



Lister-Sink: Struggle

# Living in the Shadows

## The Silent Struggle of Pianists with Playing-Related Injury

by Barbara Lister-Sink, Ed.D.

*“The pain can be excruciating at times when I play...I’ve had to keep from crying while performing.”*

During the last half century, I have become intimately acquainted with and increasingly dismayed by the shadow side of our profession. As a piano teacher specialising for over thirty-five years in injury-preventive technique, I have seen so much suffering while trying to help hundreds of pianists negotiate the arduous, complex journey through injury, diagnosis, treatment, retraining and recovery. I have wept in the face of their suffering, equaled only by their resilience, perseverance and courage. But I have also shed tears of gratitude as I listened in a darkened concert hall to their triumphant return to music-making with the piano. This article is dedicated to those beloved piano students, past and present, who have travelled the long, arduous path to injury-free playing. These are their own words; this has been their journey.

### INTRODUCTION

*“I have been very depressed... I thought about ending my life almost every day.”*

As I write, we are in the midst of an historic pandemic that has cast its own ominous shadow over the globe. It has affected countless lives in great and small ways, many with the gravest of consequences. But the global epidemic I write about is of another sort, one that lurks in the shadows of our piano world. It is the decades-old plague of playing-related injury that will affect well over half of advanced pianists in their lifetimes<sup>1</sup>. It is confined to thousands, not millions, but its consequences in the music world can be devastating in physical, mental, emotional, personal, financial and professional ways.

*“Imagine for a moment that your life has taken an unexpected turn...That your vocation...your identity, your passion, your hopes*

*I have wept in the face of their suffering, equaled only by their resilience, perseverance and courage*

*and dreams for your life, and the avenue by which you expressed the innermost parts of who you are, are all being threatened. The thing that you once loved so dearly is now causing you daily pain...*

*You see doctor after physician after specialist, and no one can tell you exactly what is going on.... It has become difficult to accomplish simple day-to-day tasks like cooking a meal, cleaning the house, taking notes in class, and even bathing yourself. You feel out of control. You feel powerless and confused and hurting. You struggle to find hope. Everyday is a challenge...This is the lived experience of musicians dealing with playing-related injuries.”*

How many of us actually play the piano every day? The piano – or any musical keyboard – continues to be the world’s most popular instrument. For centuries, it has captivated, intrigued, mesmerised and charmed us. Statistics in the last decade report that 100 million people play the piano – or some form of keyboard – worldwide, including some 30-40 million children in China, and over 23 million amateur pianists and one million piano students in the US taught by 40,000-50,000 piano teachers. During the pandemic, that number may have increased as people shelter in their homes. In times of deep distress, through its music, the piano and those who play it have offered comfort and hope, even when all seems lost. So it would seem that the piano will continue to be, for millions, young and old, worldwide, an old and beloved friend. For most, it may be their oldest friend. But for thousands of serious pianists worldwide, the piano is a foe that betrayed them and gave them pain.

*“I have been playing the piano for about 30 years - most of my life. I am in constant pain. The pain feels like a punishment... People do not talk about it. They think it’s a part of being a musician.”*

### MY STORY

I am personally acquainted with the pain, confusion and despair. When I was child, the piano became my ticket to a rich and deeply fulfilling inner world. I studied with well-trained and loving teachers. But at age 16, while preparing Beethoven’s Third Concerto, I awoke with a burning sensation in my right arm. All the fast, loud passages I’d practised for hours now caused searing pain. A doctor ordered daily cortisone shots and two weeks of total rest. I managed to perform the concerto, but the pain continued to plague me for six more frustrating years. I was a frequent guest at the college infirmary, soaking my arm in a whirlpool bath and taking aspirin. I continued to play recitals, but I lost confidence and always feared the pain would return, my fingers would stop moving, and I would have to stop playing in the middle of a concert. No one, including a variety of doctors, had any answers. I never even got a diagnosis for my injury.

This situation worsened and led to tremendous self-doubt and feelings of worthlessness. My best friend had become my worst enemy. The path I had dreamt of seemed to disappear into a fog of fear and unanswered questions. Then, completely by accident, while living in Amsterdam, I met an extraordinarily gifted teacher far ahead of her time in understanding the root, as well as the means of recovering from injury. Edith Lateiner-Grosz told me, “you must be aware,” (in Dutch “Je moet bewust zijn”) of everything I did with my whole body, not only my arms, hands

and fingers. After several months of careful, mindful practice in a very specific way, I was free of pain. But since little was known about playing-related injuries at that time, I was never really sure why the pain had gone away.

This devastating experience set me on a path of exploration and experimentation for the next 50 years. I learned everything I could about technique – devouring books, studying Alexander Technique, biomechanics, neuroscience, and joining forces with the performing arts medicine movement. I even self-financed a 160-minute video on injury-preventive technique in the late 1990s, doing everything in my power to prevent other pianists from losing their musical voice, their joy in playing the piano – their best friend.

