

CRITICAL DISABILITY STUDIES IN MUSIC: BUILDING INCLUSIVE MUSICAL  
PRACTICES

Rachel Huang

A dissertation  
submitted in partial fulfillment of the  
requirements for the degree of

Doctor of Musical Arts

University of Washington

2026

Reading Committee:

Robin McCabe, Chair

Mark Rodgers

Craig Sheppard

Program Authorized to Offer Degree:

Music

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Rachel Huang

University of Washington

**Abstract**

Critical Disability Studies in Music: Building Inclusive Musical Practices

Rachel Huang

Chair of the Supervisory Committee:

Robin McCabe

Department of Music

This document is designed in allyship with disabled musicians as a primer to introduce wider inclusive possibilities in higher education. There is currently a lack of understanding about disability studies in the general music education or in conservatory and university settings. It is the responsibility of our educators to instill anti-oppressive ideals into musician education. Musicians of all bodies deserve equitable access to a supportive education that fosters their autonomy in their performance and career, and this can be achieved most effectively through curriculum reform. I hope to inspire fellow able-bodied musicians to engage with disabled communities and work toward communal equity by building inclusive and participatory practices into our artistic goals. I seek to challenge systemic ableism in higher education through Iris Marion Young's reconceptualization of social responsibility, in which she urges correcting structural injustice through social responsibility and consciousness-raising. To challenge ableism in music education at the university, I make suggestions for reforming performance education to

inspire collaborative and equitable experiences for all students. This paper falls under the category of consciousness raising, seeking to inspire greater social responsibility amongst my cohort of musicians.

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## INTRODUCTION

Critical Disability Studies is a social model which describes disability as a cultural and social construction, not merely a biological or pathological diagnosis. The social model marks society, more than the disability itself, as the disabling agent in peoples' lives.<sup>1</sup> This is in opposition to the medical model, which sees disability as a lack to be acknowledged and contended with.

The social model is a more productive perspective since it, as Rebecca Warren describes, “shifts the blame for oppression away from people with disabilities and puts it on social structures, institutions, and other malleable entities.”<sup>2</sup> McRuer’s “crip theory” further explains “that compulsory able-bodiedness/able-mindedness is a normative force that constructs social Others. Through this process, disabled people become Othered because they show the fallibility of the human form.”<sup>3</sup> This paints a picture of disability as a social conflict between mainstream and Othered bodies.

Because mainstream bodies hold more social power, responsibility thus falls on able-bodied society to rectify this disparity and better support disabled autonomy. Iris M. Young proposes framing responses to structural injustices through 1) social responsibility and 2) consciousness raising. She calls on social agents to “take responsibility for their actions, habits, feelings, attitudes, images and associations” in “forward-looking” action, asking us “to submit

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<sup>1</sup> Beth Pickard, “Challenging Deficit-Based Discourse in Higher Education Through a Social Connection Model of Responsibility: A Critical Disability Studies Perspective.” (PhD diss., University of South Wales, 2020), ProQuest: 28822401.

<sup>2</sup> Emily Krebs, “Baccalaureates or Burdens? Complicating “Reasonable Accommodations,” *Disability Studies Quarterly* 39, no. 3, 4.

<sup>3</sup> Krebs, “Baccalaureates or Burdens,” 4.

such unconscious behavior to reflection, to work to change habits and attitudes.”<sup>4</sup> This moves the burden of change away from the Othered community and instead onto the mainstream.

Pickard furthers these ideas by problematizing the term “inclusivity.” She notes that “‘including’ marginalised communities in the normative system requires them to conform to hegemonic norms, and thus is potentially tokenistic at best, and detrimental at worst.” Inclusivity has to mean more than simply bringing disabled people into able-bodied spaces. That process should also empower them through equitable access. The way forward must therefore be one of participatory collaboration, which can and has been modeled in our musical communities.

This is the foundation upon which I will analyze the intersection of disability with music performance and pedagogy. I will examine instances of disability at their intersection with music through the lens of Critical Disability Studies and explore spaces where the existing system can more actively work toward greater collaborative inclusivity. I present this document as an example for how we can use sociological frameworks to interrogate our musical practices. I will start with a review of relevant literature to contextualize disability studies in music, music education, and music therapy. Section 1 discusses neurodivergence and mental health, examining how language and framing influences social images of disability. I will follow with an exploration of how left-hand pianism acts as a literal performance of disability. Next I will examine ways through which blind and low-vision musicians tackle learning music and how this reveals limitations in assistive technology. Finally, having demonstrated ways to better make

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<sup>4</sup> Iris Marion Young, *Justice and the Politics of Difference*, (Princeton University Press, 2020).

space for disabled perspectives, I will identify and critique ableism in music schooling and propose future considerations.<sup>5</sup>

By exploring communities that grow from inclusive practices, we can see where spaces built around accommodation and understanding not only validate disability as an identity and cultural space but also clarify the importance of empathetic connection. As musicians we understand that at music's most basic foundation, playing music develops empathy through shared experience and a shared sense of feeling and togetherness we experience through our interaction with each other and music. Everyone has a right to that sense of connection, and we can achieve that by building a kinder and more compassionate world. One step toward that is by furthering our understanding of each other and of people who differ from us.

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<sup>5</sup> I will use identity-first language (ie. "autistic person" instead of "person with autism") throughout this paper to acknowledge the community culture of disability. I want to also acknowledge the debate over this terminology and understand that ultimately, people deserve to choose how and with what language they are recognized.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

### Foundations

The late 20th century saw the emergence of new identity studies in western humanities through the lenses of gender, sexuality, and race. The disability rights movement of the 1980s, which culminated in the Americans with Disabilities Act, or ADA, of 1990, birthed a new interdisciplinary field in parallel: disability studies, or DS.<sup>6</sup> This has more recently developed into cultural disability studies, whose central tenet is that disability is a cultural and social construction, not a biological one, and that our differences should be celebrated rather than ostracized. The field of disability studies in music, or DISMUS, sees the realm of music as a case study in how people perform, sometimes literally, disability socially. By examining the ways musicians navigate disability in a highly performative sphere, we see that music serves as both a reflection and construction of disability.<sup>7</sup>

As an outcropping of DS, DISMUS relies heavily on the groundbreaking scholarship of disability studies. Rosemarie Garland-Thomson, Professor Emerita of English and bioethics at Emory University's College of Arts and Sciences, is a pivotal figure who has published extensively in the field.<sup>8</sup> Her 1996 anthology *Freakery: Cultural Spectacles of the Extraordinary Body* examines American reception of the visual Other by tracing the history and discourse of the freak show. This is an idea which translates well to the musicologist's purpose as it frames the "extraordinary body" in terms of performance.<sup>4</sup> Garland-Thomson's work particularly

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<sup>6</sup> Blake Howe et al., introduction to *The Oxford Handbook of Disability Studies in Music* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), 1.

<sup>7</sup> Joseph N. Straus, *Extraordinary Measures: Disability Studies in Music* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), 14.

<sup>8</sup> "Rosemarie Garland-Thomson," Emory College of Arts and Sciences: Department of English, accessed November 21, 2021, <https://english.emory.edu/people/bios/garland-thomson-rosemarie.html>.

inspired musicologist and theorist Joseph N. Straus. Straus cites Garland-Thomson's mentorship as his "deepest intellectual [debt]" and describes her 1997 *Extraordinary Bodies: Figuring Physical Disability in American Culture and Literature* as "a threshold event in the history of Disability Studies."<sup>9</sup> In this book, which studies representations of physical disability in 19th- and 20th-century America, Garland-Thomson concludes "that gender, ethnicity, sexuality, and disability are related products of the same social processes and practices that shape bodies according to ideological structures."<sup>10</sup> Garland-Thomas elaborates on this definition by coining the term "cultural disability studies:"

What I have just defined as cultural disability studies understands and investigates disability as a cultural product, as a way of interpreting bodily variation and a social concept that widely influences our collective thinking and practices. It works against dominant traditional understandings of disability as medical pathology or individual inadequacy, which are the lenses through which disability has traditionally been viewed in the academic world. Cultural disability studies can be thought of, then, as an augmentation to the study of disability in the health and biosciences... Disability as a category of analysis in artistic production is a new way of thinking in both research and critical explication.<sup>11</sup>

Garland-Thomson specifies that cultural disability studies rejects the medical lens in favor of the cultural one.<sup>12</sup> This means that disability is seen as a cultural and social identity which is

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<sup>9</sup> Straus, *Extraordinary Measures*, x. Garland-Thomson's book and title were clearly the inspiration behind Straus's own 2011 *Extraordinary Measures: Disability in Music*.

<sup>10</sup> Rosemarie Garland Thomson *Extraordinary Bodies: Figuring Physical Disability in American Culture and Literature* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1997), 136.

<sup>11</sup> Rosemarie Garland-Thomson, forward to *Sounding off: Theorizing Disability in Music*, edited by Neil Lerner and Joseph N. Straus, xiii-xiv (London: Taylor and Francis, 2006). Her essay also stresses the debt cultural disability studies and other identity studies owe to civil rights movements, whose goals were to produce a more equitable society. She further states, "Cultural disability studies and other identity studies are distinct from the rights movements that inspired them because they are intellectual endeavors, not advocacy initiatives on the part of the individual traditionally disenfranchised groups. Research, scholarship, and pedagogy drive identity studies, even though—like all academic work—they do have a political dimension." So, the distinction, there is always the goal of social justice behind work in the DISMUS field.

<sup>12</sup> According to the CDC website, disability is defined as "any condition of the body or mind (impairment) that makes it more difficult or the person with the condition to do certain activities (activity limitation) and interact with the world around them (participation restrictions)."

performed in the same way as gender, race, and sexuality instead of a pathological diagnosis or disorder. This key idea provides the basis for the DISMUS perspective on its own purpose.

## A Growing Field

In the acknowledgements of his book *Extraordinary Measures: Disability in Music*, Straus names several other DS scholars as instrumental to his introduction to the field, calling their works “the foundational texts.”<sup>13</sup> Lennard J. Davis, Distinguished Professor of Liberal Arts and Sciences at the University of Illinois at Chicago, is as entrenched in the DS field as Garland-Thomson and has been publishing in it since the 1990s.<sup>14</sup> He is editor of *The Disability Studies Reader*, which collects essential essays in disability studies and is a gateway into the field, showcasing a diversity of interdisciplinary analyses.<sup>15</sup> Paul Longmore was professor of history at San Francisco State University and director of the Institute on Disability.<sup>12</sup> His 2003 *Why I Burned My Book and Other Essays on Disability* presents a history of disability studies over the 20th century and seeks to connect scholarship with activism.<sup>13</sup> Simi Linton is the founder and president of Disability/Arts, a New York City organization that engages disability studies in the arts.<sup>16</sup> In 1998 she authored *Claiming Disability*, an overview of the field of disability studies,

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<sup>13</sup> Straus, *Extraordinary Measures*, ix.

<sup>14</sup> In 2000 Davis joined the Department of Disability and Human Development at University of Illinois, which has one of the world’s few Ph.D. programs in the field. On his website, he says, “Disability studies matters because it points out the obvious, the common, the things no one notices because most of those ‘no ones’ see themselves [as] living in the mirage of being normal.” For more on his publications visit his website. <http://lennarddavis.com/>.

<sup>15</sup> *The Disability Studies Reader* was first published in 1997 and is now in its 5th edition, published in 2017.<sup>12</sup> The SFSU Institute houses the Paul K. Longmore Institute on Disability, which “studies and showcases disabled people’s experiences to revolutionize social views. Through public education, scholarship and cultural events, the Longmore Institute shares disability history and theory, promotes critical thinking, and builds a broader community.” More information and Longmore’s full bio can be found at <https://longmoreinstitute.sfsu.edu/>.<sup>13</sup> This title was inspired by his experiences fighting for federal aid as a person with disabilities who was also earning income from academic publications.

<sup>16</sup> “Simi Linton,” Simi Linton, accessed December 14, 2021, <https://www.similinton.com/>.

and in 2006 she published *My Body Politic: A Memoir*.<sup>17</sup> Both works examine disability as a social and political identity. These scholars are especially notable in that their work is inspired by personal experience with disability. Davis grew up with Deaf culture, Longmore was a polio survivor, and Linton suffered a car accident. This humanist perspective colors the foundations of DS and DISMUS; both fields engage analyses from a personal, social perspective in opposition to medical diagnoses and view disability as an evolving identity. That these were the first authors Straus reached for speaks to his dedication to the same definition. As a major instigator for discussion around disability in music in the musicological space, his perspective remains foundational to DISMUS scholarship.<sup>18</sup>

Musicologists writing in DISMUS often have a range of research interests, which speaks to the interdisciplinary nature of the field. Straus, for example, Distinguished Professor of Music at CUNY, is also a celebrated music theorist and has published several widely used textbooks on tonality, including *Concise Introduction to Tonal Harmony*, *Elements of Music*, and *Introduction to PostTonal Theory*.<sup>19</sup> His interest in disabilities studies was initially sparked by research into

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<sup>17</sup> Simi Linton, *Claiming Disability: Knowledge and Identity* (New York University Press, 1998).; Simi Linton, *My Body Politic: A Memoir* (University of Michigan Press, 2006).

<sup>18</sup> Straus also cites some “pioneering work” by Alex Lubet, professor of composition at the College of Liberal Arts at the University of Minnesota, whose current work has forked somewhat away from the themes of other scholars’ work mentioned in this paper. For this reason, I have not included him in the main discussion. Lubet’s basic argument initially parallels the themes of cultural disability studies—that disability is culturally constructed and performed as an identity. In his 2011 book *Music, Disability, and Society*, he names this phenomenon “social confluence,” and describes it as “the unifying theme that guides these encounters between music and disability... The theory argues that in contemporary globalized society... the fundamental unit of identity is a social confluence—that is, the role in which an individual finds herself at any given time. This role is subject to redefinition at a moment’s notice as soon as one proceeds to the next encounter” (1-2). By this he means that disability or impairment is determined by the specifics of any encounter. Where he strays from other scholarship is how he applies this theory. He uses the example of a Chinese student at an English-speaking conservatory, where Lubet calls the language barrier disabling for the student. From reviews of his most recent book, most scholars do not agree with his stances nor take them seriously. He does not seem to publish in the same circles as his contemporaries.

<sup>19</sup> Straus’s current research and teaching interests include current trends in music theory, analyzing atonal music, and music and disability. For a more comprehensive list of Straus’s publications visit his CUNY faculty bio at: <https://www.gc.cuny.edu/Faculty/Core-Bios/Joseph-Straus>. Straus’s theory textbooks can be found on the publisher’s site at <https://www.norton.com/author/17149/josephnstraus>.

his son's autism diagnosis, from which he was inspired to make connections to music.<sup>18</sup> He is responsible for many early publications in DISMUS in the mid-2000s. Straus first approached the multidisciplinary field as a theorist with writings on disability representations in compositions, as in his 2006 article "Normalizing the Abnormal: Disability in Music and Music Theory."<sup>20</sup> Later he would examine music therapy's treatment of autism in his 2014 essay "Music Therapy and Autism."<sup>21</sup> He also uses art and music to survey the spectrum at large in "Idiots Savants, Retarded Savants, Talented Aments, Mono-savants, Autistic Savants, Just Plain Savants, People with Savant Syndrome, and Autistic People who are Good at Things: A View from Disability Studies."<sup>22</sup> These are two more recent essays Straus published in journals outside of the music community, further demonstrating the applicability of music to the DS field and its flexibility in other disciplines.

