

LURED BY THE LEFT

Over 6,000 works exist for the left hand alone, yet most remain relegated to the murky depths of the piano repertoire. *Jeremy Nicholas* examines the history and importance of this music in conversation with specialists Clare Hammond and Nicholas McCarthy

THE EARLIEST KNOWN WORK written to be played by one hand alone is the Klavierstück in A, Wq.117/1 composed sometime before 1770 by CPE Bach (who, incidentally, was left-handed) Since then, more than 700 composers have written pieces to be played on the piano by the left hand alone amounting to more than 6,000 titles. (By contrast, only 75 examples appear to have been published for the right hand alone.) Audiences never fail to be enchanted by the novelty of seeing a pianist play with one hand, entranced by the beauty of the music and impressed by the technical accomplishment of the pianist. Yet the only works for the medium that are regularly programmed are Ravel's Concerto for the Left Hand (which will be performed by Alexandre Tharaud and the BBC Philharmonic at this year's Proms, 30 July), Scriabin's Prelude and Nocturne, Op 9 and Blumenthal's Etude in A flat, Op 36. Most pianists ignore the whole left hand repertoire.

But why – if they have two hands and feet – should pianists play it? And why should anyone want to compose left hand piano music in the first place? Is there any advantage, musically and technically, in deliberately ignoring what is traditionally the stronger hand of the two?

Pianist Clare Hammond, who not only includes left hand music in her recitals but has also recently completed a doctoral thesis on the subject, says: 'There are four principal reasons why people write for the left hand. The first pieces were published in the very early 19th century and were all remedial studies. Most two-handed pianists, even though they might be left handed when they write and do other things, find that the right hand becomes more developed than the left because the parts given to the right hand are so much more difficult. So initially, when people started writing etudes for the left hand, they were written for two-handed pianists.

The second phase of left hand compositions came in about the 1840s, when pianists like Adolfo Fumagalli (1828-1856) and Alexander Dreyschock (1818-1869) arranged a number of works for the left hand alone – popular themes from operas and things like that – which they would use in their concert programmes. ➤



Concert pianist Nicholas McCarthy, who was born without his right hand, champions left hand repertoire

The main purpose of these was for virtuosic display.

Then there were other pieces like the Bach-Brahms Chaconne that were written by people who were intrigued by the compositional possibilities that left hand music opens up. Brahms was keen to play the Chaconne, originally for the violin, but when he played it with two hands he found the overall effect too facile. When he transcribed it for the left hand alone, he arranged the spread chords in much the same way that a violinist would have to cross the strings in the original, so he could better preserve Bach's intention.

The final reason why a great deal was written for the left hand is that a number of soldiers came back from the First and Second World Wars having lost their right arms – in particular Paul Wittgenstein, who had the money to commission new works. If another pianist who'd had the money had lost his left arm, the situation might have been very different. As it was, the left hand repertoire benefitted from that.

The first known professional one-armed pianist in history was the remarkable Count Géza Zichy (1849-1924), who lost his right arm at the age of 15. A horse lurched as he was unloading a gun from the back of a cart. The gun went off and shattered his arm, making it necessary for it to be amputated at the shoulder. The extraordinary thing is that he did not decide to become a pianist until after this tragedy. He studied eventually with Liszt (who became immensely fond of him) and composed a number of left hand pieces including a concerto. Because of Zichy's enormous inherited wealth and social standing, he felt it was wrong to take a fee for concerts and gave everything he earned to charity. By 1886 he had raised and given away well over a million francs.

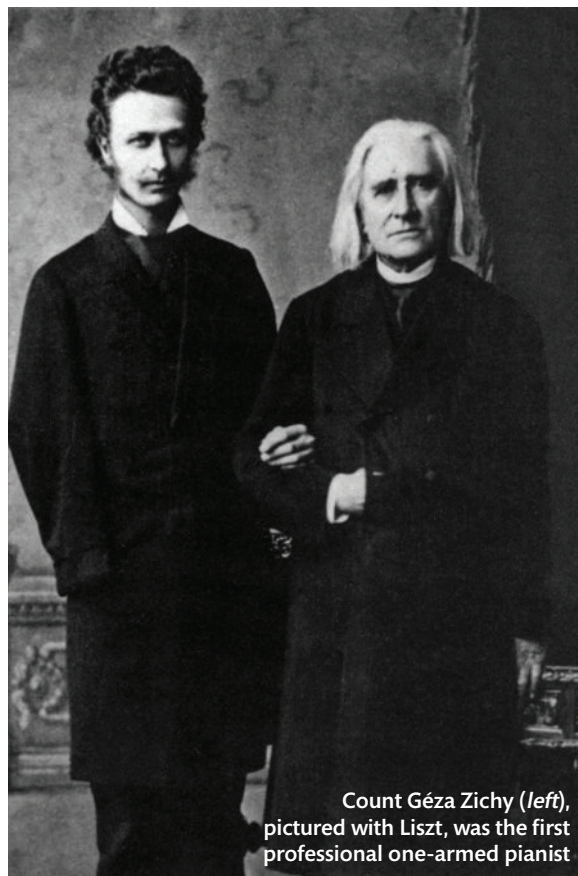
ONE MUSICIAN WHO HAS an affinity with Zichy is the one-handed English pianist Nicholas McCarthy. 'I've become particularly interested in Zichy,' he says. 'I feel more attracted to him than to Wittgenstein. My technique seems very suited to his compositions and arrangements. There seems to be very little left hand repertoire – especially concertos

