Piano Music for One Hand

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Preface

Few pianists suspect the true scope and size of the one-hand literature—nearly a thousand solo works for left hand, dozens of concerti, and much chamber music. At least sixty pieces exist for right hand alone. A few selections, such as the *Nocturne* by Scriabin and Ravel's *Concerto*, have received well-merited attention. But why ignore all that music which, from the viewpoint of technical development, may be more useful and at the same time constitutes an unusual facet of the repertoire? And not all left-hand music is from the Romantic era: a surprising number of works are contemporary, even avant-garde.

As I have twice experienced personally, temporary injuries can take a pianist by surprise. One night I stumbled on a pile of branches and fell on my right wrist, spraining it badly. My right hand was out of commission for a month. Several years later, when I was a few minutes into the only tennis class of my life, I ran for a long shot and took a nasty fall on the same wrist. The result: a broken navicular bone and six weeks in a cast.

Students occasionally suffer similar damage to their hands, with more or less dire results. All players, from master pianists to young aspirants—whether they will soon be able to return to the standard repertoire or never again—need to know that there is a vast body of music for them, in every style and genre, from the simplest note-stepping to the dizzy heights of pyrotechnical display.

In the catalogue entries in Part II, the emphasis is on objective data—tempo, character, texture, harmonic vocabulary, degree of difficulty, length, and publication information. Subjective value judgments are also made on musical worth and idiomatic writing for a single hand. In a list containing so much nineteenth-century salon music, it was inevitable that some of those judgments would be negative. However, I did not omit works for any reason: I considered it best to list all the material for one hand known to me and allow others to examine the music and make up their own minds. Musical examples are provided for works of musical distinction or special technical value.

Arrangements and transcriptions are listed under the arranger, not the original composer (Godowsky, not Chopin). Music for *two* hands with a difficult left-hand part—and many such works have mistakenly found their way onto lists of left-hand music—has been excluded.

Entries are as complete as possible but vary according to the data available. For certain obscure composers no biography could be found; for some works only reprints were available. And there are pieces, though known to have been printed (from Hofmeister's catalogue, etc.), which could not be located and examined. These

are listed without commentary. Whenever possible, a library location for the music is given. Unless otherwise noted, translations are my own.

Because music continually goes in and out of print, there is no attempt at classifying works as being "in-print." Joseph Rezits' *Piano Music in Print* can serve as a rough guide—it has a section on available left-hand music—but that book was last issued in 1978.

A visit to the Library of Congress in Washington, D.C., will yield the fullest results: hundreds of works may be seen there and tried on the piano. There is also a fair-sized collection at the New York Public Library (Library of the Performing Arts at Lincoln Center), though it is less convenient to examine. The American Music Center (30 W. 26 St., New York, NY 10010) receives many recent American scores in manuscript. Those with access to an interlibrary loan system have at their disposal the holdings of thousands of libraries. In Europe, the great collection is at the British Library. Also in London is the Disabled Living Foundation (380–384 Harrow Road, London W9 2HU); its Music Advisory Service publishes lists of left-hand works held in libraries and those available from the Foundation itself.

This book was made possible by a sabbatical leave from the University of Illinois at Chicago. I would like to thank the library staff of the University, particularly Kathy Kilian, as well as the staff at the Library of Congress. Robert N. Levin read the original manuscript and offered many valuable suggestions. Special thanks go to my wife, Chun, for conceiving the idea of studying piano music for one hand.

Abbreviations

A number of works appear in three extensive anthologies:

"Australian" = *Piano Music for One Hand by Australian Composers*, compiled by Shirley Harris (Melbourne: Allans Music Australia Pty. Ltd., 1984).

"Lewenthal" = *Piano Music For One Hand, A Collection of Studies, Exercises and Pieces*, edited by Raymond Lewenthal (New York: G. Schirmer, 1972).

"Georgii" = *Einhändig: Eine Sammlung von originalen und übertragenen Kompositionen*, edited by Walter Georgii (Cologne: P.J. Tonger, n.d.).

Degrees of technical difficulty:

E = Easy
M-E = Moderately easy
M-D = Moderately difficult
D = Difficult

NYPL = New York Public Library at Lincoln Center
L of C = Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.
Brit. Lib. = British Library, London

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Part One

INTRODUCTION

1.

