

Early English keyboard fingerings

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EARLY ENGLISH KEYBOARD FINGERINGS

BY MARK LINDLEY

Introduction

Thousands of fingerings are extant in English keyboard music from late 16th and early to mid 17th centuries. They are mostly in undated manuscripts and have not yet been put in chronological order¹; this gives the scholar a challenge, but needn't really trouble performers who wish to develop an historically appropriate technique for the repertoire, as they can take a somewhat 'global' approach.

Many sources have occasional fingerings, as in Ex. 1. These were evidently useful to players who were already quite familiar with contemporary techniques. More valuable today are detailed fingerings as in Ex. 2. Indeed, the best way to study the old playing techniques is to learn first a few pieces which are fingered in detail throughout.² In choosing the pieces, one should bear in mind that the fingerings in any one manuscript may to some extent be personal, but if a piece is fingered in different manuscripts which have variant readings showing that it was widely played and not merely copied, then the fingerings which they have in common can be accepted as competent and representative of their day. In this regard it is worthwhile for modern editors to distinguish

Ex. 1. Gibbons, Fantasia, (F-PC rés 1186 bis ii, page 44), beginning



Ex. 2. Gibbons, Fantasia, (GB-Och mus 378, page 1), beginning



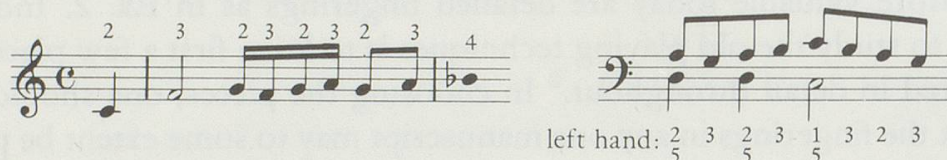
¹ For an inventory of sources, see Peter Le Huray, "English keyboard fingering in the 16th and early 17th centuries", in Ian Bent, ed., *Source material and the interpretation of music. A memorial volume to Thurstan Dart*, London 1981.

² Several such pieces have been published in Maria Boxall, ed., *Harpsichord studies*, London 1980; Peter Le Huray, ed., *The fingering of virginal music*, London 1981; and Mark Lindley and Maria Boxall, eds., *Early keyboard fingerings, an anthology*, London 1982. I should like to thank Miss Boxall for sharing with me information which I have used in preparing this study.

clearly among the different readings, and particularly to make clear the relation between the variant fingerings and the variant notes and accidentals.³

A brief word on the historical background may be suitable here. The earliest German and Italian evidence about keyboard fingerings, which is in treatises by Hans Buchner (c1525) and Girolamo Diruta (1593), suggest that the normal use of 3 in a melodic line was for metrically weak notes, as in Ex. 3 (from Buchner). This is contrary to the English tendency to use 3 on strong notes, as in Ex. 2. At Leipzig in the 1570s and '80s, Nicolaus Ammerbach put 3 on weak or strong notes indifferently, as in Ex. 4; apparently his main concerns were to avoid shifting the hand within a beat and to take all the right hand's quick notes with the three longest fingers. Buchner and Ammerbach both used the left thumb more than the right, as one might infer from Exx. 3 and 4. They, and Diruta too, would normally use the same pair of fingers for the same harmonic interval in different contexts, as in Ex. 5.⁴

Ex. 3. Buchner, *Quem terra pontus* (CH-Bu f i 8a), bars 7–9 and 15



Ex. 4. Ammerbach, exercise (1571), excerpt




Ex. 5. Buchner, *Quem terra pontus*, bars 31–32



³ For example, the fingering 4512 in the second bar of Ex. 50 becomes quite awkward when applied (as in Le Huray's edition) to the *Musica Britannica* version of the passage, which reads F# GAA instead of DDAA. For a list of c150 emendations to Le Huray's edition of this piece, see my "Early fingerings: some editing problems and some new readings for J. S. Bach and John Bull", *Early Music* 17 (1989) p. 60.

⁴ Hans Buchner, 'fundament buch', in CH-Bu F.I.8a, edited by J. H. Schmidt in *Hans Buchner, Sämtliche Orgelwerke = Das Erbe Deutscher Musik*, vol. 54, Basel 1974; Elias Nikolaus Ammerbach, *Orgel oder Instrument Tabulatur*, Leipzig 1571 and *Orgel oder Instrument Tabulaturbuch*, Nürnberg 1583; Girolamo Diruta, *Il transilvano*, vol. 1, Venice 1593; Eng. trans in E. J. Soehnlein, *Diruta on the art of keyboard playing*, Ph.D. diss., Univ. of Michigan, 1975 and in M. Bradshaw and E. J. Soehnlein, *Girolamo Diruta's The Transylvanian*, Brooklyn 1980. Diruta gave no examples with fingerings, only rules.

