

# PUTTING YOUR LEFT



There's no denying that in much piano literature the left hand is the 'Cinderella' hand, subservient to the right hand which hogs the limelight with all the big tunes, the glitter and the showy passagework. But it's also true that many pieces contain passages for the left hand that are just as difficult to play. What can you do to improve your left

hand so that not only can it cope with these challenges, but it can also invest all the music it plays with control, agility, subtlety, delicacy and rhythmic precision?

Moreover, what would you do if you found yourself for whatever reason totally unable to play with your right hand? I had to find this out for myself when my right arm was put out of action for a long time due to a 'frozen shoulder'. It was the perfect opportunity to put my left to rights!

My starting point was Theodore Edel's invaluable *Piano Music for One Hand* (Indiana University Press 1994). This book reveals a fascinating cornucopia of composers, some well known but the majority long forgotten. I was surprised to discover that nearly 1,000 works have been written for the left hand alone, but Scriabin's Nocturne and Ravel's Concerto aside, little has entered the mainstream repertoire.

Why have such a vast number of pieces been written for the left hand alone, whereas there are virtually none for the far more capable right hand on its own? Even by its very name the left hand sounds inferior – just think of the French *gauche* or the Italian *sinistra* and you get the idea that anything left-handed is rather suspect and clumsy.

Contrast that with the right hand – *dextra* (dextrous), *droit* (adroit). In fact this contrast is one of the very reasons that led to the existence of so many left hand pieces: everyone is accustomed to hearing the right hand perform 'fireworks' and dazzling technical displays in two-handed pieces, so it's not anything out of the ordinary to have it do more of the same on its own – but how much more impressive for

Godowsky maintained that the left hand was more adaptable to cultivation than the right because it was less used in daily life

an audience to witness the normally reticent left hand tackle such bravura displays.

The Czech composer Alexander Dreyschock (1818-1869) led the way when, responding to a dare, he learnt and performed the left hand of Chopin's 'Revolutionary' Study in octaves instead of single notes. From then on he became obsessed with the possibilities of what the left hand could do. Dreyschock wrote several long and immensely difficult pieces for the left hand, and thus assured himself a glittering career.

Other composer-pianists vied with each other to transfix audiences with their technical prowess. The inclusion of a bravura left hand piece was a guarantee of success and adulation. When Leopold Godowsky (1870-1938) made his debut in Berlin in 1900 he included several of his *Paraphrases on Chopin Studies* [Boris Berezovsky talks about these in this issue's cover interview]. He described how 'the entire audience actually went mad. They were screaming like wild beasts.'

Godowsky's name became synonymous with left hand piano music. In addition to transcribing 22 of Chopin's Études, he wrote a number of his own compositions, taking the genre into a completely new dimension in terms of what could be achieved by the left hand alone. He maintained that the left hand was actually more adaptable to cultivation than the right because it was less used in daily life and therefore its muscles were less cramped and more able to be relaxed. He also noted that the left hand had a more favoured position in relation to the keyboard because the stronger fingers were naturally placed to play the upper part or the melody. He stated that 'the left hand is greatly favoured by the command it has over the superior register of the modern piano... I need only mention the splendid sonority, mellowness and tonal sensitivities of the lower half of the keyboard as compared with the thin, brittle and tinkly sound of the upper register, a characteristic which becomes more and more accentuated as the right hand ascends the keyboard. Because of the fullness of the lower register, the left hand is easily capable of producing a tone of more sonorous, less percussive quality, thus attaining quantity and quality with minimum effort.'

## Productive pain

Even though Godowsky and other composer-pianists were preoccupied by the challenges of writing for the left hand, in fact most solo left hand repertoire came to be written because the right hand is more prone to injury, both at and away from the keyboard. Besides having the lion's share of the music to play, the right hand also must project the melody with the weaker fingers, so it's hardly surprising that it is the hand that suffers injury through overpractising or incorrect practising.

A competitive rivalry with Josef Lhevinne caused Scriabin to overpractise Balakirev's *Islamey* and Liszt's *Don Juan Fantasy*, resulting in tendonitis in his right hand. It took him two years to fully recover, but during this time he composed his sublime *Prelude and Nocturne for the Left Hand*. While Scriabin's Prelude has a touching Russian melancholy to it, the Nocturne is a glorious outpouring of Chopinesque lyricism. Both pieces show a total understanding of the musical and pianistic problems of writing for the left hand alone. Look at how in the opening bars of the Nocturne [Example] Scriabin sometimes delays the bass notes on the downbeats and other times the melody, and how ingeniously he dovetails the melody within the textures – seamless perfection!