Survey of the Literature

The story of one-hand piano music is primarily the story of music for the *left* hand alone, in that right-hand works make up only a small percentage of the repertoire and are of more recent origin. The vast repertoire for the left hand created over the last 150 years arose from a variety of causes: technical development, injury, compositional challenge, and virtuoso display. Four players have been singled out for separate sketches. Alexander Dreyschock and Adolfo Fumagalli were pioneers, the first two pianists to perform in public with their left hands alone. The origins of left-hand music are tied to the rise of the solo piano recital, and their concerts exemplify much about European musical life in the mid-nineteenth century. In later decades the one-armed pianists Geza Zichy and Paul Wittgenstein had unique careers of great interest.

Technical Development

The piano literature for two hands, in fact, the literature of all instruments, is rich in studies, or *etudes*—pieces at every level of difficulty designed to augment a player's technical skills. Similarly, one of the key purposes of left-hand music, to judge from the sheer numbers of technical works created, has been pedagogic. Because the standard piano literature favors the right hand so much, by playing that literature virtually every pianist, whether a great virtuoso or a fumbling student, eventually comes upon a crucial gap in ability: the right hand can do things that the left finds impossible. And yet the left must function with subtlety, strength and precision, and at times it is called

on to perform the most difficult feats. The myriad studies for left hand alone—those which carry that title as well as those that bear other names but are really "studies"—have been largely an attempt to close this gap in skill. Sometimes the relationship was personal: Saint-Saëns created his *Six Etudes* for the students of his friend Louis Diémer, teacher at the Paris Conservatory. According to Robert Casadesus, the best one, the *Bourée,* went to him.

Every serious pianist, at some point in his or her development, must face this problem of the left hand. Although there are many two-hand works with a difficult left-hand part—Chopin's *"Revolutionary" Etude* and the Czerny *Left Hand Studies,* op. 718, are only two from a multitude of possible examples—none offers quite the same opportunity for putting the left hand "under a microscope" as music for left hand alone. It is primarily a matter of increased awareness. While some players, especially professionals, may have the maturity to adhere to high standards at all times (for example, always playing the fast running bass notes of a Beethoven concerto evenly and clearly, even when the right hand is busy with the melody), there are many more who allow the details of the left hand to get lost.

Young people in particular can benefit from this total "exposure" of the left hand. Given human nature, it is more likely that a Moszkowski *Etude* for the left hand alone will be practiced more evenly and with greater precision—creating better technical habits—than will occur when the same pianist works on Chopin's *"Revolutionary" Etude.* And since important habits are formed in the young years, careful work on the Moszkowski (though admittedly of lesser musical value) may enable a player to master the greater music later on.

There is also the question of confidence. Singing a solo before an audience would be a growth experience—even if not a totally positive one—never to be gained by participating in a vocal quartet. To master and give a decent performance of a piece for the left hand alone is to come just a little closer to believing in yourself, which may be the most valuable regimen of all.

Each of the extensive *Schools* for left hand by Berens, Bonamici, Phillip, and Wittgenstein—to list them in order of increasing difficulty—offers a complete course of left-hand training through the inclusion of exercises, studies, and transcriptions. (How strange that Czerny, with his mania for the encyclopedic, never produced a school for the left hand alone.) In our own time, with the codification of teaching material for young people, there has been an array of simple left-hand music for children.

All of this said, let us not make exaggerated claims for left-hand music. If the final goal is two-hand playing, the left hand must be fully integrated. That is, the crucial thing for a pianist is the way the left hand functions while the right is playing. A whole world of habits may be involved. Recent research in the very complex area of physical psychology indicates that the left hand may be doing something rather different when it plays by itself than when it functions with its partner.* So one-hand music should not be seen as a cure-all.

*According to Leon Miller, Professor of Psychology at the University of Illinois at Chicago, in bi-manual playing the brain must control what each hand does separately as well as what the hands are doing together. There may also be some "spillover" of commands from one hand to the other.

Injury

Some pianists have no choice in the decision to study left-hand music. The number of players who have sustained serious permanent damage to their right hands through accidents, overpracticing, strain, nerve deterioration, or some other cause is tragically high. In fact, the treatment of injured performers is becoming an American industry, with a journal—*Medical Problems of Performing Artists*—and major centers in at least seventeen cities.