Straus's frequent collaborator Neil Lerner, department chair and professor of music at Davidson College, specializes primarily in music in film media and video games. His works in disability studies often come from this mixed-media perspective in their examination of representations of disability and demonstrate the multi-disciplinary nature of the field. His article "The Horrors of One-Handed Pianism: Music and Disability in *The Beast with Five Fingers*," for example, frames the discussion of disability narratives around film and film music analysis.<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> Straus, *Extraordinary Measures*, ix.

<sup>20</sup> This essay was the first article on the subject published in the *Journal of the America Musicological Society* 59 (1): 113-184 and would later appear in *Sounding Off*.

<sup>21</sup> Joseph N. Straus, "Music Therapy and Autism: A Perspective from Disability Studies," *Voices: A World Forum for Music Therapy* 14 no. 3 (November 2014), <https://voices.no/index.php/voices/article/view/2219/1973>.

<sup>22</sup> Joseph N. Straus, "Idiots Savants, Retarded Savants, Talented Aments, Mono-savants, Autistic Savants, Just Plain Savants, People with Savant Syndrome, and Autistic People who are Good at Things: A View from Disability Studies," *Disability Studies Quarterly* 34 no. 3 (Summer 2014).

<sup>23</sup> Neil Lerner, "The Horrors of One-Handed Pianism: Music and Disability in *The Beast with Five Fingers*," in *Sounding Off: Theorizing Disability in Music*, ed. Neil Lerner and Joseph N. Straus (New York: Taylor and Francis, 2006), 75-89.

The film, about the disembodied hand of a onehanded pianist, treats the pianist and his hand as a “horrific threat to the normal body, as well as... [a] horrific threat to the symbolic body of classical music and its implicit messages of perfect form and perfect execution.”<sup>24</sup> The film’s narrative kills the disabled pianist, turns his hand into a horror film monster, and finally removes the disability entirely by revealing the hand to be a mere hallucination. This trope, which Lerner calls “social erasure,” rids the world of a threat to normality in order to “reinstate the social undesirability of the one-handed pianist.”<sup>25</sup> Lerner’s essay thus dissects a highly visible example of disability in the classical world using methods of narrative analysis associated with his other expertise, film studies.

In 2004, inspired by his reading, Straus organized a panel discussion on disability studies in music at the American Musicological Society conference Seattle, marking an official beginning to music scholars’ attention to disabilities issues.<sup>26</sup> Panel members at this early gathering included Maria Cizmici, Brian Hyer, Marianne Kielian-Gilbert, Neil Lerner, Ray Rahn, and Amy Vidali; like Lerner, many of these scholars would continue to collaborate with Straus on future publications.<sup>27</sup> Cizmici, Kielian-Gilbert, and Lerner, for example, contributed to one of the first major essay collections, *Sounding Off: Theorizing Disability in Music*, edited by Lerner and Straus and published in 2006.<sup>28</sup> In the introduction of this collection, Lerner and Straus state that their goal in connecting disability studies to music is to bring “greater attention to music as a

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<sup>24</sup> Lerner, “Horrors,” 86.

<sup>25</sup> Lerner, “Horrors,” 86.

<sup>26</sup> The American Musicological Society, “Seattle Preliminary Program,” *AMS Newsletter* 34 no. 2 (August 2004); Blake Howe et al., introduction to *The Oxford Handbook of Disability Studies in Music* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), 3. The panel was a three-hour Friday evening session hosted by Straus called “Disability Studies in Music.” There are publications by Lubet connecting disability studies with the arts that predate this conference, but they were not yet published within the musicologist community.

<sup>27</sup> Straus, *Extraordinary Measures*, ix.

<sup>28</sup> Neil Lerner and Joseph N. Straus, *Sounding off: Theorizing Disability Studies in Music*, (Routledge, 2006).

manifestation of our embodiment, whether that be as listeners, composers, or performers.”<sup>29</sup> This reiterates the stance that music constructs and is a construct of our bodies, or in this case of our bodies’ disability. The authors use this book to prove music’s relevancy to the field of disability studies by presenting a broad spectrum of topics, ranging from stuttering in 17th-century opera to representations of autism in 19th-century American popular music. As the first book-length study connecting disability studies with music, the work establishes several preliminary themes of research that future collections build upon. Here Lerner and Straus partition the essays into three larger themes: musical performance of disability, works as representations of disability, narratives around or about disability. *Sounding Off* stands as a precursor to the *Oxford Handbook of Music and Disability Studies* as many of the authors here are also represented in that collection.<sup>30</sup>

The *Oxford Handbook* is an anthology in the *Oxford Handbook* series published in 2016 and edited by a few familiar names: returning duo Straus and Lerner and newcomers Stephanie Jensen-Moulton and Blake Howe.<sup>31</sup> If *Sounding Off* reads as a proving ground for the field, the *Oxford Handbook* asserts itself as a foundational text. It has a thorough introduction to the topic of disabilities in music, providing a brief history of the study and a primer on the field’s current goals and themes at the time of publication. As in *Sounding Off*, the essays here demonstrate the

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<sup>29</sup> Lerner, Straus, *Sounding Off*, 1.

<sup>30</sup> Blake Howe, et al., *The Oxford Handbook of Music and Disability Studies* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016).

<sup>31</sup> Jensen-Moulton, Associate Professor of Music at Brooklyn College, has current research interests in opera and disability in 20th-century America. She has previously written about popular music, music by women composers, and American music of the 1900s. For more on her work visit her website: [http://www.brooklyn.cuny.edu/web/academics/faculty/faculty\\_profile.jsp?faculty=673](http://www.brooklyn.cuny.edu/web/academics/faculty/faculty_profile.jsp?faculty=673). Blake Howe, Manship Associate Professor of Musicology at LSU School of Music, focuses on musicology and theory as well as Disability Studies. For more on his work visit his website: <https://www.lsu.edu/cmda/music/people/faculty/howe.php>. <sup>31</sup> For a more comprehensive list of past and forthcoming texts visit “Music and Disability at SMT and AMS,” the official SMT-and-AMS-affiliated blog of the Music and Disability interest group, at <https://musicdisabilitystudies.wordpress.com/>.

wide diversity of research topics but are divided more specifically. The newer collection explores established themes while also expanding on the field's purview to call greater attention to its multi-disciplinary nature. Expanded topics include music's interactions with different disability communities, performing disability musically, intersections of different identities, disability through war and trauma, conceptions of disability in different times periods (early, Classical, and modern), and disability in film and musical theater.<sup>31</sup> This expansion draws from the interactions of different fields and further illustrates the pervasiveness of disability studies in its connection to other disciplines. As fundamental texts in the field, these works both represent and influence themes of further scholarship, which generally fall under two major themes of discussion: analysis of identity and analysis of reception, or how disability is performed versus how disability is perceived.

Many works grapple with the difference between "disability" and "impairment" and its implications for the disabled performing musician. As Davis explains, "an impairment becomes a disability when the ambient society creates environments with barriers."<sup>32</sup> A musician may be socially able but musically disabled because of an impairment which affects only their music-making but not their social existence. This occurs with impairments such as amusia (tone deafness) or focal dystonia (loss in fine motor control), both "invisible" impairments that may not affect someone's daily life but do affect a musician's ability to perform. Howe describes this phenomenon as a "normal performance body" afflicted with "performance impairments."<sup>33</sup> At the other end of the visibility spectrum lies one-handed pianism. Howe's "Paul Wittgenstein and

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<sup>32</sup> Lennard Davis, *Bending Over Backwards: Disability, Dismodernism, and Other Difficult Positions* (New York University Press, 2002), 41.

<sup>33</sup> Blake Howe, "Disabling Music Performance," in *The Oxford Handbook of Music and Disability*, ed. Howe et al., (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), 196-197.

the Performance of Disability” is one of several essays to investigate reception of disability through this piano-specific impairment.<sup>34</sup> Howe argues that public reception of Wittgenstein’s performances and even his own treatment of his performance uses a “deficiency model” to normalize him; Wittgenstein requires normalizing because society finds his bodily difference threatening.<sup>35</sup> In such discussion of the disabled musician’s identity scholars engage with the ideas of visible versus hidden impairment and how these interact with cultural ideas of the normal body.

In another thematic area, scholars interpret works as representations of disability and narrative trends that follow. Such essays provide ample opportunity for scholars to explore different media genres; I have already mentioned Lerner’s exploration of film music using horror tropes. Using more traditional score analysis, works such as Stephen Rodger’s discussion of Berlioz’s *Symphonie fantastique* look at ways in which the structure and idiosyncratic writing of a work read as expressions of the composer’s emotional and mental state. Where Berlioz’s programmatic writing here is often considered slapdash and incomprehensible, Rodgers argues that the composer purposely uses these “musical deformations” to represent another layer of “human deformations” and embed his mental and physical obsession into the work.<sup>36</sup> Samantha Bassler’s article “‘That suck’d the honey of his music vows’: Disability Studies in Early Modern Musicological Research” crosses into the literary and theater realm of Shakespeare by analyzing “mad songs” sung by Ophelia in *Hamlet* and Desdemona in *Othello*. She concludes that music

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<sup>34</sup> Blake Howe, “Paul Wittgenstein and the Performance of Disability,” *The Journal of Musicology* 27, no. 2 (2010): 135–80.

<sup>35</sup> Howe, “Wittgenstein,” 80.

<sup>36</sup> Stephen Rodgers, “Mental Illness and Musical Metaphor in the First Movement of Hector Berlioz’s *Symphonie fantastique*,” in *Sounding Off: Theorizing Music and Disability*, ed. Neil Lerner and Joseph N. Straus (New York: Taylor and Francis Group, 2006), 235–256.

and disability are intertwined with these characters' femininity, and musical expression through song represents the characters' expressions of mental and physical states.<sup>37</sup> Bassler uses this analysis to characterize the way disability was constructed in early literary works and also develop a better methodology for the study of disability in early music.<sup>38</sup> This further demonstrates how cross-discipline study can help develop research methods for a range of fields.

### **Areas for New Growth**

The wide array of diverse discussions in these works speaks to the field's growth and maturity over a relatively short period; however, there is still room for further development.<sup>39</sup> One major gap lies in musicology's disconnect from music therapy and education. As inherently interdisciplinary, DISMUS is indebted to and can offer much practical application to these fields. The root of this separation may be found in the differences in fundamental definitions, namely the conflict between Garland-Thomson's definition of cultural disability studies and the medical definition around which music therapy for disability is established. Perhaps in an effort to legitimize itself in the healthcare industry, therapy has cornered itself into the medical definition of disability, but compassionate care should be built on the idea that disability is as much a cultural construction as it is diagnosis. Straus demonstrates the limits of the medical definition in his essay on autism published in *Voices: A World Forum for Music Therapy*. He points out that, "music therapy is a normalizing enterprise... they seek to cure, remediate, or normalize their

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<sup>37</sup> Samantha Bassler, "'That suck'd the honey of his music vows': Disability Studies in Early Modern Musicological Research," *Postmedieval: A Journal of Medieval Cultural Studies* 3, no. 2 (May 2012): 182-194. <https://link.springer.com/journal/41280/volumes-and-issues/3-2>.

<sup>38</sup> Bassler, "'That suck'd the honey of his music vows'," 193.

<sup>39</sup> There are a few other areas of neglect I did not have space to discuss in this paper. A common complaint in musicology is the lack of exploration of music outside of the Western classical tradition, and that complaint holds true for DISMUS. With its predominantly white-male demographic of scholars, this is hardly surprising and is an issue the field of musicology at large must confront. Second, there are very few works analyzing the disabled female body beyond the frame of feminine "madness" or mental illness, which has other problematic implications. As Samantha Bassler addresses in her article, a new methodology is necessary to move beyond this limited scope.

patients” through methods that can ultimately be harmful.<sup>40</sup> He argues that if disability can be understood as cultural identity, then no cure can be desired, so music therapists should disconnect from the medical model and seek instead to “enhance [patients’] indigenous culture through mutual respect.”<sup>41</sup> Rebecca Warren’s surveys of music therapy students reveals training programs developed and taught by “neurotypical practioners ignore neurodivergent culture, enforce arbitrary social standards for compliance, and ignore the client-centered practice that is said to be an ethical standard.”<sup>42</sup> These works caution against therapizing disability in order to undertand it. Rather, an ethnomusicological approach may offer a more compassionate way forward by foregrounding community perspectives. Ethnomusicologist Michael Bakan critiques medically-foregrounded therapeutic goals in his work and encourages collaboration in solidarity with the autistic community in his 2018 book, *Speaking for Ourselves: Conversations on Life, Music, and Autism*, in which he centers and platforms disabled voices.<sup>43</sup>

The understanding of disability as culture instead of pathology continues to ground new work, as scholars build around it their critiques of educational practices. Alice M. Hammel and Ryan M. Hourigan’s book *Teaching Music to Students with Differences and Disabilities* offers a thorough examination of the social structures that affect primary school special needs education.<sup>44</sup> The book provides a comprehensive timeline of relevant United States litigation and

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<sup>40</sup> Joseph N. Straus, “Music Therapy and Autism: A Perspective from Disability Studies,” *Voices: A World Forum for Music Therapy* 14 No. 3 (November 2014), <https://voices.no/index.php/voices/article/view/2219/1973>.

<sup>41</sup> In Straus’s exact wording, “Instead of seeking to normalize autistic people, music therapy might instead acknowledge their distinctive sorts of musical interests and attitudes and offer to enhance their indigenous culture in an atmosphere of mutual respect. Instead of normalization and cure, music therapists might seek enhanced self-expression, knowledge, and pleasure through mutual music-making.” Straus’s requirements here do not seem to conflict with the stated goals of music therapy, so perhaps he has a different idea of what equitable treatment may look like. He does not make any specific suggestions in this article.

<sup>42</sup> Rebecca J. Warren, “Examining Ableism in Music Therapy Education and Clinical Training: Student and Educator Perspectives,” (PhD diss., Lesley University 2023) ProQuest, 77.

<sup>43</sup> Michael B. Bakan, *Speaking for Ourselves: Conversations on Life, Music, and Autism* (Oxford Academic 2018).

<sup>44</sup> Alice M. Hammel and Ryan M. Hourigan, *Teaching Music to Students with Differences and Disabilities, Third Edition*, (Oxford University Press 2025).

development of research practices and best teaching practices. It serves as an invaluable resource for music teachers in public classroom as well as private studio environments. In parallel, Jay Timothy Dolmage's *Academic Ableism: Disability and higher education*, is an important contribution in the higher education sphere.<sup>45</sup> His work introduces Universal Design, originally an architectural concept which argues that structures should be designed for universal active use, as a response to academic ableism. Dolmage argues that structuring our academics around usability for all not only supports disabled students but will ultimately benefit all students. Emily Krieb's writing on university accommodation examines the intersectional issue of access to accommodation in higher education while critiquing the ADA statute on which these policies are based. She also questions the usefulness of the term "accommodation" itself, using crip theory to point out that the label frames disabled accommodation as a charity; this "normalizes able-bodied/minded people as the gatekeepers who can decide whether or not disabled students are able-enough to enter academic institutions."<sup>46</sup>

UK-based music therapy lecturer Beth Pickard writes on both academic and therapy structures. She bases her analyses on Iris Marion Young's work in sociology, which reconceptualizes social responses to structural injustice through 1) social responsibility and 2) consciousness raising.<sup>47</sup> Pickard's work on higher education studies uses critical disability studies to suggest academic reform around a new, anti-oppressive social arts philosophy.<sup>48</sup> Meanwhile she also challenges therapeutic ideas about normalization and highlights the

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<sup>45</sup> Jay Timothy Dolmage, *Academic ableism: Disability and higher education*, (University of Michigan Press, 2017).

