

Expanding Your Teaching Horizons

Teaching Piano Music For One Hand

by Adrienne Wiley

Teaching, learning and practicing piano music written for one hand can be fun and rewarding! Single-handed piano music can be of the same calibre and as interesting as two-handed music. Piano music written for one hand can be equally or more challenging than music written for two hands. Students sometimes injure themselves in a sports-related activity (or by over-practicing). Single-handed music gives the incapacitated hand, arm, wrist or fingers an opportunity to heal. These pieces can also serve as valuable additions to our teaching libraries, even when the student is not faced with an injury.

Incorporating single-handed music into the studio provides a welcome break from the regular routine. Additionally, programming a recital of works for one hand is a unique studio project.

It is interesting to note that the right hand and arm are much more frequently injured than the left, thus about 99 percent of all single-handed piano music is written for the left hand¹. There is, however, a small body of works written for the right hand. There is also a substantial number of accessible educational pieces for the elementary through late intermediate/early advanced pianist adaptable for either the left or right hand.

Learning piano music for one hand increases the technical facility of that hand and makes it more adept in executing accompaniment patterns in two-handed pieces. In addition, music written for one hand places new demands on that hand, such as voicing the melody and balancing the accompaniment with the same hand. In traditional two-handed music, the right hand fifth finger generally voices the melody. In left-handed music, the thumb becomes the voicing finger, whereas right-handed music retains the use of the outer fingers to voice the melody. Also, the single hand may encounter wide leaps due to the spacing of the melody and accompaniment, and large chords may be rolled or broken. Finally, when playing music for the left or right hand, pianists usually need to adjust their seating position at the piano. This will depend upon the range of the keyboard used in each piece and may require moving to the left or right of center.

Single-handed music has been around since the mid-1700s. The earliest example that is cited and featured in Raymond Lewenthal's collection *Piano Music for One Hand* is C.P.E. Bach's "Klavierstucke," which can be played by either hand.

Approximately 1840 the year marks the birthdate of left-handed piano music. Friedrich Kalkbrenner's (1785-1849) "Four-Voiced Fugue" is the first and earliest example. The concept of "la mano sinistra," one-handed piano music, was vogue in Italy by the early 1800s. Many left-handed compositions were paraphrases of well-known operas of the day.

Not all great composers wrote in this genre. For example, even though Franz Liszt (1811-1886) was noted for his tremendous technical command of the piano, he did not venture to write extensively for the left hand. One of his one-hand pieces survives and is dedicated to his pupil and friend, Count Geza Zichy, who lost his right arm in a hunting accident early in life. Zichy (1849-1924) also published several pieces for one hand. Another famous pianist of the Romantic era, Charles Alkan (1813-1888), wrote an interesting set of etudes featuring two for the right hand and one for both hands alone. The latter etude is quite unique: it begins with the left hand, alternates to the right hand, and then concludes with both hands!

In America during the 1870s and 1880s, several composers, including Arthur Foote (1853-1937), produced works for one hand. One popular compositional idiom at that time was the transcription of folk melodies; thus, many of the single-handed pieces were arrangements of such familiar tunes as

"Home, Sweet Home."

One important contributor to the single-handed repertoire during the twentieth century was pianist Paul Wittgenstein (1887-1961), who lost his right arm during the First World War. Not only did he write several books of etudes for the left hand, but he also commissioned over 40 works from well-known twentieth-century composers. His ability to commission and pay for single-handed works has provided an invaluable source of literature for pianists today 1 .

Before playing single-handed music, it may be helpful for the student to study preparatory exercises. Teaching and learning this music, however, is just the same as two-handed music. Strive for clarity of pedaling and balance between the melody and accompaniment, shaping to the peak of each phrase. In addition, fingering for one-handed music is very important for achieving musical and technical goals.