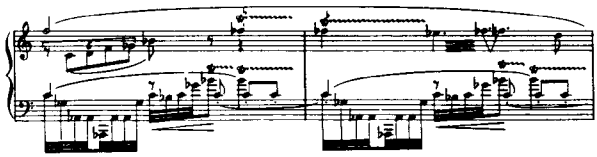
In the nineteenth century virtually everyone was right-handed; that is, until recently the small minority of individuals who were born left-handed were discouraged from using the left hand and forced to conform to the majority. This would presumably lead to a great preponderance of right-hand injuries sustained in daily life away from the piano. As for *playing*-related impairments, since the right hand has the most complex music and bears the burden of projecting the melody as well, the harm caused by the strain of overpracticing and by incorrect practicing generally strikes there. The classic case was Robert Schumann. Working without a teacher, the impetuous nineteen-year-old set himself an impossible regimen, which included a ten-fold repetition of his newly composed *Toccata*! After two years of trouble, Schumann sealed his fate with a contraption designed to strengthen the fourth finger of his right hand. What had begun as a sensation of numbness led to a crippling paralysis of at least two fingers.

Although Schumann's struggles bore no compositional fruit, the very first published work for the left hand may have resulted from a physical disability. In 1820 Ludwig Berger brought out his *Studies*, op. 12. Three years earlier an apoplectic stroke had rendered his right arm useless. That would explain the inclusion of one study for the left hand.

When Alexander Scriabin was a student at the Moscow Conservatory, his teacher Vassily Safonoff advised him to "sink into the keys, don't skitter over them." Scriabin (he was the same age as Schumann had been) decided to go at it with a vengeance. Determined to play Balakirev's *Islamey* and Liszt's *Don Juan Fantasy* as fast as his phenomenal classmate Josef Lhevinne, he rented a summer house and banged away at his piano day and night. The result: tendinitis of the right hand and a prediction from his doctors that he would never play again. But Scriabin refused to despair and fortunately had the good sense to totally rest his strained hand. He worked patiently with the left hand alone, although we do not know what material he played. After six months he could use his right hand again, but it would be two more anguished years before he achieved a complete recovery. The *Prelude and Nocturne*, op. 9, written two years after his problem began, were not the only fruits of this youthful crisis. From this point on, the piano music of Scriabin evinced a wonderful richness (and difficulty) in the left-hand parts (see Ex.1).

For the rest of his life, Scriabin obsessed nervously over his right hand, continually looking at it and tapping it on the table while speaking with people. Aside from the appeal of the music, might the frequent inclusion of the *Prelude and Nocturne* on his concert programs indicate a wish to rest his delicate right hand for several minutes?

EX. 1. **Scriabin: *Sonata* no. 6 (Belaieff, 1912), mm. 248–249.**



It seems that during the time of his injury Scriabin also devised a left-hand paraphrase on waltz themes by Johann Strauss. His friend Rozamov often heard him playing it, and wrote, "God alone could count the virtuoso tricks it contained." In 1907, Scriabin played this waltz in New York City:

> There was quite a to-do over me in America. . . . The left hand Nocturne always enjoyed a special success. Then and there I somehow remembered that I had composed a wickedly clever waltz for the left hand, after the manner of Strauss, full of virtuoso passages, octaves, and it was ghastly! I composed it so as to exercise my left hand when I was ill, and it was at a time when I was a . . . worldly person. And so I decided to play this waltz for the Americans to see what would happen. I played it and it brought the house down, could not have been better. Suddenly in the middle of this noise and applause, I heard one single, piercing hiss. . . . It seems it was an acquaintance of mine, a Russian, who happened to be in town and came to hear the concert. He was expressing his disapproval for what he thought was disgraceful for me. . . . And I too felt ashamed, and I never played that waltz again.[1]

Scriabin's *Waltz* has not been found—perhaps he never wrote it down.*

Count Geza Zichy, who made a playing career after losing his right arm in a hunting accident, had a few works composed for him. They include a song transcription by his friend Franz Liszt and Emil Sauer's fine *Etude*.

We can only imagine the number of musicians who returned from the front maimed after World War I. Two of the most celebrated cases were Ottakar Hollman of Czechoslovakia, whose arm was permanently paralyzed, and the Viennese Paul Wittgenstein, who suffered an amputation. Hollman convinced two of his fellow-countrymen to compose for him—Janáček (*Capriccio for Piano and Winds*) and Martinů (*Divertimento* for piano and chamber orchestra). In addition he received a *Sonata* by Janoslaw Tomasek, one of the very few left-hand works in that genre. Wittgenstein commissioned dozens of pieces, most of them chamber works and concerti, and his great wealth ensured that many were by illustrious composers.

At the end of World War II, Walter Georgii, also with the injured in mind, compiled a large volume of both old scores and newly commissioned works by German composers. Maria Büttner's *Austrian Dances* contains a poignant Afterword dedicating her music to the wounded soldiers.