### THE SHADOW SIDE OF INJURY

Pianists’ suffering is not only physical. It can become deeply emotional and leave scars. The world of injury can be a nether region of loneliness and isolation with little support:

*“I used to think that playing-related injuries only happened to other people. When it did happen to me, it was surreal. Now with this pervasive attitude staring back at me from colleagues and teachers, I realised that no-one can understand until it happens to them...”*

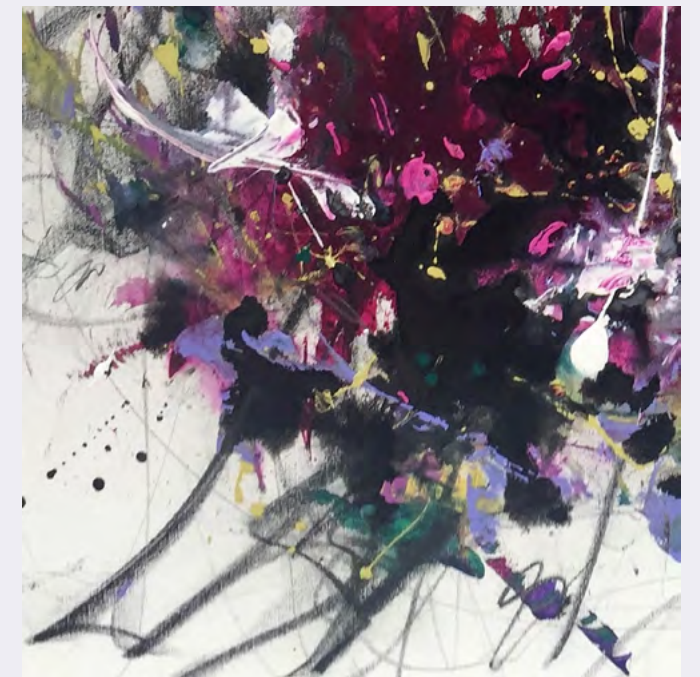
Injury leaves pianists devastated, depressed, disconsolate, even suicidal. They often feel worthless, and are accused of being hypochondriacs and in need of psychiatric help:

*“All of the elements of my journey seem to be corroborated by most other injured pianists; lack of acceptance from teachers and academic institutions, going through a litany of medical professionals, and feelings of hopelessness and despondency. I’ll never forget my college professor’s response that I would hear for the rest of my college career, “You know, when people say they have hand problems, sometimes I think the problem is in their head rather than in their hands. Just be careful, take an ibuprofen and keep practising.” ”*

Their lives are often left in tatters. Life is a constant struggle. They lose all sense of purpose:

*“I felt as if I were being punished for pursuing my love and passion. I felt imprisoned in my own body, not being able to express myself... Since music is at the core of my soul, I felt that there was no purpose for me to live any longer.”*

Playing-related injuries have cost pianists their scholarships, positions, gigs and even careers. They often find themselves caught in a web of confusion, frustration, unanswered questions,



Lister-Sink: Struggle - Detail 1



anger and despair. They have lost their musical voice. For many pianists, there is no way out of this maze of injury:

**“Not being able to play without pain felt like a personal failure; a loss of identity. It was a lonely experience, with people sympathising with you but not fully understanding what you were going through.”**

FROM THE RESEARCH

Like dancers and other “artist-athletes”, pianists combine subtle, complex motor skills to meet high artistic standards. Scientists have deemed advanced piano playing to be one of humankind’s most demanding activities. Noted physiologist Homer W. Smith encapsulates the demands of our trade:

“The most intricately and perfectly coordinated of all voluntary movements in the animal kingdom are those of the human hand and fingers, and perhaps in no other human activity do memory, complex integration and muscular coordination surpass the achievements of the skilled pianist.” Given the multifaceted demands of playing the piano – physically, mentally, artistically – little wonder that there is high risk for injury.

Studies over the last 15 years have revealed

- 2005 playing-related injuries vary between 26% and 93%.<sup>2</sup>
- 2006 Japanese study showed 77% of female pianists had sustained injuries<sup>3</sup>
- 2010 Australian study reported injuries in 71.9% of professional pianists<sup>4</sup>
- Women pianists are twice as likely to suffer playing-related injury because of hand size<sup>6,7</sup>

TYPES OF PLAYING-RELATED DISORDERS

The list of playing-related neuromusculoskeletal injuries or disorders is long and continues to evolve. This list below is not comprehensive. Playing-related injuries are complicated by genetics, lifestyle and non-playing-related conditions. The injuries themselves may begin as “simple” as muscle fatigue or forearm tendonitis. But if left undiagnosed and untreated, they can evolve into complex disorders involving nerves, muscles, tendons, ligaments, joints and fascia, and perplexing neurological disorders such as focal dystonia.

