



“Re-narrating Disability” through Musical Performance^{*}

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ABSTRACT: The combination of disability and music performance engages two principal dimensions: the reality of living and functioning as a musician with an impairment (lived experience), and the outside perceptions of that reality which intrude upon an audience’s experience of, and response to a musical performance. In recognition of the fact that these two aspects of disability affect both performer and audience in numerous complex ways, this paper addresses both of these dimensions in turn, and then examines how they intersect in the context of a live musical performance. The central purpose of this paper, then, is to elucidate the dialectical relationship between the lived reality of being a visibly impaired musician, and external views of that reality. I shall argue that the presence of visible physical difference in the context of a Western art music performance disrupts conventional binary oppositions between ability and disability, and as such opens up a space for both performers and audiences within which they can re-think their relationships to, and interactions with, people whose lived experiences sometimes may be very different from their own. To support this project, I draw upon Henri Giroux’s conception of culture as “the primary sphere in which individuals, groups, and institutions engage in the art of translating the diverse and multiple relations that mediate between private life and public concerns.” Following Giroux’s assertion that “private issues” connect with “larger social conditions” (Giroux 2004, 62), I explore the relationship between the private experience of physical impairment, and the impact of physical difference on society in general and musical performance in particular, by using my own experiences as a musician with physical impairments as a point of reference.

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—Our work is the presentation of our capabilities.—
Johann Wolfgang Von Goethe

Introduction

[1] The interdisciplinary conversations between Western art music and Disability Studies have inspired me to reflect on my studies in music, both as a person with a physical impairment and as a graduate student participating in a well-established and privileged artistic community of practice. My dual identity as both a musician and a musician with a visible impairment provides me with a specific vantage point from which to participate in these dialogues. Previously, my identity as a musician with a physical impairment has often been polluted by self-doubt. In coping with the “disabling” effects of these psychological barriers, I alternately tried to “hide” my impairment as far as possible, or struggled to “prove” myself to my able-bodied peers. The emerging field of Disability and Music has offered me the chance to re-construct a positive identity

for myself, to transcend the simplistic and dichotomous cultural meanings traditionally prescribed for physically-impaired performers in mainstream society: “invisibility as an active member in the public sphere, and hyper-visibility and instant categorization” (Sandahl and Auslander 2005).

[2] To this end, I share my own experiences as a music student with a disability, and discuss how studying music at university has enabled me to access, as it were, feelings of “able-bodiedness” and to (momentarily) disrupt the perceptions certain publics may have of my physical difference. The paper is divided into four main sections: first, I outline some of the main difficulties related to the participation of musicians with disabilities in Western art music performance. I locate my own approach to these challenges in relation to Joseph N. Straus’ discussion of how to revise “experientialist” discourse in order to accommodate “bodily difference” (Straus 2006). I then discuss certain of the realities of living with a physical impairment as they relate to my activities as an aspiring pianist. The third part of the paper draws upon various theoretical concepts relevant to my personal experiences of disability in music: these include the “affirmational model” of disability, as well as the concept of “passing.” Having established these concepts as a theoretical framework, the fourth part of my paper addresses the ways in which the visible aspects of my condition may or may not intrude upon audience perception in the context of a live performance.⁽¹⁾ I conclude by suggesting that musical performance can participate in the project of constructing new narratives about disability, stories which negate triumphalism and victimhood, and which reinforce positive identity, mutual accommodation, and collaboration. The realm of public music performance provides fertile ground for the advancement of such a project: as a form of cultural production, the performance of Western art music is simultaneously “the ground of both contestation and accommodation,” and a forum for the construction of “narratives, metaphors, and images that exercise a powerful pedagogical force over how people think of themselves and their relationship to others” (Giroux 2004, 63). Although my discussion unfolds largely as a personal narrative—and I rely primarily on my own experiences rather than on the academic literature to elaborate my central premises—I hope that the issues I address will be of interest to a wide audience, transcending the various boundaries demarcated by socially- and culturally-marked physical difference.

Potential Obstacles in Accommodating Physically Impaired Musicians in Western Art Music

[3] Although the most obvious barriers to the inclusion of people with physical impairments into the mainstream of Western art music are structural, for example performing venues, teaching and recording studios, and music schools which are inaccessible to people with visual, aural, and mobility impairments, there are other challenges that require a combination of individual and societal accommodations in order to prevent them from becoming disabling barriers.⁽²⁾ This section of my paper tackles what I perceive to be some of the most important of these potential obstacles to the full participation of physically impaired pianists in Western art music and offers some solutions which have been beneficial in my own life.

