



Julius Beltrame

the 21st-century answer to playing the piano



Helen Glaisher-Hernández meets the creator of the latest holistic piano technique, GÉNIA, to find out more...

For any ordinary professional musician, breaking a bone in the hands or arms is a catastrophic event with only one possible outcome: the end of their career. In May 2008 Russian concert pianist GÉNIA was faced with one such nightmare: she tripped on the pavement whilst walking down the street, breaking her right wrist.

GÉNIA, however, is no ordinary musician: great-grand-niece of one of the 20th century's greatest concert pianists, Vladimir Horowitz, and by this time an acclaimed classical pianist in her own right on the London concert scene, she had also developed a unique set of piano exercises inspired by her passion for Yoga which she had been using with her own students, with impressive results. These were now about to be published in the form of her first book 'Transform Your Hands: A Complete Ten Week Course of Piano Exercises'. Described by GÉNIA as 'little yogic exercises for the fingers', the book claims to strengthen the fingers and hands, improve dexterity, control, co-ordination and flexibility, and even widen hand span.

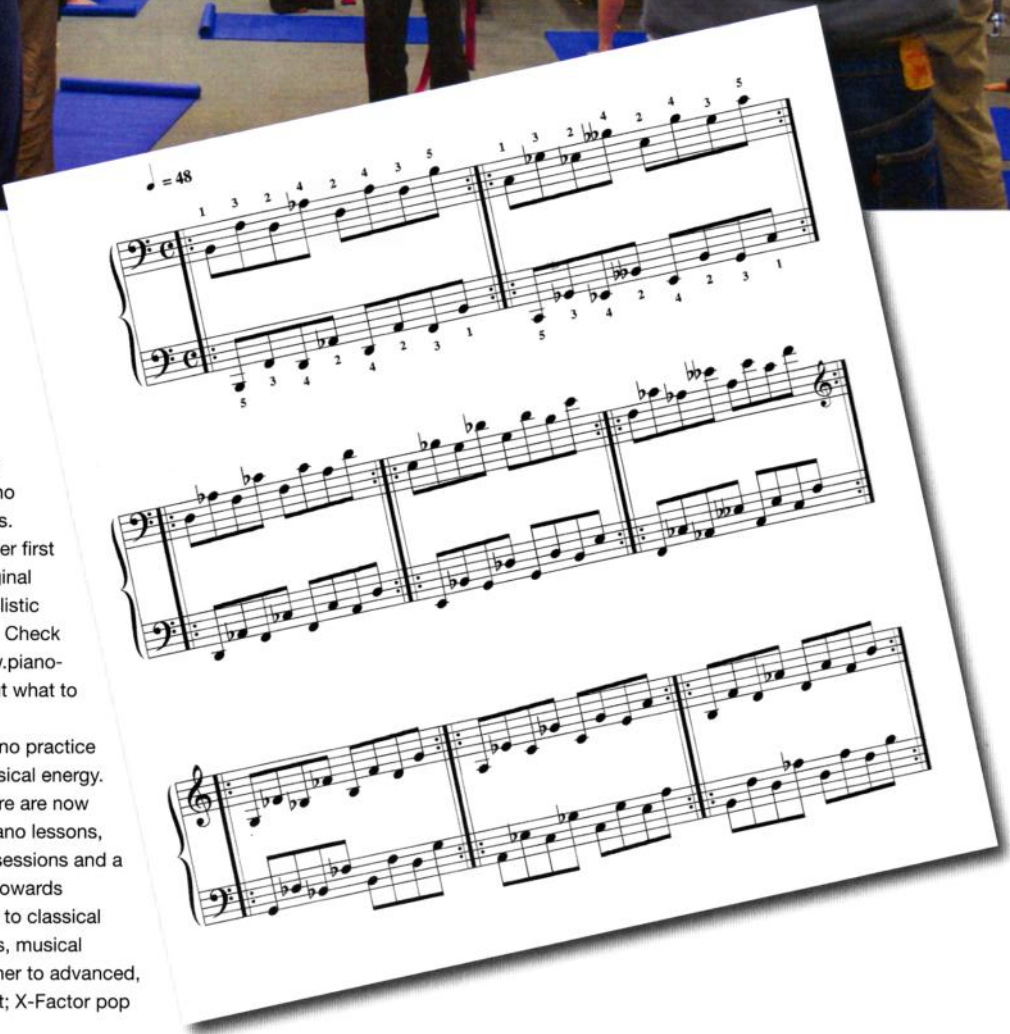
So now came the acid test: could GÉNIA's own exercises transform her hand back to how it was before the accident? "When they removed the cast I was even more devastated than before: I had no mobility in my wrist whatsoever," GÉNIA recalls. But to the complete incredulity of her hand specialist, GÉNIA was in fact back on the podium giving her first concert only 10 weeks later. "Now my wrist is

as good as new," she grins. "In fact, no...; it's actually better than it was before!"

At first publishers considered the method controversial because it advocates the use of 'flat' or straight fingers (as opposed to curved fingers), but having since been 'test-driven' by various leading figures in the piano pedagogy world the method has received rave reviews in the classical music press and interest in it is continually growing.

I asked GÉNIA how this miracle technique came into being: "I had been offered an opportunity to perform Rachmaninov's infamous 'Rhapsody on the Theme' by Paganini with orchestra, but when I opened the score for the first time I was confronted with hair-raising stretches (my hands are quite small). So I began sourcing exercises that would allow me to widen my hand span, yet I couldn't find any coherent course to help me. At that point I had just started doing Yoga and couldn't help but notice how Yoga helped me to elongate my body and strengthen my muscles. So I started experimenting and applied the same principles to my hands, devising my own exercises. Thanks to that I was able to play the 'Rhapsody'. Shortly afterwards I began sharing the exercises with my students and notating them, and that's how the book was conceived. I then trained as a Yoga teacher at the Life Centre in London in order to consolidate my approach.

