

BODY & MIND

Russian pianist **GÉNIA** longed to play Rachmaninov, and in seeking ways to safely stretch her handspan, she formed a new keyboard methodology

OFTEN, WHEN PEOPLE HEAR THE TERM ‘PIANO-Yoga’, they ask, ‘Do you mean yoga on the piano?’ Or, ‘Is it yoga for pianists?’ What typically springs to mind is an image of someone sitting at a piano doing Gomukhasana arms (the yoga pose known as ‘cow face’). And then I disappoint them: it is none of the above! Piano-Yoga is a piano method that encompasses the person as a whole, providing an individual approach to the physical and psychological state of the performer. Piano-Yoga is a method I began developing and sharing with piano students 13 years ago. It is based on the main principles of the Russian piano schools, and on ideas and techniques taken from yoga and various other Eastern philosophies.

Piano-Yoga came into being through my own personal experiences as a young concert pianist. Although I benefited from the most fantastic and diverse training, almost all of my teachers stressed that, due to the small size of my hands, I should not be playing repertoire requiring big stretches. Although I could see their point, I had one major problem with this – Rachmaninov was one of my all-time favourite composers, and I felt that I would be miserably unfulfilled for the rest of my life if I couldn’t play his music. A piece I had always particularly wanted to play was the *Rhapsody on a Theme of Paganini*. While my teachers vehemently attempted to divert my attention instead to the likes of Schubert and Mendelssohn, I made it unavoidable for them to work with me on this piece by securing a booking to perform it with the Ukrainian State Orchestra. With this in place, my teachers could not discourage me any further.

I happily purchased the score and returned home in high spirits. But when I opened the music, my heart sank to the floor as I realised my teachers did in fact know what they were talking about: the chords were enormous, requiring massive strength and stretching. I was realistic enough to acknowledge that my technique at that time would not allow me to play this piece well. ➤





However, I remained determined and believed that there must be a way of safely stretching my hands and improving my technique. I started searching for a method that would enable me to do this: I went to libraries and music shops and browsed the internet, and although I found individual exercises (such as Leschetizky's) for stretching the hands, I could not find one coherent course that would lead me step-by-step to the desired result.

At that time I had been practising yoga for a number of years and could not help but notice how yoga changed my body: not only did it completely cure me of the back pain I had acquired from long hours of practise, but my muscles had become toned, my arms and legs felt longer and I even felt taller. It occurred to me that surely the yogic principles that applied to my whole body should also include my hands, and this prompted me to experiment with ideas I had learned in my yoga classes. I arrived at a series of exercises that gradually stretched my hands and increased my strength, allowing me finally to tackle the *Rhapsody* successfully.

The more I experimented mixing yoga and piano, the more I became intrigued with my discoveries. I realised that there was huge, unexplored potential for yoga to inform piano technique, and decided I needed to consolidate my approach with formal yoga training, which I undertook at one of Europe's best yoga schools, The Life Centre (now known as 'Yoga Campus') in London. Apart from the physical exercises, I studied philosophy, anatomy and various other holistic disciplines, and in 2008 I graduated as a qualified BWY Yoga Teacher.

I started applying the method to all my own students with astounding results, varying the programme depending on their level and hand size. The outcome was rewarding and fascinating; many of my students asked me to provide printed copies of the exercises. Eventually I had enough material to

publish as a book, and *Transform Your Hands: A Complete Ten Week Course of Piano Exercises* was released in 2009.

Piano-Yoga has since grown into a wider set of techniques, working on three main levels in keeping with the individual's physique, energy level and state of mind. They are:

Physical Level. Piano-Yoga approaches piano technique by looking at the whole physical body, starting with the feet, hips and spine and the alignment of the shoulders, neck and arms – only then does it deal with hands and fingers. It cultivates whole-body awareness, something many musicians often lack.

Psychological Level. The method also addresses performance nerves, memory, rhythm and the ability to concentrate while using principles borrowed from Ayurveda, an ancient Indian philosophy. Piano-Yoga also encourages visualisation and other alternative techniques, which nurture and 'open up' the student.

Subconscious Level. For those who enjoy meditation, Piano-Yoga works with the subconscious mind to turn piano playing itself into a meditative experience.

It delights me to see how Piano-Yoga, a method originally created out of necessity for myself, is now used more than a decade later by various people: professional musicians who suffer from tension and exhaustion due to heavy workloads; music students who practise for hours and suffer from overuse of their bodies; young wunderkinds who experience stage fright; children who are just starting to learn; teenagers who are about to give up; parents who need advice on how to support their children; amateur performers looking for new skills, and even complete beginners. With the Piano-Yoga rehabilitation programme I see many pianists returning to the instrument, sometimes to their greatest surprise!

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From its genesis as a simple set of exercises, Piano-Yoga has now grown into a dedicated music school located in central London, which runs regular classes, international piano retreats and alternative therapies, as well as mentoring programmes for young people and their parents and even Skype lessons for pianists outside London and further afield.

The more I work with Piano-Yoga, the more I realise how much untapped potential this discipline has to offer the piano community. My research is still very much ongoing, with frequent new revelations, and it is my hope in the long term to pass on my knowledge to other piano teachers wishing to teach Piano-Yoga for themselves. I believe that the time is now ripe for incorporating new philosophies such as yoga into piano playing on a much deeper level. 🎵

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