

Learning from pictures
Keyboard performance practice in Renaissance and Early Baroque paintings

"Fingering strategies have always been of intense interest to keyboard players, because fingering significantly affect the technical and expressive qualities of a performance." (R. Parncutt)

The most famous description of how to keep the hand and which fingers use for playing harpsichord and organ in Italy is in Girolamo Diruta's *Il Transilvano* (1593-1609). His system conflicts with the one described by the contemporary Adriano Banchieri: this suggests a quite complex situation with different coexisting systems in late Renaissance Italy, not to mention other European systems. Iconographical sources, not fully investigated, can give some indication to the performer. A certain number of paintings of men and women playing harpsichords, spinets or little chamber organs was issued by various Italian painters (Tiziano, O. Gentileschi, S. Anguissola, L. Fontana...): mostly portraits, they reflected the high importance of music making for Renaissance men and women and, for this reason, they seem to be reliable with regard to a reliable representation of the actual way of playing.

As a result of an experimental study on fingering and hand position conducted under the guidance of the pictures themselves, this paper aims to describe these Renaissance pictures analysing the representation in relation to the contemporary theoretical writings on these matters. Practical examples will be associated with specific pictures and theoretical assumptions.

A specific comparison will be made with paintings of a subject that began to appear in the second half of the XVI century and was fully developed slightly later, from the first years of XVII century onwards, St. Cecilia at the keyboard. The representations of Cecilia dramatically increase after the "discover" of the saint's body in 1599. Many Cecílias, especially in the first 20 years of XVII century, show a rather curious position of the hand, in great contrast with hand position in Renaissance paintings, marking perhaps a change in technique and taste. I will try to explain which effects this position can have on the performance at the keyboard and if we can relate it to the suggestions of later theoretical writings.



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Maria Luisa Baldassari graduated in piano, harpsichord and musicology. Active as performer and scholar, she plays regularly in Italy, Europe, USA and Canada. She has founded Les Nations, a group composed by Italian specialists in early music, whose repertoire is focused on Renaissance and early Baroque Italian music. The ensemble has recorded 7 cd and staged "Euridice" by Peri and "Semele" by Haendel.

M.L.Baldassari has recorded for Echo, Tactus, Rivo Alto, Urania, EMI and Nuova Era. Her first solo CD is dedicated to Andrea Antico; a new one with music of Durante is programmed for 2022. Harpsichord teacher at Bologna

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As a musicologist she studies Renaissance keyboard music and Seventeenth century vocal music, presents articles in musicological reviews and in international meetings. She edits critical editions for 'Ut Orpheus' (A.Scarlatti, G.B.Martini, A.Antico, A.Valente).