The appropriation of Yoga by musicians is nothing new. In fact, Yoga gained popularity in the West through one of the greatest classical violinists in the world, Yehudi Menuhin, who was a student of BKS. Iyengar. (Menuhin also wrote the preface to Iyengar's famous book 'Light on Yoga'.) In more recent decades musicians have increasingly embraced a variety of 'alternative' disciplines to enhance their performance, including Yoga, Alexander Technique, hypnotherapy, Reiki and NLP. But the significance of Piano-Yoga® is something much more radical, because the method goes beyond the



use of Yoga as a merely complementary activity to incorporating yogic principles into music technique itself. As such, this constitutes the first entirely new piano technique to emerge in over 50 years.

A year on from the publication of her first book, GéNIA has developed the original technique to encompass a broad holistic 'lifestyle' approach to piano playing. Check out GéNIA's blog, for example (www.piano-Yoga.com/blog), and you will find out what to eat before your performance, how aromatherapy can enhance your piano practice and how lighting can affect your musical energy. At the School in central London there are now also a range of courses including piano lessons, workshops, retreats, 'regular' Yoga sessions and a variety of holistic therapies tailored towards pianists. And lessons are not limited to classical pianists; musicians of all instruments, musical genres, ages and levels, from beginner to advanced, can also use method to great benefit; X-Factor pop

singer Laura White and television presenter Sue Perkins are two of its most recent celebrity advocates.

So how does it work? The current method uses yogic principles in a number of ways to improve piano playing, as GèNIA explains:

- **piano technique:** "Improving strength, hand span and flexibility in the fingers through slow finger stretching, often accompanied by breathing work, produces very effective results, and often more quickly than traditional piano exercises. Learning to incorporate the use of *bandhas* (such as the *Uddiyana Bandha*) can dramatically improve a musician's energy, memory and concentration and even their musicality. Increasing awareness of various parts of the fingers promotes finger strength without having to even touch the piano!"
- **performance psychology:** "Performance anxiety affects the vast majority of professional musicians, and if you are an amateur learner taking exams you probably also know how debilitating stage nerves can be. A combination of breathing techniques, Yoga postures (my favourite for improving concentration is the Tree Pose) and visualisation techniques help to control adrenalin before giving a public concert, whilst the increased grounding of the player during performance can also counter its negative effects, as well as harnessing the principles of Ayurvedic diet to bring the performer into a *sattvic* state."
- **body maintenance:** "Pianists use their body as an instrument, and professionals are often required to practise up to 8 hours a day. Being stuck on a piano stool for long periods means that many pianists have a sedentary lifestyle and tend to be very tight in the hips, as well as over using the upper body - this is why chronic back pain is a common ailment

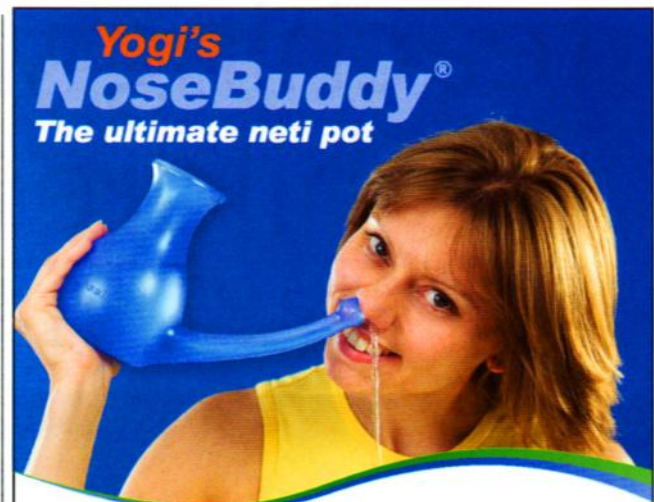
"Pianists use their body as an instrument, and professionals are often required to practise up to 8 hours a day".

amongst piano students and professionals. On a muscular level, Yoga practice focuses on the shoulders, back, arms and hips to unlock tension and help pianists to look after their bodies in the long term and improve overall well-being. I also suggest particular Yoga routines to be included in the daily piano practice for each student."

Conversely, playing the piano can also serve as a kind of 'Yoga' in itself: as a therapeutic and meditative activity which changes your energy it can help you to relax and enjoy the here-and-now. So whether you're a novice or a seasoned professional performer, Piano-Yoga® is an ideal way to combine an interest in Yoga with learning the piano.



Helen Glaisher-Hernandez is a freelance writer. For further details and of day Retreats, visit: www.piano-Yoga.com.



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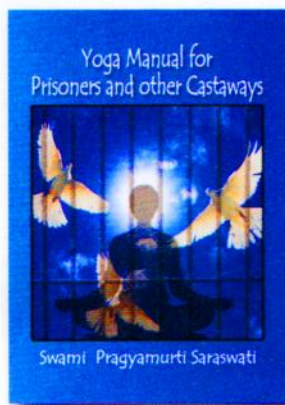


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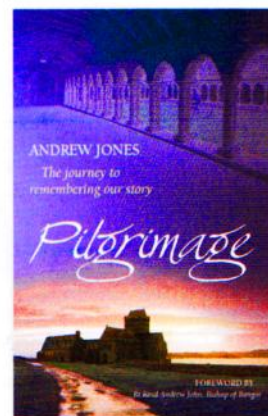
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