The English habit of giving the strong notes in a tune to 3 may have come originally from Spain. Amongst Henry VIII's wives, Catherine of Aragon's tenure was by far the longest, and Spanish influence at the English court was again strong under her daughter, Queen Mary. In the preface to the *Obras de Musica* (1578) of Antonio de Cabezón (whose visit to England in the mid-1550s is sometimes thought to have stimulated the precocious development of the keyboard variation-set there), the composer's brother recommended that the right hand take scales 3434 ... up, and 3232 ... down.⁵

Tomás de Santa María said in 1565 that the hand should point towards the key to be played next, and the finger which has just played should be lifted before the next one plays.⁶ Should we apply this advice to the English fingering? The more detached the articulation, the more the hand's motions can be reduced to lateral shifts, which after some getting used to can be done very fast while keeping quite relaxed. But uniform detaching is almost as insipid as uniform slurring in pairs. One can make a real legato by 'walking', that is, crossing the longer fingers over each other, but this may overtax the hand. One might cultivate a very subtle degree of detachment, turning the hand just enough to mitigate it without trying to eliminate it altogether. I suppose good playing entails all these possibilities at different times. A  phrasing for semiquavers admits some slurring while letting the hand make its lateral shifts unobtrusively between beats.

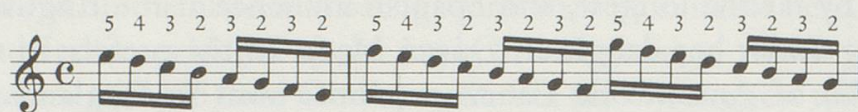
Stepwise passages and small skips

As for the fingerings themselves: Ex. 6 is but one of many which could be cited to show that for descending right-hand scales, the English would nor-

⁵ In general, however, the patterns of early Spanish keyboard fingerings are rather complicated. Information is given in prefaces or treatises by Juan Bermudo (1555), Venegas de Henestrosa (1557), Tomás de Santa María (1565), Hernando Cabezón (1578), and Francisco Correa de Arauxo (1626). Only Correa de Arauxo gives any examples with fingerings (in part VIII of his *Facultad organica*, Acala 1626, where some brief examples are fingered in chapters 9–10); see Jon Burnett Holland, "Francisco Correa de Arauxo's *Facultad Organica*: a translation and study of its theoretical and pedagogical aspects", D.M.A. diss., Univ. of Oregon, 1985, pp. 105–113 and 217–260. See also Robert Parkins, "Keyboard fingerings in early Spanish sources", *Early Music* 11 (1983) p. 323; and Barbara Sachs and Barry Ife, ed., *Anthology of early keyboard methods*, Cambridge, Eng. 1982.

⁶ Tomás de Santa María, *Arte de tañer fantasia*, Valladolid 1569, fol. 38^v: "al herir de los dedos en las teclas, siempre el dedo que herire primero se levante antes que hiera el otro que inmediatamente se sigue tras el." Some equivalent 18th-century German remarks are discussed in my "Keyboard technique and articulation: evidence for the performance practices of Bach, Handel and Scarlatti", in Peter Williams, ed., *Bach, Handel and Scarlatti: tercentenary essays*, Cambridge 1985.

Ex. 6. Gibbons, Prelude (F-PC rés 1186 bis i, page 5), bars 20–21 [GB-Och mus 89 (page 304) and Hdolmetsch ii e 17 (fol 9^v) give only the 5's]

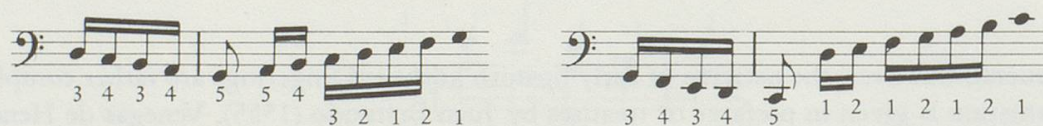


mally use 3232 ..., except that they would start with 5432 after a leap up from 2. For either hand, scales away from the body would be fingered 3434 ... (after perhaps starting from the thumb) and end with 5, as in Exx. 7*b*–9; and sometimes an ascending scale for the left hand might begin with 5, as in Exx. 8*a* and 9. (Ex. 9 is from the late 17th century and shows the persistence of the 3434 technique.⁷) Ad-hoc considerations could affect the fingering at the beginning or end of a run. In Ex. 8*b*, the reason for beginning with the thumb is obvious; Ex. 10 is more exotic-looking, but just as logical, and very effective in the playing.

Ex. 7. Gibbons, 'The king's jewell' (GB-Lbm add 36661, fol 40^v), bars 1–4 and 33–36



Ex. 8. Gibbons, Whoop do me no harm (Priscilla Bunbury's Virginal Book), bars 22–23 and 21–22 [*F-Pc rés 1186 bis ii gives 3 for this A, thus implying 32 1212 1]

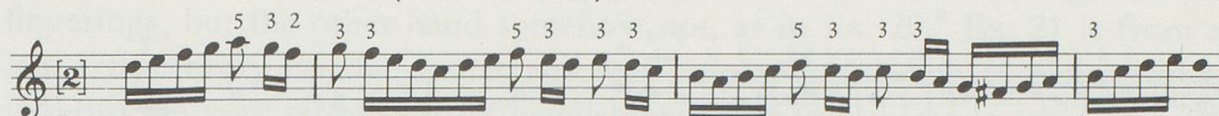


Ex. 9. Blow, Voluntary (GB-Lc 2093, fol 23^v), bars 11–12



⁷ C. P. E. Bach said in 1753 that for scales with few or no accidentals, 4343 would sometimes produce the smoothest effect, since without any chromatic notes, the thumb has relatively little ease to cross under (*Versuch über die wahre Art das Clavier zu spielen*, ch. 1. para. 64).

