

An Introduction to Piano Music for the Left Hand Alone

If you are experienced at playing left hand piano works, or play at a very high level, read no farther: this article is not for you. However, if you are a newcomer to the subject of piano music for the left hand alone, you may find some of the information in this short article interesting, and, I hope, helpful.

Left Hand vs. Right Hand

While there is a plethora of music for the left hand alone, there is only a very small amount written for the right hand alone. What could account for this strange fact? One possible explanation has to do with the structure of the hands and their relationship to the keyboard. With the left hand placed on the keyboard, the thumb is on top (playing higher pitched keys). The thumb is the strongest of all fingers and is therefore well suited for playing melodies with the left hand.

With the left hand one has the feeling of being able to “search out harmonies” – a feeling mostly absent with the right hand. In playing two-handed music the left hand plays the bass notes, or anchoring harmonies. In playing music for the left hand alone, the left hand retains this harmonic function, and is still able to play melodies with the thumb. (Of course, fingers other than the thumb may play melodies in left hand music. I am just speaking generally here.)

Another odd fact of the piano world is that virtually all pianists play better with their right hand, even pianists who are *left handed* in life. It seems that a person who writes with their left hand, throws a ball with their left hand, and performs daily tasks with the left hand, should naturally play the piano better with their left hand as well. In actual practice, however, we find the *left handed* person is usually *right handed* at the keyboard. Writing piano music for the left hand makes a virtue out of this weakness, and, thus, it is of great benefit for any pianist to play music devoted solely to the left hand.

Why Compose Music for the Left Hand Alone?

It is a compositional challenge for a composer to create piano compositions which are to be played using only the five fingers of the left hand. The list of extant left hand compositions shows how many fine composers have risen to the challenge. Do not make the mistake of thinking that only a few, unimportant composers wrote music for the left hand alone. In fact, many famous composers have written works for the left hand: Brahms, Bartok, Czerny, Ravel, Scriabin, Liszt, Godowsky, Prokofiev, Britten, Hindemith, Saint-Saens, and more. (The website of Dr. Hans Brofeldt, *Piano Music for the Left Hand Alone*, gives a comprehensive listing of composers who have composed for the left hand.)

Some composers have written music for the left hand alone in order to make playable pieces for the pianist who has temporarily injured his or her right hand. An example of this would be the Johannes Brahms transcription for the left hand alone of the Bach D Minor *Chaconne*. Brahms composed this work for concert pianist, Clara Schumann, when she had injured her right hand.

Composers have also written music for the left hand alone for pianists who were permanently disabled and only able to play with the left hand. Pianist, Paul Wittgenstein (1887–1961), lost his right arm in the First World War. He thereafter used his personal fortune to commission many works for the left hand alone, and had a career as a left-handed concert pianist. For instance, the Ravel Piano Concerto for the Left Hand was commissioned by Wittgenstein.

Another reason for writing music for the left hand alone is for the technical development of the left hand. When one plays with just the left hand, the left hand gets one's complete attention. Technical inadequacies cannot be hidden by the right hand playing at the same time. An example of this type of composition would be the 12 *Etudes* for the Left Hand Alone, Op.92, by Moritz Moszkowski (1854–1925).

The composer who has written the most music for the left hand alone is Frederic Meinders. His superb compositions are available through his website.

Why Play Piano Music for the Left Hand Alone?

As covered in the previous section, there are obvious technical benefits to playing pieces for the left hand alone. Pianists who have injured their right hands, temporarily or permanently, could play piano music for the left hand.

Additionally, in playing left hand music, a pianist benefits from studying the compositional aspects of left hand pieces. It is not necessary to play left hand music in public to gain the advantages of studying such music.

Personally, I play piano music for the left hand because I find it challenging and fun. I have learned a lot about piano technique and composition by studying left hand pieces. I feel that playing left hand pieces has improved my playing with two hands.

Fingering

Finding correct fingerings is important in any piano music, but even more so in works for the left hand alone. Because the performer is limited to five fingers, the choices for fingerings are obviously reduced. It is not possible to redistribute notes between the hands when the performer is using only the left hand. Also, the left hand is now playing *all the parts*. Getting the correct fingering can therefore mean the difference between being able to play a passage and not being able to play it.

In my experience, the master of fingering for the left hand is Leopold Godowsky. A study of Godowsky's left hand works (and his two hand works for that matter) may open your eyes to new fingering possibilities and patterns. Whether or not you ever play any of these Godowsky pieces in public, the private study of these works will prove rewarding.

