

Readers' Letters

Get in touch

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STAR LETTER wins a surprise CD. Letters may be edited.

STAR LETTER

Playing by ear

On the Letters page of issue 93, Derek Connolly says that he cannot play music without a score in front of him, and so he is unable to improvise. This seems to be a common problem. I think that the ability to play by ear is the first step to being able to improvise, which can be achieved by everyone with a little work.

So this is how I set about improving my ability to play by ear: Because I have been a subscriber to your excellent magazine from the first issue I have an amazing learning resource of scores with CDs. I put a cover CD on the player and listen to the first piece, probably only the first few phrases, and try to replicate it on the keyboard. Then I check with the music to see if I am correct. In other words I am listening first, reading the music second. The pieces become harder as one moves through each CD/issue. I have been surprised to find that I am better at this than I expected, and my ear is definitely improving.

Ruth Hughes, Cumbria, UK

Congratulations on having found such an original way of improving your ability to play by ear! It must take some persevering too. A surprise CD is on its way to you.

Narrower keyboards for larger hands

Thank you for publishing John Evans' article, 'The Upper Hand', in issue 93, which highlights an important topic of interest to all pianists.

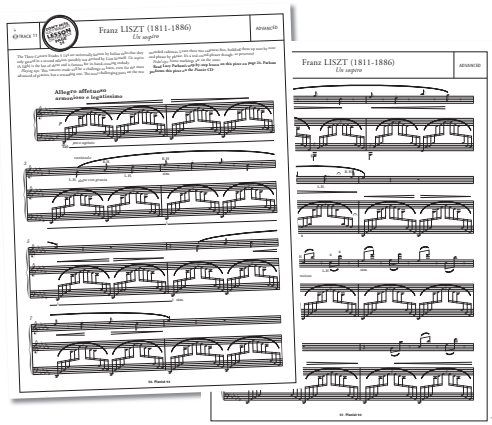
Research shows that the 'one-size-fits-all' piano keyboard does not suit all hands. The current keyboard was designed to suit European male virtuosos of the late 19th century. During the 20th century, the changing gender and ethnic mix of pianists has meant that for most, their hand span is not well matched to this keyboard. The link between inadequate hand span and the pain and injury affecting many pianists is well established in the performing arts health literature. Equally important is the enhanced quality of a pianist's performance, particularly for advanced repertoire, when the piano keyboard fits the hand.

A pianist's hand span depends on three characteristics: hand width, finger length and flexibility. Hence, short fingers can be offset by having a broad hand and good flexibility; or narrow, bony hands with good flexibility and long fingers can result in quite a wide span. While plaster casts of pianists' hands might illustrate obvious visual characteristics such as shape and finger length, they cannot provide an accurate indication of flexibility or reach.

The data collected in our study (referred to in John Evans' article) of the hand spans of 473 pianists confirms the results of previous studies, showing that hand spans among adults vary enormously. In our study, thumb to fifth finger spans ranged from 6.4 inches (smallest female) to 10.8 inches (largest male), more than the width of four white piano keys. The average span of adult males is one inch greater than that of adult females, slightly more than the width of one white piano key.

Steinbuhler DS® keyboards (www.steinbuhler.com) are gaining popularity, particularly in North America. These narrower keyboards effectively give pianists 'larger hands'. Personal reactions from these pianists are consistent in describing the relief from pain and injury as well as enhanced personal enjoyment, thus allowing them to reach their technical and artistic potential. Our analysis indicates that about 24% of men and 87% of women would benefit from playing a keyboard with narrower keys. For a summary of the relevant literature on hand size and piano playing, please visit www.smallpianokeyboards.org.

Rhonda Boyle, Robin Boyle, Erica Booker, Victoria, Australia



Why Un sospiro?

Your inclusion of Liszt's *Un sospiro* in issue 93 prompts a number of questions in my mind. This is a virtuoso piece, requiring a consummate technique. Anyone who can play it can play almost anything in the piano repertoire. Anyone who can play it will almost certainly already have the score in their library.

So why include it in *Pianist*? The implication would seem to be that those of us with less than consummate techniques might like to 'have a go' at it, but what would the purpose or value of this be? Why would anyone take pleasure or satisfaction from performing badly pieces that are too hard for them, rather than performing pieces that are within their technical capability to a good standard? And why would you encourage them to do so?

I would much rather perform a piece that I can master technically in order to be able to create a meaningful interpretation than 'busk' my way through something that is far too hard and consequently sounds either a mess or meaningless, at half speed or with 'simplified' rhythms. What do you and other readers think?

Anyone who, like me, loves Liszt but often finds him too difficult (as in the case of *Un sospiro* and the third *Liebestraum*, which you published a while ago) might like to know that he himself made a simplified arrangement of his marvellous *Legend: St Francis Walking on the Water*, which is within the reach of anyone at around Grade 8.

Joseph Laredo, London, UK

In his book 'Play it Again', the former *Guardian* editor Alan Rusbridger described learning Chopin's *First Ballade* in a single year (and then performing it), even though he knew it was way beyond his playing abilities. Everyone has the right to learn what they want, and to push the boundaries, just as Rusbridger did. Most of our readers tell us they don't wish to perform in public. We think that telling a pianist not to learn a piece of music because it's beyond their capabilities is like telling a novice painter to give up painting water lilies because they'll never be as good as Claude Monet. However, it's worth taking note of the advice, given by Mark Tanner in his *Mindfulness* article on page 16, that you should not overreach your ambitions. What do other readers think?

Loving Un sospiro!

I wanted to let you know how much I love issue 93. I have over 20 issues of *Pianist* and this issue is by far my favourite for both articles and sheet music. What caught my eye immediately was the inclusion of Liszt's *Un sospiro*. I am an intermediate/advanced student and have worked on this piece for the past year. What I liked best was the fingering you included. This is a piece I will never be able to play in public, but that doesn't matter to me. I find myself playing it often for just myself. It's addictive and challenging. Keep including wonderful pieces like this in future issues.

Sally Olson, Chicago, USA