Ex. 10. Gibbons, Fantasia (F-Pc rés 1186), bars 29–32



In Ex. 11, the reason for using 3 (and not 1) seems to be that if the hand has assumed the best posture for crossing 3 over 2 or 4, then it is awkward to bring the thumb to the keyboard. Hence also (I suppose) the 3 at the beginning of the second bar of Ex. 12. In Ex. 13, the hand must go rather into the keyboard for the B^b's, and so need hardly go further to introduce the thumb. Exx. 14–15 show how, in the right hand, 5 was used more readily than 1. Ex. 16 is from a late 17th-century source; I suppose the fingering reflects a modern tendency for its time.

Ex. 11. Bull, Fantasia (GB-Lbm 36661, fol 48), bars 64 and 66



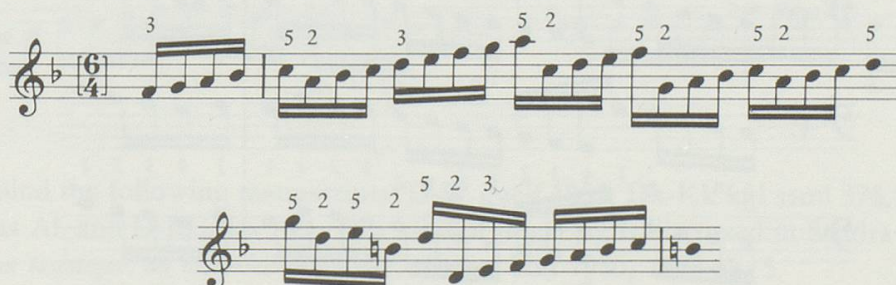
Ex. 12. Gibbons, Prelude (F-Pc rés 1186; Och mus 89 and Hdolmetsch), bars 22–24



Ex. 13. Bull, Fantasia, bar 67



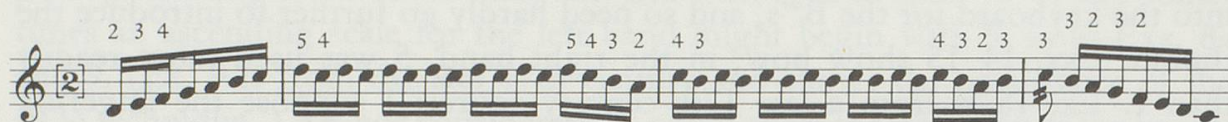
Ex. 14. Gibbons, The woods so wild (GB-Lbm add 36661, fol 41^v), bars 33–35 and 35–36



Ex. 15. Gibbons, Fantasia (GB-Och mus 378), bars 23–26



Ex. 16. Edward Bevin, Praeludium (GB-Lbm add 31403, fol 3), bars 7–10

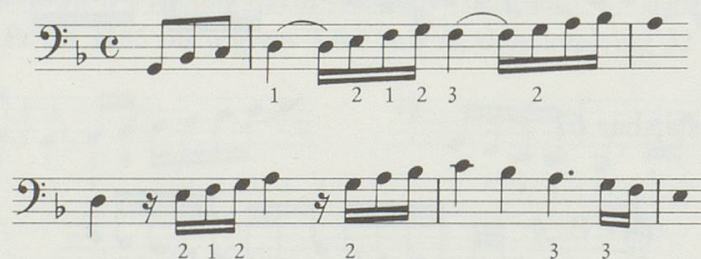


The left thumb was used more readily than the right, and sometimes, as in Exx. 8–9 and 17–19, more than it is usually used today. In Ex. 19, the 4 on the lowest note is like some of the 2's in Ex. 14.

Ex. 17. Bull, Preludium (GB-Lbm add 31403, fol 3), bars 8–10



Ex. 18. Bull, Fantasia, bars 8–10 and 31–33



Ex. 19. Gibbons, Prelude (GB-Och mus 89; F-Pc rés 1186; GB-Hdolmetsch), bars 5–6



In some 17th-century north Germanic music, one hand has English-style fingerings, but the other hand somehow not, as in Ex. 20.⁸ Ex. 21 is from a late 17th-century English source and may reflect such an influence; fingerings like this are very rare in earlier English sources.

Ex. 20. Anon, diminutions (D-W guelf 1055, fol 2^v)

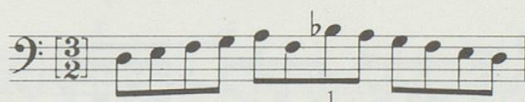


Ex. 21. Blow, Voluntary, bars 15–16



Exx. 22–24 show that the left thumb was no less adept at taking a B^b than it must be in, say, Chopin's music. Ex. 25 suggests that this may already have been so in 16th-century Germany. More unusual was the use of 5 in the left hand to play a B^b, as in Ex. 26.

