

Letters

to the Editor

Two-stage tendon reconstruction

Have you had two-stage tendon reconstruction surgery to your hand? Do you know a pianist who has?

Following the rupture of the flexor tendon in my RH thumb, I have undergone the first stage of this surgery whereby a silicon rod was inserted into my thumb/hand. The next stage will involve the removal of a tendon from elsewhere for transplant.

As a pianist, I am anxious to hear from a fellow pianist who has had this done.

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Janet West

Readers may recall a contribution by Janet West to the 'Sideways Learning' discussion on 'Using composition' (September 2003). I am, in fact, the 'teacher' she referred to, and I was extremely saddened to hear from her husband of her death in March this year under most unfortunate circumstances.

She had a history of breast cancer and, whether as a result of early drug treatment or purely as a health bonus I never discovered, she developed the thyroid eye disease mentioned in her article. Despite a number of very delicate eye operations, it resulted in seeing double if she lifted her eyes above horizon level. Not only did this create obvious difficulties focusing on music

at the keyboard, but it also kept her away from conferences and other gatherings, so she was not widely known within the Association.

Recently she experienced pain when raising her arms, and a regrowth of malignant cells was diagnosed, this time affecting the upper part of her spine. Seemingly undaunted, she waited while the NHS got its act together for a 10 hour operation which was declared to have been completely successful. But while still in hospital tragedy struck in the form of a completely unrelated bowel infection so virulent that dehydration led to liver and kidney failure, and her subsequent death.

Janet would not claim to have left an indelible mark on the profession, but she was one among many of our members who make a most valuable contribution to raising the standard of piano playing by constantly seeking to improve their teaching through continuing professional development. In her case, she showed extraordinary courage in battling with her afflictions, and I did not want her demise to go unremarked.

Frank Martin

Downward scales

You suggested in the April 2004 issue of PP that students tend to make mistakes in scales on the way down. It seems to me there are several reasons

why scales are played less well descending. Children often find the fingering more tricky in the RH when ascending and in the LH when descending (when a decision has to be made as to whether to play 1-2-3-1 or 1-2-3-4-1). The LH tends to be neglected in practice by all but the most conscientious youngsters. So the LH becomes the weaker hand. When pupils make a mistake in their scales, they often go back to the beginning and start again. Therefore, the ascending scale is played more often than the descending scale.

One obvious remedy is to practise LH scales more than RH scales, having first established which note is to be played with the fourth finger. Another is to practise scales (and arpeggios) several times descending only, then to practise them descending followed by ascending. Another way of focusing on the LH is to play the LH *forte* while the RH is *piano*. Repeating a scale several times one octave only (hands separately or together) establishes the basic fingering pattern. It can then be played two octaves, waiting on each tonic to prepare mentally for the next octave or, even better, waiting before putting a finger over or tucking a thumb under in each hand in order to decide which finger is to be played. Mental and physical preparation is often the key.

Jenny Macmillan

Jazz and popular styles

The accusation has come round again that we are letting our pupils down by not engaging with their interest in jazz and popular styles. Through talking to members at Conferences and with evidence from both the Pedagogy Course and the Composers Club, I know this is not true in many cases.

But it would be helpful to know to what extent members

- are comfortable dealing with jazz and popular styles
- have some degree of competence in these styles
- feel pupils are best left to explore these interests independently

Any thoughts would be most welcome (anonymously if you prefer).

Frank Martin