[4] The standard literature on piano technique does not, for the most part, substantially address bodily variation as a factor in the development of technical and mechanical fluency at the keyboard. However, in his treatise *Rational Principles of Pianoforte Technique*, Alfred Cortot confidently declares that “no physical obstacle exists in pianistic execution, which is absolutely insurmountable, when once the nature of the obstacle has been clearly defined, and when reason and logic have been called upon for its conquest” (Cortot 1930, 3). This triumphant assertion takes on added meaning and urgency in a discussion of physical impairment in relation to pianistic technique.

[5] Cortot emphasizes the necessity of adapting a teaching method and technical approach to suit different types of hands. My own approach to playing the piano expands this idea of adaptation to include bodily variation on a larger scale. I am influenced in this endeavor by Joseph Straus, who has critiqued experientialist discourse for assuming “that we all inhabit the same kind of body, a normatively abled body, and thus all experience our bodies in pretty much the same way.” Guided by Straus’ assertion that “bodies differ, and bodily difference makes a difference” (Straus 2006, 123–4), I would like to explore ways of expanding the discourses of piano performance and keyboard technique to include more fluid approaches to mechanical and technical issues, thereby paving the way for increased participation by physically impaired musicians .

[6] I frame this discussion by drawing attention to an interesting and potentially instructive parallel between a challenge common to all pianists—namely, the requirement to adapt one’s technical approach to accommodate pianos of different shapes, sizes and capabilities—and a challenge specific to physically-impaired pianists, by which I refer to the need to accommodate physical bodies of different shapes and sizes. To be employed most effectively, the impaired body, like the piano, requires a fluid and flexible approach, which takes into account its particular strengths, without ignoring its potential liabilities and indeed disabilities. Although one might argue that all pianists, regardless of whether or not they identify or are identified by others as physically-impaired, need to take their own particular physical configurations into account when playing, I argue that the challenges posed by physical impairment in this regard are highly specific and cannot necessarily be

addressed by standard technical approaches to piano-playing. In the next section, I explore this matter in detail, drawing on my personal experiences as a pianist thus far.

Accommodating Impairment at the Piano: Personal experiences

[7] I turn now to some of the particular concerns I regularly confront when I perform in various public venues. All of these challenges are potentially “disabling”; that is to say, they can all negatively impact my piano playing to the extent that I perceive myself, and am likewise perceived to be “disabled.” Therefore, I present some of the different solutions that my teachers and I have developed over the past number of years in order to address these concerns effectively and to prevent “disability.”

[8] Broadly speaking, there are two ways of facilitating the acquisition of mechanical and technical fluency on a particular instrument for people with physical impairments. The most obvious solution is the construction of various adaptive external devices (pedal extensions, extra supports for the player, etc). The other method, and the one which I have privileged throughout my studies in piano, is to use the impaired body to mimic, as far as possible, normative keyboard techniques. I have gradually come to the realization that, practically speaking, some compromise between these two methods is necessary, given the infinite range of physical impairments and specific needs for accommodations.

[9] My single greatest concern when performing on an unfamiliar piano is the damper pedal. These pedals vary widely in size and shape, and also in their distance from the floor. Because my right leg does not fully extend outwards, I sometimes have to sit uncomfortably close to the keyboard, in a physically cramped manner, in order to reach the damper pedal. Of course, this impacts my overall playing technique, since muscular relaxation is essential to good tone production and fluent mechanics. It is unpleasant, and psychologically disabling to realize that my inability to use the damper pedal on a given piano can have a significant, even drastic impact on my technical fluency and could therefore impact the overall artistic quality of my playing.

[10] In an effort to deal effectively with this situation, I have had designed a number of external devices which can be attached to the damper pedal. The principal aim of these devices has been to serve as an extension to the pedal in order to accommodate my restricted right leg movement. However, these mechanisms, while initially promising, have ultimately proven ineffective since their design does not allow them to remain firmly attached to the pedal for a significant length of time. During practice sessions with these devices, I have had trouble maintaining contact with my foot, and have also noticed that these devices invariably slide either right or left after a few minutes. Also, these pedal extensions require an involved effort to attach them to the damper pedal, requiring movements such as bending down, and crouching, which are beyond my range of physical ability. Although I am happy to seek assistance when necessary, I would prefer to have a mechanical pedal extension which is designed in such a way that I can attach it to the pedals myself.