- Complex Regional Pain Syndrome
- Tendonitis
- Cervical Radiculopathy
- Carpal Tunnel Syndrome
- Cubital Tunnel Syndrome
- De Quervain’s Syndrome
- Medial and Lateral Epicondylitis
- Ganglion Cysts
- Myofascial Pain Syndrome
- Nerve Compression Syndrome
- Osteoarthritis
- Focal Dystonia

If successful diagnoses and treatments are not found, psychological problems may arise. I have also seen hypermobility lead to a number of maladaptive, compensatory malcoordinations when left unaddressed. But the most elusive and confounding disorder I have witnessed in my teaching career is complex or chronic pain syndrome and the resultant “central sensitisation” of the nervous system, a product of the dark side of maladaptive neuroplasticity.

WHERE WE ARE TODAY

Because I direct a program that focuses on injury-prevention and recovery, most of my own pianists have recovered completely or partially.<sup>8</sup> In almost all cases, they have continued, with courage and a can-do spirit, to create a life in music. And as teachers and advocates, they are eager to help others along their own difficult



Lister-Sink: Struggle - Detail 2

Given the multifaceted demands of playing the piano – physically, mentally, artistically – little wonder that there is high risk for injury

journey, either to prevent or to recover from injury.

Despite the persistently high rate of injury, there are encouraging signs. Performing arts medicine is now a global field that has evolved over the last 40 years, thanks to a number of dedicated researchers, health-care practitioners and educators. There are a number of performing arts clinics and specialised healthcare providers committed to helping musicians worldwide. National and international music organisations promote wellness websites, workshops, resource and referral materials, and lectures, and have developed guidelines for injury-prevention. Dedicated researchers have worked indefatigably to understand risk factors and develop effective treatments.

But accurate diagnoses and treatments of these frequently complex disorders are difficult to obtain, and pianists become reticent even to seek out medical advice, fearing they will be told they must stop playing – sometimes forever – and find another career path. Since this is an unacceptable choice for most pianists, they continue in desperation to find solutions.

**“It happened literally overnight without warning and no one really knew what to do with me. I spent the next five years trying everything that was suggested – orthopedists, chiropractors, massage therapy, hot and cold packs, muscle relaxants, pain medication, yoga...Nothing worked. It was (and still is) the worst time in my life.”**

It is my fervent hope that this article and these poignant, even heartbreaking words from my own students might bring more awareness to the enormous extent of this pervasive and unacceptable situation. I believe our piano profession can and should do much more to reduce this plague of injury. We owe it to our piano students and to our art.

POSTSCRIPT

Sadly, the piano world recently lost one of the most beloved pianists of our times - Leon Fleisher. He was without doubt one of the greatest musicians, pianists and teachers of the 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> centuries. His contributions to the global music world were as

boundless as was his generosity of spirit.

But Leon Fleisher also brought playing-related injury to international visibility. He was one of the most courageous, resilient and positive forces in our music world because he himself suffered the devastating loss of use of his right hand. Focal dystonia was the primary diagnosis. After his injury came to great prominence in the 1970s, he paved a courageous path for countless injured pianists. He showed them how to turn a potentially devastating loss into a tool for creativity, innovation and deeper connection with their own humanity through music.<sup>9</sup>

CITATIONS

- <sup>1</sup>Chong, J. & Manchester, F. (2014, March).What can go wrong and what to do to get back on track. Workshop presented for Pedagogy Saturday, Music Teachers National Association and Performing Arts Medicine Association: A Pioneering Partnership to Keep Musicians Performing at the 2014 MTNA National Conference, Chicago, IL.
- <sup>2</sup>Bialocerkowski, A., Bragge, P. & McMeeken, J. (2006a). A systematic review of prevalence and risk factors associated with playing-related musculoskeletal disorders in pianists. Occupational Medicine 56 (2006): 28-38.



**Barbara Lister-Sink**, internationally acclaimed pianist and acknowledged global leader in injury-preventive keyboard technique, is a graduate of Smith College, the Utrecht Conservatory and holds an Ed.D. from Columbia University. A Steinway Artist since 1977, Lister-Sink has performed and given workshops throughout North America, Europe and Australia. Her DVD *Freeing the Caged Bird – Developing Well-Coordinated, Injury-Preventive Piano Technique* won the 2002 MTNA-Frances Clark Keyboard Pedagogy Award. Presently Artistic Director of the Salem College School of Music and Director of the Graduate Music Program, she has taught on the Eastman School of Music Artist Faculty and was keyboardist for the Royal Concertgebouw Orchestra. A previewer for Oxford University Press, Lister-Sink was chosen by *Musical America Global* as one of America’s “30 Top Professionals of 2018” as an innovator, independent thinker, and visionary leader.

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