# TO RIGHTS



Is your left hand being taken for a ride by your right hand? How often do you give it the attention it deserves? When injury sidelined her right hand, **Margaret Fingerhut** discovered the joys of left-handed playing

Three staves of musical notation for Scriabin's Nocturne op 9. The first staff shows a piano introduction with a dynamic marking 'p'. The second and third staves show more complex passages with various articulations and dynamics.

**Example:**  
**Scriabin's**  
**Nocturne op 9**

Another pianist, the Hungarian Count Géza Zichy (1849-1924) lost his right arm in a hunting accident when he was 14. His was an extraordinary story of determination and sheer willpower in deciding to have a career in music after his accident, and indeed he was remarkably successful, travelling all over Europe, playing before packed houses. Zichy, who composed about 15 left hand pieces, idolised Liszt, who in turn found him to be 'an astonishing artist of the left hand'. They became great friends and even performed together. Zichy's three-handed arrangement of Liszt's *Rakoczy March*. Liszt would also have approved of Zichy's giving away every penny he earned from his concerts to charity, and Liszt arranged one of his songs, *Hungary's God*, for Zichy to perform. Sadly, this atypical composition was Liszt's only contribution to the left hand repertoire.

There is no doubt that the most important of the one-armed pianists was Paul Wittgenstein (1887-1961). He had already embarked on a successful performing career when he was badly wounded in the First World War, and had to have his right arm amputated. With immense fortitude and single-mindedness he refused to give up the piano and worked

for long hours every day to build up his left-hand technique. He used the considerable wealth of his family to commission some 40 works; the list of composers he was able to call upon is awe-inspiring – Ravel, Richard Strauss, Prokofiev, Franz Schmidt, Korngold, Hindemith and Britten. However, Wittgenstein was quick to criticise and dismiss the results of his commissions. He would take liberties in re-arranging the score to suit him – something that did not go down terribly well with Ravel when Wittgenstein first played his concerto through to him in rehearsal. Wittgenstein was also not reticent about expressing his disapproval if the music was not to his taste. On receiving Prokofiev's Fourth Piano Concerto he wrote back to the composer 'I thank you for the Concerto, but I don't understand one note of it and I won't play it!' Hindemith's Concerto met a similar fate – Wittgenstein never played it and the manuscript is lost.

Tracking down some of the left-handed works written for Wittgenstein has been frustrating and time-consuming. For example, Franz Schmidt contributed no fewer than six commissions – including three quintets that contain the most gorgeously appealing music – but sadly none of them are published today in the original left hand version.

## Left hand forward

There is still a significant amount of superb left hand repertoire readily available. So, on reading these inspiring examples of what can be achieved with determination and hard work, are you ready to take on the challenge of improving your left hand? If you are, where should you start?

Obviously, much depends on your own level of ability and curiosity. If you have ever played CPE Bach's *Solfeggietto* using both hands, how about trying it now with your left hand only? You don't even need to buy a separate arrangement of it, as it is virtually all playable (after practice!) with just one hand – only the odd bass note needs re-arranging. Raymond Lewenthal has collected and edited a marvellous volume of studies, exercises and pieces for one hand, which includes the *Solfeggietto*. You will also find Scriabin's Prelude and Nocturne in this volume, as well as Felix Blumenfeld's melodious Etude in A flat, one of the most beautiful of all left hand compositions. In addition there is a study by Bartók, an early piece of astonishing bravura that was a terrific success at his Berlin debut, demonstrating his desire to be a young titan at the keyboard. The two original left hand compositions by Godowsky that ▶

Lewenthal includes, *Meditation* and *Elegie*, are most attractive and not nearly as difficult as his Chopin paraphrases. Other repertoire worth exploring is a recently published collection of contemporary pieces, *The Fand Left-Hand Piano Album*, which is full of short yet charmingly accessible works.

Mention must also be made of one of the most important of all left hand piano works – Brahms' arrangement of the Bach Chaconne, which he wrote for Clara Schumann, coincidentally at just the very moment she had strained a muscle in her right hand while opening a drawer. Clara was overjoyed to receive the transcription, and wrote to Brahms: 'you may imagine what a glorious refuge your Chaconne has been to me! You alone could have accomplished such a thing, and what seems to me most extraordinary about it is the way in which you so faithfully reproduce the sound of the violin.' Brahms had indeed been fascinated by the compositional challenge of staying as close as he could to the original, although in converting the four strings of the violin to the five fingers of the left hand, he transposed the piece down an octave.