[11] The most significant break-through in my pedaling technique occurred after I stopped wearing my leg-braces during performances. Without the added bulk of these braces, I have been able to slide myself slightly further underneath the keyboard, and closer to the pedal. Furthermore, the absence of my leg-braces during performances has had the pleasing psychological effect of allowing me to feel physically “able-bodied.”

[12] The type of piano bench available at a given performance venue has a significant impact upon my performance. Because of my physical condition, I require a padded, adjustable surface upon which to sit. I frequently elect to perform directly from my manual wheelchair, since, as it happens, its height is well suited to a great many pianos. I always remove the armrests and footrests in order to obtain maximum freedom of lateral movement in my arms and legs. An additional advantage of performing from my wheelchair is the back support I obtain therein. Although I am physically capable of sitting on a bench without a back support, my back becomes fatigued rapidly and I am therefore unable to sit in such a manner for the duration of a recital. When I was a child, I was more physically mobile and used walking devices such as crutches to move around. Partly because of different physical circumstances at the time, and perhaps out of some un-acknowledged need to feel as able-bodied as possible—a phenomenon referred to in Disability Studies literature as “passing”—I would often walk out on stage, or if I used my wheelchair, would have it removed from public view, and would transfer to the piano bench in order to play. Presently, I find it more convenient, and comfortable to simply play from my wheelchair, and I try to achieve “able-bodiedness” through my playing rather than through attempting to hide the fact that I use a wheelchair.

[13] In analyzing some aspects of posture for the physically-impaired pianist in further detail, I would like once again to use Alfred Cortot’s *Rational Principles of Pianoforte Technique* as a point of departure from which to suggest approaches that

accommodate a larger range of bodily difference than commonly assumed in the existing literature. In his discussion of equality and independence of the fingers, Cortot advises that “care must be taken, according to the different conformations of the hand, to curve the fingers in such a way that they each strike the note on the same level” (Cortot 1930, 9). Following Joseph Straus’ example in advocating accommodation of bodily difference in experientialist discourse, I should like to propose expanding Cortot’s advice to include spinal curvature as an important consideration in tone production involving larger muscle units (hand, wrist, forearm, and shoulder). My revised version of Cortot’s approach would read: “care must be taken, according to the different conformations of the pianist’s body, particularly the spine, to move the upper body in such a way that all muscular units, from the fingers to the shoulders, can strike the notes on the same level.”

[14] Restricted movement in my legs and ankles prevents me from being able to use the *una corda* pedal. So far I have not solicited assistance in constructing a mechanical device to enable me to access the *una corda* pedal, since my priority is first to acquire a suitable mechanism for the damper pedal.

[15] However, in the meantime, limiting my repertoire to only those pieces which do not require the *una corda* pedal is not a viable option. To do so would be to create “disability.” My teachers and I have therefore, over the years, approached this issue as though it were in the realm of manual technique. Flattening the fingers almost completely over the keys is an effective way of changing the color of the sound, since the perception of attack is mitigated by the angle at which the fingertip strikes the key. In addition, timing can be used to good effect; for example, a slight delay at the beginning of a passage designated to be played with the *una corda* pedal can dramatically alter the mood and create an effective sense of anticipation. Through adjustments in tempo and dynamic, I think that it is possible to shift attention away from what is “missing” to what is actually present, and to offer a convincing, “disability-inflected” reinterpretation of this passage (Straus 2006, 124).⁽³⁾

Theoretical Framework: The “Affirmation Model” of Disability and the Concept of “Passing”

[16] Let us now examine personal and public responses to visible impairment in the public performance of Western art music. Prior to beginning this discussion, however, I wish to briefly outline a theoretical model of disability which will help contextualize my analysis.

[17] My approach is implicitly under-girded by the so-called “affirmative model” of disability. Briefly, this view of disability seeks to promote positive identity by rejecting the idea that physical impairment is tragic, and by moving beyond the documentation of various examples of social, cultural, and historical wrong-doing by normatively able-bodied societies and cultures.⁽⁴⁾ The two other well-known models of disability, the medical and social models, are unsuited to my purpose: my aim here is not to separate out those aspects of my physical condition which are biological (as in the medical model) from those which can, to varying degrees, be ascribed to socio-cultural barriers (the social model), but rather to share my experience of living with an impairment, and to consider how my own lived experiences connect with the perceptions that audiences have of my physical condition.