Ex. 22. Byrd, My Lady Nevell's ground (My Lady Nevell's Book, no 1), bar 102



Ex. 23. Gibbons, The woods so wild, bars 25–27

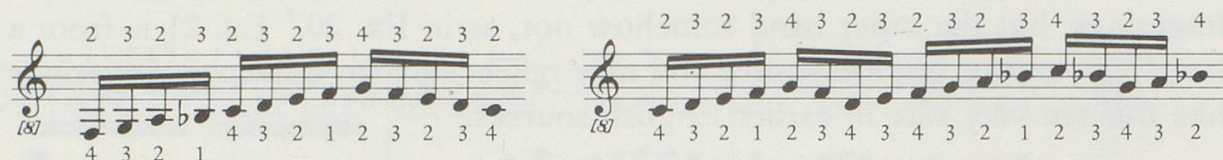


Ex. 24. Bull, Miserere (GB-Och mus 1207; (F-Pc rés 1186 bis ii, fol 54), bars 17–18 and 23–25

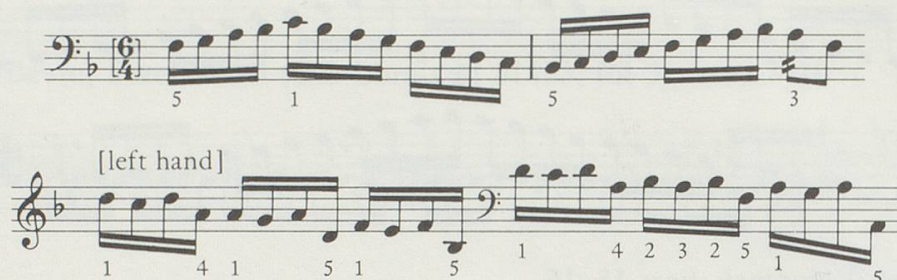


⁸ I have in mind the following manuscripts: D-W guelf 1055, Dk-Kk kgl saml 376, R-Brm 808, D-Bda lynar Al, and D-LÜr kn 149. This kind of fingering is discussed in Sandra Soderland's tutor, *Organ technique, an historical approach*, Chapel Hill 1980, 1985 ch. 5.

Ex. 25. Ammerbach, exercises (1583), excerpts

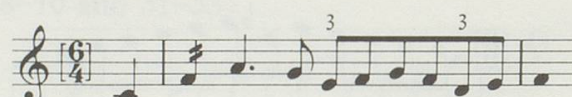


Ex. 26. Gibbons, *The woods so wild*, bars 17–18 and 21

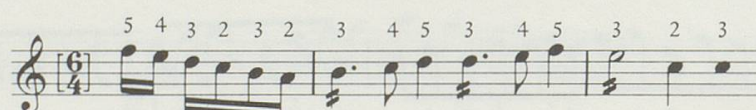


Exx. 27–31 show how the right hand would often, particularly in a tune, shift slightly, at the beat, to put 3 on a strong note. (To shift within the beat, as in Ex. 31, was less common.) But this was not obligatory; there are plenty of contrary examples in music by William Byrd (Exx. 32–35) and later composers (Exx. 36–39). (See also Exx. 47–49.) The reason for taking a strong note with 2 or 4 might be to use the three long fingers for a group of notes comprising a 3rd; or it might be a matter of sparing 1 or 5 the trouble of playing a sharp.

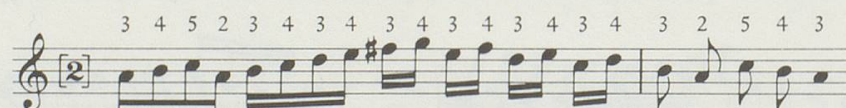
Ex. 27. Byrd, *The carmans whistle* (*My Lady Nevell's Book*, no 34), bars 22–24



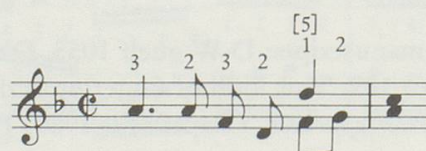
Ex. 28. Gibbons, *Whoop do me no harm*, bars 20–22



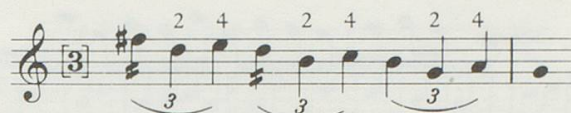
Ex. 29. Bull, *Prelude* (GB-Lbm add 31403, fol 4), bars 3–5



