

THE MAN WITH THE GOLDEN ARM

How did war-wounded pianist Paul Wittgenstein persuade Ravel, Britten and Prokofiev to write pieces for his left hand? **Melissa Lesnie** finds out

“There are an enormous number of general empirical propositions that count as certain for us. One such is that if someone’s arm is cut off it will not grow again”. Not the most nuanced philosophical assertion, stated plainly and harshly in *On Certainty*, the posthumously published notes of Ludwig Wittgenstein. But it’s no accident that the great Viennese thinker chose such a brutal image; his pianist brother Paul had suffered a particularly cruel twist of fate in 1914, when a bullet wound sustained at the Russian front claimed his right arm.

Of course, the maimed soldier could not have disputed his younger brother’s observation, but his severe disability didn’t deter him. “It was like climbing a mountain. If you can’t get up one way, you try another,” he wrote of his determination to continue on the path of a virtuoso pianist. Rising above a handicap that would end most performers’ dreams of concert life, flouting the disapproval of his family, one of the wealthiest and most influential in Vienna, he carved out a place for himself in musical history by commissioning some of the 20th century’s most striking piano music... All for the left-hand.

Crowned by Ravel’s famed masterpiece *pour la main gauche*, the collection of 17 concertos written for

him has inspired countless injured pianists – among them the American Leon Fleisher, who says he is “enormously grateful personally to Wittgenstein for enriching the repertoire”. At the same time, it presents an irresistible challenge to able-bodied players, like Serbian-born Ivan Ilić, who calls the left hand “the underdog in piano playing; the weak, less agile hand.” Still, he admits that “playing with both hands masks the deficiencies of each hand, until one plays with one hand. Initially, it’s like being naked in cold rain. It’s like playing a different instrument.”



Wittgenstein himself had a troubled relationship to the works he commissioned, one that suggests there’s more to the story than heroism and triumph over tragedy. After all, it must

have taken a very particular character to fall foul of Ravel, Prokofiev and Hindemith.

Did he like or even understand the musical legacy he devised and self-funded? How did he respond to the overwhelming cultural pressure of simply being a Wittgenstein, and what finally led to his complete estrangement from the family? And perhaps the most vexed question: would he be remembered today if he had had two hands?

In December 1913, less than a year before he awoke in a military hospital to discover his right arm missing, the

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26-year-old had made his concert debut in the splendour of Vienna's Grosser Musikvereinsaal. He hired the hall and orchestra – money was no object for a Wittgenstein. (Ludwig, then living in Norway, was notably absent.) Onlookers saw the anxious soloist thump the walls with his fists and tear up his sheet music minutes before striding out onstage, but the reviews were favourable on this occasion, one of the few public performances he gave before he enlisted along with his brother.

One suspects much of his initial success came in response to the family name, which carried much prestige in Viennese society, and especially in musical circles. Paul's industrialist father Karl was a steel tycoon whose near-monopoly on supplies within the Austro-German Empire enabled him to amass one of the largest private fortunes in Europe. Good news for musicians, since the Wittgenstein patriarch was an amateur violinist and devoted patron of the arts; Paul spent his childhood dining with Brahms and Clara Schumann and playing duets with Richard Strauss. Mahler, Casals and Bruno Walter were regular guests at the Wittgensteins' obscenely lavish palace on the Alleegasse.

Paradoxically, Karl Wittgenstein disapproved of the artistic pursuits of his own children — ambitions he had nourished so comprehensively — insisting that they should follow him into the family business. Even Brahms, a frequent visitor, noticed the tension within the family: "They seemed to act towards one another as if they were at court." The oppressive attitude in the household may have led to three the nine Wittgenstein children committing suicide, and Paul felt unable to launch his concert career until after his domineering father had died of cancer.

In August 1914, a world away from the glittering Wittgenstein palace and its seven grand pianos, Paul was *en route* from Galicia towards the Russian border when his right elbow was shattered by an enemy bullet. He lost consciousness before reaching the field hospital, receiving no warning that his arm would be amputated. By the time he awoke to the trauma of what had happened on the operating table, the hospital had fallen into enemy hands. The patients and medical staff were dispatched to camps in Russia and Siberia.

In a state of shock, his wound festering, he was transported thousands of kilometres in the freezing, cramped conditions of a *teplushka* cattle car. Ludwig, who by October had received word of his brother's



ordeal, wrote about the "frightfully sad business" in his diary. "I keep having to think of poor Paul, who has so suddenly lost his career! How terrible. What philosophy is needed to get over it! If only this can be achieved in any other way than suicide!"

But Paul had other ideas. Whether or not he contemplated suicide during his recovery at the Omsk prisoners-of-war hospital, he never abandoned his desire to resume life as a concert pianist. Even as he learned to perform simple everyday tasks like washing, dressing and eating one-handed, he had also drawn the charcoal outline

Despite losing his arm, Wittgenstein's drive to become a concert pianist never wavered

of a keyboard on a wooden crate, on which he practised seven hours a day to refine his left-hand technique. The other patients must have thought he had lost his mind as well as his arm. Within months, a sympathetic diplomat who saw this spectacle requested for the wounded soldier to be transferred to an internment camp where he would have access to a piano. Paul set to work arranging for the left hand anything he knew by heart, starting with Chopin's *Revolutionary Etude*, a piece that captures the human spirit rising above extreme tribulation if ever there was one.

