

MIND & BODY

After successfully playing the Rachmaninov concert, GéNIA began developing her Piano-Yoga method, teaching it one on one and in workshops. Already an enthusiast practitioner of yoga, she then spent two years to become a qualified British Wheel of Yoga teacher, studying anatomy as part of that training.

This understanding evidently proved useful to her. Near the start of *Transform your hands*, there's a 'Hand Map', a photo of a hand with some of the parts marked out. 'Skin creases reflect the range of movement at each joint,' reads the text below this striking image.

Range of music

Talking to GéNIA, I quickly realize there would be nothing like a hands-on experience to get a better sense of Piano-Yoga. I put down my notepad, and she takes me through some of preliminary exercises, such as her 'Digits' exercise (see box, opposite). I then sit down at the Steinway grand, where she shows me the steps for finding the right sitting position at the piano. First, I'm asked to put my feet on the floor and to lift up my toes, before slowly putting them down, 'ideally one by one' (an instruction I am unable to comply with successfully). Then I have to raise my heels as high as I can and lower them, again slowly. GéNIA guides me further in exercises to align shoulders and fingertips, and asks me to play. I have a sense of released tension, although I'm not sure if that isn't partly that I'm trying to please someone who is clearly a fine teacher.

So far, we've just touched on exercises in the 'Preliminary Stage: Foundation Piano-Yoga' in the first part of her book. GéNIA advises spending at least a week on this seemingly simple stage before advancing to 'Stage One: Core Piano Yoga'. This is followed by sections for players with small hands (and another for large hands) and then two further stages for intermediate and advanced pianists. Some exercises are based on photos and text, but most at the later stages are based on printed music. There are also recommended pieces to play at each stage.

'Exercise Six: Flat Fingers' in the Preliminary Stage presents several

exercises based on various types of seventh chords. In her book, GéNIA explains that most exercises in the book must be done with flat fingers. This advice, she tells me, is often overlooked by pianists eager for quick results. I observe that playing with flat fingers doesn't seem like good technique, so why must the exercises be done this way?

'The idea of flat/straight fingers comes from yoga: you lengthen first, and then build strength,' replies GéNIA. 'Playing with flat fingers will activate three sides of the hands.'

Unsurprisingly, a number of pianists have come to GéNIA because they have some kind of injury from their playing. There are two sides to injury, she tells me: the actual physical injury and the psychological injury, which might mean that even though the physical aspect is healed, the mind-set that caused the injury is still there. Unless bad habits and behaviours are re-examined, the possibility for physical injury remains, lurking in the background. Many of her injured pupils share a similar profile: professional pianists in their early thirties who work non-stop. What they also have in common, she says with a note of exasperation, is that they are 'people who don't know how to relax and take breaks.'

Between performing, composing and teaching, GéNIA must lead a non-stop life too. Piano-Yoga takes up a good part of her time, with teaching, plans for more books ('I have another three books half-written'), videos and training of other Piano-Yoga teachers as well as in the mix. Training new Piano-Yoga teachers will be a challenge, she says. 'They have to be credited musicians,' she asserts. 'They'd have to study anatomy, philosophy, technique... for me, music is philosophy, then you need technique.'

This autumn, GéNIA is launching a club on the first Wednesday of the month at Schott Music in central London. 'The aim of the club is to spread the teaching of Piano-Yoga and to connect like-minded people,' she explains. 'The activities will include some practical physical exercises that pianists could use in their practice routine, a short presentation from me on a specific topic, and question-and-answer sessions.'



Try it! 'Digits' – a Piano-Yoga exercise

Aim: To make your fingers stronger.

Initial position: Put both hands on your knees so the palms cover the kneecaps. Lift both arms off the knees, keeping the hand position exactly as it was when on your knees. Make sure that the tips of your thumbs are bent towards the palms. Then, while still keeping the hands in their original position, turn them so your thumbs are on top, above your little fingers. Each hand should look like it is holding a ball (see photo).

Exercise: Your fingers are divided into three parts called *phalanges*. The *proximal phalanx* is the bottom part of the finger nearest your palm, followed by the *middle phalanx*, and lastly the *distal phalanx* located on the top part, the finger tip.

Concentrate your attention on the bottom (proximal phalanges) of all your fingers. Tense them for three seconds, then relax. Do this three times. Proceed in the same manner to concentrating on tensing the top parts (distal phalanges) of all your fingers. This is a slightly trickier task.

Once you feel that you are doing it correctly, proceed to the most advanced stage. Concentrate your attention on the middle phalanges of fingers two, three, four and five. Tense them for three seconds, then relax. Can you feel all the different phalanges of your fingers?

Benefit: This exercise involves thought process and visualisation techniques, as it is impossible to isolate each joint separately. If you do this exercise regularly, after one week you will not only become sensitive to different parts of your fingers, but also start building up their strength.

This is an edited excerpt from Transform your hands: A complete ten week course of piano exercises, created by GéNIA.

Previous page: Piano-Yoga founder GéNIA demonstrates one aspect of finding a good sitting position at the piano; a stretching exercise on the keyboard

This page: GéNIA leads a group Piano-Yoga class; the 'Digits' exercise

There will be some time for people to perform as well, although this won't be necessary to attend the club.'

If after reading this article, you're intrigued by Piano-Yoga but you can't make it to London, GéNIA's book might help. As one of the endorsements in the front of her book says of Piano-Yoga: 'The exercises increase strength and coordination between different parts of the finger and hand, but also focus on the complex relationship between the whole body and mind in the act of performance.'

'The idea is that the book is like a little gym,' says GéNIA. 'An hour of Piano-Yoga can save you hours of practice.' ■

To find out more about Piano-Yoga, GéNIA's book or the new Piano-Yoga club, go to www.piano-yoga.com.