– that is sumptuously romantic.

'Zichy published a book [*Das Buch des Einarmigen* – 'The Book of the One-Armed'] that showed limbless soldiers how to do things with one hand. There are photographs showing him doing up buttons and cutting a steak with one hand. I associate very much with him because he just decided to be a pianist and went for it. He was a real trail blazer. He didn't have the Ravel or Prokofiev concertos, whereas I've got that repertoire. But now I have the big task of getting people to rediscover the repertoire through various means. So I see both of us as trail blazers.'

One difference between the two is that McCarthy did not lose a hand: he is a rare example of a pianist who was born without one. 'I haven't got a right hand, wrist or forearm. My arm stops just below my elbow.' Amazingly, he did not touch a piano until he was 14, when a friend of his played Beethoven's 'Waldstein' Sonata. 'It was one of those pivotal moments you have in life. I fell in love with the piano and everything about it. Quite naively, I decided to be a concert pianist. I didn't know anything about the concept of practising. I didn't even know such a thing as left hand repertoire existed. Up until then I'd had a totally fulfilled childhood full of play time, so when I decided to be a pianist I was quite happy to sit up in my bedroom with the cheap Argos keyboard that Mum and Dad had bought me because they thought it was a fad I was going through. I had to teach myself to sight-read and learn one piece after another, and in three years I reached a high enough standard to be accepted as a junior at the Guildhall School.'

I ask McCarthy if, when later he studied at the Royal College of Music, he ever felt envious of fellow students with two hands? 'Well, I had a lot of them say they wished they had my left hand! During the first



Count Géza Zichy (left), pictured with Liszt, was the first professional one-armed pianist

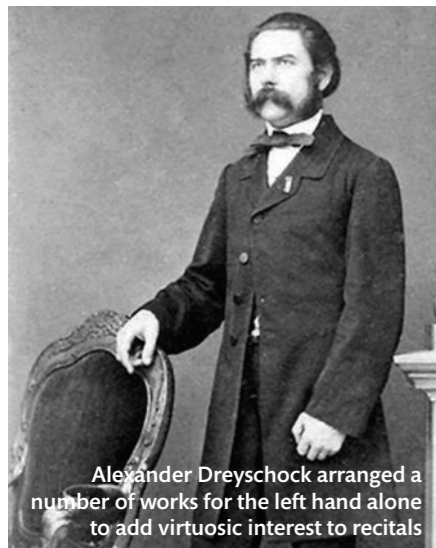
year or so I did. I didn't resent them but I missed the fact that I could never play Tchaikovsky's B flat minor Concerto. I knew I'd never get to play anything by Rachmaninov because he never composed anything for the left hand. But when I delved further into the repertoire I rediscovered my love for the piano, in a different way. Yes, there were a lot of people playing Ravel with two hands, but at the same time I thought, "I'm the only person playing Ravel with one hand!" That kind of consoled me about the fact I would never play the two-hand music that I nevertheless love and listen to all the time.'

On a practical level, how does he cope with page turns? 'I never perform from sheet music, so it's not an issue. I'm a quick learner when it comes to committing something to memory, so even in practice, I usually have the awkward page turns committed to memory.'

THE MOST FAMOUS ONE-armed pianist was the Austrian Paul Wittgenstein (1887-1961), the brother of the philosopher Ludwig and,



Paul Wittgenstein, who lost his right arm during the Great War, commissioned composers such as Korngold, Ravel and Britten, adding over 40 works to the left hand piano repertoire



Alexander Dreyschok arranged a number of works for the left hand alone to add virtuosic interest to recitals

