

Pièces de Clavecin
Jean-Philippe Rameau (1683-1764)
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Selected quotes collected by Wilma Jensen

Page 17

“First, it is necessary to sit at the harpsichord with the elbows higher than the level of the keyboard, so that the hand can drop on to the keyboard merely by the natural movement of the wrist joint.

It is so that the hand should drop as of itself on to the keyboard that the elbows have to be higher than the level of this latter, and they are never too high so long as the 1st and 5th can rest on the edge of the keys.”

“However, as has already been said, by dropping the hand, the fingers curl naturally to the necessary extent and they must then be neither extended nor curled any further, except in certain cases where one has no alternative.”

“The wrist must always be supple.”

“The movement of the fingers begins at their root, that is to say, at the point where they join the hand, and never anywhere else. That of the hand begins at the wrist joint, whilst that of the forearm, assuming that such a movement is necessary, begins at the elbow.”

“The fingers must drop on to the keys and not hit them: moreover, they must glide [*coulent: glide; flow; roll*], so to speak, from one key to the other when playing successive notes, which will give some idea of how gently one has to start.”

“From the finger with which you started, pass on to its neighbor and so on from one to the other...”

“Remember to make every finger act by its own particular movement, and see that the finger which releases a key always remains so close to it that it appears to be touching it.”

Page 18:

“First get the hand accustomed to supporting the fingers; space the fingers out to correspond with the arrangement of the keys; see that every finger acquires a separate movement; get used to lifting one while lowering the other. The strength behind them, their weight and their movement become equalized in time.”

“Avoid, so far as possible, playing a *sharp* or a *flat* with the 1st or 5th, especially in the *roulements*, endeavoring to ensure when a sharp or a flat is to be played that the 1st is resting on the preceding key, as this will facilitate execution.”

Page 19:

“When practicing *trills* or *shakes*, only those fingers which are in use should be raised as high as possible. However, as the movement becomes familiar, these fingers are raised less and less and the considerable movement employed at the outset is finally replaced by a movement which is light and brisk. Take great care not to rush the end of the trill in terminating it, for it will *close* naturally once one has grown accustomed to it.”

Many thanks to my former student Parker Ramsay for directing me to the Pièces de Clavecin and Rameau's remarks about the placement of the wrist, the motions of the fingers and hand, and other facets of keyboard technique.