*Although Scriabin and his Russian friend were so ashamed of the left-hand *Waltz*, something quite different soon scandalized the public: when it was discovered that the composer was traveling with his mistress, Scriabin had to make a hurried exit from New York.

In 1948, the British pianist Harriet Cohen sustained a bizarre injury: she was holding a drinking glass in her right hand when, for no apparent reason, it suddenly shattered. The damage done to her hand was too great for the continuance of her career, but she was fortunate in having as a close friend the prominent composer Arnold Bax. He wrote a *Concerto* for her.

The Dutch pianist Cor de Groot, during a period when his right hand was incapacitated (1959–60), received works from six Dutch colleagues; at the same time he composed for his own use the *Variations-Imaginaires* for left hand and orchestra. Another composer-pianist writing for himself during a brief period of right-hand injury was the American Robert Helps. Leon Fleisher and Gary Graffman are no longer able to play with their right hands, and their plight has inspired several recent compositions, including concerti by C. Curtis-Smith (for Fleisher) and Ned Rorem (for Graffman).

Because so much of the literature for left hand alone was created by composers no longer known, for each story that we do possess there are many more lost in the mists of history. Although it is not possible to reconstruct the circumstances of their creation, the dedications found on these scores may indicate the existence of an injured student or colleague.

Compositional Challenge

In the preceding discussion of technique and injuries, the emphasis has been on the needs of performers. But left-hand music may also arise from an inner *compositional* urge. This might be the challenge to create something complete with an incomplete number of fingers or, in the case of Johannes Brahms, a special aesthetic pleasure. When Brahms played Bach's string music on the piano he felt the satisfaction of limitations—Bach had used only four strings, so Brahms would use only five fingers. Out of this activity arose his version of the *Chaconne* for violin. As he explained his experience to Clara Schumann:

> The Chaconne is in my opinion one of the most wonderful and most incomprehensible pieces of music. Using the technique adapted to a small instrument the man writes a whole world of the deepest thoughts and most powerful feelings. If I could picture myself writing, or even conceiving, such a piece, I am certain that the extreme excitement and emotional tension would have driven me mad. If one has no supremely great violinist at hand, the most exquisite of joys is probably simply to let the Chaconne ring in one's mind. But the piece certainly inspires one to occupy oneself with it somehow. One does not always want to hear music actually played, and in any case Joachim is not always there, so one tries it otherwise. But whether I try it with an orchestra or piano, the pleasure is always spoiled for me. There is only one way in which I can secure undiluted joy from the piece, though on a small and only approximate scale, and that is when I play it with the left hand alone. And then at times I cannot help thinking of Columbus' egg. The same difficulty, the nature of the technique, the rendering of the arpeggios, everything conspires to make me—feel like a violinist! Portschach, June, 1877[2]

Brahms's absolute fidelity to the original *Chaconne*, so unusual for the Romantic period, resulted from his deep reverence for Bach's music.

In any study of left-hand music, Leopold Godowsky must inevitably take pride of place, and his name will recur often in the following pages. Not only did he create the greatest number of works, but they stand alone in the piano literature as the last word in complexity, ingenuity, and technical difficulty. Pianists exploring his music for the first time will most likely have a reaction similar to that of Leon Fleisher: "I was rummaging the other day and came across a marvelous piece called *Symphonic Metamorphosis on Themes from the Gypsy Baron* by Leopold Godowsky. I can barely get through it with two hands! It's not to be believed—virtually unplayable."[3]

The heart of Godowsky's left-hand output are the *Paraphrases on Chopin's Etudes*. Of these 53 Chopin/Godowsky *Studies*, 22 are for the left hand alone. Godowsky put forward his broad compositional purpose in the Preface: "to develop the mechanical, technical and musical possibilities of pianoforte playing, to expand the peculiarly adapted nature of the instrument to polyphonic, polyrhythmic and polydynamic work, and to widen the range of its possibilities in tone coloring."

Godowsky believed that, in regard to the piano, the left hand holds a superiority over the right: 1. it has the stronger fingers placed naturally for the playing of upper voices; 2. it is more elastic by being much less used in daily life; 3. it is well positioned for playing the all-important low bass notes. Surely Godowsky was making these claims on behalf of his own left hand, for pianist William Mason called him "unapproachable in his specialty. His left hand is in every respect the equal of his right, and passages of extreme intricacy and rapidity come out with astonishing clearness of detail."[4]

More than simply offering pianists a body of music for expanding their left-hand technique, Godowsky was out to revolutionize piano composition itself. He prophesied: "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!" (Preface, p. 7).