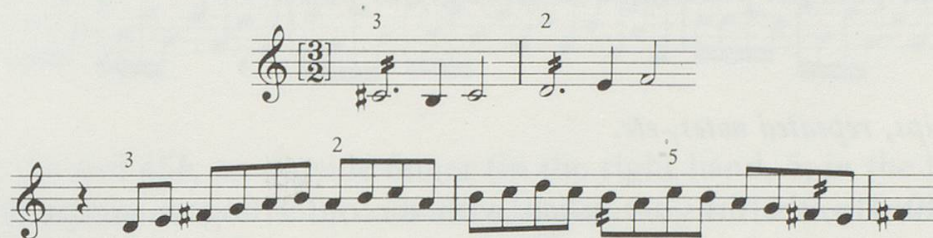
Ex. 30. Anon, *The buildings* (GB-Och mus 431, fol 4^v), beginning



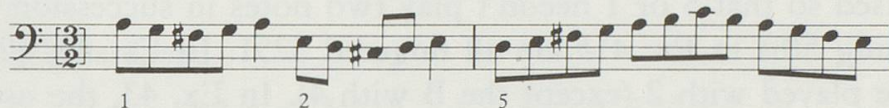
Ex. 31. Byrd, My Lady Nevell's ground, bars 111–12



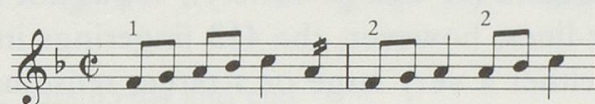
Ex. 32. Byrd, My Lady Nevell's ground, bars 1–2 and 61–63



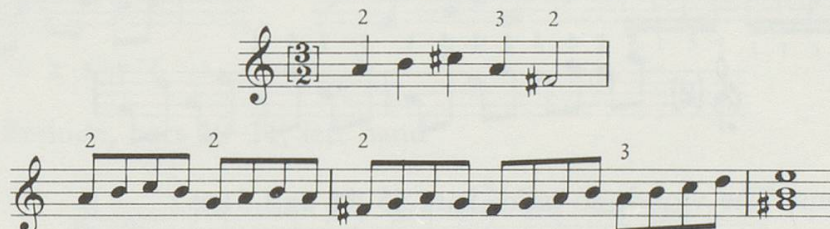
Ex. 33. Byrd, My Lady Nevell's ground, bars 79–80



Ex. 34. Byrd, Fortune (GB-En panmure 9), fol 14v, bars 30–31



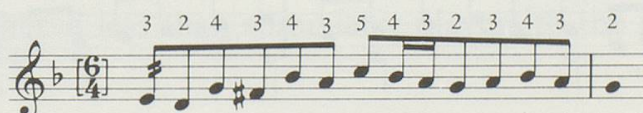
Ex. 35. Byrd, Qui passe (My Lady Nevell's Book, no 2), bars 48 and 62–64



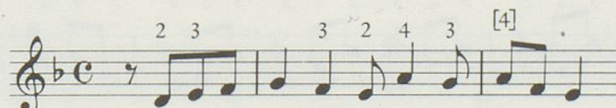
Ex. 36. Gibbons, The woods so wild, bars 41 and 42–43



Ex. 37. Gibbons, The woods so wild, bars 59–60



Ex. 38. Bull, Fantasia, bars 18–20



Ex. 39. Bull, Miserere, bars 18–19



For the first six notes in Ex. 40, I suppose the fingering may have been intended to prevent phrasing too strongly in pairs.

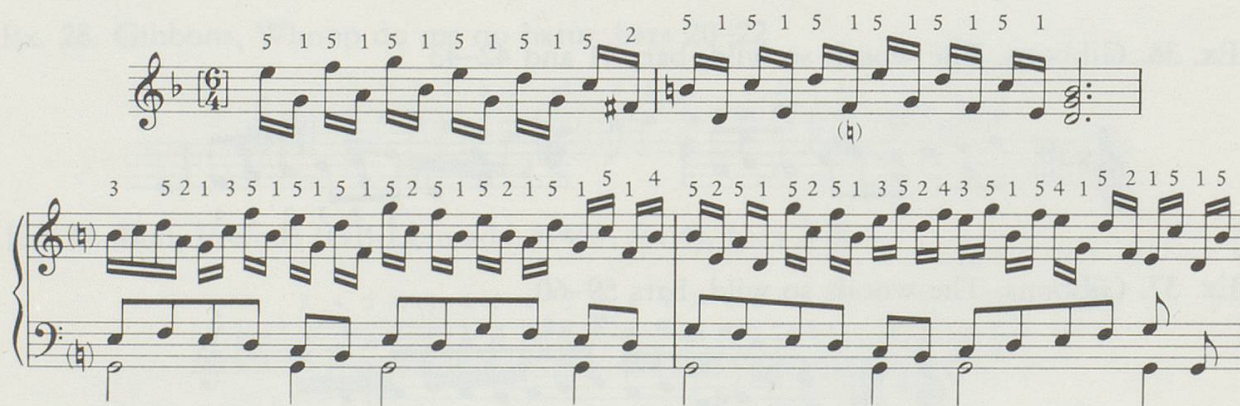
Larger skips, repeated notes, etc.