It's no coincidence that he chose this work, with its cascading broken chords and turbulent *moto perpetuo*. Wittgenstein is likely to have known of the Vienna-based composer-pianist Leopold Godowsky's arrangements of Chopin etudes published between 1904 and 1914: a collection of 22 studies for the left hand alone, which compress from ten to five fingers the already fiendish originals, hardly removing a note. They were undertaken not to cater for disability but, conversely, in the name of able-bodied advancement of technique, as what their creator described as "experiments" designed to "further the art of piano playing". A *Revolutionary Etude* to revolutionise technique to the point of a sort of superpianism. "If it is possible to assign to the left hand alone the work done usually by both hands simultaneously, what vistas are opened to future composers, were this attainment to be extended to both?" Godowsky wrote of the etudes that became known as the Everest of the piano repertoire.

Wittgenstein didn't have to look beyond his hometown for other role models or sources of inspiration — like

Count Géza Zichy, a favourite student of Liszt's who became the world's first professional one-armed pianist after a hunting accident in his teens. He would have understood Paul's grim determination: shortly after the loss of his limb, the young Hungarian gave his tutor a sealed letter not to be opened for a year. He had written:

"If exactly one year from today I am unable to do with one hand what other people can do with two, put a bullet through my head." In May 1915, Zichy gave a charity performance to a Berlin audience composed entirely of men returned from the front disabled.

Repatriated in Vienna, Wittgenstein made his own one-handed concert debut in December the following year. One imagines the challenge of the stunned critics confronted with an empty tuxedo sleeve facing the audience, a sorry sight that must have made an unbiased assessment of the concert near-impossible. Julius Korngold's review captures the unavoidable pat-on-the-back tone, as he urged readers to "clasp the courageous hand, which he has learned to use so skilfully. The sounds produced by his left hand do not betray the artist's melancholy at no longer possessing a right hand, rather they express his triumph at being able to bear his loss so well." Of Wittgenstein's American debut, the *Boston Evening Transcript* asserts that the pianist has been "praised all over Europe, not merely as a freak, but as a musician and virtuoso whose performances are legitimate and artistically fruitful."

Wittgenstein did not want to be regarded as an oddity any more than he wanted to be congratulated for not



The left-hand repertoire has inspired able-bodied pianists such as Ivan Illic



being one. He sought to distinguish his artistry on its own, serious terms and, having much more money than he had repertoire to play, came to the conclusion that commissioning new works would enable him to rise above the slightest insinuation that one-handed arrangements of well-known masterworks short-changed audiences or could not compete with the originals. He had already begun the process while in Omsk, writing to the blind composer Josef Labor to request a concerto. The family fortune made it easy to approach the most illustrious composers of the 20th

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century – among them Korngold, Hindemith, Richard Strauss and Franz Schmidt in the 1920s – followed by Ravel and Prokofiev in 1930, to Britten in 1942. In responding to the technical limitations and challenges of writing for the left hand, the composers, many being pianists themselves, turned out some of their best and most surprising work. Wittgenstein, however, didn't like most of what he commissioned. By turns demanding and dismissive, critical and possessive, he often clashed with his chosen collaborators. He insisted on lifelong exclusive rights to play the Korngold Piano Concerto Op 17 of 1923: “You don't build a house just so that someone else can live in it. I commissioned and paid for the works, the whole idea was mine...”

In 1931, the score of Prokofiev's Fourth Piano Concerto was greeted harshly: “Thank you for the concerto, but I do not understand a single note in it, and I will not play it.” It was not performed during the composer's lifetime, waiting until 1956 to receive its premiere when pianist Siegfried Rapp, who had also lost his right arm in war, requested the score from Prokofiev's widow.

Hindemith's *Klaviermusik* Op 29, from 1924, is a particularly thorny example. Wittgenstein despised the work and rejected it flatly – but refused to let anyone else play it either. Following his migration to the US in 1938, the manuscript languished in his study until the death of his widow in 2002. The pianist entrusted with bringing this long-lost 20th-century gem to life in its world premiere has a remarkable story of his own. In 1965, the American prodigy Leon Fleisher, then 36, was preparing for a major concert tour with George Szell. Suddenly and inexplicably, the fourth and fifth fingers of his right hand began to curl until they remained permanently fixed in that position. “I don't want to be dramatic, but I really thought that in a way my life was over,” he told me over the phone. (As he put it in the short documentary film *Two Hands*: “The gods know where to hit you when they want to hit you.”)

For Fleisher, however, there was a silver lining. “It took me about two years to realise it was not so much my connection to piano playing that was important,



but my connection to music, and that I could find other ways of satisfying that love of music and that need for music. I gave more attention to my teaching; I began conducting. I extended my activities rather than just playing left-handed repertoire. I think it enlarged my overview of music.”