<sup>46</sup> Krebs, "Baccalaureates or Burdens," 12.

<sup>47</sup> Iris Marion Young, "Responsibility and Global Justice: A Social Connection Model." *Social Philosophy & Policy* (New York) 23, no. 1 (2006): 102-30. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0265052506060043>.

<sup>48</sup> Beth Pickard, "The Process, Challenges and Opportunities of Developing an Undergraduate Curriculum in Creative and Therapeutic Arts," *International Journal of Art and Design Education*, 39 no. 1, 98-112.

Neurodiversity movement.<sup>49</sup> Her work inspired much of this paper's ideas on the critical disabilities framework.

Other scholarship understands the importance of foregrounding disabled voices, as in “Performing disability in music teacher education: Moving beyond inclusion through expanded professionalism” by Tuulikki Laes and Heidi Westerlund. In this 2017 Finnish study, musicians with learning disabilities worked with student music teachers over three years and determined that performing disability in this context improves diversity of thought and inclusivity, with the ultimate goal being an “expanded professionalism.”<sup>50</sup> By consulting with disabled musicians, these educators demonstrate an eagerness to collaborate with what Straus calls the “indigenous culture.” So, there is a movement already toward the equitable exchange of culture and education. The one thing lacking is active collaboration between musicological research and educational and therapeutic application. As a field inspired by activism, it is important to continue to look forward to these applications. If musicologists, therapists, and educators can meet in the middle of this issue, their collective understanding can only enhance the purpose of such research in disability studies in music.

As the growth of the DISMUS field shows, the world of music provides a safe space in which to explore the performance of disability. Meanwhile, the musical practices we engage in still have room to develop more inclusive participation. As disability becomes a much more visible social spectrum, we have to confront the ways our language and social tropes shape our images of the disability because social images directly affect systemic approaches to

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<sup>49</sup> Beth Pickard, “Construction of Normalcy and Diversity in Music Therapy, Theory, and Practice,” Lancaster University Disability Studies Conference, Lancaster, UK, 11-13 September 2018.

<sup>50</sup> Tuulikki Laes and Heidi Westerlund, “Performing disability in music teacher education,” *International Journal of Music Education* 36, no. 1 (2018): 34-36, 43.

accommodation. I will start by critiquing our understanding of neurodivergence in music therapy and performance spaces.

## CHAPTER 1: LANGUAGE AND FRAMING

As a social construction, language shapes attitudes around disability. Images of neurodivergence are heavily influenced by popular media depictions of people on extreme ends of the spectrum. For example, we frequently see portrayals of individuals with Aspergers who are seen as superhuman geniuses, as in Mozart in the film *Amadeus*. On the other end, much less flattering images of neurodivergent people range from outright offensive to infantilizing. This kind of framing worms its way into systemic attitudes toward disability, so it is important to critique them. We can start by examining definitions.

### **Neurodivergence.**

The term “neurodivergence” recognizes that the human mind processes the world in a variety of ways. One of the most mainstream images of neurodivergence comes from our understanding of autism.<sup>51</sup> Autism spectrum disorder, or ASD, is defined by the American Psychiatry Association as “a complex developmental condition involving persistent challenges with social communication, restricted interests, and repetitive behavior.”<sup>52</sup> The National Institute of Mental Health adds that it “affects how people interact with others, communicate, learn, and

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<sup>51</sup> In popular culture, neurodivergence usually means autism and ADHD. The National Institute of Mental Health defines ADHD as a “developmental disorder characterized by an ongoing pattern of one or more of the following types of symptoms: Inattention, such as having difficulty paying attention, keeping on task, or staying organized; hyperactivity, such as often moving around (including during inappropriate times), feeling restless, or talking excessively; and impulsivity, such as interrupting, intruding on others, or having trouble waiting one’s turn. (<https://www.nimh.nih.gov/health/topics/attention-deficit-hyperactivity-disorder-adhd> ) Research suggests that these symptoms are connected to a combined dysregulation of dopamine, norepinephrine, and serotonin – all chemicals which are responsible for regulating mood, behavior, and select physical functions. For people with ADHD, this dysregulation can also result in comorbidities like mood or sleep disorders. ADHD is treated with a combination of stimulants and counseling. While autistic individuals sometimes present with ADHD symptoms, ASD-ADHD comorbidity studies have yielded mixed results. Camille Hours, Christophe Recasens, and Jean-Marc Baleyte, “ASD and ADHD Comorbidity: What Are We Talking About?” *Frontiers in psychiatry*, 13 (2022), <https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyt.2022.837424>

<sup>52</sup> “Autism Spectrum Disorder,” American Psychiatric Association, accessed April 13, 2026.

behave.” Treatment generally focuses on developing social function through remediating communication skills.

If we read this definition through the social lens of disability, we understand these medicalized behaviors (“restricted interests” and “repetitive behavior”) to be ableist in their framing. The benchmarks for autistic behaviors view them as “inappropriate” and refer implicitly back to “acceptable” behavior modeled by neurotypical actions. While a medical diagnosis is both necessary for access to accommodation and useful for self-awareness, relying solely on medical paternalism to categorize people is dehumanizing and reductive.<sup>53</sup>

The Neurodiversity Movement seeks to challenge the widely accepted bias toward medicalization. Rather than prioritize the medical model’s “interest in causation and cure, the Neurodiversity Movement seeks to [celebrate neurodivergence] as an inseparable aspect of identity.”<sup>54</sup> According to the National Autistic Society,

The Neurodiversity Movement is a social justice movement that seeks civil rights, equality, respect and inclusion for all neurodivergent people... The main aim of the movement is to end the discrimination neurodivergent people face in society. This includes fighting against the ‘pathologisation’ of neurodivergence, including autism, which means changing views in medical science and society more widely so that people understand neurodivergence as a difference, not a ‘deficit’ or ‘disorder.’<sup>55</sup>

Rather, by viewing autistic behaviors as an aspect of someone’s social identity we see that there is nothing to “fix” or “normalize” because one is entitled to one’s personality. Treatments that seek to reshape people in the image of social norms are both disabling and isolating. Any practice that challenges individuals’ autonomy by attempting to resolve such

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<sup>53</sup> “Medical paternalism” refers to attitudes where the physician makes decisions for the patient. This is usually done with limited regard for the patients’ wishes or autonomy.

<sup>54</sup> Steven Kapp, Kristen Gillespie-Lynch, Lauren E Sherman, and Ted Hutman, “Deficit, Difference, or Both? Autism and Neurodiversity,” *Developmental Psychology* (United States) 49, no. 1 (2013): 59–71.

<sup>55</sup> “The neurodiversity movement,” The National Autistic Society, accessed April 15, 2026, <https://www.autism.org.uk/advice-and-guidance/identity/the-neurodiversity-movement>.

behavior is therefore inherently ableist and should be questioned. Instead, therapeutic frameworks should understand and embrace these differences with greater empathy.

### **Disabled Autonomy**

Music therapy is a well-known tool of remediation for autism. The field medicalizes the idea of musical language as an avenue of communication for those who cannot in the “usual” ways.

The American Music Therapy Association defines its practice as:

Music Therapy is the clinical and evidence-based use of music interventions to accomplish individualized goals within a therapeutic relationship by a credentialed professional who has completed an approved music therapy program. ... Music therapy provides a unique variety of music experiences in an intentional and developmentally appropriate manner to effect changes in behavior and facilitate development of skills. ... Music therapy can stimulate individuals [with ASD] to reduce negative and/or self-stimulatory responses and increase participation in more appropriate and socially acceptable ways. ... Because music is processed in both hemispheres of the brain, it can stimulate cognitive functioning and may be used for remediation of some speech/language skills [in persons with ASD].<sup>56</sup>

Particularly when focused on autistic children’s development, this definition is heavily preoccupied with ideas of what is considered “normal” and “socially acceptable.”<sup>57</sup> The idea of social “function” also promotes a narrow, normative view of function within society as the only way to exist. If these aims are understood as ableist, then in its current shape, therapy as a product of neurotypical training can actually disable its patients by enforcing harmful and alienating social norms. Instead of pushing for therapeutic goals that suppress patients’

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<sup>56</sup> “Music Therapy and Autism Spectrum Disorder,” American Music Therapy Association, accessed 10 April, 2026. [https://www.musictherapy.org/research/music\\_therapy\\_and\\_autism\\_spectrum\\_disorder/](https://www.musictherapy.org/research/music_therapy_and_autism_spectrum_disorder/).

<sup>57</sup> “Music therapy interventions focus on enhancing social, communicative, motor/sensory, emotional, and academic/cognitive functioning, or music skills in individuals with ASD... Music therapy sessions provide familiarity, consistency, structure, and predictability — characteristics that support the learning style of individuals with ASD.” “Music Therapy and Autism Spectrum Disorder,” American Music Therapy Association, accessed 10 April, 2026. [https://www.musictherapy.org/research/music\\_therapy\\_and\\_autism\\_spectrum\\_disorder/](https://www.musictherapy.org/research/music_therapy_and_autism_spectrum_disorder/).

indigenous culture, patients should be treated with compassionate care and given tools with which they can use to relate to social standards but which also maintain a sense of autonomy and identity.

Respecting autistic agency begins by decentering the medical model of disability and challenging medical paternalism. To do this, we can take cues from the ethnomusicology perspective. Ethnomusicology considers music through a multidimensional lens, and most importantly, considers their subjects through their own cultural perspectives.<sup>58</sup> Michael Bakan proposes as much in his work, “Toward an Ethnographic Model of Disability in the Ethnomusicology of Autism.”<sup>59</sup>

In this article, Bakan understands his role as an ethnomusicologist as

[Operating] from a different premise than most of my counterparts in the music therapy profession. I am not interested in changing the people whose lives and music I endeavor to understand. My goals are basically ethnographic, not therapeutic; and to the extent that a therapeutic aim may be said to exist at all, it is to cultivate a space in which the children in Artism get to be themselves as they wish to be, a space devoid of the kinds of externally imposed pressures, expectations, assessments, and objectives that customarily go hand in hand with programs and activities rooted in symptomatological epistemologies of autism and autistic experience.<sup>60</sup>

Bakan further achieves these ethnographic goals through the Artism Music Project, “a neurodiverse, intergenerational, and intercultural creative music performance collective....”<sup>61</sup>

The collective features autistic children, their parents, and professional musicians of diverse backgrounds in improvisatory play, in which the children control the composition.<sup>62</sup>

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<sup>58</sup> Carole Pegg, Stanley Sadie (ed.) et al. “Ethnomusicology,” in *New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians* (2nd ed.), edited By Stanley Sadie (Macmillan, 2001), 367–403.

<sup>59</sup> Michael B. Bakan. “Toward an Ethnographic Model of Disability in the Ethnomusicology of Autism” in *The Oxford Handbook of Music and Disability Studies*, edited by Blake Howe et. Al (Oxford Academic, 2015).

<sup>60</sup> Bakan, “Toward an Ethnographic Model,” 16.

<sup>61</sup> Bakan, “Toward an Ethnographic Model,” 19.

<sup>62</sup> Bakan, “Toward an Ethnographic Model,” 23.

The compositions are most often built around percussion, with the child members leading and conducting. In *Drum Battle* (2012), ensemble members Coffeebean and NICKstr initiate musical dialogue through an improvised drum duet before the rest of the band follows along in a reggae groove. A key element to the ensemble's coordination is as Bakan states, "to allow the children to define their own terms of engagement in guiding the group."<sup>63</sup> This places the group's musical autonomy in the children's hands, and they define the group's artistic aesthetic.

Bakan calls the instability of the ensemble groove "slippery" and asks the listener to "Notice how the groove initially slides and shifts about until it finally finds its way and stabilizes."<sup>64</sup> He continues that, here, "'slipperiness' is not a negative aspect of performance, but rather a characteristic and organic feature of Artism's distinctive musical aesthetic."<sup>65</sup> In a different cultural context, this aspect of the group's music-making may, when held up to normative classical standards, seem amateurish. However, Bakan intellectualizes the flexibility as a purposeful, organically shifting musical groove. Doing this treats the "slipperiness" as an indelible part of the group's artistic aesthetic and validates the ensemble's development of a disabled musical style.

Engaging autistic children's play around a free form like improvisation is itself a subversive practice. In doing so, the ensemble rejects the stereotype that autistic people rely strictly on what Fein describes as "meaning-making systems" in which "conditions where social expectations and givens are consistent, explicit, systematic, and shared between interlocutors."<sup>66</sup>

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<sup>63</sup> "Track 1.1," Bakan, "Toward an Ethnographic Model," in *The Oxford Handbook of Music and Disability Studies*, accessed April 30. <https://global.oup.com/us/companion.websites/9780199331444/ch1/1.1/>.

<sup>64</sup> "Track 1.3," Bakan, "Toward an Ethnographic Model," in *The Oxford Handbook of Music and Disability Studies*, accessed April 30. <https://global.oup.com/us/companion.websites/9780199331444/ch1/1.3/>.

<sup>65</sup> "Track 1.4," Bakan, "Toward an Ethnographic Model," in *The Oxford Handbook of Music and Disability Studies*, accessed April 30. <https://global.oup.com/us/companion.websites/9780199331444/ch1/1.4/>.

<sup>66</sup> Elizabeth Fein, "The Machine Within: An Ethnography of Asperger's Syndrome, Biomedicine, and the Paradoxes of Identity," (PhD diss. University of Chicago, 2012), ProQuest 70-71.

This stereotype suggests that autistic people struggle in unpredictable systems and avoid spaces requiring flexibility and improvisation. In direct contradiction to this, the children control and often initiate aspects of unpredictability into the music. NICKstr purposefully manipulates expectations through playful subversion of musical cues. Bakan warns, “To perform these pieces under NICKstr’s direction, one must be extremely attentive to his various cues and gestures, as well as be aware of his penchant for trying to trick players into missing his cues!”<sup>67</sup> NICKstr’s ability to challenge the professional musicians speaks to his understanding of musical form and cements his position in the ensemble as a driving force in the performance. The ensemble’s approach therefore demonstrates and legitimizes the development of a disabled music aesthetic.

By championing a much more flexible model of collaboration, the Artism Ensemble proves that autistic children can thrive in open-ended environments.<sup>68</sup> The success of the collaboration within the ensemble speaks to both the artistic and advocacy potential in actively pursuing autistic input and perspective. Bakan’s work with the ARTISM Ensemble thus models how forefronting the disabled community and critically examining medicalized biases can create a more culturally sensitive, disabled-led performance practice.

## **Mental Health and Wellness**

Other mental conditions can compound challenges faced by neurodivergent people, since mental health disorders can also be disabling. The World Health Organization categorizes mental health disorders as those that “severely disrupt daily life and cause long-term suffering if left untreated.”<sup>69</sup> Conditions like anxiety, depression, PTSD, schizophrenia, and eating disorders

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<sup>67</sup> “Track 1.5,” Bakan, “Toward an Ethnographic Model,” in *The Oxford Handbook of Music and Disability Studies*, accessed April 30. <https://global.oup.com/us/companion.websites/9780199331444/ch1/1.5/>

<sup>68</sup> Bakan, “Toward an Ethnographic Model,” 23.

<sup>69</sup> “Mental Disorders,” World Health Organization, accessed March 24, 2026, <https://www.who.int/news-room/fact-sheets/detail/mental-disorders>.

affect nearly 1 in 7 people worldwide and are treated with various forms of appropriate therapies and medication.