[18] In adopting the “affirmative model” I argue that music performance offers unique opportunities for the assimilation of physical difference in ways that threaten neither to undermine existing (and highly necessary!) standards of excellence in Western art music, nor to exclude people based purely on physical difference through the simplistic equation of normative standards of able-bodiedness with artistic and technical excellence in piano playing. Rather, through the integration of Disability Studies and performance, physical difference itself can become the site of the wholly contemporary project of testing boundaries and challenging entrenched conventions, thereby enabling the individual and collective re-thinking of the nature of limitations, ability, and potential.

[19] It should be noted that my own interpretation of the “affirmative model” is less radical than the view adopted by many scholars in the disability arts movement. Many scholars and activists adopt the motto “proud, angry, and strong.”⁽⁵⁾ On a personal level, I cannot with any degree of honesty engage discourses that portray those with visible physical impairments and difference as victims of societal oppression, whether structural or attitudinal. My own experiences in academia thus far have certainly not been defined by oppression, marginalization, or exclusion. Indeed academia has afforded me the opportunity to feel included, and to feel that I am judged for my contributions to a community of practice—for what I sound like as a musician, rather than for what I look like as a musician with a disability. I firmly believe that the current efforts to bridge scholarship and activism in Disability and Music can have beneficial effects on society as a whole and further the goals of inclusion and accommodation.

[20] Throughout my childhood, I viewed my studies in music, at least in part, as an opportunity for hiding my impairment from the gaze of the normatively able-bodied public. However, the field of Music and Disability has encouraged me to re-think my views on the relationship between physical impairment and music, and on a more personal level, to try to find a sensible middle-ground between erasure and foregrounding.

[21] “Passing” is the term commonly employed by Disability Studies scholars to denote the act of deflecting attention from impairment (Sandahl and Auslander 2005, 3).⁽⁶⁾ This tactic is understood to take place predominantly in medical institutions, settings which offer a variety of normalizing therapies, medical procedures, and mechanical devices designed to rehabilitate people with impairments. However, since “passing” has as its goal the re-construction of meaning, I argue that the performance of Western art music opens up further spaces for the social enactment of passing. Perhaps even more importantly, the concert hall offers an ideal venue in which to critique the assumption that “the disabled body is naturally about disability” by forcing audience and performer alike to reflect on how ability and disability are contiguous phenomena, continuously playing against each other (Sandahl and Auslander 2005, 4). The willing acknowledgement and accommodation of our disabilities, individually and collectively, leads us ever further into new areas of ability, and deepens our awareness of the pliability of the boundaries of our personal and common limitations as human beings.

Public perceptions of Disability in Musical Performance

[22] The noted scholar Henri Giroux defines pedagogy as a communal endeavour concerned with more than the “social construction of knowledge, values, and experiences; it is also a performative practice embodied in the lived interactions among educators, audiences, texts, and institutional formations” (Giroux 2004, 62). Such a philosophy of education can be profitably applied to the realm of Western art music performance. If we regard the concert hall, practice room, and teaching studio as opportunities for “public pedagogy,” then a whole host of disabling barriers can be tackled. My approach to disability and music aims to expand conceptions in Disability Studies of the impaired body as the site of historical, cultural, and institutional oppression by proffering such an imperfect body as a venue for the realization of rich possibilities.

[23] While it is true that live musical performances necessarily involve an element of visual spectacle, I suggest that the presence of visible impairment complicates the relationship between the audible and visual aspects of a performance. To illustrate how visible impairment “in performance” cannot be effectively reduced to any one particular role, I offer up two very different responses from audience members to my piano playing and to the relationship between my pianism and my physical appearance and condition.

[24] When I was in Salzburg to participate in the Internationale Sommerakademie of the Mozarteum, the director Alexander Muellenbach observed that I played as though there were no “disability” present. In particular he complimented my pedaling, perhaps the single greatest source of struggle for me from both a technical and artistic standpoint. He expressed interest in how I achieved a variety of effects with the pedal, but contextualized his remarks within a larger discussion of interpretation. In that space, and in that moment, I ceased to be “disabled” even though my physical condition was readily visible to the audience. It seems that a musically convincing performance can indeed allow audience perceptions of physical “otherness” to recede into the background in certain public performance situations.