Learning and performing this music with ease will take time. Consistent practice will reap the best rewards. And, should anyone ask why you are playing this type of music, you may respond with Raymond Lewenthal's words: "Because I can!" 1

Recommended Books on Piano Music for One Hand

Theodore Edel, Piano Music for One Hand, Indiana University Press, 1994.

Raymond Lewenthal, Piano Music for One Hand, G. Schirmer, 1972.

After numerous requests from teachers for single-handed music, Alfred has released eight new single-handed solos. Some of these solos are for left hand alone, others are for right hand alone; two can be played by either hand. Adrienne Wiley-Lippoldt offers her practice suggestions to meet the challenges of each piece.

For the Right Hand Alone

Title: Between Two Lands

Composer: Sharon Aaronson

Level: Late Intermediate

Challenge: Balance between melody and accompaniment

Practice: 1. Practice the melody alone with the suggested fingering. Strive to shape the melody smoothly.

2. Practice the melody and accompaniment with two hands; use the correct fingering for the melody in the right hand.

Title: Peaceful Hearts

Composer: Dennis Alexander

Level: Late Intermediate

Challenge: Moving quickly and smoothly between melody and accompaniment

Practice: 1. Practice the melody (treble notes) and the accompaniment (bass notes) alone.

2. Listen for a smooth shape and transition between each part.

Title: New Horizon

Composer: Randall Hartsell

Level: Early Intermediate

Challenge: A smoothly shaped melody, even through the rests

Practice: 1. Practice fingering and playing the melody alone. Concentrate on the shape of the melody, even if interrupted by rests.

2. Practice the accompaniment in measures 2, 4, etc., striving for a legato connection between the finger crossings of thumb to finger two.

For Either Hand

Title: Blue Mood

Composer: Margaret Goldston

Level: Early Intermediate

Challenge: Perfecting a legato connection between each third

Practice: 1. Practice the thirds alone, several measures at a time. Play the top note legato while playing the bottom note staccato, then reverse.

2. Play the thirds legato, remembering to lift at the end of each phrase.

Title: The Ocean Deep

Composer: Kathleen Massoud

Level: Elementary

Challenge: Moving between keyboard registers with a smooth and flexible wrist.

Practice: Using the first two measures as a preparatory exercise, play the open fifths around the entire keyboard. Strive for a relaxed wrist and a graceful lift between each chord.

For the Left Hand Alone

Title: Rhapsody

Composer: Martha Mier

Level: Late Intermediate

Challenge: Execution of finger crossings in the arpeggiated accompaniment

Practice: 1. Practice the melody alone with the suggested fingering. Strive to shape the melody smoothly.

2. Practice the melody and accompaniment with two hands; use the correct fingering for the melody in the left hand.

3. Practice the arpeggiated accompaniment alone, using the correct fingering. Listen carefully to the last note of each measure of the accompaniment, being careful not to "clip" the last note!

Title: Scherzino

Composer: George Peter Tingley

Level: Early Intermediate

Challenge: Evenly played scalar passages and energetic articulations

Practice: 1. A good warm-up for this piece is the left-hand F harmonic minor scale!

2. Practice measures 6-8, 14-16, and 30-34 alone, following all fingering.

3. Practice measures 1-6 concentrating on the slurs and staccato articulations. A flexible wrist will insure better success in performing these articulations.

Title: Vagabond Clouds

Composer: Judy East Wells

Level: Intermediate

Challenge: Beautifully shaped phrases and smoothly executed finger crossings

Practice: Practice in phrases with correct fingering. Remember to shape each ascending pattern smoothly and taper the ends of phrases.

Adrienne Wiley is Professor of Piano Pedagogy and Applied Piano at Central Michigan University, where she also directs and coordinates the Community Music School and Piano Preparatory Program. Her interest in single-handed music began during her doctoral program and has continued since then. She is a frequent clinician and performer of single-handed music, her specialty being music for the left hand alone.

1. Raymond Lewenthal, Piano Music for One Hand, G. Schirmer, p. iii.