## Equal rights for lefts

Maybe by now I have whetted your appetite to the degree that you are determined to make your left hand more the equal of your right. If so, there are complete courses in left hand playing, the best being Hermann Berens' *The Training of the Left Hand* (1872), Isidor Phillip's *Exercises et Etudes techniques* (1895) and, the most extensive of them, Wittgenstein's *School for the Left Hand* (1957), which runs to some three volumes and contains every type of exercise and etude imaginable. You could also do well to explore a set of Etudes written by Moszkowski that are musically grateful to play as well as being technically beneficial.

If you are unable to use your right hand through overstrain or injury, you should need no further persuasion about the merits of learning left-handed works. The excellent repertoire that exists means that, thankfully, your music-making need not stop. But why should a two-handed pianist bother with a left-handed piece? Why, if they want to improve their left hand, could they not simply isolate the tricky left hand passages from their two-handed pieces and practise them that much harder? The answer is that playing pieces or studies specifically written for the left hand puts a total focus and concentration on that hand. Even something like the left hand of the 'Revolutionary' Study won't be practised to the same degree of performance level because, whatever the challenges, the music is ultimately not complete in itself.

When playing with your left hand it's a good idea if you can sit on a bench rather than a piano stool: this allows you to shift your body slightly when you have to travel to the extremes of the keyboard. Generally you should sit just a little to the right of where you would normally sit, though beware that this doesn't introduce any tension in your lower torso when pedalling. Make sure that your right arm is as relaxed as possible, especially when you are playing a taxing passage – it's easy to find the muscles of your right side tensing up in sympathy! Sometimes you might need to place your right hand on the seat to steady yourself when you have to cross your left hand over your body to reach the upper register.

As with all piano playing, a flexible wrist is the real key to improving the agility of your left hand. This is particularly important because your left hand is used to playing in an area of the piano which requires more weight, and this may be a contributory factor to its lack of mobility. Godowsky achieved his famous left hand dexterity – pardon the pun – by consciously relaxing his arm and using only its natural weight with no pressure or force. Another important factor in playing left hand alone is that the approach to pedalling is different.

A lone hand is less able to hold onto sounds, so there is an almost constant need for the pedal to be there to cover when the hand jumps to a different part of the keyboard. Since the bass is unable to sound at the same time as the melody, half pedals, quarter pedals and the middle pedal will all be needed to ensure

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a continuous cantabile line without blurring the harmonies. My final piece of advice on practising left hand repertoire is something of a paradox: part of the process of learning a two-handed piece is to practise it with hands separately. However, when you learn a left-handed piece, practise it occasionally with both hands so you can clearly delineate the voices.

Hopefully, after reading this article, you will now never allow your left hand to get left behind! ■

Margaret Fingerbut's recording of Bax's *Concertante for Piano (left hand) and Orchestra* is on Chandos, CHAN 9715. She has her own website at [www.margaretfingerbut.co.uk](http://www.margaretfingerbut.co.uk).

## SOLO LEFT HAND REPERTOIRE

|                  |   |
|------------------|---|
| Bartók           | Etude in B flat (Difficult)                       |
| Felix Blumenthal | Etude in A flat op 36 (Moderate-Difficult)        |
| York Bowen       | Nocturne from <i>Curiosity Suite</i> op 42 (M-D)  |
| Brahms           | Chaconne from Bach's Partita No 2 for violin (D)  |
| Frank Bridge     | <i>Three Improvisations</i> (M-D)                 |
| Godowsky         | <i>Paraphrases on Chopin's Etudes</i> (D)         |
|                  | <i>Elegie</i> (M-D)                               |
|                  | <i>Meditation</i> (M-D)                           |
|                  | Impromptu (D)                                     |
| Miriam Hyde      | <i>Susan Bray's Album</i> (Easy)                  |
| Rafael Joseffy   | Gavotte from Bach's Partita No 3 for violin (M-D) |
| Liszt            | <i>Hungary's God</i> (Intermediate)               |
| Moszkowski       | Twelve Etudes op 92 (M-D)                         |
| Reger            | Four Spezialstudien (D)                           |
| Saint-Saëns      | Six Etudes op 135 (M-D)                           |
| Emil von Sauer   | <i>Waldandacht: Konzert-Etüde</i> No 28 (D)       |
| Franz Schmidt    | Toccata (D)                                       |
| Scriabin         | Prelude and Nocturne op 9 (M-D)                   |

## ANTHOLOGIES

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|---------------------------------|--|
| <i>Piano Music for One Hand</i> | <i>The Fand Left-Hand Piano Album</i>                    |
| Raymond Lewenthal               | Fand Music FM132   |
| G Schirmer Inc                  | Tel: +44 (0)1730 267341                                  |
| ISBN 0-79355-268-0              | <a href="http://www.fandmusic.com">www.fandmusic.com</a> |