In Exx. 40–41*a*, the 6ths are taken with the outer fingers except where 2 is used to keep the right thumb off a chromatic note. But the last part of Ex. 41*b* suggests that when successive 6ths were broken in opposite directions, 4 or 2 was used so that 5 or 1 needn't play two notes in succession. The pairs of descending 5ths in Ex. 41*b* are all fingered 5251. In Ex. 42, all the weak quavers are played with 2 (except the B with 4). In Ex. 43, the use of 4 just before three of the bar-lines seems sensible. I should like to imagine that for the sake of a relaxed hand (as well as variety), 4 was not intended to be used before the other bar-lines; however, the 413 fingerings in the middle of two of the bars suggest either a very large or a rather tense hand.

Ex. 40. Anon, Why ask you (F-Pc rés 1186), bars 29–30



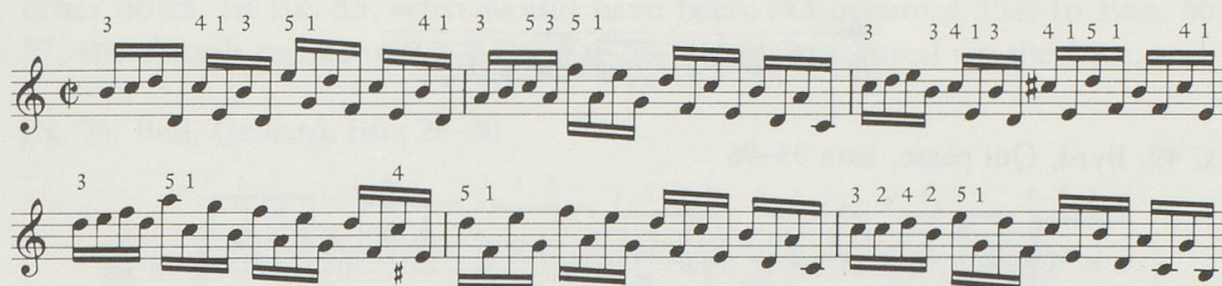
Ex. 41. Gibbons, *The woods so wild*, bars 55–56 and 51–52



Ex. 42. Bull, Galliard (GB-Lbm add 36661, fol 50^v), bars 13–16



Ex. 43. Bull, Miserere, bars 43–48

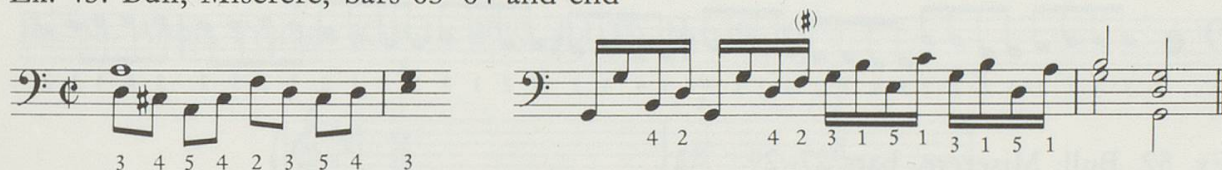


In Exx. 44 and 45*b*, an outside finger (in the right hand, 5; in the left hand, 1) takes a prominent role in broken-chord figuration as the final chord of the piece is approached. This encourages the player to hesitate (very slightly) at the last barline. Ex. 46 shows a more routine fingering.

Ex. 44. Bull, Galliard, end



Ex. 45. Bull, Miserere, bars 63–64 and end

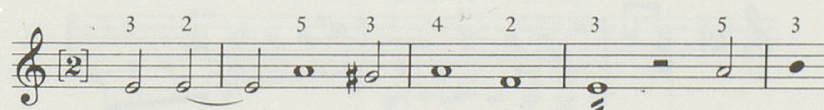


Ex. 46. Bull, Prelude, bars 10–11, left hand

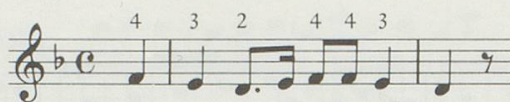


In the middle of Ex. 41*b*, the two B's in succession are played with different fingers. This technique was often used for repeated notes, as in Ex. 47. In Ex. 48, however, the principle of filling a 3rd with 2, 3 and 4 has prevailed. Ex. 49 suggests to me, especially when considered in the light of Exx. 32–35, that Byrd may have adhered less than some later players to the principle of taking strong notes with 3.

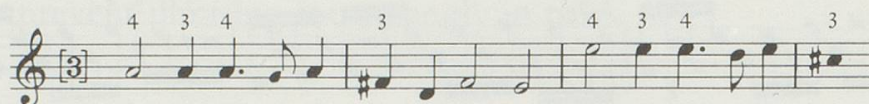
Ex. 47. Anon, Voluntary (GB-Lc 2093, fol 45), bars 11–15



Ex. 48. Bull, Fantasia, bars 15–17

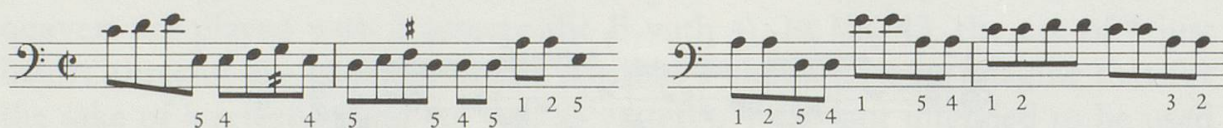


Ex. 49. Byrd, Qui passe, bars 93–96



Bull's "Miserere" has many repeated notes, as Exx. 50–53 show. Usually the rhythmically stronger one is fingered 1, 3 or 5, the weaker 2 or 4. But this was not a constant principle, as Exx. 50*a* and 53 show with regard to Bull, and Ex. 54 with regard to Byrd.