[25] A rather extreme example of the reverse, that is, an inflexible hyper-awareness of my physical condition, comes from my childhood. After I had performed in a class recital featuring the students of my second piano teacher, a woman came up to me and asked me how I managed to operate the damper pedal without proper foot movement. Somewhat embarrassed by her blunt fixation on my pedaling technique, I explained that I had devised a way of pedaling by lifting my entire leg in order to allow my foot to operate the pedal. After several more questions about the specific nature of my condition (Spina Bifida) and about my restricted leg movement, she walked away. I do not recall her asking me about the music I had performed, or attempting to engage in a discussion of interpretation. Instead her anxiety about my ability to fulfill the task at hand (rendering a given work in a convincing manner) clouded her ability to evaluate whether or not I had, in fact, succeeded.

[26] The collision of these vastly different reactions to my playing not only with each other, but with my own views of the relationship between my physical impairment and my music-making illustrates the complexity involved in identity-construction. Although it might be tempting to dismiss the woman’s obsession with the purely physical and visible aspects of my disability as a function of ignorance, and therefore “invalid,” and to ascribe the difference between her reaction and that of Alexander Muellenbach to the difference between education and the lack thereof, I prefer to understand this difference as a catalyst in positive identity-construction, since the latter entails the acknowledgement and ownership of difference as a pre-requisite. Being put in the position of having to allay the fears which visible impairment may arouse has made me

increasingly aware both of my own agency and the power inherent in possessing insider knowledge of the experience(s) of physical impairment. Positive identity construction, then, involves more than the simple erasure of the visible effects of physical impairment; it entails the constant negotiation between different conceptions of physical difference and demands a profound awareness of how these formulations intersect, elide, and indeed collide to shape our collective experiences, internal and external, of visible impairment.

Conclusion

[27] Carrie Sandahl and Phillip Auslander have pointed out that mainstream arts and disability studies had an uneasy relationship at the beginning, and that Disability Studies scholars viewed artistic disciplines “mainly as purveyors of negative images of people with disabilities” (Sandahl and Auslander 2005, 6). I have tried to further the project of dismantling such barriers between Disability Studies and the Arts by arguing that to view mainstream Western art traditions as predominantly oppressive is simplistic and indeed ‘disabling.’ On the contrary, music performance offers exciting potential for promoting the inclusion of disability into the culture of Western art music.

[28] In my examination of the conflicts between the lived reality of physical impairment and external perceptions of this reality, I have sought to acknowledge both as valid: just as non-impaired people do not have the right to dismiss the subjectivity of people with impairments as irrelevant, people with impairments should not automatically react with hostility to the articulation of external views of physical impairment. During the course of my studies in music at the university level (spanning approximately nine years and three degrees), I have been fortunate enough to work with a number of first-rank pianists and to have benefited greatly from these studies. The experiences resulting from my interaction with these musicians point to the vast potential within academia for inclusiveness and accommodation, founded upon shared goals (the attainment of musical excellence) rather than upon obsession with physical appearance. I feel that my work as a pianist enables me to construct personal narratives about physical impairment which transcend traditional binary oppositions separating ability from disability. These fluid narratives are about the constant probing of real and perceived limitations, as well as the accommodation of differing views of physical impairment and even impairment itself.

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Footnotes

* My approach in this paper draws inspiration from the idea that “the artistic genre of performance lends itself especially well to the project of renarrating disability because the body is the artistic medium of performance” (Garland-Thompson 2005, 33). Although Garland-Thompson refers specifically in this chapter to disability performance art, (in which disabled performing artists foreground their bodies), I believe that Western art music performance can also participate in the construction of new narratives about disability.

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1. John Swain and Sally French have discussed in detail the implications of the “affirmative model” in relation to various other theoretical conceptualizations of disability in Swain and French 2000. The issues of both personal accommodation of disability at the piano, and audience perception of disability in the context of musical performance have been outlined in Honisch, “The Road to Marginalization is Paved With Good Intentions: In Pursuit of the Re-humanization of Physically-Impaired Musicians” (forthcoming).

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2. Alex Lubet discusses Western art music’s “formidable impediments to full participation” by musicians with various disabilities at length in Lubet 2004.

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3. Straus uses the phrase “disability-inflected” in the context of his discussion of how experientialist literature might be more inclusive of physical difference, specifically disability. In applying this phrase to my discussion of alternatives to the soft pedal, I wish to highlight how piano performance can also become an important site for the accommodation of physical impairment.

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4. As discussed at length in Swain and French 2000.

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5. John Swain and Sally French mention Johnny Crescendo’s song “Proud, Angry and Strong” in relation to the disability arts movement, and suggest that it embodies the spirit of the affirmative model (Swain and French 2000, 569).

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6. The concept of “passing” actually originates in Critical Race Theory. For an analysis of “passing” in this context, see Piper 1992.

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