



PASK: PIANISTS FOR ALTERNATIVELY SIZED KEYBOARDS
An international movement committed to choice in piano keyboard size

IF EVERYONE PLAYS THE SAME SIZE, MOST ARE PLAYING THE WRONG SIZE!

Are we at the beginning of a revolution? The signs are promising!

We are at the start of a revolution where we will move away from the 'one size fits all' piano keyboard – a keyboard that just happens to be skewed to favour those with large hands. Widespread availability of narrow keys could lead to a real renaissance in piano playing worldwide.

Around the world, the growing numbers of pianists trying keyboards with narrower keys are finding the experience to be a revelation. They suddenly understand how a keyboard that is too big for their hands has profoundly restricted their ability to fulfil their musical potential. Narrower keys effectively give you larger hands!

The piano keyboard has been standardised since the late 19th century. But whom does it really suit?

As renowned UK concert pianist, adjudicator, educator and writer, Murray McLachlan¹ says: *'Today we live in a generically sized piano world. All major manufacturers produce instruments designed for comfortable use by performers blessed with hands that are larger than a certain dimension.'* The current size, large by historical standards, suited male virtuosos with large hands back in the late 19th century.

The evidence is clear: the current conventional size prevents a majority of pianists from ever being able to play any repertoire they may choose, reach their musical potential and puts them at increased risk of injury. As McLachlan says: *'...the 'one size fits all' range of instruments appears to be sexist and discriminatory. Time and again the overwhelming majority of prize-winners at international competitions are males with large hands. We need to accept that too often the pedagogical approach to students with small hands has been to compromise, fudge and muddle along...Sweat and tears should not be the default starting point for creativity if you have small hands.'*

Prize winners at elite international competitions are indeed overwhelmingly male, reflecting the significant hand span advantage enjoyed by men, on average. The 2022 Van Cliburn competition, with only three out of 30 being women, is an extreme example of a general pattern of male domination across these competitions over the years. <https://paskpiano.org/gender-differences-in-major-competitions-and-performing-careers/>

The International Stretto Piano Festival - 'Narrow keys...Broad minds...No Boundaries'

Conceived by New York City-based pianist, educator and singer Hannah Reimann in 2021, the second annual **International Stretto Piano Festival** is a celebration of the 'Stretto' piano keyboard with narrower-than-usual keys to better suit players with smaller hands. It is no accident that in this unique festival, women outnumber men!

Over nine exciting days from June 18 to June 26 this year, audiences are invited to experience in-person, live streamed, and pre-recorded performances of Stretto piano concerts by more than 30 pianists spanning five continents. It is truly a unique event and the first of its kind, involving a worldwide collaboration of pianists.

Many of the artists have had performing careers curtailed by pain or injury, or generally limited by their smaller hand spans and the mismatch with the 'large' piano keyboard. This unique festival shines a light on just some of these pianists – those who are fortunate to have access to narrow keys today. But most pianists around the world do not yet have this luxury!

As Canadian pianist and Stretto performer, Linda Gould has said: *'I couldn't ever get a Chopin Etude to performance level. Now I can!'*

¹ <https://www.elenacobb.com/pianos-and-discrimination-opening-up-the-hornets-nest-and-calling-for-more-action/>

Current options for pianists

The availability of affordable pianos and keyboards – for amateur and professional pianists of all genres, students and teachers – is critical to achieving widespread access to keyboard choice.

Acoustic pianos and keyboards: Hailun US and Cunningham are leading the way, by offering new pianos with narrower keys through a partnership with the DS Standard Foundation². Steinway & Sons USA will provide narrower keyboards in Steinway grands on request, via Hannah Reimann.

The DS Standard Foundation continues to make retrofit keyboards for acoustic pianos in Pennsylvania. This business is still the only one to consistently produce the smaller DS5.5 and DS5.1 sizes. The Foundation has recently begun retrofitting the MP11SE Kawai digital keyboard with DS keys.

Digital keyboards: Two exciting projects accommodating narrow keys are in development:

- The NK5.5 (with 5.5 inch octave keyboard), developed in the US, will be on display at the NAMM show in California this June. This lightweight keyboard is designed to suit a wide range of pianists from beginners through to professionals, including 'gig pianists'. It has 88 full length keys that are match weighted (similar to normal key weighting). The keyboard is fully compliant with the new MIDI 2.0 standard, bringing better expressive control to the instrument and the musician. Limited quantities are expected to be on offer by mid-2022. <https://www.narrowkeys.com/>
- A digital keyboard *Respons*, and associated sound module and soundboard, *Tendens* is being developed in Poland. Pre-orders are now being completed for *Respons*, with deliveries anticipated this year. While the global shortage of computer chips has delayed production, the first keyboard is expected to be delivered to the University of Music and Performing Arts in Stuttgart, Germany soon. This keyboard is designed to match the best acoustic pianos, with real-time continuous sensing, high precision ballistic simulation and damper control. It also promises to be revolutionary in other ways, with an adjustable action (to fit the pianist's level of expertise and playing style) and its 'flexible key' design, which incredibly, will allow the pianist to change the key width in minutes! This could really be a 'keyboard for life', from early childhood through adulthood and into old age. <https://kaduk.nl/#digital>

