

Flex Time

Can a yoga-inspired piano method bring greater focus to your playing and help small hands stretch further? **Inge Kjemtrup** talks to Russian concert pianist **GéNIA**, the creator of Piano-Yoga

Piano-Yoga' – the term conjures up an image of a leotard-wearing pianist striking an intricate pose with a piano;

perhaps with one foot on the stool, the other on a pedal, with one hand gripping the lid. Sounds awkward. 'Some people do think it's yoga next to the piano,' says GéNIA, the founder of Piano-Yoga, when we meet at Steinway Hall in London.

In fact, Piano-Yoga has nothing to do with doing the 'Downward-Facing Dog' position on top of your piano but everything to do with making best use of your specific anatomy, strength and flexibility to help your playing. Piano-Yoga aims at being nothing less than a 'holistic approach toward playing the piano', as GéNIA writes in her book, *Transform your hands: A complete ten week course of piano exercises*.

It was her own experience as a concert pianist with small hands that led GéNIA (her one-word name is a creative variant of 'Evgenia') to look more closely at aspects of strength and flexibility that might help her play what she wanted to play on the piano – music by the maestro of big hands himself, Sergei Rachmaninov. It all started when asked to perform Rachmaninov's *Rhapsody on a Theme of Paganini* with an orchestra. She couldn't say no – even though her teachers had warned her that small-handed players like her couldn't (or shouldn't) take on such a massive work.

For more than three months, GéNIA researched the problem of small hands playing big hand repertoire. No obvious solution emerged. She knew better than to get into Schumann territory with complicated stretching devices, and she began to consider what she already knew. 'My hands are not flexible,' she says. 'I was doing lots of yoga then, and I felt taller and stronger afterwards. So I created exercises that enabled me to play the piece for the concert.'

It's perhaps unsurprising that this daughter of scientists (both parents are mathematicians) would develop a systematic method like Piano-Yoga. Music is also part of her DNA, however. Born in Kharkov, Ukraine, GéNIA is the great-granddaughter of Regina Horowitz, sister of the famous pianist Vladimir. She studied with Regina (the dedicatee of her book), and then with Sergei Yushkevitch at the Kharkov State Institute of the Arts.

She arrived on British shores after winning a scholarship to the Guildhall School, first focusing on the fortepiano, and then on the piano, taking lessons with Joan Havill. She left the Guildhall having won the Premier Prix, and went to the Trinity College of Music, where she studied with Douglas Finch.

Winning an audition for the Park Lane Group, a charity that supports young artists and composers, brought her into contemporary music. She recorded an album featuring four contemporary Russian woman composers, including Sofia Gubaidulina. More recently, she has delved more seriously into composing. But Piano-Yoga is an abiding occupation. ▶