Ex. 50. Bull, Miserere, bars 2–3 and 8–9



Ex. 51. Bull, Miserere, bars 11–13



Ex. 52. Bull, Miserere, bars 27–29



Ex. 53. Bull, Miserere, bars 26–29 and 45–46



Ex. 54. Byrd, The march before the battle (My Lady Nevell's Book, no 3), bars 41–43



The fingering for a tune will of course differ if the hand must also play other notes. In Ex. 55, what would have been 143 becomes 353. In Exx. 56–57, the thumb passes under 2. In Ex. 58, 4 and 2 are used on the beat.

Ex. 55. Bull, Galliard, bars 28–30



Ex. 56. Anon, Voluntary (GB-Lc 2093, fol 44), penultimate bars



Ex. 57. Anon, Prelude (GB-Lc 2093, fol 3^v), bars 11–13



Ex. 58. Anon, Prelude (GB-Lc 2093, fol 3^v), bars 9–10

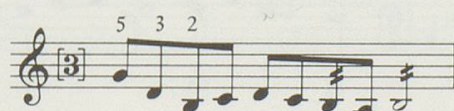


The fingering of a triad shown at the beginning of Ex. 58 is not rare in English sources, but it is contrary to a later continental habit represented here by Ex. 59. Ex. 60 is also something of a counter-example.

Ex. 59. Dandrieu, Gavotte tendre (*Pièces de clavecin courtes et faciles*, 1713), bars 11–12

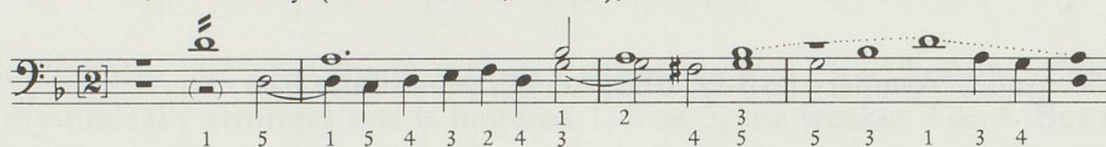


Ex. 60. Byrd, My Lady Nevell's ground, bar 64

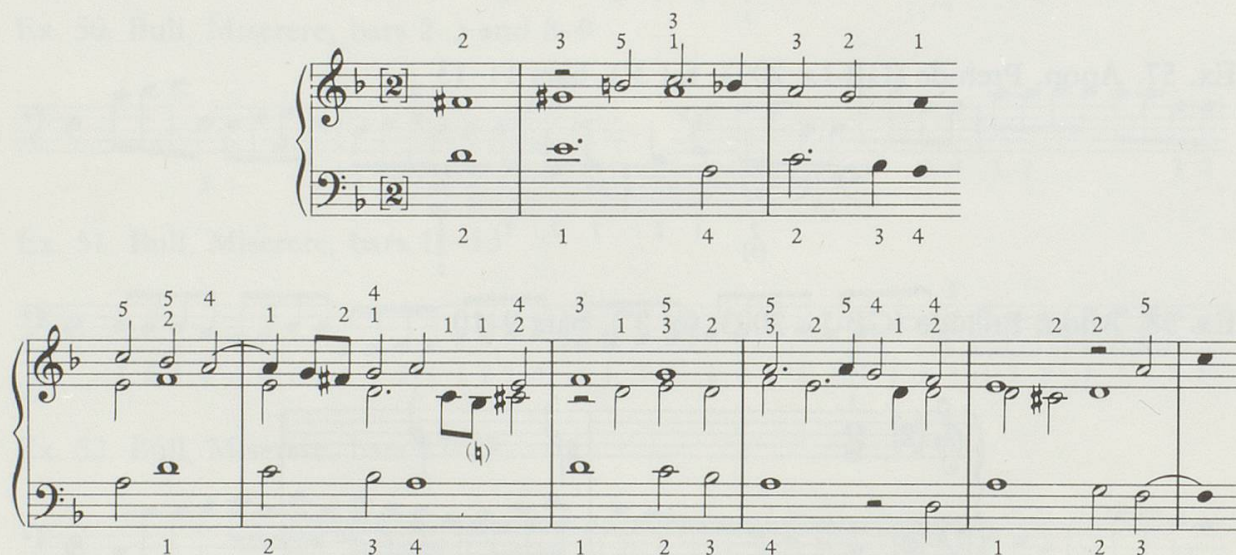


Exx. 58 and 61–71 show that when one hand played two parts, it was normal for the same finger often to take two or more notes in succession. This might occasionally involve taking a chromatic note with the thumb, as in Ex. 64 and 66*b*, or with the little finger, as in Ex. 70*a*. But most often it was a matter of taking two or more diatonic notes with 5 or 1. This technique was common on the continent for a long time, as Ex. 72 may illustrate.

