

To Conceal or Reveal: left-hand pianism with particular reference to  
Ravel's *Concerto pour la main gauche* and Britten's *Diversions*

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## Abstract

This thesis aims to explore both compositional and performance techniques associated with music for the left hand and the circumstances of its performance, thereby allowing a much clearer appraisal than has previously been available of canonic works for the medium.

Leopold Godowsky's transcriptions of Chopin's *Etudes*, op. 10 and op. 25, in which the left hand alone persuasively executes music originally written for two hands, offer a starting point for such exploration. Maurice Ravel's *Concerto pour la main gauche* and Benjamin Britten's *Diversions*, op. 21 are two major works written specifically for the left-handed pianist; using both received and recontextualised techniques, they reveal quite different approaches to the medium. The commissioner of both was Paul Wittgenstein. His alterations to the pieces reveal both his priorities as a left-handed pianist and his creative and expressive impact on the works.

As the artistic identity of the solo performer is so strikingly defined in these works, such a study invites us not only to consider issues related to left-hand pianism but also the contrasting claims of performer and composer, the possible manipulation of works in the formation of a performer's persona and, ultimately, the relationship between the score and performance itself.

## Preface

I have no personal ‘claim’ to the left-hand repertoire. I am a two-handed pianist and the vast majority of the repertoire that I perform is written to be played with two hands. Of the left-hand repertoire, I encountered only Scriabin’s *Prelude and Nocturne*, op. 9 as a child and was utterly perplexed by a score of Ravel’s *Concerto pour la main gauche*. Unable to translate the title, or to play it at an adequate tempo, I immediately dismissed it as a dreadful dirge which was, moreover, very badly written for the instrument. It was only a few years later when I heard a recording of the work, and saw that it was written for the left hand alone, that I realised what a magnificent and inspirational piece it was. I began to explore other works of the left-hand repertoire and came across Britten’s *Diversions*, op. 21, which I adored. It still astonishes me how infrequently it is played in concert.

I had stumbled upon a little-known body of repertoire which not only deserved a wider audience, but whose musical fabric intrigued me. I began to wonder how composers had dealt with the left-handedness of the performer, how they had responded to this seemingly impossible challenge. That there must have been left-handed pianists for whom these works were written struck me as a revelation.<sup>1</sup> I could not imagine how one could build up and sustain a career when impeded, as I saw it, so strikingly by the absence of a right hand, the hand which is largely dominant in the repertoire I had played to date. This thesis is an attempt to explore both composers’ and performers’ responses to this resource and to ascertain how left-handedness may be perceived not as a burden but as creative inspiration in its own right.

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<sup>1</sup> Throughout this dissertation I have used the term ‘left-handed pianist’ to refer to a pianist who plays with the left hand alone, rather than one who, in the usual sense of the phrase, demonstrates superior capacity in their left hand.

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