In recent years, mental health has seen an encouraging trend toward destigmatization. People now speak more openly about their struggles with mental health conditions and online communities in solidarity with each other. We even see commercialization of mental health with the rise of the wellness industry and popularization of therapy, see this with the rise of mobile apps like BetterHelp. As mental health takes a mainstream turn, it is important to consider our language and framing of disorders. The popular frame of genius artistry, for example, can obscure serious mental health struggles.

One popular trope is that of the “mad artist.” A prominent subject of the label is Robert Schumann, whose posthumous diagnosis has seen healthy historical debate. Over the years since his death, musicologists, historians, and psychiatrists have tried their hands at a convincing diagnosis. Felicia Gordon explains the appeal, that, “Schumann provide[s] a valuable case history to test the concept of genius itself and the question of whether it was not only allied to, but even a product of, madness.”<sup>70</sup> Romanticizing mental illness is a tempting trap, and Schumann presents an easy target of study. Now, modern scholars generally agree he was affected by a mood disorder and have narrowed this to a type of bipolar disorder.<sup>71</sup>

As the National Institute of Mental Health defines:

Bipolar disorder (formerly called manic-depressive illness or manic depression) is a mental illness that causes clear shifts in a person’s mood, energy, activity levels, and concentration. People with bipolar disorder often experience periods of extremely “up,”

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<sup>70</sup> Felicia Gordon, “‘Robert Schumann’s Mental Illnesses. (Genius and Madness),’ by Mlle Dr Pascal (1908a).” *History of Psychiatry* 26, no. 3 (2015): 359–71, 362.

<sup>71</sup> Ta-Wei Guu and Kuan-Pin Su, “Musical creativity and mood bipolarity in Robert Schumann: A tribute on the 200th anniversary of the composer's birth,” *Psychiatry and Clinical Neurosciences* 65 (2011): 113-114.

elated, irritable, or energized behavior (known as manic episodes) and very “down,” sad, indifferent, or hopeless periods (known as depressive episodes).<sup>72</sup>

The diagnosis is seemingly corroborated by Schumann’s literary alter egos, the gregarious Florestan and introspective Eusebius, who have come to represent his manic and depressive moods, respectively.<sup>73</sup> In this narrative, Schumann’s mental illness and creativity are inextricably linked. Biographer Michael Musgrave admits that, “No biography can ignore Schumann’s health.”<sup>74</sup> Camille Mauclair claims Schumann “understood that sorrow is the basis of art.”<sup>75</sup> Much of Schumann’s biography seems defined by his art’s relation to his mental health battles.

However, this is a one-dimensional view of Schumann’s reality. Thanks to these dialogues, there is a studied connection between his moods and productivity that paints a more complex picture. William Frosch’s analysis charts Schumann’s moods against his productivity between 1840 and 1849, as he graphed below:<sup>76</sup>

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<sup>72</sup> “Bipolar Disorder,” National Institute of Mental Health, accessed March 20, 2026, <https://www.nimh.nih.gov/health/topics/bipolar-disorder>.

<sup>73</sup> Robert W. Weisberg, “Genius and Madness? A Quasi-Experimental Test of the Hypothesis That Manic-Depression Increases Creativity,” *Psychological Science* 5, no. 6 (1994): 361–67.

<sup>74</sup> Michael Musgrave, *The Life of Schumann*, (Cambridge University Press, 2011), 5.

<sup>75</sup> Gordon, “Robert Schumann’s Mental Illnesses,” 362.

<sup>76</sup> Kay Redfield Jamison, “Manic-Depressive Illness and Creativity,” *Scientific American* 272, no. 2 (1995): 62–67, 66

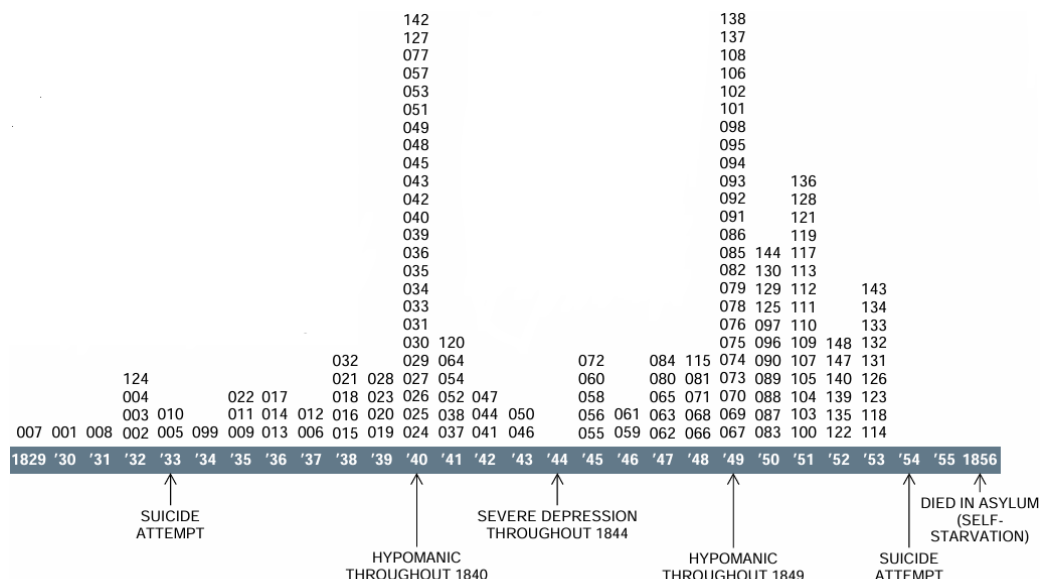


Figure 1: Schumann's quantity of output graphed as number of works written over time against time. William Frosch, "Moods, Madness, and Music. I. Major Affective Disease and Musical Creativity." *Comprehensive Psychiatry* 28, no. 4 (1987): 315–22. <https://doi.org/10.10>

Frosch measures the creative quality of Schumann's work produced during that time by volume of recordings and productivity by the quantity of works written. Frosch's work reveals that Schumann's moods, whether up or down, did not in fact affect the creativity of the works produced, only the quantity. Frosch explains, "There is no significant difference between the proportion of high-quality compositions during depressed versus hypomanic years... and negative correlations between quantity and relative quality of Schumann's output are insignificant."<sup>77</sup> Essentially, Schumann wrote less during his depressive modes and wrote more during his manic modes, but the quality and standard of creativity remained constant throughout his creative life. Interpretations like Frosch's subvert the Romantic image of the composer as the tortured artist and support the reality that Schuman's artistic endeavors persisted in spite of his

<sup>77</sup> Weisberg, "Genius and Madness? A Quasi-Experimental Test of the Hypothesis That Manic-Depression Increases Creativity," *Psychological Science* 5, no. 6 (1994): 361–67, 365

illness. While his work may have been colored by his struggles, his art was not a manifestation of his “madness.”

Psychiatric pioneer Dr. Candace Pascal agrees, concluding that,

If it is impossible to be precise about Robert Schumann’s mental disorder, his pathological history nevertheless remains extremely interesting. It shows us that during his terrible bouts of suffering, only the man remained and his genius faded away. His illness reduced all his creative faculties to inactivity. Schumann created his immortal masterpieces in moments of perfect mental balance... Thus Schumann’s musical genius appears to be the result of perfect mental functioning and his inspired intuition as the finest and healthiest manifestation of his mind.<sup>78</sup>

So we see that while his mental health may have inspired his art, Schumann’s genius is actually disconnected from his illness, and the framing of his creativity as bound to his suffering is inaccurate. Beyond painting a false image of Schumann’s artistic life, the “tortured artist” narrative also promotes the harmful mentality that genius-level creativity must be fueled by suffering.

Pianist Jonathan Biss writes that,

It is a myth that renders the artist simultaneously superhuman and less than fully human. He... does godlike things; he has no control over his impulses. He knows how to tame lions or conjure infinity; he cannot be expected to know how to tie his shoes. He is totally at home in the world of art; he is utterly out of place in the actual world. Paradoxically, this presumption of emotional instability has made it not easier but more difficult for artists to be forthright about our mental health. We are fighting a preconception that disembodies us and has the potential to make us less employable.<sup>79</sup>

Upholding this trope places artists’ value in their illness. Further, romanticizing mental illness demotivates people from seeking sometimes life-saving treatment. Rather than defining art as only expressions of mental health strife, it is more productive to understand these works as proof

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<sup>78</sup> Gordon, “Robert Schumann’s Mental Illnesses,” 370.

<sup>79</sup> Jonathan Biss, “The Myth of the Mad Artist Is Harmful. I Should Know,” *New York Times*, October 30, 2014, <https://www.nytimes.com/2024/10/30/opinion/mental-health-tortured-artist-robert-schumann.html>.

of artistic perseverance. Viewing creative output this way supports disabled artistic autonomy by putting control back into the artists' hands rather than letting mental illness dictate their art.

Language and framing define the mainstream image we have of disability. They shape systemic views of disability in ways that can often lack nuance and perpetuate harmful stereotypes. Medical definitions are useful as tools for understanding practical and functional aspects of disability, but they should not dictate social treatment of disabled people. It is ethical and compassionate to the disabled culture to build our definitions with the understanding that beyond a medical diagnosis, disability is a social and cultural identity. Our health care professionals especially should take a more ethnographic understanding of the social and cultural implications of the critical disability model in order to provide compassionate care and humanize disabled people.

## CHAPTER 2: APPLYING THE FRAMEWORK

Categorizing disability socially can be deceptively complicated as physical disabilities do not always manifest visibly to the passive onlooker. Chronic conditions like mental disorders or illnesses like POTS or cancer, for example, are not immediately visibly obvious. This might give the impression to an incidental viewer that no impairment exists. Because daily life and mundane tasks can be accomplished with little to no limitation, this person is not seen as functionally disabled. This creates the false idea that “functional” people do not need assistance, which in some cases may make them ineligible for governmental subsidies or assistance programs. This effectively disables them and erases the individual’s disability. This definition is even further complicated at the intersection of disability and music.

For musicians, physical impairment may manifest in ways that are invisible socially but professionally debilitating. The physical body acts as a tool of connection to music. Singers, for example, probably have the closest connection as they physically inhabit their instrument. String players use their hands and arms to connect to violins, cellos. Wind and brass players connect through breath flowing through their diaphragms and mouths. The tie between the body and instrument is so vital that injury to the body breaks the connection between the musician and expression. Sometimes these injuries are internal and may not manifest in an outward aberration from the appearance of a “healthy” body. Injuries like these might include vocal chord nodules, which afflicted pop stars like Miley Cyrus and Adele, and focal dystonia, as with pianist Leon Fleischer, who eventually lost motor function in his right hand. In Fleischer’s case, his injury inspired him to commission left-hand works.

Having established an understanding of disability as a cultural construction, I will now use this framework to analyze the intersection of music and disability. Doing so will show that disability as a cultural space empowers its members to engage with their disability as an integral aspect of social performance. By applying the social lens to the ways communities of left-hand pianists and BLV musicians interact with and influence normative society, I urge greater reflection on how our musical practices can promote this empowerment through inclusive participation.

## LEFT-HAND PIANISM

The visual aspect of a musician's physicality on stage plays an important role in musical performance and the audience's perception of that performance. Through our long history of western classical performance, audiences have developed expectations for what musical performance convention looks like; there is a collective understanding of the so-called performance narrative. One such narrative is the able-bodied convention for keyboard playing, which involves full use of two hands.

One-hand pianism on the other hand plays into a narrative of spectacle because it deviates from that convention. Blake Howe calls one-hand repertoire "*disablist music*" because it "subverts the normal performance body by accommodating aurally disabled performers excluded from conformational musical practices."<sup>80</sup> Historically, one-handed keyboard writing has skewed toward the left-hand. As author of *Piano Music for One Hand*, Theodore Edel says, "The story of one-hand piano music is primarily the story of music for the *left* hand." The growth of this specialized genre is intrinsically tied to the emergence of the virtuoso performer of the nineteenth century and the genre of the *etude*. The development of the modern metal-frame piano also helped create a sympathetic environment for virtuosic playing; the upper register is physically lighter, making it easier to play technically brilliant passages. Much of the growth of the genre in the early 20th century can be attributed to Paul Wittgenstein, who lost his right limb to war and spent the rest of his career arranging and commissioning left-hand works.

Pieces of this period would often dedicate melodic material, which we will characterize as being more lyrical and virtuosic, to the right hand while the left hand dealt more frequently with harmony and accompaniment material. As composers challenged performers with

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<sup>80</sup> Blake Howe, "Disabling Music Performance," abstract.

increasingly flamboyant technical displays in the right hand, finding as Edel describes, that “the right hand can do things that the left hand finds impossible,” left-hand studies and *etudes* grew out of an “attempt to close this gap in skill.”<sup>81</sup>

With greater physical demands on the right hand came greater injury risk, and many injuries occurred due to over-practicing. Scriabin, for example, developed tendonitis in his right hand from over-practicing. Schumann was famously rumored to have lost use of his right hand due to a finger-strengthening contraption. Where Schumann transitioned almost entirely away from performance due to the injury, Scriabin wrote his op. 9 *Prelude and Nocturne* to play with his left hand while recovering his right.

In these instances, development of left-hand repertoire was reactionary, responses to a new need. Composers like Leopold Godowsky and Maurice Ravel, on the other hand, viewed left-hand writing as an expansion of the piano-writing frontier. Ravel was said to despise Alfred Cortot’s two-hand arrangement of his own left-hand concerto, claiming that it belittled the accomplishment of one-handed writing.<sup>82</sup> Godowsky’s left-hand arrangements of Chopin’s *etudes* pushes beyond by shifting artistic focus to the left hand and challenging right hand dominance. Rearranging these works shifts ownership of the work to the one-hand community. This task has its own set of challenges specific to one-hand playing that the performer needs to acknowledge in order to play successfully. Works and attitudes such as these legitimize left-hand compositions as a genre worth exploring on its own merits, rather than viewing it as a consolation prize.

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<sup>81</sup> Theodore Edel, *Piano Music for One Hand* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1994), 3-4.

<sup>82</sup> Blake Howe, "Paul Wittgenstein and the Performance Of Disability," *The Journal of Musicology* 27, no. 2 (2010): 135-80, 162.

## Performance Considerations

There are a few anatomical considerations unique to the approach of composition of left-hand music and left-hand performance at the piano.<sup>83</sup> The modern piano is a string instrument driven by a lever system. Depressing the key causes the hammer to strike the string and produce tone. The length of the strings on an acoustic piano extend longer at the lower registers, which is generally the domain of the left hand. This register is responsible for much of the harmonic sonorities in piano playing. Because of this quality, piano repertoire for the left hand often incorporates figures that span wide distances across the keyboard. Such figures in the bass registers have accustomed the left hand to such far-ranging leaps. Leaping up toward finger 1, or our heaviest digit the thumb, in particular is gesturally comfortable and idiomatic to the left hand. The three strongest and most independent fingers for piano playing, by weight and dexterity, are fingers 1 (thumb), 2 (index), and 3 (middle). Because the three strongest fingers sit on the right side of the hand, the left hand is an ideal tool for projecting the upper melody over an accompaniment figure played by weaker fingers. Chordal figures require a broadly circular, carefully weighted motion with the arm to cushion the sound. This allows the lower register to maintain beauty of tone while respecting the hierarchical balance between melodic and accompaniment figures.