ESSENTIAL SOLO LEFT HAND REPERTOIRE

- Alkan:** Fantaisie in A flat, Op 76 No 1
Bartók: Etude in B flat (1903)
Blumenfeld: Etude in A flat, Op 36
Brahms: Chaconne from Partita No 2 in D minor, BWV 1016 (Bach)
Dreyschok: Variationen, Op 22
Godowsky: 22 Studies on Chopin's Etudes
Godowsky: Prelude and Fugue on BACH
Leschetizky: Andante finale from Lucia di Lammermoor, Op 13 (Donizetti)
Moszkowski: 12 Etudes, Op 92
Reinecke: Sonata in C minor, Op 179
Saint-Saëns: Six Etudes, Op 135
Saxton: Chacony
Scriabin: Prelude and Nocturne, Op 9

like Zichy, from a fabulously wealthy family. Wittgenstein was already a professional pianist (a pupil of Leschetizky) when he was called up for service in the First World War. His right arm had to be amputated when he was severely wounded near the Polish border. With enormous determination, he retrained himself to play with the left hand, studying alone for seven hours a day. Dissatisfied with most of the repertoire, he set about commissioning the leading composers of the day to provide him with new works. Few turned down the substantial fee involved, though many came to regret their involvement with him for he was rarely satisfied with the results, rewriting concerto parts to suit himself (Ravel) or simply refusing to play the music (Prokofiev and Hindemith) if he disliked it. Roughly 40 works were written for Wittgenstein, including pieces for piano and orchestra by Korngold, Richard Strauss, Franz Schmidt and Britten, among others.

The trouble was that Wittgenstein was conservative in his musical tastes and not a very good pianist (listen to his recordings for evidence). Leopold Godowsky wrote his Symphonic Metamorphoses of the Schatz-Walzer/Themes from *The Gypsy Baron* specifically for Wittgenstein. 'It is good music,' Godowsky wrote mischievously to his wife in 1928. 'Very likely too good for Wittgenstein.' Though he was given exclusive rights for three years, Wittgenstein never played the piece and Godowsky eventually dedicated it to Simon Barere.

It was Godowsky who, more than any other composer, was responsible for developing the latent potential of the left hand. By the time he visited Russia in 1905, many of his 53 Studies on Chopin's Etudes had been composed, among them 22 studies for the left hand. There he met Felix Blumenfeld (1863-1931), the prominent conductor, pianist, composer and teacher. Godowsky's left hand playing inspired Blumenfeld to write one of the masterpieces of the genre, his famous Etude in A flat. He dedicated the work to Godowsky. The first (and still the greatest) recording of the piece was made by Simon Barere, a student of Blumenfeld's.

Godowsky (1870-1938) wrote in the preface to his Studies on Chopin's Etudes

that his purpose was to increase the technical and musical possibilities of piano playing. He explains that the left hand, far from being the weaker of the two, is 'favoured by nature in having the stronger part of the hand for the upper voice of all double notes and chords and also by having the strongest fingers for the strongest parts of the melody'. The left hand, he says, commands the lower part of the keyboard, is better suited to producing 'a fuller and mellower tone' and is more susceptible to training 'owing to its being much less employed in daily use in general than the right hand [...] If it is possible to assign to the left hand alone the work done usually by both hands simultaneously, what vistas are opened to future composers, were this attainment to be extended to both hands!'

Godowsky wrote much other music in this form, including a Suite which, with its eight dance movements over 37 pages, is the longest solo work ever written for the left hand. His ingenuity was in the vast vocabulary of new fingerings and figurations that he evolved. It is no coincidence that with few exceptions, all the most musically convincing left hand music came after the first of Godowsky's Chopin Studies were published (the entire set appeared between 1899 and 1914). From Bartók's Etude (inspired by hearing his fellow countryman Zichy play), Scriabin's Prelude and Nocturne (written while he was recovering from tendonitis), etudes by Saint-Saëns and Moszkowski and the Wittgenstein commissions, right up to the present day, few of the best left hand piano works were written without reference to Godowsky. Indeed, when Wittgenstein commissioned some of his works, he sent some composers Godowsky transcriptions for inspiration, as confirmed in letters to Britten and Ravel.

WHILE WORKING ON HER thesis, Clare Hammond found there were certain techniques that 'you wouldn't expect to be adapted to the left hand' that could nevertheless be made to work. She cites fugal writing as an example. 'Godowsky wrote a fugue on BACH (B flat, A, C, B natural). It's not a wonderful fugue but it's remarkable that it works at all. But then, for example, in the original of Chopin's Etude Op 10 No

3, there are some passages where the two hands play in contrary motion. Though Godowsky tries to put a tiny element of contrary motion into the left hand transcription, that clearly doesn't work because you can't stretch the left hand beyond a tenth in opposite directions.

'You often find in left hand works that composers are much more inclined to exploit the central and lower regions of the keyboard, so you end up with a much more mellow tone colour a lot of the time,' she adds. 'A feature in a lot of left hand works is the *style brisé* – the spreading of chords, in effect. Then, obviously, you get very imaginative use of both the right hand and central pedals. As a performer, the most difficult thing to get to grips with is that your hand has to sustain so many more lines than usual. It has to be so much more flexible. That is muscularly quite tiring. The way you use your arm for two-handed works is very different. The shapes that your hand has to adopt I found quite unfamiliar at first. I've got used to it now and I'm quite happy switching between two-handed and left hand repertoire in concert, but at the beginning it was quite a struggle.'

