; such a long-term effort might seem overwhelming, and discourage slow and methodical study. However, it is cheaper to buy three-year's worth at a time, and you will also need a good supply of whiting-pens. If Mento's *Harpsichord Method* is the course you intend to take, I would urge you to tackle just one volume at a time, and forget the author's artificial time-limits. Speed of progress varies considerably from one individual to another with any course of instruction.

Beginning with beginners

The decision to start at the beginning, mainly with children in mind, which Mento rightly felt was a lacuna in the teaching of harpsichord (as opposed to piano), is a worthy one. I like the space he leaves for drawing round the pupil's hand, to explain fingering numbers (something

I also do in a first lesson), but, alongside the eight points he gives on posture, an image of the hand-position at the keyboard would be helpful. Even the cover is stark black and white; text only. Images and quizzes appeal to children, along with explanations (from their teacher), that are coloured imaginatively and metaphorically, to suit the pupil. Adults might not need titles such as 'Belvedere' or 'Undergrowth' explained to them, or so I thought until I read Mento's interesting 18th-century definition of 'The Mall' and, in Volume 5, a list of the individual Canary Islands. Whilst the layout of exercises, pieces and random nuggets of information is spacious enough for additional personal notes, the lack of any aesthetic appeal is off-putting in Volume 1, for beginners.

Subtitled, 'First Year', the first book covers the theoretical basics; initially, the child's needs are uppermost, but with one rather glaring omission; there is no indication or reference anywhere of how the pupils, in their first lesson, are to find middle C on the keyboard, although instructed to do so. He presumably expects the teacher will give assistance, but the book is so prescriptive in other aspects, that this lack is illogical. Harpsichord keyboards are not standardised, so middle C can be confusing, even for those who can normally easily locate it, but this is not discussed. It is probably also necessary to discuss the letter-names in conjunction with sol-fa, which is many children's first musical language. British historical instruction books show the keyboard with letter names attached, and occasionally linked to the staves, for a correlation between the named note on the music score and that upon the instrument. Indeed, some such tutors even include a double page or flap, to view the layout. It would have been interesting to see it with the black natural keys, and white sharps or accidentals and, even though this was not standardised in the 18th-century, it would reinforce its specificity for the harpsichord.

It is no small task to accumulate the theoretical information, pieces and exercises to cover all technical challenges, but it does not always teach the student step by step, as an holistic process. Volume 2, continues the introduction of pieces and exercises by named composers, started in the first volume, but I would question the wisdom of teaching scales (starting with Eb major), somewhat randomly and pointlessly, without also coupling them with pieces in the keys that are appropriate to this elementary level. Root-position triads appear on the last page, without differentiating major, minor, or diminished, and yet the explanations, along with their inversions, should have already prefaced the Purcell prelude, twelve pages earlier.

Fingering matters

If I use this method, for children or adults, the first thing will be to apply a whiting pen to almost all the fingering numbers and any printed letter-names in the text, leaving only the key ones. I have, in fact, started on my copies, but this is irksome, because Mento has applied them to every note at the start. Whilst choice of fingering will be essential in producing chosen articulations later on—for beginners with a fixed hand position, few fingerings are needed. Throughout the method, there are far too many numbers; despite the suggestion, in Volume 2, that you should avoid relying on fingerings, such a forest of numbers can also lead to ignoring them altogether. This frequency is completely unnecessary if hand-positions are explained and adhered to, and will discourage reading the notes on the two staves. The ‘Localizing Notes’ pages would, initially, be better achieved with a smaller range of random notes, but they are helpful for shape recognition. The sight-reading exercises do not begin until Volume 7, and they do not equate to the higher standards of the pieces of this standard or, indeed, the ABRSM exam system.

Exercises

Despite my insistence on the removal of unnecessary fingering numbers, the inclusion of five-finger exercises is helpful for digital skills, many of which are derived from historic publications, including Couperin, Hartung, Marpurg etc. I would have liked the exercises to complement specific pieces, to be created out of, and for, the following piece to encourage productive future practice.