The normative posture for two-handed playing centers the pianist at Middle C, which sits directly above the foot pedals with the chest facing toward the sound board. This leaves both limbs with equal command of their respective registers. The one-handed pianist, meanwhile, must consider alternatives due to the one-sided nature of their task. Rather than the torso's

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<sup>83</sup> Paul Wittgenstein's book on left-hand music discusses these at length and includes examples and exercises on each, with some additions by Godowsky. A more comprehensive and indepth overview as well as the literature discussing these techniques can be found at in Scott Matthew Noriega's 2020 dissertation.

middle line, the body should now be centered around the left shoulder as the fulcrum. This moves the seating position to the right so the left arm has greater access to the keyboard's full register. If the pianist has non-playing right hand, they may consider bracing with it above on the piano's soundboard or music stand, on the right stand/shelf, or on the bench next to them for balance. The body should also adjust to face the chest diagonally to the left to accommodate the right pedalling foot. Finally, physical flexibility is required, as leaning the body for reach and balance becomes important.

A different approach to playing the piano necessitates a different approach to composing for left-hand piano. In left-hand playing, breaking chords, like extended chords or figures where the melody and accompaniment are far apart in range, becomes an important technique. This essentially turns large chords into leaping arpeggiation, as in the two following examples from Wittgenstein's *School for the Left Hand*.

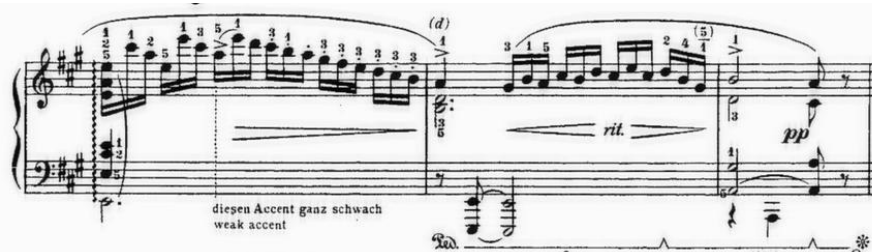


Figure 2: Paul Wittgenstein-Haydn, *Quartet*, Op. 64, no. 5, mvt. 1, Universal Edition, 1957, mm. 82-84.

\* The 4 over the 3 legato.

\*\* The F to sound into the next bar.

\*\*\* Execution at the end of the last arpeggio:

\*\*\* Das Ende des letzten Arpeggios wird so ausgeführt.

U.E. 12329 L.

Figure 3: Paul Wittgenstein-Wagner-Liszt, *Isolde's Love Death*, *Introduzione*, Universal Edition, 1957, mm. 80-82.

This differs from a two-hand approach, where in the case of a small hand facing a large chord, there is tacit permission for the pianist to break or arpeggiate the chord.<sup>84</sup> In left-hand music, meanwhile, breaking of the chord is the rule rather than an exception and is often a motion necessary to perform melody and accompaniment simultaneously.

Left-hand approaches to voicing also differ. First, finger 1 becomes the primary and preferred voicer of the melody. Godowsky even suggests that using the same finger with the same weight and arm motion behind it might provide a smoother overall legato than attempting finger legato.



Figure 4: Paul Wittgenstein-Haydn, *String Quartet in D-major, Op. 64, no. 5, mvt. 1*, Universal Edition, 1957, mm. 62-63.

This kind of fingering can of course only be facilitated by a new approach to pedalling. In two-handed pedalling, use of the damper pedal is intended as a tool for color, not necessarily one for lengthening tone. In the case of one-handed music, however, the damper pedal becomes vital not only for color but also to maintain continuous sound, often instead of finger legato. Half pedalling also becomes more important for sustaining bass notes underneath upper register filigree. Finally, the one-hand pianist engages the *sostenuto* pedal much more liberally; with works of slower tempi, for example, the pianist may use the *sostenuto* with similar intentions to the use of the half pedal—to sustain bass notes.

<sup>84</sup> I think a case can be made about small hands in piano playing acting as a musically disabling factor for the pianist; socially they are able-bodied, but pianistically they have an added difficulty to the artform.

The left-hand pianist's approach to timing is the final, most vital tool. With this style of playing, there is generally a much more generous sense of flexibility and *rubato*, as with a Romantic bent, meaning the player approaches with more stretch and give stylistically. This Romantic sense of timing is necessary because of the greater athleticism required of the left hand. Much of the repertoire already comes from this compositional era, thanks to commissioners like Wittgenstein. The stretching of time, therefore, is an inherent part of the writing and validates a more flexible approach. With these works, pianists will also notice much more editorializing in the work. Tempi may change bar-by-bar, composers will insert fermata and *rubato* markings with more frequency in anticipation of the greater athleticism required. In the following transcription of a Haydn work, for example, the fussiness of the markings is an editor edition, rather than an original Haydn marking, which would be traditionally much less marked. Here is where the Romantic bent comes in.

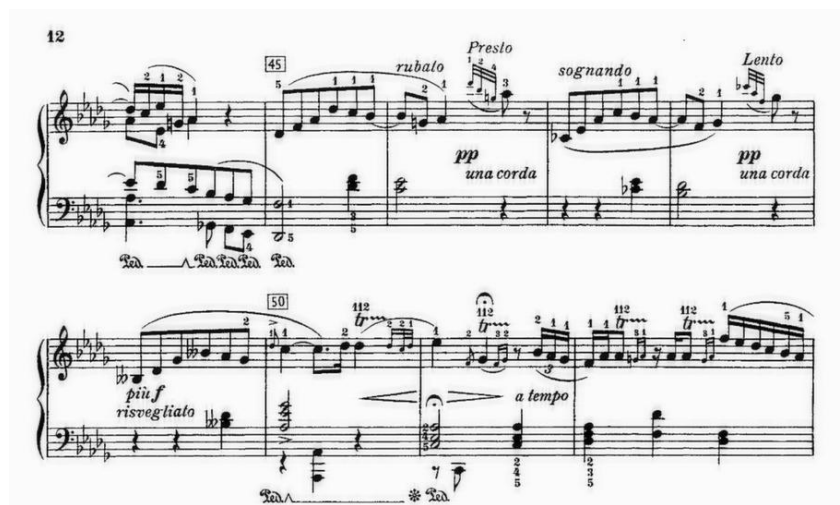


Figure 5: Paul Wittgenstein-Haydn, *String Quartet in D-major, Op. 64, no. 5, mvt. 1*, Universal Edition, 1957, mm. 44-52.

We may also see breath markings throughout, implying a brief pause. This is highly unusual for keyboard works as these marks are usually reserved for wind instruments or vocal scores, seen as commas. In the case of the score below, the breath is notated as a checkmark.

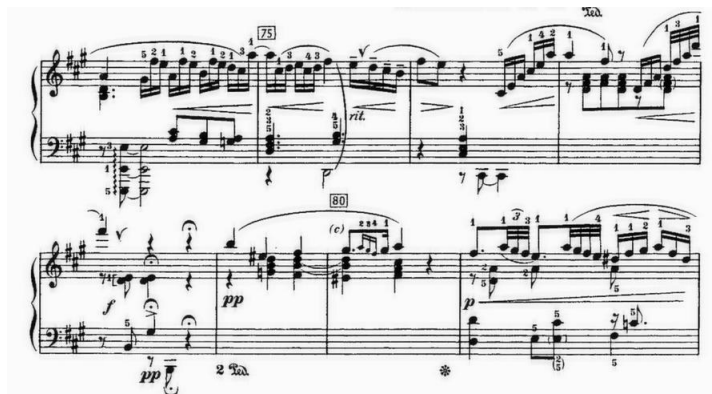


Figure 6: Paul Wittgenstein- Haydn, *String Quartet in D-major, Op. 64, no. 5, mvt. 2*, Universal Edition, 1957, mm. 74-81.

In some cases it acts as a separation of a phrase, and in other cases it may offer the performer permission to take time for a leap or uncomfortable reach.

### Compositional Considerations

Compositional approaches to writing for the left hand may be divided into two categories: transcriptions of existing works, and dedicated left-hand works. The writing in transcriptions simulates two-hand textures by referencing the existing work. It often relies on the memory of the existing work to sonically validate its identity. For even non-piano works like symphonies and chamber ensemble works, the many different instruments and voices are translated to the piano by taking advantage of the piano's polyphonic nature. In two-handed transcriptions, the two-handedness is merely an additional tool used to capture the full range of musical information. Transcriptive works for the left hand on the other hand require the left-hand techniques discussed to approximate and imply fuller textures of multi-instrumental works. Dedicated works written expressly for the left hand, conversely, actively accommodate the unique shape of the left-hand performer. The writing works in tandem with the left hand more than it challenges the hand, as may occur in a transcription, to meet the music virtuosically.

## A. Transcriptions

Playing usually transcriptions requires some rearranging of the work to better fit the left hand. Johann Sebastian Bach's *Prelude in C minor* utilizes a relatively limited keyboard range. As the original score and Wittgenstein transcription show below, is a piece which requires minimal adjusting. The repetitive figures in both hands make it simpler to transcribe for one hand as the consistency makes planning gestures between the upper and lower registers predictable to work out. The melody sits at the upper register, embellished by an accompaniment figure beneath.

Johann Sebastian Bach  
Prelude No 1 in C-major from WTK I BWV 846

Figure 7: Johann Sebastian Bach, *Prelude no. 1 in C-major from WTC 1*, BWV 846, Schirmer, 1893.



Figure 8: Paul Wittgenstein-Bach, *School for the Left Hand III: Transcriptions*, Universal Edition, 1957, 2.

In this excerpt, we can see where the application of the left-hand pedalling technique is necessary to maintain the bass when the range between the accompaniment and melody widens as the hand travels upward. The use of half pedal might work best here (compared to *sostenuto*) because of the busy sixteenth-note textures.

In Godowsky's transcription of Frederic Chopin's *Op. 10, No. 3 in E major*, Godowsky preserves the original textures literally, with some adjustments made with regard to timing. The major, glaring difference lies in the key. The original is in E major. By transposing the work to D-flat major instead, Godowsky takes advantage of the texture and spacing of the keyboard itself to assist the left hand. It is much easier to maneuver the left hand over top of the black keys in this tonality than it is to navigate in between the black keys with E major. Doing this allows Godowsky to bias the work for the left hand. (Godowsky transcription on the left, original Chopin on the right.)



Figure 9: Godowsky-Chopin, *Etude in D-flat major, Op. 10, No. 3*, Schlesinger, 1903-1914, mm. 1-2.



Figure 10: Frederic Chopin, *Etude in E-major, Op. 10, no. 3*. Peters, 1880, mm. 1-2.

Finally, the Bach-Brahms *Chaconne in D minor* is a piece that has been transcribed for a near-infinite plethora of instrument combinations. The original work by Bach was written for solo violin, excerpted below:



Figure 11: Johann Sebastian Bach, *Violin Partita No. 2 in D-minor, V. Chaconne*. Peters, 1931.

A single-voice instrument work makes for easier translation for a one-hand piano composition. Left-hand transcription might be interpreted as the closest transcriptive cousin we have to the original violin work because of the distribution of voices and the limited distance between voices. The opening of the transcription, for instance, is mainly set in one clef.

Studien für Pianoforte von Johannes Brahms. N<sup>o</sup> V.

Figure 12: Johannes Brahms, *Chaconne von J.S. Bach*, Musgiz, 1932.

The violin even approaches some techniques in a manner akin to left-hand playing technique; pitch is managed mainly with the left hand moving over the violin's fret. Chords on the violin are also managed similarly due to the single point of contact between the bow and the strings; the violin player will arpeggiate or break the chord the same way the left-hand would break a chord in a piano work. This stands as an argument for interpreting the timing of the Brahms piano version in imitation of the violin. In this case, therefore, the piece transcribes several different dimensions of the music, not merely pitch and texture.

## **B. Dedicated Left-Hand Works**

Unlike transcriptions, dedicated works for the left hand require less overt rearranging as the composition considers the left-hand's idiosyncrasies already. From Saint-Saens's Op. 135, 6 *Études pour la main gauche seule*, the *Prelude* movement opens with a G major arpeggio traveling from the lower to upper register.

Prélude  
Op. 135, No. 1

Allegretto moderato

1

Figure 13: Camille Saint-Saëns, 6 *Études pour la main gauche seule*, Op.135, no. 1: *Prelude*, Durand 1912, mm. 1-11.

This idiomatic upward motion is spelled out directly in the work, rather than notated as a rolled chord, with the timing spelled out specifically. The held note in the melody implied a finger 1 voicing above a short accompaniment figure played by the weaker and less dextrous left-side fingers.

The second movement, *Fugue*, is a two-voice fugue, in which the voices stay in narrow proximity to each other, in deference to the constraint of playing two simultaneous voices in one hand.



Figure 14: Camille Saint-Saëns, 6 *Études pour la main gauche seule*, Op.135, no. 2: *Alla Fuga*, Durand 1912, mm. 1-26.

Saint-Saens keeps the range small to disinvite virtuoso playing. He instead maintains a moderate tempo while keeping the voices in close proximity to each other as they travel through the range of the keyboard together. They move in parallel with each other rather than indulge in athletic leaps. Here the second subject entering above the first also takes advantage of the stronger rightward fingers being more suited to voicing easily.

Polyphonic texture is an appropriate genre to tackle for one hand because it does not necessarily prioritize any hand in particular. Compare this to other genres, such as chorales which involve homophonic textures that move in parallel, or the Chopin *bel canto* style where the operatic melody flies above an arpeggiated bass figure. The voicing of the subject in a

polyphonic texture should be approached similarly in either hand. That kind of equality between voices and hand makes the fugue an ideal genre to write for one hand.

Scriabin's Op. 9 *Prelude & Nocturne* also showcases advance consideration of left-hand performance. Beginning with the *Prelude*, the range of the melodic and accompanimental figures stays relatively close together throughout.

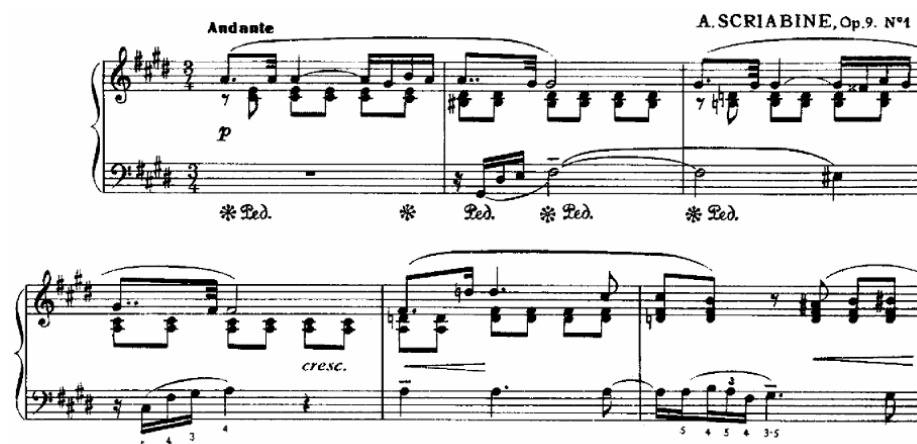


Figure 15: Alexander Scriabin, *Prelude and Nocturne for the Left Hand*, Op. 9, no. 1: *Prelude*, Muzgiz, 1947, mm. 1-6.

Even when he expands the range, the voices interlap at just the right point so as to not disturb the rhythm or change the timing of the playing. The pedalling in measure 2 further implies the physical release of the bass F-sharp to reach the upper G (assuming the hand cannot reach the 10th interval). The harmony there also accounts for this pedal.

Several elements of the *Nocturne* similarly illustrate left-hand forethought.