Unlike Paul Wittgenstein, who as Ludwig noted would never grow back his right arm, Fleisher was able to live in hope that this affliction that had struck “out of the blue” might simply go away out of the blue. Between submitting himself to one experimental therapy after another, he began to immerse himself in the body of work that Wittgenstein had built up. Like his predecessor, he became active in commissioning and collaborating with composers – among them William Bolcom, whose Concerto for Two Pianos, Left Hand was designed for Fleisher and his friend Gary Graffman, who also suffers from a condition affecting the right hand.

Almost four decades after losing the use of those frozen fingers, Fleisher was diagnosed with focal dystonia, involuntary contraction of muscles caused by a neurological glitch. The hoped for treatment turned out to be Botox injections that enabled the pianist to record and perform again, giving the premiere of Wittgenstein's discarded Hindemith Concerto 81 years after it was written. (As the long-suffering Fleisher agrees, better late than never.)

As a commissioner of left-hand work, Fleisher has been decidedly more open-minded than Wittgenstein, whose stifling “19th-century approach” caused him to recoil from the biting austerity and touches of jazz in Prokofiev's and Hindemith's idioms, which he

Wittgenstein's commissioned works allowed Leon Fleischer to keep playing



Above: Wittgenstein in concert, 1935
Below: The family in 1917, Paul second from left, Ludwig far right

must have felt did little to showcase his rippling, romantic brand of virtuosity.

Ivan Ilić, who frequently performs and records left-hand repertoire, speculates that “Paul wanted to be the centre of attention. He was uncomfortable with the hierarchy of the composer-performer relationship; he wanted to have a greater role in the process. He paid fortunes for the commissioned pieces. He had a Romantic, even reactionary sensibility, but ultimately it was the right move to pick such important composers, because the work will live on.”

Coming from such an elite, ambitious clan, he had something to prove. And with his fierce determination to succeed despite his disability came an enormous pressure to be taken seriously – by his family, audiences and fellow musicians. Was he really a great virtuoso tragically maimed, or did the gimmick of his one-handedness mean that lacklustre playing fell on deaf ears? Before the war, his teacher Theodor Leschetizky had dubbed him, unflatteringly, the *Saitenknicker* (key-smasher). Prokofiev was cruelly cynical: “I don’t see any special talent in his left hand,” he wrote, adding that Wittgenstein’s misfortune on the battlefield might have been a “stroke

of good luck”, since with two hands intact he “would not have stood out from a crowd of mediocre pianists”.

“I have neither seen nor heard evidence that Paul was a first-rate performer,” asserts Ilić. “His recordings are sloppy. On the other hand, thanks to him, there is this tremendous, quirky repertoire that otherwise would not exist.”

The Wittgenstein fortune might have funded Paul’s commissions, but he never had the family’s emotional support – they felt that his grotesquery brought shame to their good name. “His playing has become much worse,” notes one of his sisters in 1942. “I suppose that is to be expected, because he insists on trying to do, what really cannot be done. It is *eine Vergewaltigung* (a violation of what is natural).”

Paul, in turn, had always been cagey with his siblings. Biographer Alexander Waugh relates the story of Paul practising in the Wittgenstein household, when he suddenly shouted to Ludwig in the adjoining room: “I cannot play when you are in the house, as I feel your scepticism seeping towards me from under the door!”

As a concert performer, he was similarly paranoid that his solo part would be swallowed by the orchestral din around him. Wittgenstein demanded changes to the score in order to bring the piano to the fore, or simply cut great swathes of music without consulting the composer. Wittgenstein should have been in rapture to receive Ravel’s D Major concerto, which remains a beloved masterpiece. He did eventually warm to it, but not before making several alterations of which the Frenchman didn’t approve. Ravel had studied the left-hand etudes of Saint-Saëns in preparation, and had taken great pains to ensure that the piano and orchestra play mainly apart and that the piano writing was deftly moulded to the physiology of the left hand. Incensed correspondence ensued between these two men, who were on opposing sides of the Great War; Wittgenstein, who grew up surrounded by servants, objected to Ravel’s assertion that “the performers are slaves”. (Ravel was even less pleased when his friend Alfred Cortot arranged and recorded the work in a two-hand version.)

With the Nazis obliterating signs of weakness and disability in the arts and public performance, and with Jewish heritage lurking in the background somewhere, Wittgenstein relocated to America in 1938, where he taught gifted students without charge. Britten wrote his *Diversions* for the left hand in 1942. The British composer-pianist, a staunch pacifist then lying low in America while the war devastated Europe, took an unusual approach to the task; stating in the preface: “In no place in the work did I attempt to imitate a two-handed piano technique.” It was to be one of Wittgenstein’s last commissions. Predictably, he complained about it. ●

THE OTHER LEFT-HANDED PIANIST

Otakar Hollmann lost the use of his right hand during WWI and commissioned a stunning chamber work from Janáček, the *Capriccio*. Janáček initially declined, saying “But my dear boy, why do you want to play with one hand? It’s hard to dance when you have only one leg.”