Large Chords

Sometimes in piano music for the left hand alone you find very large chords. These chords may span more than the interval of a tenth or twelfth. Even with a very large hand it will be impossible to reach all the keys to play such a chord. In such a case, the chord should be *arpeggiated* (rolled) to sound all the notes of the chord.

Balance

By *balance* I mean how loud one voice is played in relation to another voice when the voices occur simultaneously. As an example, we have all heard since we were children that the accompaniment should not be too loud for the melody. In a lot of piano music, the right hand plays the melody and the left hand plays an accompaniment. In such a case, the left hand should not dominate when the right hand is trying to play the tune. In one-handed piano music the situation is more complex, as the one hand is playing both the melody and the accompaniment. Even though one hand is performing both tasks – melody and accompaniment – the accompaniment must not overpower the melody. The correct *balance* between the two parts must be maintained. Playing with the correct balance between simultaneous parts is a requisite skill for the pianist who endeavors to play piano music for one hand alone.

The Seat

Sometimes it is helpful to move the piano bench (seat) a bit to the right when performing piano music for the left hand alone. This makes it easier to reach the treble keys. With the bench too far to the left, the pianist is forced to reach across the torso to play the higher pitched keys. This position – reaching across the torso -- is awkward and makes playing more difficult. A simple solution is to move the piano bench a bit to the left. (If you do this, do not move the bench so far to the right that you cannot reach the lowest pitched keys.)

The Pedal

There is no such thing as an expert pianist who is not also an expert with the pedals. With one-handed piano music, the proper use of the right pedal (or, damper pedal) is especially important. For instance: one of the functions of the right pedal is to bind together sonorities when the fingers cannot. Clearly, it is impossible to play *legato* (smoothly connected) with the fingers beyond the stretch of the hand. The situation is pronounced when one hand is doing all the work and playing all the parts. The right pedal can be used to connect tones when the fingers cannot reach, thus preserving a *legato* effect.

In general, one must use more pedal in playing left hand pieces. In a left hand piece, the texture is often thinner than in a piece for two hands. The damper pedal can help avoid too dry a

sound and can help to sustain harmonies.

When playing with two hands, the left hand plays the key upon which the harmony is anchored. There are many times when you can keep the left hand key depressed and change the pedal at the same time. In the case of the left hand alone, there are times when you cannot jump to a melody note while keeping the bass note depressed. In this instance the distance between the bass key and the melody key is greater than the distance the hand can reach; the hand must shift position to play the melody key. Thus, with the left hand piece, it is necessary to keep the damper pedal depressed as long as possible to sustain the bass note while the hand shifts to play the melody tone.

As in all piano playing, the final judge is the ear. Giving careful attention to pedaling is extremely important in left hand playing – at least as important as when you play with two hands.

A comprehensive text on pedaling is *The Pianist's Guide to Pedaling*, by Joseph Banowetz (Indiana University Press, 1985). I recommend this book for piano students who wish to improve their use of the pedals.

Levels of Difficulty of Left Hand Music

Attempting to grade left hand piano music by degree of difficulty is a daunting task due to the vast amount of such literature and the time that would be involved in making such adjudications. Moreover, it would be very hard to get pianists to agree on the difficulty of certain pieces. All pianists have their strengths and weaknesses: some pianists find one thing easy while others find the same thing difficult.

Having said that, there have been efforts to grade left hand piano music. I refer the reader to *Piano Music for One Hand*, by Theodore Edel (Indiana University Press, 1994). Edel grades the left hand literature listed in his book according to a scheme of E = Easy to D = Difficult.

A general reference on piano literature such as the *Guide to Pianist's Repertoire*, by Maurice Hinson (Indiana University Press; 2000, 1987), may also be helpful in determining the difficulty level of left hand pieces.

Finally, I should state that I know of no piano method for the left hand alone. However, the ingenious piano teacher should have no difficulty in adapting traditional piano methods to a beginning student who is unable to use his or her right hand. I have done so myself with students who were temporarily injured, and both teacher and students were pleased with the results.

How to Procure Left Hand Sheet Music

I recommend starting with your local music store. If they do not have left hand music in stock, they may be able to order it for you. Major music publishers such as Alfred's Publishing Co., Inc., publish piano music for the left hand alone. Check their website or catalog for details.

An excellent anthology of left hand music is *Piano Music for One Hand*, selected and edited by Raymond Lewenthal (G. Schirmer, Inc., distributed by Hal Leonard). This book is widely available and full of all sorts of pieces, from the intermediate level to advanced.

Conclusion

Playing piano music for the left hand alone can be a rewarding and educational experience. I hope this brief introduction to this music has been of assistance to you.

James Marchand
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Websites

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