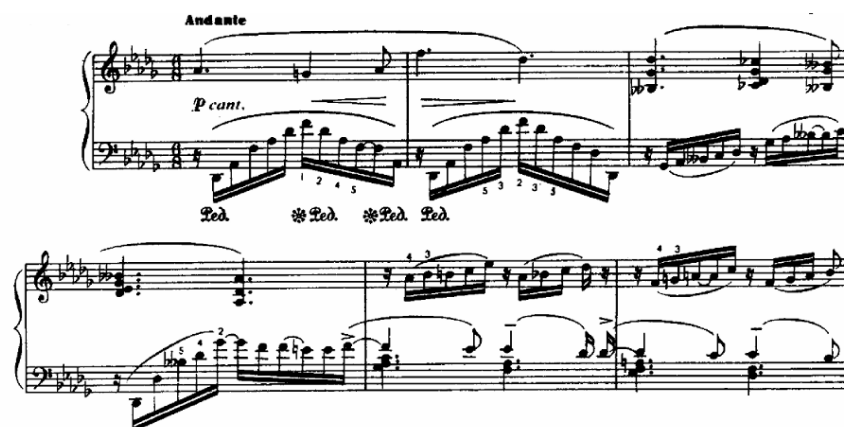


Figure 16: Alexander Scriabin, *Prelude and Nocturne for the Left Hand, Op. 9, no. 2: Nocturne*, Muzgiz, 1947, mm. 1-6.

The tempo and careful placement of the rests gives space for the hand to move between registers in appropriate time. The ties found in measures 3 and 4 do the same, so that there is no need to roll or change the timing. In measure 5, the appoggiatura-like figures in the melody anticipates the timing of the hand movement and quick transition required to move between positions. By keeping the range relatively narrow and carefully planning the timing of the hand movements, it is clear that the hand anatomy is prioritized in this work.

## Discussion

As shown by the analysis above, the performance of one-handedness at the piano depends on two styles of left-hand composition. Transcriptive writing works as a kind of musical prosthetic to aurally disguise the one-handedness of the performer. In transcriptive works, the composer must balance not only the physical and idiosyncrasies of left-hand playing but also the textures and aural information of the original work. While keeping the capabilities of an instrument in mind is not foreign to a composer familiar with the task of orchestration, the transcriber's priorities may bias toward aural mimicry, in favor of maintaining the spirit of the original work, over the comfort of the performer.

Where works transcribed for the left hand necessitate new and extended approaches to playing technique and push the hand sometimes unpianistically, works written expressly for the left hand very specifically and purposefully accommodate the left hand 'S anatomy and ability. In these cases, left hand virtuosity is highlighted by the writing and performance rather than necessitated in imitation of a previous texture to “survive” a work.

The analysis shows therefore that such compositions are able to express disability through tropes tied to the uniqueness of each hand. This uniqueness validates that left-hand piano may be viewed as its own kind of instrument worthy of its own specific musical genre and repertoire canon that engages with its own kind of culture.<sup>85</sup>

So, if left-hand piano is a genre based around its own specialty instrument that has built its own culture and career opportunities, then the performer of those works from this genre must also belong to this fully formed culture. Rather than thought of as a consolation career, or a career defined by “overcoming” limitation, a career in left-hand music is fully actualized and stands on its own merit. We should see this genre of performance and engagement with music on its own terms rather than discussing it through its relation to the able-bodied norm. By its international appeal, storied history, and growing repertoire, we see a community that embraces disability with specificity and compassion can inspire artistic expression and innovation and pushes the mainstream culture.

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<sup>85</sup> For an example of recent growth of the community, we can look to such participation as The Left Hand Archive Project, which has done a lot of archival research to build the community's history and canon. They, according to their website, are a Japanese-based “volunteer group dedicated to the revival and popularization of piano music played with one hand, primarily focusing on works written for the left hand. Since 2010, our core activity has been to revive these works for the modern age through performance, based on valuable documents and scores, and to pass on their beauty and artistic potential to people living today and to future generations. (translated Japanese-English website) Their site includes video archives as well as competition and recital events as recent as September 2025 and shows there is a thirst for this kind of international community engagement for left-hand piano music.

## BLIND AND LOW VISION TECHNOLOGIES

According to the World Health Organization, over 2.2 billion people are affected by visual impairment.<sup>86</sup> The spectrum of impairment encompasses levels of visual function from normal to various degrees of light perception to blindness. Some low vision people may have some light perception but little functional vision, while fully blind people may have no light perception at all. Causes for visual impairment vary widely, as does access to quality and timely care, particularly in low-income areas. The most prevalent cause of visual impairment is refractive errors and cataracts, while other common causes include congenital conditions, disease, and macular degeneration due to aging. Variations in light perception further contribute to print disability, in which a person cannot access print materials due to impairment. In the digital age, screens factor into print disability as much as paper. Some workarounds for those with some light perception include using larger fonts, changing brightness settings, or altering environment lights. As normative society is structured predominantly visually, treating sight as the default creates a disabling environment for those with visual impairment. Terminology around visual impairment varies across fields and organizations, including labels such as “blind,” “sight-impaired,” or “low vision.” For the purposes of the following section, I will use the term “blind and low vision,” shortened to BLV, to encompass the whole spectrum of light perception.

In order to function in sighted society, BLV people rely on accessibility technologies, such as Braille displays. BLV musicians further adapt these technologies to access music, as in using Braille readers that are compatible with Braille music notation.

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<sup>86</sup> “Blindness and vision impairment,” World Health Organization, accessed April 27, 2026, <https://www.who.int/news-room/fact-sheets/detail/blindness-and-visual-impairment>.



Figure 17: Refreshable Braille reader. “What is a Braille Keyboard?” allyant, <https://allyant.com/blog/what-is-a-braille-keyboard-types/>.

Some displays can cost up to several thousands of dollars, with simple ones priced at around \$700, so cost can be prohibitive to access.<sup>87</sup> Print-to-Braille translation systems also exist, but they too come with accessibility issues, as they often require a sighted interpreter to work the software. Technologies like these still default to the normative, abled body and thus do not adequately promote disabled autonomy and independence. Examining the ways the BLV musicians approach learning music provides insight into how disabled communities carve out a place within the mainstream culture with the technology available.

Here I will explore technologies the BLV community uses to navigate normative society. Exploring technologies BLV musicians use to access music challenges mainstream ideas of music education and literacy by questioning the primacy of print notation. The social disability framework recontextualizes visual impairment as not merely an impairment but also as a social force. We can see this in how BLV musicians’ multimodal approach to music learning is born out of necessity but also has potential to influence the wider sighted musician culture.

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<sup>87</sup> “What is a Braille Keyboard?” allyant, accessed March 30, 2026, <https://allyant.com/blog/what-is-a-braille-keyboard-types/>.

## Multimodal Learning

In surveying BLV musicians, researchers Lu, Crispin, and Girouard discovered that there is a strong preference for a combination of different tools in learning music, since relying on just one tool often provides only a limited picture of a piece of music.<sup>88</sup> The main challenge to BLV musicians is the fact that many of the tools used for learning music are unisensory. Braille, for example, is a touch-based unisensory tool. Listening to audio is an aural unisensory tool. One type of sensory input alone cannot provide a holistic view of a piece of music, and absorbing multiple unisensory inputs at once can be quite overstimulating. The solution to this is to rely on multimodal interactions instead.

The idea behind multimodal interaction is based on the Multiple Resource Theory (MRT), which “states that tasks can be performed more efficiently when attention and workload are distributed across different visual, audio and tactile modalities... In sum, multimodal interactions have the potential to reduce the cognitive load of completing complex tasks... multimodal interactions improved learning efficiency when compared to unisensory input methods for learning.”

This style of learning has, of course, applications for musicians of all bodies whether sighted or otherwise. A learning process that includes the four modes of notation, memory, audio, and haptics provides the most complete picture.

*Notation.* The most specialized mode for BLV and print-disabled musicians is the touch-based notation, Braille. Louis Braille’s original system of notation went through several variations

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<sup>88</sup> Leon Lu, Chase Crispin, and Audrey Girouard, “‘We Musicians Know How to Divide and Conquer:’ Exploring Multimodal Interactions To Improve Music Reading and Memorization for Blind and Low Vision Learners,” in Proceedings of the 26th International ACM SIGACCESS Conference on Computers and Accessibility, edited by Tiago Guerreiro, Faustina Hwang, David Flatla, and Robin Brewer (New York: ACM, 2024) 1–14, doi:10.1145/3663548.3675604.

before an enduring adaptation for musical notation persisted. The dissemination of modern music Braille notation can be traced back to blind musician and print pioneer Louis W. Rodenberg, who introduced the bar-over-bar style of notation.<sup>89</sup> This was an important development toward helping BLV musicians develop a culture of notational literacy and has since become a highly accepted international standard.<sup>90</sup> The following figures provide examples of Braille notation and a parallel musical Braille notation.

While important for BLV notational literacy, musical Braille comes with several barriers to use. First, Braille and musical Braille notation are not totally identical. Even if one is already familiar with the Braille system, one would still need to learn an entirely new system. Braille scores can also be difficult or expensive to obtain and can be very heavy and unwieldy.

116

FRED G. KERSTEN

Figure 9

C Scale Written in Quarter Notes

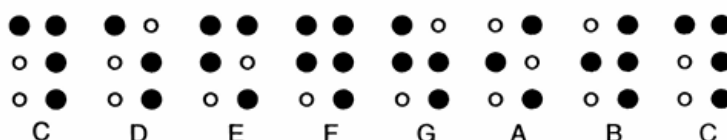


Figure 18: C scale written out in Braille in quarter notes. Fred G. Kersten, "The History and Development of Braille Music Methodology," 116.

Further, Braille musical notation limits the reader to experiencing the music one data point at a time. Each musical element (pitch, duration, octave, accidentals, dynamics, articulation) must be

<sup>89</sup> Fred G. Kersten, "The History and Development of Braille Music Methodology," *Bulletin of Historical Research in Music Education* 18, no. 2 (1997): 106–25. doi:10.1177/153660069701800202, 116.

<sup>90</sup> Donald Hickey and Lyle Seymour, "Louis Rodenberg: Pioneer in Braille Printing," *Journal of the Illinois State Historical Society* (Springfield, 1982) 75, no. 1: 39–46.

provided and processed individually. This is evident in Figure 19, which shows how different rhythmic values change the pitch markings. Figure 20 illustrates a Bar-over-bar layout which imitates keyboard notation.

|                          | C    | D    | E  | F  | G  | A  | B  |
|--------------------------|------|------|----|----|----|----|----|
| Whole or 16th note       | ⠠    | ⠡    | ⠢  | ⠣  | ⠤  | ⠥  | ⠦  |
| Half or 32nd note        | ⠠    | ⠡    | ⠢  | ⠣  | ⠤  | ⠥  | ⠦  |
| Quarter or 64th note     | ⠠    | ⠡    | ⠢  | ⠣  | ⠤  | ⠥  | ⠦  |
| 8th or 128th note        | ⠠    | ⠡    | ⠢  | ⠣  | ⠤  | ⠥  | ⠦  |
| 256th note               | ⠠⠠⠠⠠ | etc. |    |    |    |    |    |
| Breve (double whole) (a) | ⠠⠠   | ⠡⠡   | ⠢⠢ | ⠣⠣ | ⠤⠤ | ⠥⠥ | ⠦⠦ |
| (b)                      | ⠠⠠⠠⠠ | etc. |    |    |    |    |    |

Figure 19: Rhythmic note values marked with pitches. *Music braille code*, Braille Authority of North America, 2015, 3.

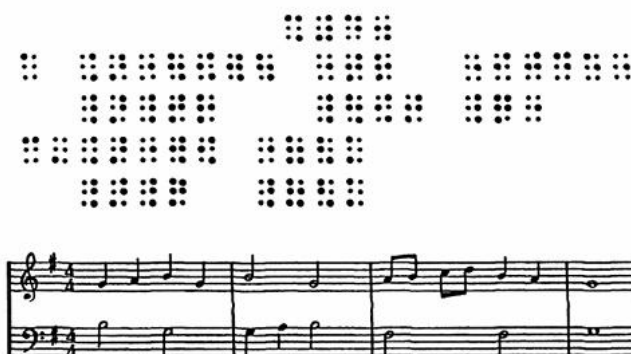


Figure 20: Musical excerpt laid out in Bar-Over-Bar format in parallel with traditional keyboard layout. Fred G. Kersten, "The History and Development of Braille Music Methodology," 123

Perceiving the score strictly in this way means the musician must absorb each symbol independently, take in the next piece of information, then amalgamate it all by memory. By this method, it is very difficult to discern large sections or whole measures of a piece holistically since the information cannot be absorbed simultaneously. It becomes challenging to view musical information within a larger context of a phrase or even a gesture, which creates limitations for sight reading. The BLV instrumentalist cannot instantaneously "read" music and

play at the same time because the means of reading and playing both require use of the hands. Vocalists might have an advantage here because their mechanisms for input (reading the Braille score through touch) and output (vocalizing) are different. Keyboardists, on the other hand, must first deconstruct the text one hand at a time before unifying the total textures with both hands. Understandably, BLV musicians complain that this process can be quite slow, cumbersome, and mentally taxing.<sup>91</sup>

*Memory.* Because BLV musicians process musical information unisensorily, they must build their understanding of a musical work one block of memorized performance at a time. Memorization is therefore a mandatory step in the learning process. Often, notation is just a stepping stone toward the goal of memorizing the music.

*Audio.* Listening to audio recordings contextualizes individual elements of musical information gathered from notation. It is particularly vital to understanding rhythms and the music's sense of flow.

*Haptic input.* Haptics can refer to several touch-sensory elements. There is first the body's physical connection to the instrument—as in a pianist's spatial awareness of black and white keyboard keys, a violinist's sense of fret distances, or a trumpet player's embouchure at the mouthpiece. The BLV musician needs a highly developed sense of spatial connection to their instrument. Second is haptic technology. This kind of technology is already commonly used in game controllers, steering wheels, and teleoperators and has also potential for general application such as vests that vibrate to signal tactile pavement. For musicians, developments in haptic technologies currently seek ways to combine modes of input to spread the sensory stimulation

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<sup>91</sup> Leon Lu, Chase Crispin, and Audrey Girouard, “We Musicians Know How to Divide and Conquer,” 2.1.

across multiple senses. A vest in development at McGill, for example, maps various musical cues to vibrating nodes placed on the body.<sup>92</sup>



*Figure 21: Image of actuators inside a haptic vest. These are meant to vibrate when specific stimuli are perceived. Jonathan Lane-Smith, “Haptic Interfaces for Musical Notation and Expression,” 47.*

A certain rhythmic value might cue a vibration on the left forearm, for instance. Researchers did run into the issue that testers found it difficult to differentiate between different nodes if they were placed too close together on a single limb. This might therefore require equipment that might ultimately be too large and expensive for casual use.

## **Music Literacy**

Centering music learning around a multimodal approach challenges traditional ideas of music literacy. Due to the social bias toward print media, our systems for transcribing aural

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<sup>92</sup> Jonathan Lane-Smith, “Haptic Interfaces for Musical Notation and Expression,” PhD diss., McGill University, Montreal, 2023. eScholarship@McGill.

information into musical text are mostly based in the visual. One must learn to visually identify various printed symbols that each translate to a sound-producing action. Once one can connect these symbols to their appropriate actions and sounds, one could hypothetically understand a work of music via the print score on its own, perhaps supplementing that mental image with audio listening. We might therefore define normative musical literacy as the ability to connect visual symbol to aural product. Because BLV musicians cannot access printed staff notation, the idea of literacy that relies on print also disables BLV musicians.

