

IN BLACK AND WHITE

# Stretched to the limit

Do piano fingerings tend to favour men's large hands? **Margaret Fingerhut** highlights gender bias in leading editions of core keyboard repertoire

**C**ovid, climate change, the imminent demise of democracy – the subject of 'sexist' fingerings might not rank high up on people's lists of things to worry about, but I am going to have a little rant about it anyway! However, unlike that notorious contrarian Charivari, who hides safely behind the cloak of anonymity, I am firmly taking ownership of my views.

I was recently playing through Bach's Fugue in G minor from Book 1 of the *Well-Tempered Clavier* when I had cause to laugh out loud. No, it wasn't the music itself that caused such hilarity; it was one of the fingerings suggested by Harold Samuel in the old Associated Board edition. In the immortal words of John McEnroe, 'You cannot be serious!' I could sooner fly to the moon than put my RH fourth finger on C and my second finger on E-flat a major sixth as he suggested – and this was in what might be deemed an educational publication undoubtedly used by younger players. Indeed, it was the edition I used when I was a child (see **Example 1**, below).

It then dawned on me how the vast majority of piano publications have always been, and to a large extent still are, edited by blokes with big hands. Before I go any further, I don't want to be accused of gender stereotyping, so let

me quickly say that of course there are always going to be a number of female pianists who have large spans or gorgeously long tapered fingers, just as there are a few male pianists with small hands. Famous among them was Josef Hofmann, who even had a Steinway built for him with narrower keys. However, with apologies to the reported 24 per cent of men who have small hands, this article addresses the 87 per cent of us women for whom editorial fingerings are all too often a source of frustration. It is time to call these sexist fingerings to account!

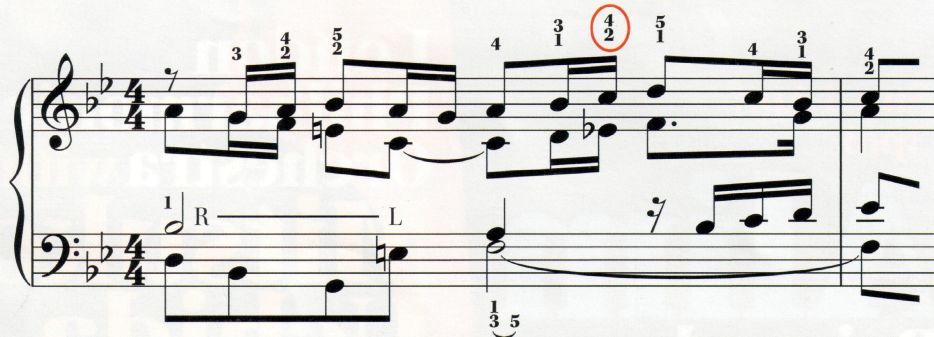
Another howler appears in the Henle edition of Brahms' Intermezzo Op 116/2 (**Example 2**, above right). I wouldn't be able to stretch the chord cleanly on the sixth quaver in the right hand with this fingering even if my life depended on it. The same goes for the octaves in Grieg's *Norwegian Dance* Op 35/2 in the Peters edition (**Example 3**, opposite).

I have drawn attention to these few examples where the fingering is an outright physical impossibility for a small hand such as mine. However, of far greater concern are the countless times where the editorial fingering will be 'doable' but probably not that comfortable for over 50 per cent of pianists. And, as everyone knows, when it comes to piano playing, tension is Public Enemy No 1.

So, you might well ask, what's the big deal? Surely anyone can simply change the fingering to one that suits them? Everyone knows that one size cannot fit all. Every hand is individual, not just in size but also in shape and dimension, in the relative lengths of the fingers and the differing reaches between them. Indeed, it begs the question as to what point there is in including any fingerings at all. Why do editors feel the need to put them in, especially in so-called Urtext editions where they can cause unnecessary confusion for many players?

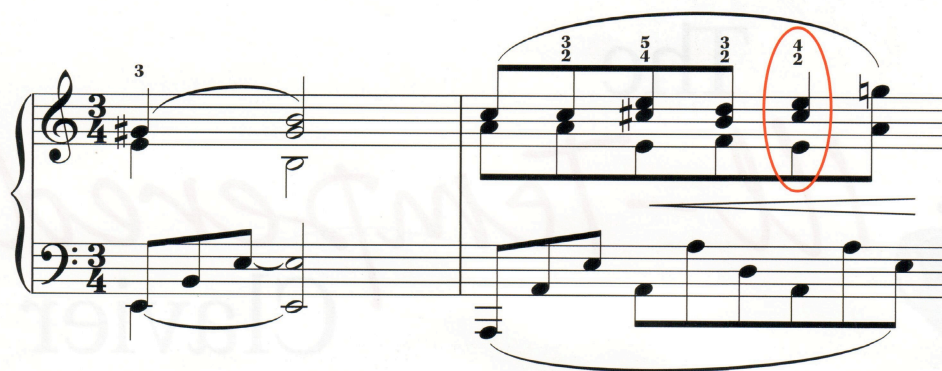
Meanwhile, if we accept the fact that all these fingered editions exist – literally hundreds of volumes of them – it is essential that we consider who they were/are aimed at. It certainly won't be for the relatively small number of professionals or experienced pianists who do their own fingerings anyway. Thus, we have to assume that editorial fingerings are geared towards the vast majority of piano players and students who might appreciate this sort of guidance. So why is it that the small-handed (ie mostly female) ones have always been given such short shrift when they constitute well over half the intended market?