Perhaps Mento’s greatest contribution to harpsichord pedagogy is the inclusion of figured bass exercises, sensibly starting from basics, with the understanding of intervals, in Volume 2. This important strand continues throughout the further volumes and offers many and diverse progressive exercises. These are to be welcomed, although as he intersperses them between his chosen repertoire, it might have been revealing to make harmonic or stylistic connections between them. Ornamentation tables are given throughout the method, but a note to explain why symbols are used (instead of notation of embellishments), might encourage flexibility in performance. The inclusion of exercises on diminutions and improvisation is to be warmly applauded for encouraging an early improvisatory approach, supported by some solid historical foundation.

Page 41 of Volume 1 offers the first piece (by Türk), with prescriptive markings, but lacks an explanation of how to execute either a legato or a tenuto; nor does he define this first occurrence of the slur. Naming the mark ‘slurred’ notes, does not enlighten the student as to its

meaning. Volume 3, a page of ‘Early Articulation’ offers some excellent examples but, whilst Mento suggests that the student should find suitable fingerings as he plays them, he gives no idea why these composers might have chosen to join or separate the notes. Those of us lucky enough to have heard Gustav Leonhardt work through a Frescobaldi toccata explaining why he was choosing each individual length of note (whether separated, or joined, or overheld, and by exactly how much), will know that articulation is so much more than mere slurs and staccato markings, and that it is a personal matter, at the heart of interpretation on the harpsichord. However, guidance is certainly needed in the early stages, such as that given by Clementi (a fine harpsichordist before he applied his techniques to the early Piano Forte), on the eighth page of his own beginners’ method. In the 1801 Introduction, Clementi indicated three different grades of detachment plus legato, and this remains a helpful starting-point.

Assessing the level and choice of repertoire

To progress to the pieces at the end of Mento’s ‘First Year’, is a tall order for most complete beginners, and I doubt the method assists sight-reading to this standard, but the choice of pieces, throughout the Method, is a good introduction to harpsichord repertoire, including that for virginals in the following volumes. It remains less common to meet students with no previous keyboard skills, and more often it is a process of adaptation. An accomplished pianist might feel it beneath them to start at Volume 2 (unless they want to improve sight-reading skills, and start figured bass), but choosing a less ambitious level would enable concentration on the instrument, the touch and the style (but where the fingerings are not marked as original, then editing will still be required). I like the early introduction of an unmeasured prelude, in Volume 3, a form which can liberate some early-learners, but wish he would put his comments ahead of the piece, rather than at the end, and make it clear for whom they are intended. More assistance will be needed by the pupil, in preparation for much of the included repertoire, which does suggest a teacher is essential to this method; the two introductory Scarlatti sonatas in Volume 7 are rich in editorial, articulatory marks that lack satisfactory explanation of their purpose (an essential for students to learn autonomy). Throughout the Method, the layout could be much improved, and save unnecessary waste of paper, as exemplified on the mostly blank page with scant and inexact information on Scarlatti. Volume 10 includes much longer major works, such as Couperin’s B minor ordre, and Rameau’s A minor suite, both of which have discontinuous bar-lines, departing from the house-style that is used to join the staves and ease reading, as in the preceding Bach prelude and fugue and Couperin piece.

In conclusion

Like J. B. Cramer and other writers of early piano preceptors, Mento may well make alterations to content and layout in future editions, and attempt to make them look more appealing. Indeed, I would be encouraging my adult students to buy what forms an excellent Basso Continuo collection, especially were Mento to issue this separately. As the exercise collection is not wedded to the repertoire within the Method, it would also be a useful freestanding publication, offering an overview of early technical practice. The elementary five-finger pieces constrict the thumbs to C, but will be useful for children in the first stages.

A few pieces for harpsichord from the last 120 years would be welcome, if only in an overview of historical repertoire (which is badly needed). I would also have liked some facsimiles, and I consider a bibliography of scores and books relevant to the harpsichord an essential addition. A mention of international harpsichord magazines (such as this one) and societies (such as the free, online British Harpsichord Society), might bring those who are new to the subject into contact with others. For a publication which I imagine is almost printed on demand, and available online, it would not be difficult to update information.

In the hands of a wise teacher, prepared to eradicate both extraneous fingering and unhelpful articulation, and to extract and supplement, according to a student's needs and preferences, the ten volumes contain much of value. They will, indeed, 'favorize' the learner with a huge number of pieces, in a method that nearly 'englobes' the repertoire, from which they will, in time, be ready to 'concertize'!

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