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LISTEN UP

Loss of hearing need not be an obstacle to pursuing a passion for the piano. Drawing on personal experience, **Nancy M. Williams** outlines five key steps to improve your study

During the early years of my adult piano lessons, whenever I played *forte* chords in my piano teacher's soundproofed practice room, my hearing aids squealed with feedback. I cringed. I was afraid that if my teacher discovered I had a hearing loss, he would decide I was hopeless as a pianist. I tried to hide my condition from my teacher and, at some level, I even tried to hide it from myself.

Six years later, I made my debut in Carnegie Hall as part of a masterclass recital, while wearing my hearing aids. That appearance precipitated my career as a speaker across the US. When I deliver my workshop on claiming passion despite hearing loss, I often perform classical repertoire on the piano.

How did I make what may seem to be a radical transition? Through practice, practice, practice, of course, but also through attempting to come to terms with my hearing loss and to grasp the impact of my hearing on my piano study.

Here I offer five key steps for people with hearing loss who are either currently playing or want to study the piano, steps which I came to formulate after years of experience.

1: Appreciate the stigma

When I finally confessed to my first adult piano teacher that I wore hearing aids, he said: 'I noticed. But it doesn't seem to affect your playing.' He told me that he found my playing very musical. To me, his opinion felt like a blessing.

If you have hearing loss, you may also catch yourself trying to hide your condition. Deep down, you may fear your loss will bar you from your passion for music. The first step is to acknowledge the social stigma against hearing loss, a stigma seemingly invisible yet powerful. Once you are aware that the stigma exists, resisting those negative messages becomes easier. Rest assured that your hearing loss does not define you. Identify your strong points on the piano, such as your musicality or technique.

2: Understand the profile of your hearing loss

Hearing losses come in all shapes and sizes. The severity of a hearing loss can vary from so-called 'mild', more than 25 decibels – which is really not mild but a significant quietening of the world – through moderate to severe to profound, at greater than 90 decibels. A piano student with a severe loss will

face more challenges than one with a mild loss.

If you wear hearing aids, ask your audiologist to describe the profile of your hearing loss in detail. Is it more pronounced in the low or high frequencies, or flat across the board? Recognise that the default setting on hearing aids is maximized for conversation. Piano students ought to take advantage of a 'music setting' on their hearing aids so that tones outside conversational range are not compressed. As an additional step, I recommend damping the volume of the music setting, which manufacturers usually configure for listening to rather than playing music. My audiologist has created three customised versions of the manufacturer's music setting, reducing it by three, six and eight decibels. I find that I use the music setting minus eight decibels the most, because it removes a pinging quality from the music.

3: Map your loss to the keyboard

For years, I thought that my loss was severe in the top two octaves of the piano. However, the upper frequency limit of a piano is 4kHz, in a region where my loss is still moderate.

Those notes in the top two octaves sound clipped to me because I'm not hearing their high-pitched overtones. Comprehending my situation has helped me to imagine the full sound of these notes.

You can do the same. Sit down at the piano bench with your audiogram. Compare your loss to the frequencies on the keyboard, using a handy chart at www.grandpianopassion.com which has been specially designed by the deaf composer and pianist Jay Alan Zimmerman.

4: Select appropriate repertoire

With your hearing loss mapped to the keyboard, you are able to consider repertoire with your hearing challenges in mind. For example, if you have a low-frequency loss, you may struggle with Beethoven's throaty chords deep in the bass. Or if you have a high-frequency loss, you may wrestle with the shimmering chords that float through the high octaves in the closing section of Debussy's *Clair de lune*. Even if you choose to study a piece that challenges your hearing, you will understand ahead of time where the difficulties may lie.

5: Create practice strategies

For passages of music squarely in the region of your hearing loss, I recommend practising them in a different octave on the piano. For example, I recently performed Beethoven's Bagatelle op 126 no 3. The high-pitched hemidemisemiquavers (32nd notes)

told me that my playing had put them in a trance. When I'm practising, the music puts me in a trance as well. I feel grateful that I have come to terms with my hearing loss, at least sufficiently to pursue my passion for the piano. I hope that sharing my experiences will motivate others with a similar passion. ■

The first step is to acknowledge the social stigma against hearing loss. Then identify your strong points

cascading down the keyboard were difficult for me to absorb stripped of their overtones.

I practised the sequence in a lower octave, singing the melody out loud and consciously ringing the notes in my mind. Eventually, I memorised the melody so I could sing it away from the piano. After I performed the music, I felt gratified when audience members

Nancy M. Williams is a speaker, writer, pianist and hearing health advocate. She is also the founding editor of the online magazine, Grand Piano Passion (www.grandpianopassion.com). Find out more at www.nancymwilliams.com, or follow her on Twitter @NWilliamsPiano and use the hashtag #MyGrandPassion.

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