Ex. 61. Anon, Voluntary (GB-Lc 2093, fol 45), bars 1–5



Ex. 62. Anon, Voluntary (GB-Lc 2093, fol 45), bars 19–21 and 37–41



Ex. 63. Bull, Prelude, end



Ex. 64. Gibbons, The woods so wild, bar 5



Ex. 65. Anon, Voluntary (GB-Lc 2093, fol 40), bars 7–10 and 19–23

Ex. 65 shows two systems of musical notation. The first system contains bars 7–10 and the second system contains bars 19–23. The notation is in treble and bass staves with a 2/4 time signature. Fingerings are indicated by numbers 1–5 above or below notes. A repeat sign is present at the end of the first system.

Ex. 66. Anon, Voluntary (GB-Lc 2093, fol 41^v), bars 9–11 and 15–17

Ex. 66 shows two systems of musical notation. The first system contains bars 9–11 and the second system contains bars 15–17. The notation is in treble and bass staves with a 2/4 time signature. Fingerings are indicated by numbers 1–5 above or below notes.

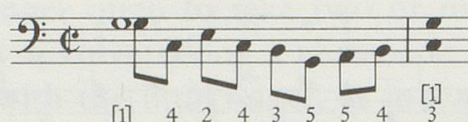
Ex. 67. Gibbons, Fantasia (GB-Och mus 378) bars 18–22

Ex. 67 shows a single system of musical notation. The notation is in treble and bass staves with a 2/4 time signature. Fingerings are indicated by numbers 1–5 above or below notes. A repeat sign is present at the end of the first system.

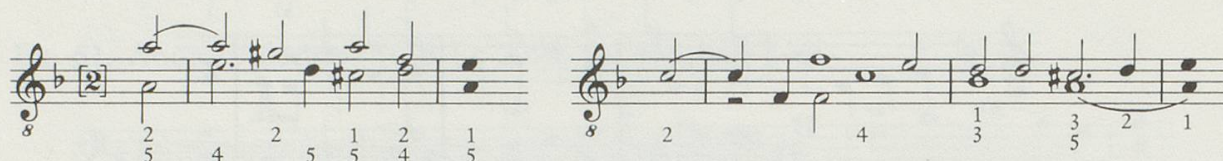
Ex. 68. Anon, The buildings, bars 7–10 and 13–14

Ex. 68 shows two systems of musical notation. The first system contains bars 7–10 and the second system contains bars 13–14. The notation is in bass staves with a 2/4 time signature. Fingerings are indicated by numbers 1–5 above or below notes.

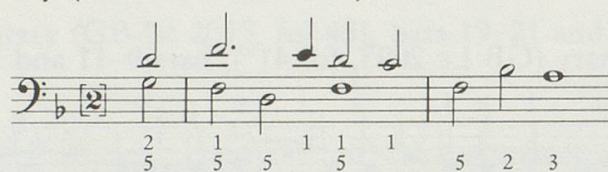
Ex. 69. Bull, Miserere, bars 40–41



Ex. 70. Anon, Voluntary (GB-Lc 2093, fol 45), bars 7–9 and 24–27



Ex. 71. Anon, Voluntary (GB-Lc 2093, fol 45), bars 21–23



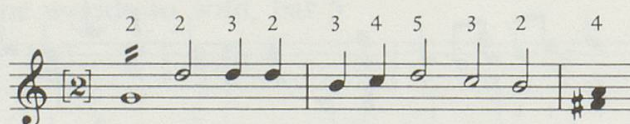
Ex. 72. J. S. Bach, Canzona (BWV 588, D-Lm 7, page 95), bars 61–66



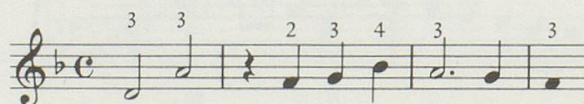
Ex. 70 suggests that when the left hand after playing an octave had to suspend the upper note over its 4th below, the most usual fingering for the new note may have been 4 (and not 3).

Finally, Exx. 73–74 show that in an unaccompanied subject at the beginning of a piece, 2 or 3 might leap between two different notes, presumably for the sake of a more deliberate articulation.

Ex. 73. Anon, Voluntary (GB-Lc 2093, fol 44), beginning



Ex. 74. Bull, Fantasia, beginning



Conclusion

A performer who wishes to develop an "English virginalist" style of playing should, in addition to becoming very familiar with information of this kind, master some pieces which are completely fingered in the sources, and then some which have extensive but incomplete original fingering.⁹ After such an intimate engagement with the historical evidence, one may be reasonably confident of one's own old-style fingerings, since in the 17th century as in any other, no accomplished player would copy anyone else.

⁹ The *Musica Britannica* editions include fingerings for several such pieces, but often without the ornaments which have conditioned some of the fingerings.