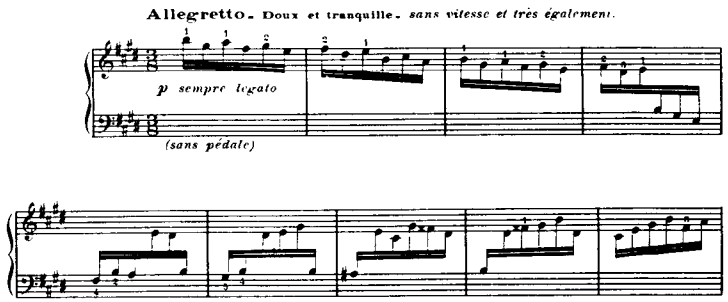
Godowsky's prediction was wrong: his late-Romantic pyrotechnics, written at the end of a period in which the piano was king, proved to be a summit, an end rather than a beginning. But for later composers of left-hand music specifically, Godowsky's immense vocabulary of figurations and finger patterns must have been a great inspiration. It cannot be a coincidence that virtually all the well-written repertoire appeared *after* his Chopin *Studies*. For example, when Godowsky played in Moscow in 1905, Felix Blumenfeld (teacher of Vladimir Horowitz and Simon Barere) was so impressed by Godowsky's left-hand feats that he was moved to produce his own beautiful *Etude* the same year. The American composer John Corigliano claims that it was a performance by James Tocco of that Blumenfeld *Etude* which in turn inspired him to create his *Etude-Fantasy* for the American Bicentennial.

Interestingly, Godowsky said he began the great puzzle of transferring Chopin's thorny right-hand passagework to the left hand in an effort to take his mind off a terrible personal tragedy that occurred in 1893: he had just received the news that his in-laws had been killed in a railroad accident near Battle Creek, Michigan.[5] A compulsive worker, Godowsky could immerse himself in practice for fifteen hours a day and was only truly happy at the piano. Out of these initial efforts arose the 22 left-hand *Paraphrases on Chopin's Etudes*.

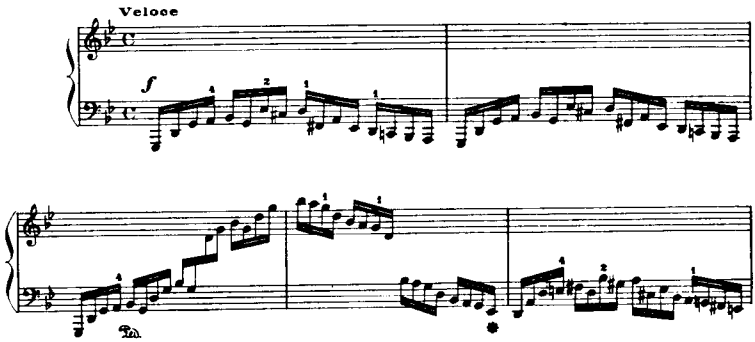
The discussion of Godowsky prompts the question: what does it mean to write well for the left hand alone? The standard piano literature for two hands partakes of

our natural ability to play the bass and treble simultaneously; at times they are widely placed from one another. The bass line works *with* the melody, as in a Beethoven Symphony or a Verdi opera. In one-hand writing the major challenge is to work around the impossibility of being in two places at once. When the primary purpose of the composition is technical, it may be enough to move in single notes (with or without occasional doublings and added tones), as if writing for the violin or cello. This can be simple (see Ex.2) or very difficult (as in Ex.3).

EX. 2. **Saint-Saëns: *Moto Perpetuo* (Durand et fils, 1912), mm. 1–9.**



EX. 3. **Moszkowski: *Etude* no. 8 (Enoch & Cie., 1915), mm. 1–5.**



Problems arise in expressive, lyrical music, where the harmonic vocabulary is important and variety of texture essential. The best writers have found a way to achieve satisfying results by frequent lateral movements of the hand, made possible by delaying both bass and melody notes (see Exx.4 and 5). Godowsky was able to completely re-think the pianistic setting.

Scriabin too was ingenious (see Ex.6). Note the delay of the bass on the downbeats of measures 1, 2, 3, 4, and 8. But at the climax—the downbeat of measure 7—it is the melody which enters late. Variety is also achieved as the tied F (last note in measure 4) is effortlessly transformed from accompaniment to melody, now sounding in the middle of a three-voice texture.

The greatest pitfall for composers has been a kind of two-handed thinking, compelling the performer to insert many grace notes and broken chords (as in Exx.7 and