Letter

Ergonomic Piano Keyboards

To the editor — I noted with interest your recent editorial (June 2014 issue) about keyboard instruments and fully support your comments. Thank you for mentioning the PASK website (Pianists for Access to Smaller Keyboards, www.paskpiano. org) which I maintain on behalf of pianists around the world who are keen to see change in the "one size fits all" approach to the piano keyboard that has prevailed since the 1880s.

As you noted, piano key widths were narrower until that time, and it seems that the current size was settled on by the then-major manufacturers based on the needs of certain European male virtuosos who were closely involved in piano design and production. As a result, we now have a keyboard best suited to males with average to large hands.

I have also maintained my own website since 2011 (www.smallpianokeyboards.org) with the purpose of collating and sharing information about this important issue and promoting the need for ESPKs (ergonomically scaled piano keyboards). Much of the literature I have reviewed is listed and summarised on the smallpianokeyboards.org website rather than on the PASK site. I originally reviewed the literature (in more detail than the summary on my website) for my first conference paper on this topic in 2009 at the Australasian Piano Pedagogy Conference Association (APPCA) meeting: www. appca.com.au/2009proceedings.php. I presented this paper soon after I acquired my own DS-5.5 keyboard (approx 7/8 conventional width) from Steinbuhler & Co. in the USA. Since then, I have noted more recent studies in subsequent APPCA conference presentations (2011 and 2013) and on my website.

Much of my own research has focused on the enormous benefits of smaller keyboards beyond the very important issue of playing-related musculoskeletal disorders (PRMDs) and also on the relationship between the wide range of hand spans among the piano playing population and the demands of classical piano playing. Personally, I have never suffered from pain or injury, despite having very small hands (even for a woman). However, the benefits of a 7/8 keyboard for me are huge and something I reflect on frequently when playing. These include ease and speed of learning, sight reading, greater security, increased speed, better control of tone and dynamic range, greater power when needed, access to a greatly increased repertoire, and overall comfort and enjoyment. Having recently had the experience of playing a DS-5.1 keyboard (approx 3/4 conventional width) in the US, I can now understand how much easier everything is for men with "average" size hand spans—because that is the keyboard size that provides the equivalent experience for me.

The MTNA e-journal published an article of mine in April 2012 which describes a survey I conducted of pianists who play ESPKs. As well as experiencing the multiple musical benefits mentioned above, virtually all respondents found that their pain or injury problems had disappeared since making the change.

My 2013 APPCA paper (www.appca.com.au/2013pro ceedings.php) explored the reported benefits of ESPKs for smaller-handed pianists, looking for the underlying biomechanical and physiological factors that might explain these perceptions. It refers in particular to the work of Otto Ortmann early last century.

I would very much appreciate any readers letting me know about recent studies relating to hand size and the piano keyboard that I may have missed in my reviews. In addition, I maintain an email list for occasional email updates on developments, events, etc., on behalf of PASK, Pianists for Access to Smaller Keyboards.

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