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The 'harpe organisée', 1720-1840 : rediscovering the lost pedal techniques on harps with a single-action pedal mechanism

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Summary

In 2014, while preparing for a concert, I began to learn Spohr's Opp. 115 and 118, the only two works by Spohr that I had not learnt or performed. I found certain passages impossible to play, if my foot pressed only one pedal at a time, on one side of the harp. From the scores, it seemed as if Spohr was asking the harpist to move at least two pedals at a time.

I consulted Backofen's method for harp, *Anleitung zum Harfenspiel* (1801), where I knew that he had written on double-pedalling, which can be simplified by folding away a middle pedal in order to move two non-adjacent pedals at the same time. I also consulted Mike Parker's book on the single-action harp.

From this, I decided to explore any aspect of pedalling on the single-action harp, especially with respect to the *virtuoso* pieces performed by exceptional harpists of the eighteenth- and early nineteenth centuries. The research into multi-pedalling was extended across five historical areas of research: treatises and methods, musical sources where a special solution is written by the composer/publisher, scores with no instructions, but where multi-pedalling is implied by the music, historical shoes, and finally images (portraits and illustrations) of harpists pedalling. Finally, I sought out any other historical sources that may point to evidence of pedalling techniques. I used newspaper accounts of concerts, journals and literary descriptions.

The non-verbal historical sources include the complete works for harp by Spohr and Op. 2 by Krumpholtz. To play Spohr's music, the harpist uses the heel and toe independently where over thirty-seven complex moves are part of his music. When a pedal is folded or unfolded during a piece, Spohr writes at least one bar's rest for the harpist.

As the single-action and double-action harp co-existed for at least thirty years, I reviewed the historical sources of the later harp to see if multi-pedalling continued on this instrument.

Historical pedalling was a movement of the whole foot, completely off the floor, and an action where most pedals are not fixed. Pedals were moved at the moment where an accidental is written on the music staves and then released as soon as possible. Pedal markings are unnecessary, if pedalling is an inherent part of the musical gesture and not a mechanical obligation. The physicality of the pedal moves

becomes of utmost importance, creating tensions and resolutions that mirror the musical line.