Higher education has a history of defaulting to equating notational literacy to musical literacy. In her 1977 article “Teaching College Music Theory Classes that Include Blind Students,” Anne Marie de Zeeuw explains that, “Since [the BLV student] will need to know [Braille] music in order to take notes in class and to write exercises in dictation and first drafts of composition assignments, he must remedy this deficiency as quickly as possible.”<sup>93</sup> She equates Braille literacy to undergraduate notational literacy,

Further, musical Braille is much more fluid than print notation, which complicates Braille’s notational consistency. In the last 30 years alone, there have been several updates made to the system; meanwhile staff notation remains relatively constant for hundreds of years, with additions for extended techniques. Since staff notation is usually mandatory in western musical education, sighted students usually come into contact with print notation before they enter the university or conservatory setting. Whereas, BLV students’ exposure to Braille notation may not be guaranteed during their schooling.

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<sup>93</sup> Anne Marie de Zeeuw, “Teaching College Music Theory Classes That Include Blind Students,” *College Music Symposium* 17, no. 2 (New York, 1977): 89–101, 92.

Current literature meanwhile rejects the idea that Braille literacy is vital to music education for visually impaired musicians. On the contrary, the modern understanding uses Braille as a learning reference that is further supplemented by other sensory modes. This brings into question the mediation of music through print notation as the primary reference point, a question well exemplified by the development of talking scores.

## Talking Scores

Talking scores are an assistive technology which originated in the Netherlands in the 1990s. They apply a multi-modal approach and decenter print as the dominant arbiter of musical information by transcribing staff notation into narration accompanied by audio samples.<sup>94</sup> These audio samples present the material as “neutrally” possible and are provided strictly to clarify and contextualize the narration. Alongside the score narration, the audio is intended as a comprehension aid rather than an interpretive example.<sup>95</sup> For example, compare the print score of the beginning bars of *Clair de lune* to Floris Schuiling’s transcription:



Figure 22: Claude Debussy, *Suite Bergamasque*, no. 3: *Clair de lune*, E. Fromont. 1905, mm. 1-3.

<sup>94</sup> Floris Schuiling, “Talking Scores and the Dismediation of Music Notation,” *Music Theory Online* 29, no. 1 (2023). doi:10.30535/mto.29.1.3.

<sup>95</sup> Schuiling, “Talking Scores,” 3.7.

Fragment 1, bars 1 to 4.

Right hand audio example. [audio plays with a click track, at a slower tempo than the full audio example]

Right hand text.

Bar 1. Pianissimo, con sordina. Two rests. Two-line F with A $\flat$ , first and fifth finger, tied, F dotted quarter note with A $\flat$ , D $\flat$  dotted quarter note with F, second and fourth finger, tied.

Bar 2. D $\flat$  with F, C with E $\flat$ , D $\flat$  with F. C dotted half-note with E $\flat$ , first and third finger, switch to second and fourth finger, tied.

Bar 3. C with E $\flat$ , B $\flat$  with D $\flat$ , C with E $\flat$ . Voice division. One-line B $\flat$  dotted half-note, tied, in accord with duplet two-line D $\flat$  F tied, duplet F D $\flat$  fourth finger, tied. End of voice division.

Figure 23: Schuiling's talking score transcription-script of *Clair de lune*, mm. 1-3. Schuiling, "Talking Scores," 4.1.

The narrative detail required in scripts presents a daunting task. Narration begins by pointing out the usual preliminary information: key signature, time signature, tempo markings, dynamic markings, and others. Practice excerpts must be kept small and conservative, keeping in mind the player will ultimately have to memorize each snippet before moving to the next. Scores are therefore usually sectioned bar-by-bar, or sometimes beat-by-beat. Keyboard scores must provide information one hand at a time. The script describes spatial movement (as in step, skips, and leaps) with fingerings integrated into the narrative, as in "finger 5 on C." The script must also point out any repeat or imitative sections. While detail is necessary, comprehension is the ultimate priority. The balance between accuracy and comprehensibility is mitigated by listening to audio, but even so a gap exists.

Transcribing the first few measures of Bach's *Invention no. 1 in C major* exemplifies the difficulty of comprehensive narration.<sup>96</sup>

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<sup>96</sup> Johann Sebastian Bach, *Invention in 1 in C major*, BWV 772, edited by Carl Ferdinand Becker (Beitkopf und Hartel, 1853), mm. 1-2.



Figure 24: Johann Sebastian Bach, *Invention in 1 in C major*, BWV 772, mm. 1-2.

- Bars 1-2:
  - Right hand:
    - Bar 1
      - Beat 1: starting at Middle C. 16th rest followed by 16th notes moving up in steps: middle C-D-E
      - Beat 2: 16th notes continue up to F - skip down to D, up to E - skip down to middle C
      - Beat 3: eighth note G, finger 2, leap up to finger 4 treble C
      - Beat 4: down to eighth note B, step back up to C
    - Bar 2:
      - Beat 1: step up to 8th note D, finger 5 (then what follows is a repeat of bar 1 transposed up a fifth): 16th note G, finger 1, stepping up to A and B
      - Beat 2: continue 16th note up to C, skip down to A, step up to B, skip down to G
      - Beat 3: leap up to 8th note D with finger 2, followed by finger 4 on 8th note high G,
      - Beat 4: step down to 8th F, then back up to 8th note G
  - Left hand:
    - Bar 1
      - Beat 1-2: half note rest through beats 1 and 2
      - Beat 3: (imitation of right hand's beat 1-2 at lower octave) 16th rest followed by imitation of the the right hand's unit in beat 1-2: 16th note bass C, finger 4 stepping up to 16th notes D and E
      - Beat 4: continue to step up to 16th notes F - skip down to D, step up to E, skip down to C
    - Bar 2:
      - Beat 1: eighth notes: leap up to G, leap down octave to G
      - Beat 2: quarter rest
      - Beat 3-4: (imitation of right hand beat 1-2 at lower octave) beats 3-4: 16th rest, then 16th note bass G, finger 4 stepping up to 16th notes A and B - continuing to step up to middle C, followed by skip down to A, step up to B, skip down to G

Learning from the narration alone can be hard to parse, so the audio samples are a necessary

supplemental reference. Audio samples also usually come with MIDI files, with script writers either recording audio themselves or editing existing audio and adding click tracks. Similar to Braille notation, the experience of the score is fleeting and relies on the immediate sensory perception. This necessarily puts much more cognitive load on the player and makes memorization mandatory. It is also difficult to mark the score or make personal performance notes.

There are further limitations; as transliterations of staff notation, talking scores are based on the disabling technology of print. They might then be interpreted as an attempt to “normalize” the print score for the print-disabled. In the same way that some print-to-Braille translation software still requires mediation through a sighted programmer, these scores lock the BLV musician into dependence on a sighted interpreter. Finding someone may prove difficult as it is not yet widely practiced; narrator Fred Mom is one of the only talking score narrators in the Netherlands, and has been since the technology’s invention.<sup>97</sup> Meanwhile efforts to digitally automate the process, like [talkingscores.org](http://talkingscores.org) are still in development and require sighted assistance to locate scores and submit them for transcription. The necessity of this partnership undermines BLV musicians’ agency. The scripts are also subject to the interpreter’s biases in the same way print scores can be editorialized. Because there is a much smaller community of interpreters, scores might not go through the same editorial process that mainstream print scores do. Issues like these may explain why the technology remains relatively obscure.

## **Discussion**

Ultimately, any assistive technology is but one piece of the learning puzzle; independent processes can look completely different, and there is no single solution to learning music.

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<sup>97</sup> Schuiling, “Talking Scores,” 3.6.

Relying on one form of notation alone is limiting, and the complicated nature of music means a combination of sensory inputs are necessary for a more holistic image. Thus using multiple sensory modes emerges as the most comprehensive way to process musical information.

Meanwhile, BLV technologies continue to butt up against the constraints of print primacy. Even assistive technologies evolved specifically for BLV musicians like Braille notation and talking scores cannot completely divorce themselves from the influence of print notation. Braille music notation is defined by staff notation because Braille scores are predominantly transcriptions of print scores; therefore rather than serve as a tool of autonomy, they instead become a tool for accessing sighted culture. The adaptation of Braille to music is essentially an attempt to create a notation experience that parallels the sighted score experience. Instead, it creates a much more labor intensive form of sensory input that can be impractical and has limited cultural impact compared to textual Braille. In reality, the true parallel experience is the one BLV musicians have actually devised through the multi-modal approach. So we see that unlike sighted musicians' singular reliance on print notational literacy, functional musical literacy for BLV musicians relies on this mixture of sensory inputs.

We should therefore expand our ideas of what music literacy looks like. Alongside our formal conceptions of notational and theoretical literacy we might also validate so-called “informal” vernacular as well. We might employ oral traditions that also de-emphasize the weight of notational reliance in our institutional training. Baker and Green point out that “the quantity of musics globally that are acquired through oral traditions dwarfs Western classical music.”<sup>98</sup> The institutionalization of the western system explains its notation's dominance in

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<sup>98</sup> David Baker and Lucy Green, “Perceptions of Schooling, Pedagogy and Notation in the Lives of Visually-Impaired Musicians,” *Research Studies in Music Education* (London, 2016) 38, no. 2: 193–219, 216.

formal spaces, but bringing oral traditions into formal academia can validate other forms of music literacy. Studying popular music still gives the connotation of an unserious learner; one *must* study classical music in order to be taken for a real musician. This is not to say we should do away with currently widely accepted notational systems; standardization of notation is vital to dissemination and communication of musical ideas. We can however afford to open the space to an expanded and more inclusive vernacular.

To start, it is the responsibility of sighted musicians' to find ways to detangle sighted culture from our aural practices. This can be difficult since so much of our conceptions and terminology rely on it, but awareness of that complication is the first step. For example, collaborative practices often center around physical gestures communicated visually—gestural cues may require eye contact or visual perception of movement. Breathing together in an ensemble is often a visual task. The ways we discuss and theorize about music are also defined by visual notation. We use terms like “contour,” and “shape” to describe musical lines. Our melody and harmony descriptions rely on the vision-centric idea of colors. We say “changes in color” to describe a timbral change. We call timbral qualities “bright” or “dark.” Certain harmonies can also be evocative of “light” or “darkness.” Even programmatic imagery relies on a visual understanding of the world—a chirping flute denoting the weightlessness of a bird might only make sense given the visual context of observing a bird flit about. Our musical vernacular is deeply rooted in the visual sense for which BLV musicians with no light perception may have no reference.

With this understanding of the bias toward sighted culture we can then make efforts to be sensitive to this difference in perception. For example we might add an aural element to the silent gestures we make; conductors can initially narrate arms movement, for example. As simple

a thing as verbal acknowledgement instead of a nod, or even narrating aloud the gesture, as in, “I’m nodding in agreement,” as one moves can provide greater context. With regard to verbiage, we can relate imagery and descriptions to senses other than the visual; for example, describing the tone of a melody as gentle and smooth like a soft breeze, to evoke the sense of touch, or sharp like a sour apple to evoke taste. A bit of imagination can go a long way to connect multiple senses.

Beyond reimagining language, we can also consider in what ways our standard education can be more inclusive to BLV learners. For early learners as in primary education or private studios, we can supplement with tactile play—sensing vibration through rhythm and dance for example. There are even tactile scores young BLV students can use to experience the structure of sighted notation. As referenced earlier, we can also involve the oral traditions of popular music vernacular in early ear training. The harmonic study of repetitive tertiary form pop is an excellent complement to Classical sonatas, for example.

To conclude, societal privileging of print media disables BLV musicians by gatekeeping music through notation. While specialized technologies like Braille musical notation and talking scores are certainly useful tools for bridging this gap, they often fall short of their goal in producing a parallel score experience for BLV musicians. We still need to challenge our ideas of what functional musical literacy looks like. Rather than center social and musical literacy around the sighted notion of printed notation, we can open our practices to other inclusive possibilities through multimodal learning. So, sighted society needs to build self-awareness of its disabling nature and defer to the disabled community on their practical needs. That way we can build accessibility purely around the disabled experience, rather than attempt to create a poor imitation of the able-bodied experience.

### CHAPTER 3: ABLEISM IN MUSIC EDUCATION

The preceding discussions have sought to engage with the cultural disabilities framework to further understand disabled musician communities and see where accommodation can be improved. Through the lens of this framework we understand society to be a disabling agent. Examining how these disabled musicians move through mainstream society shows how culture and new art forms are born out of disabled community. This further reveals disabled community to be an enabling force that counters ableism.

Recalling Iris M. Young's model of social responsibility and consciousness raising, we can bring this into practical action by applying it to our music education. Using our critical social framework of disability as the basis, we can reimagine our music education as an anti-oppressive space that enables and empowers all its students.

#### **Primary School**

As it stands, the western primary education system can act in ways that disables its students. Disabled students may choose between a private or public education experience. Private, specialized education is more likely to provide both students and teachers with access to individualized resources. Students here may build community in solidarity with peers who face similar social challenges. Educators are better supported by the school administration to create more equitable spaces that meet students' specific needs. This is accomplished through objectives like access to trained specialists, maintaining smaller class sizes, and subsidizing specialized equipment such as expensive Braille readers.<sup>99</sup> However, because these schools are privatized, and the resources required are costly, the burden of that cost is reflected in

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<sup>99</sup> Baker and Green, "Perceptions of Schooling," 209.

prohibitively high tuition. And while they may find solidarity in peers with disabilities, students are also isolated from mainstream society.

On the other hand, as a public, socially funded good, mainstream schools are free to attend and may offer more opportunities for the student to engage with communal activities, such as orchestras or vocal ensembles. Students are afforded greater exposure to social interaction and experience with mainstream society.

However, the broad education of public schools may not be an appropriate fit for a disabled student. Educators at these schools have specifically cited the need for differentiation for students (for example, having autistic students of different levels, or kinds of visual impairment in the same class) but have difficulty achieving this due to constraints on time and class size. Baker and Green discovered that “the onus is on music teachers to have knowledge of accessibility technologies, their compatibility with music technologies, and workable digital formats of scores (according to specific learning approaches) where required. But this represents a troubling situation raising questions about the breadth of knowledge needed by a school’s music teacher.”<sup>100</sup> Hammel and Hourigan note that “in-service music teachers are not always prepared to work with students with disabilities...” citing gaps in music education training.<sup>101</sup> If the teacher is unable to cater to the individual needs of each student they must take a more catch-all approach, which can be inclusive to most students but exclusive to others. In a situation like this, it is impossible to treat all students with equity. This can be ultimately isolating and discouraging to the student with disabilities.<sup>102</sup>

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<sup>100</sup> Baker and Green, “Perceptions of Schooling,” 217.

<sup>101</sup> Hammel and Hourigan, *Teaching Music*, 13.

<sup>102</sup> Hammel and Hourigan, *Teaching Music*, 16.

Public schools also continue to face funding challenges, putting many already struggling specialized programs at risk. Because budgets depend on student density and local real estate taxes, schools in lower income areas have difficulty obtaining funding necessary to provide students access to proper resources and trained specialists.<sup>103</sup> The financial burden of therapies, technologies, medication, and other services thus falls on the child's family. An ADHD evaluation alone can cost thousands of dollars.<sup>104</sup> Monetary costs like these, as well as implicit social costs, litter the accommodation request process and act as a tacit barrier to accessibility.