From the late 18th century onwards many more girls than boys learnt to play the piano. It was expected that young women of a certain class should be able to play with a high degree of proficiency even though it was frowned upon for them to perform in public. But unlike stringed instruments that come in every conceivable size, right down to a 1/64 violin, pianos on the contrary went the other way from about 1850 onwards. The size of an octave increased significantly and the action became much heavier. At the same time, male editors ruled the roost, the honourable exception being Clara Schumann, although interestingly she included very little by way



**Example 1** ••• Bach Fugue in G minor BWV 861, bar 16





Example 2 ••• Brahms Intermezzo in A minor Op 116/2, bar 14

of fingering in her edition of her husband's piano music.

I should hasten to add this is not a blanket condemnation of every male editor. Many of them took great pains to find an 'average' fingering. One of the most prolific of all editors, Hans-Martin Theopold, who produced no fewer than 226 editions for Henle, was initially very reluctant to do any fingerings at all, citing the need for them to remain something individual. And then there is Alfred Cortot, who in his footnote to Chopin's Etude Op 10/1 provides alternative fingerings that are eminently practical for small hands. But then he goes and ruins it by stating that the use of these fingerings 'is not admissible when performing'. Ouch! Even Artur Schnabel's wonderfully idiosyncratic editions, fascinating though they are, are filled with uncomfortable fingerings from the point of view of someone with a small span.

What is to be done? How can the situation be redressed to ensure a more level playing field (sorry about the pun) for small-handed pianists? After all, we are the not-so-silent majority here! Needless to say, there has been no rush whatsoever by piano manufacturers to start mass-producing pianos with narrower keys. I also doubt very much that many publishers would be willing to run

to the expense of revisiting past or current editions. Please do not think for a minute that I am proposing these venerable editions be 'cancelled' simply on account of male bias. Perhaps all I am suggesting is that if we must have editorial fingerings at all, publishers could and should be more aware of the needs of the majority of their consumers. There are encouraging signs that this is already happening. Dare I also suggest it might help if there were a few more female editors, please?

### *'When it comes to piano playing, tension is Public Enemy No 1'*

Meanwhile though, sisters, do not despair! I am forever telling my small-handed students, 'Size doesn't matter, it's what you do with it!' Just listen to Alicia de Larrocha playing Granados and Albéniz. In other words, although our small hands might put us at certain disadvantages compared with our big-handed friends, the key factor is, in the famous words of Chopin: '*Souplesse avant tout!*' – flexibility above all.

It is harder to keep supple and flexible if our fingers or hands are stretched awkwardly by an impractical fingering, so this is where

we need to employ various cunning tactics. These include finger redistribution, finger substitution, releasing notes early, dividing or rolling chords, plus some fancy footwork for when you cannot avoid spreading chords (especially when you are trying to sustain a melody in the right hand at the same time).

The thing is always to sound convincing, as if you are deliberately choosing to spread the chord because you believe it is better that way. Never sound apologetic about it. Make it beautiful! Admittedly this can occasionally be hard to do. I cannot tell you how much I have agonised over the chordal passage leading to the coda of Chopin's Fourth Ballade. Likewise, the very last chord of Finzi's *Eclogue*.

If all else fails, there is another possibility which is to omit or revise awkward notes. So, for example, in bar 191 of Liszt's *Vallée d'Obermann*, instead of laboriously spreading every chord, I rearrange them so that the momentum and onward sweep of the phrase can be maintained. If you make this bar sound truly sonorous and you play with the requisite sense of drama and passion, I defy anyone to notice – or care!

In the old Associated Board edition of the Beethoven Sonatas, Donald Tovey wrote the following in his notes for the last movement of Op 2/1: 'This sonata will probably be attempted by players whose hands are so small that the second chord in the RH is troublesome (some of our greatest players have found it so) ... If a note must be left out, leave out the G; the octaves are central to the colour.' Thank you, Sir Donald! Maybe this sort of advice could offer another way forward in the future, and that every edition includes guidance for small-handed pianists as standard. A few helpful notes from a sympathetic pianist/editor for we women surely wouldn't go amiss. **IP** [margaretfingerrhut.co.uk](http://margaretfingerrhut.co.uk)



Example 3 ••• Grieg Norwegian Dance in A major Op 35/2, bars 9-12