It is a mystifying truth that when a pianist loses the use of a hand, it tends to be the right hand. Godowsky, Solomon and Michael Ponti lost theirs because of disabling strokes; Harriet Cohen's right hand was damaged by a drinking glass that suddenly shattered; and Leon Fleisher, Gary Graffman and Cor de Groot (*see pp27-29*) were no longer able to play with both hands because of different muscular disorders in their right hands.

Disability is far from being the only (or indeed principal) reason for writing for and/or playing with one hand. Often, the motivation is simply 'why not?' Last year, McCarthy transcribed Chopin's G minor Ballade for the left hand. 'That particular one out of the four really works,' he says. 'I always talk to my audiences and I say to them before I play the Ballade, "By no means have I done this as a replacement – go and get Rubinstein's recording of the original because it's fantastic. I'm only doing it to show what the left hand can do."'

McCarthy is a throwback to the days when display and fun were essential elements of piano recitals. Dreyschok

astonished audiences with his party piece, playing the left hand of Chopin's Revolutionary Etude in octaves. And here is the critic of *L'Indépendance Belge* reviewing the short-lived Fumagalli in his celebrated Fantasy on Meyerbeer's *Robert le Diable* for the left hand. 'In general we are not very partial to tours de force in music, but this one deserves all the applause lavished on it by the public. With one hand the artist occupies the entire keyboard. Simultaneously, he plays the melody in the middle, an accompaniment in the bass and embroidery in the upper octaves. These three parts proceed together, in a sustained manner, with perfect clarity and a great variety of effects. One doubts the possibility of what one is hearing.'

There is no more touching illustration of the effect this kind of playing can have than the story of a party in London some time in 1934. The chief guest was the then unknown Simon Barere. He was invited to play for the assembled company, which included the blind pianist and composer

Alec Templeton, best known today for his witty parodies *Bach Goes to Town* and *Bach Before the Mast*. Among the pieces Barere played was the Blumenfeld Etude. As Barere rounded off the piece to rapturous applause, one of the other guests said to Templeton, 'Amazing, isn't it, what you can play with one hand?' 'What do you mean?' asked Templeton. 'Well, Mr Barere played that with just his left hand.' Templeton remonstrated angrily, saying that it was a remark in poor taste if he thought it amusing to tease someone who was blind. As a pianist, he said, what he had just heard could not possibly be played by one hand. Barere overheard and invited Templeton to sit next to him. 'Hold my right hand,' he requested. 'I'll play it for you again.' He did so. Templeton sat there with tears streaming down his face. ♪

For a full list of left hand repertoire, go to Dr Hans Brofeldt's website *Piano Music for the Left Hand Alone* (<http://bjem.get2net.dk/Brofeldt>)

FURTHER LISTENING: LEFT HAND RECORDINGS

Oeuvres pour la main gauche
 Michel Béroff, EMI CDC 7 49079 2

Piano works for the left hand
 Leon Fleisher, Sony SK 48 0871

Godowsky: 22 Studies on Chopin's Etudes for the left hand alone
 Ivan Ilič, Paraty 311.205

Blumenfeld: Study for the Left Hand (rec 1935)
 Simon Barere, APR CDAPR 7001

Ravel: Piano Concerto in D major
 Paul Wittgenstein, Concertgebouw Orchestra/Bruno Walter (rec 1937), URAN SP4209

Jean-Efflam Bavouzet, BBC Symphony Orchestra/Yan Pascal Tortelier, Chandos CHSA 5084

Korngold: Piano Concerto in C sharp major, Op 17
 Marc-André Hamelin, BBC Scottish Symphony Orchestra/Osmo Vänskä Hyperion CDA66990

Korngold: Suite for Piano, 2 Violins & Cello; Schmidt: Piano Quintet
 Leon Fleisher, Ma, Laredo & co Sony SK48253

Prokofiev: Piano Concerto No 4 in B flat major, Op 53
 Vladimir Krainev, Frankfurt Radio Symphony Orchestra/Dmitri Kitaenko
 Apex 2564 61694-2

Bortkiewicz: Piano Concerto No 2, Op 28
 Stefan Doniga, Janáček Philharmonic Orchestra/David Porcelijn
 STEMRA/C13172

Richard Strauss: Parergon, Op 73
 Ian Hobson, Philharmonia Orchestra/Norman del Mar Arabesque Z6567

Britten: Diversions, Op 21
 Steven Osborne, BBC Scottish Symphony Orchestra/Ilan Volkov
 Hyperion CDA67625

Roem: Piano Concerto for Left Hand
 Gary Graffman, Symphony Orchestra of the Curtis Institute of Music/André Previn
 New World 80445-2