Acoustic keyboard loans to universities, music school and piano stores

The DS Standard Foundation is expanding its keyboard loan program around the world. In early 2022, a DS6.0 keyboard was loaned to a major piano store (A Loja de Pianos) in Sao Paolo Brazil. There is already a DS6.0 keyboard at the Australian National Academy of Music in Melbourne, Australia. Both will feature in the Stretto festival in 2022. In the coming months, DS5.5 keyboards will be made available to the University of Auckland (NZ) and Chetham's School of Music in Manchester, UK. All of these keyboards are designed to fit Yamaha grand pianos.

New video: *Piano's Darkest Secret*

This video by Lionel Yu of Musical Basics (1.13m subscribers on YouTube) was released in February 2022 and has resulted in a surge in awareness of the problems with the 'standard' piano keyboard. As a result, the DS Standard Foundation has been inundated with requests and orders from pianists around the world! The video has now been viewed more than 530k times. The thousands of comments are overwhelmingly positive.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZXlknI-Jc48&list=PLHBn-VaaOCGcfrUskll1GztxTaaGj5sPh&index=7>

Lionel Yu has acquired a MP11SE Kawai keyboard with DS6.0 keys and is expected to showcase it in future videos.

²The DS Standard Foundation has adopted the names DS5.5[®] and DS6.0[®] for the alternative sizes, reflecting their octave sizes in inches. The current 'standard' keyboard (DS6.5) has a 6.5 inch octave.

BACKGROUND

Benefits of piano keyboards with narrower keys

- Faster learning
- Access to more repertoire
- Hands are closer to ideal playing position – ergonomically neutral
- Improves performance quality - tone control, extra power and speed where needed
- Technical problems are reduced or disappear
- Initial adaptation to a smaller size normally takes no more than one hour
- Pianists who play these keyboards can swap easily as needed - just like string and woodwind players.
- Reduced tension and pain, greater security
- Greater enjoyment!

Hand span research findings

- Adult males have a significantly larger span than adult females. On average, the gender difference is 1 inch (2.5 cm) – more than the width of one white key!
- Caucasian spans (for each gender) are about one quarter of an inch larger than Asian spans.
- Esteemed international soloists and competition prize-winners who perform across a wide range of repertoire tend to have larger spans than others.
- Based on new hand span data and objective criteria, about 87% of adult females and 24% of adult males (and nearly all children) have hands that are ‘too small’ for the conventional keyboard!
- As Linda Gould explains in the video here, being able to play a 10th is critical to mastering much advance repertoire: <https://www.narrowkeys.com/hand-size>
- Those with smaller hand spans are at greater risk of pain and injury, mainly from playing large chords and fast octave passages which put hands in a stressed position.

From renowned pianists and teachers

Dr Carol Leone, Chair of Keyboard Studies at Southern Methodist University in Dallas: *'I often witness pianists place their hands for the first time on a keyboard that better suits their hand span. How often the pianist spontaneously bursts into tears. A lifetime of struggling with a seemingly insurmountable problem vanishes in the moment they realise, "It's not me that is the problem; it is the instrument!" Following on that, the joy of possibility overwhelms them.'* (Piano Professional, EPTA UK, Summer 2015.)

Simon Tedeschi, Australian concert pianist: *'For a concert pianist playing big repertoire constantly for decades now, I have had to contend with small hands. Anyone (usually a big handed or non-pianist) who blithely says that all that is required is "technique" or "rotation" or "relaxation" has never had to navigate the many complex and creative ways small handed pianists have to work twice as hard in order to get the same result, especially in romantic repertoire, in which maintaining the arch of the hand is integral to sound quality and control. I'm thrilled that there is at least a discussion happening about this and am pleased to lend my name to it.'*

[Note that Simon's hand span is significantly larger than that of most adult women.]

Professor Ulrike Wohlwender, University of Music and Performing Arts in Stuttgart: Watch this very informative video that summarises the benefits for pianists playing the 'Sirius' 6.0 keyboard at her university: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yjFA0Kolg_0&t=492s

Further information

<http://paskpiano.org>,

<http://youtube.com/channel/UCdiQ0iwCWFsGjZ1QI41KSBg> [PASK YouTube channel]

<https://www.strettopianoconcerts.org/>

<https://info.musae.me/stretto-2022>

<http://dsstandardfoundation.org>

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