In their book *Teaching Music to Students with Differences and Disabilities* Hammel and Hourigan describe four key approaches music teachers should undertake when managing a special education classroom:<sup>105</sup>

- 1) **Close supervision and monitoring.** Teachers maintain proximity and active engagement with students.
- 2) **Classroom rules.** Teachers help students create a sense of ownership of the classroom space by collaborating with students on rules and expectations
- 3) **Opportunities to respond.** Teachers offer opportunities to engage through physical movement, oral response, and other participation.
- 4) **Contingent praise.** Teachers offer frequent and specific praise.

These elements can be easily adapted to the studio lesson structure, as the one-on-one, individualized space makes it ideal for accommodating specific, student-centered needs while also inspiring student autonomy. Two additional considerations specific to the studio music teacher include:

- 1) **Flexibility.** Teachers should be flexible in their expectations of progress with day-to-day learning goals and follow the student's pace. Teachers should approach student behavior with an open mind; challenging behaviors should prompt the teacher to make teaching adjustments on their end rather than seek to suppress the student's reactions.
- 2) **Constructivism.** The constructivist learning theory refers to the idea that students "construct meaning through their own experiences."<sup>106</sup> In practical terms, this means the

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<sup>103</sup> Hammel and Hourigan, *Teaching Music*, 10.

<sup>104</sup> Krebs, "Baccalaureates or Burdens," 7.

<sup>105</sup> Hammel and Hourigan, *Teaching Music*, 105.

<sup>106</sup> Hammel and Hourigan, *Teaching Music*, 132.

student learns through activity and draws conclusions based on the experience of the activity.

## ADA

The 1990 American Disabilities Act (ADA) is :

a federal civil rights law that prohibits discrimination against people with disabilities in everyday activities. The ADA prohibits discrimination on the basis of disability just as other civil rights laws prohibit discrimination on the basis of race, color, sex, national origin, age, and religion. The ADA guarantees that people with disabilities have the same opportunities as everyone else to enjoy employment opportunities, purchase goods and services, and participate in state and local government programs.<sup>107</sup>

Amended in 2008, the statute requires institutions to make efforts toward inclusivity via “reasonable accommodation” without “undue hardship.” The Office of Disability Employment specifies, “Reasonable accommodations should not be viewed as “special treatment” and they often benefit all employees... Many job accommodations cost very little and often involve minor changes to a work environment, schedule or work-related technologies.”<sup>108</sup>

Critics however have noted the ambiguity of the statute’s language, specifically that “reasonable” and “undue hardship” are both vague terms that leave too much room for interpretation. This ambiguity makes the law easy to circumvent, leading to civil disagreement and in some cases requiring court intervention.<sup>109</sup> Krebs points out that conflicts like these between disabled communities and the institutions required to accommodate them “[perpetuate] a stigma against people who use, or consider using, such adaptations by framing them as social

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<sup>107</sup> ADA Amendments Act of 2008 (P.L. 110-325)

<sup>108</sup> “Accommodations,” Office of Disability Employment Policy, accessed April 27, 2026, <https://www.dol.gov/agencies/odep/program-areas/employers/accommodations>.

<sup>109</sup> Krebs, “Baccalaureates or Burdens,” 3.

problems—thorns in the sides of employers and academic institutions.”<sup>110</sup> This stigma, further, makes people “hesitant to pursue accommodations in the first place.”<sup>111</sup>

Meanwhile the history of medical bias still influences modern accommodation practice.<sup>112</sup> The request process requires “expert” corroboration and documentation.<sup>113</sup> The financial and social burden of obtaining “proof” of diagnosis from this expert depends on other socioeconomic factors that intersect with the disabled identity and may interfere with health care access. High upfront cost may dissuade low-income people from obtaining a formal diagnosis, for example, leaving the disabled individual stranded come time to request accommodation from an institution.

### **University Accommodation**

Barriers and stigmas that students faced in primary school may follow them beyond into higher education, as the same problems persist through all levels of academics. In the 2022-2023 academic year, about 15 percent of all public school students enrolled in primary school received special education services through the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), up from the previous year’s 13 percent.<sup>114</sup>

According to a census by the Postsecondary National Policy Institute, in the 2019-2020 academic year, 21 percent of undergraduates and 11 percent of graduate students reported having a disability, but only 8 percent of students in that same year registered for disability services at their institution.<sup>115</sup> A survey by the National Center for College Students with Disabilities also

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<sup>110</sup> Krebs, “Baccalaureates or Burdens,” 3.

<sup>111</sup> Krebs, “Baccalaureates or Burdens,” 11.

<sup>112</sup> Isaac Chance Garcia, Isaac Chance, “Music Listening as an Academic Accommodation for College Students With Disabilities,” (PhD diss., Arizona State University, 2024), ProQuest, 2.

<sup>113</sup> Krebs, “Baccalaureates or Burdens,” 6.

<sup>114</sup> “Students with Disabilities,” National Center for Education Statistics, accessed March 14, 2026, <https://nces.ed.gov/programs/coe/indicator/cgg/students-with-disabilities>.

<sup>115</sup> “Communities of Students & Types of Institutions,” PNPI, accessed March 14, 2026, <https://pnpi.org/factsheets/>.

identifies several barriers to access for students, such as lack of awareness of available accommodations, inadequate instructional support, and structural support issues, and many other complaints. The availability of assistance is evidently not translating to usage.

Hsiao identifies several factors which prevent students from seeking accomodation:<sup>116</sup>

- (a) a need to establish a new identity to reduce stigma and prevent negative social reactions
- (b) negative preconceptions about the quality, efficiency, and helpfulness of DSS and the accommodations process, especially the risk of losing confidentiality
- (c) resistance from faculty who are reluctant to provide accommodations
- (d) a lack of literacy among [disabled students] to explain the depth of disability or how it can affect their classroom participation and academic performance

The request procedure itself can be opaque and make students feel exposed. It requires the student to first self-identify as having a disability and subsequently self-report. This necessitates strong independence and self-advocacy skills on the student's part. At the University of Washington, the Disabilities Resources for Students (DRS) follows a standard procedure.<sup>117</sup> The application process is multi-step, digital, and requires several pieces of documentation. The timeline for the application is quite strict and asks for a lot of forward thinking. Once approved, the disabilities office communicates their approval and accommodation decisions to faculty, where it is then up to students to collaborate with their professors on managing their accommodation.

Such policies are often too passive, and self-reporting practices place the burden of access on disabled students. This coupled with continued social stigmatization means that despite its ostensible availability, accommodation may still be impenetrable to some. Even for those who

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<sup>116</sup> Feilin Hsiao, Shelly Zeiser, Daniel Nuss, and Keith Hatschek, "Developing Effective Academic Accommodations in Higher Education: A Collaborative Decision-Making Process," *International Journal of Music Education* (London, 2018) 36, no. 2, 244–58, 246–7.

<sup>117</sup> "Documentation Guidelines," University of Washington, accessed March 18, 2026, <https://depts.washington.edu/uwdrs/prospective-students/documentation-guidelines/>.

successfully complete the process, the quality of accommodation is not always guaranteed. The exact nature of the accommodations is also dependent on faculty knowledge and resources, and while faculty are generally willing to assist their students, students still meet resistance because of inadequate faculty training. Faculty may not be adequately knowledgeable on a student's specific disability and will need to rely on the student to voice their own needs, once again pushing the labor of accommodation onto the student. Hsiao indicates several reasons for accommodation resistance:<sup>118</sup>

- (a) misconceptions that major modifications give SWDs unfair advantages and diminish academic standards
- (b) feeling underprepared
- (c) time constraints
- (d) increased workload without compensation
- (e) lack of support from the administration

University faculty survey participants in a Norwegian study reported limited institutional support in learning about inclusive practices.<sup>119</sup> Requiring so much labor from disabled students to obtain accommodation defeats the purpose of offering such services in the first place. So, though the will to assist is there, there is still a disconnect between requesting accommodation and receiving it appropriately.

## Barriers

The most difficult barrier to accommodation is simply ignorance. Hammel and Hourigan maintain in *Teaching Music to Students with Differences and Disabilities* that, "There continues to be a considerable lack of coursework within our current undergraduate and graduate music

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<sup>118</sup> Hsiao, Zeiser, Nuss, and Hatschek, "Developing Effective Academic Accommodations in Higher Education, 247.

<sup>119</sup> Rannveig Svenby, "Lecturers/ teaching experiences with invisibly disabled students in higher education: Connecting and aiming at inclusion," *Scandinavian Journal of Disability Research* 1 (Stockholm, 2020) 275–284, 284.

education programs to prepare students for teaching diverse student populations, including students with disabilities.”<sup>120</sup> They add that such programs that exist usually coincide with music therapy programs instead, stating only 38.9 percent of music education programs offer courses on these topics and in only 29.6 percent of those programs are they a degree requirement.<sup>121</sup> This lack of exposure to disability studies in music education curricula little prepares students for building inclusive music classrooms. Disability studies might appear as a special topics course, but this falls to the discretion of faculty. Further, treating disability studies as a special topic rather than a mandatory one belittles the field and dehumanizes disabled musicians.

Music therapy programs have their own issues. Therapy’s goal of remediation currently borrows framing of disability from the medical model. Students and educators in music therapy have themselves identified this model as “inherent[ly] ableist” and critiqued its influence on music therapy program curricula.<sup>122</sup> Rebecca Warren’s survey of UK students further reveals problems with “ableist concepts, language, or techniques that were taught in their music therapy program,” including “outdated terms or euphemisms for disabilities.”<sup>123</sup> Music therapy students specifically problematize their education’s reliance on Applied Behavioral Analysis, a controversial behavioral conditioning practice that is outright rejected by autistic rights advocates.<sup>124</sup> Since we understand disability to be a social performance, we view the behaviors exhibited by disabled people neutrally, not as a pathologized symptom. Therefore, any therapeutic effort to reshape that behavior into a more socially “acceptable” one is in itself an ableist endeavor. So, the modern music therapy curriculum also stands on ableist foundations.

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<sup>120</sup> Hammel and Hourigan, *Teaching Music*, 13.

<sup>121</sup> Hammel and Hourigan, *Teaching Music*, 13.

<sup>122</sup> Warren, “Examining Ableism in Music Therapy Education and Clinical Training,” 74.

<sup>123</sup> Warren, “Examining Ableism in Music Therapy Education and Clinical Training,” 74.

<sup>124</sup> Ari Ne’Eman, “When Disability is Defined by Behavior, Outcome Measures Should Not Promote ‘Passing’”. *AMA Journal of Ethics* 23 no. 7: 569–575, doi:10.1001/amajethics.2021.569. PMC 8957386. PMID 34351268.

If these topics are addressed in only a minority of programs in music education and music therapy programs exhibit outdated attitudes, certainly few formalized programs in performance degrees address disability studies at all. There is generally a lack of required pedagogical study, even for those with performance backgrounds going into private instruction. For musicians coming from the applied studio tradition, student-focused pedagogical training comes in piecemeal, on-the-job learning rather than through an institutionalized process. While performance students may be exposed to pedagogy-focused courses, these are not always required by their performance degree programs. Restructuring pedagogy requirements to mandate this kind of coursework would not just better prepare performance majors for work as studio teachers but also make more space for conversations around inclusivity.

## **Action**

As musicians moving through the university space, we have a responsibility to critique the processes we inherit from our professors and mentors. We should direct able-bodied privilege toward developing anti-oppressive practices to support our peers. We can start by leaning into collaborative processes, with the ultimate goal being equitable participation. Here are actions we can take to get us closer:

- 1) collaborate with the disabled community on accommodation
- 2) challenge the dominance of the studio model
- 3) open ourselves to ideas from multi-disciplinary fields of study
- 4) challenge current curricula

### **1) Collaborative accommodation**

First we can interrogate our own implicit biases and engage with other perspectives, starting by acknowledging the diversity of lived experiences in the disabled community and defer to those experiences. We can look to scholars and educators who foreground disabled voices, like Michael Bakan in his Artism ensemble, or Nicole Brown in *Lived Experiences of*

*Ableism in Academia: Strategies for Inclusion in Higher Education*. To protest against ableism in academia Brown argues in her book that, “The final strand... is the need for engaging disabled, chronically ill and/ or neurodivergent members of staff in the narrative of disability in academia.”<sup>125</sup>

To further the aim of disabled students’ autonomy, we can reassess the accommodation systems in place. For an example of what this might look like, look to Hsiao’s case study of a student asking for accommodation for a music theory course. Hsiao’s work here illuminates the need for a more involved cross-departmental process. She particularly highlights the specialized nature of the music field as something of which a disabilities resource office may have limited knowledge. This lack of knowledge means development and execution of an accommodation plan rests much more heavily on the music faculty, who in turn may not have the necessary understanding of the student’s disability or resources. Faulty understanding on all sides leads to resistance, confusion, and unorganized attempts at accommodating the student. The solution to this, Hsiao finds, is open and active communication, in which the administration, faculty, and student “[exchange] information on disability awareness and subject-specific knowledge via a shared language.”<sup>126</sup> This models collaboration that can mitigate preventative elements which pit students’ anxiety against the faculty’s unfamiliarity. Ultimately, fully engaged communication between all parties is necessary for disabled students’ success .<sup>127</sup> In addition to empowering and supporting the student’s wellness, this creates an environment of greater trust and community between all parties.

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<sup>125</sup> Brown Brown, ed. *Lived Experiences of Ableism in Academia: Strategies for Inclusion in Higher Education*, (Policy Press, 2022), 318.

<sup>126</sup> Hsiao, Zeiser, Nuss, and Hatschek, “Developing Effective Academic Accommodations in Higher Education, 254.

<sup>127</sup> Hsiao, Zeiser, Nuss, and Hatschek, “Developing Effective Academic Accommodations in Higher Education, 246.

Beyond a restructuring of communication channels, we can also refer to Brown's suggestion for an, "attitudinal shift among everyone studying, working and living in academia in order to build a higher education sector that becomes inclusive and allows for all sorts of ways of working."<sup>128</sup> Higher education teachers cite the need for greater awareness and through education and training in order to a more empathetic and accessible institution of academia.<sup>129</sup> In the performance field, we can begin doing this by reflecting on our long-held pedagogical practices.

## 2) The studio model

The performance sphere should reshape its approach to pedagogy, foremost by challenging dominance of the applied studio model of instrumental education. The studio model retains traditions from a long history of master-apprentice partnerships, and this tradition continues to dominate musical education in private teaching and higher education.<sup>130</sup> In higher education, applied music studio professors are often recruited on the merits of their performance skill and reputation, over their pedagogical training.<sup>131</sup> Daniel and Parkes' study across the United States, Australia, New Zealand, and Southeast Asia reveals that almost half of the studio educators surveyed in higher education had no formal pedagogical training, with many lacking opportunities for professional development.<sup>132</sup> Students prioritize working with teachers as the best opportunity for growth as performers rather than pedagogues. This creates an insular and

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<sup>128</sup> Brown Brown, ed. *Lived Experiences of Ableism in Academia: Strategies for Inclusion in Higher Education*, (Policy Press, 2022), 317.

<sup>129</sup> Brown Brown, ed. *Lived Experiences of Ableism in Academia: Strategies for Inclusion in Higher Education*, (Policy Press, 2022), 317-318.

<sup>130</sup> Kelly A. Parkes and Ryan Daniel, *The Applied Studio Model in Higher Music Education: Critical Perspectives and Opportunities*, first edition (Routledge, 2025), 9.

<sup>131</sup> Parkes and Daniel, "The Applied Studio Model in Higher Music Education," 9.

<sup>132</sup> Ryan Ryan and Kelly A. Parkes. "Applied music studio teachers in higher education: evidence of learner-centred teaching," *Music Education Research* 21 (Routledge, 2019): 269 - 281.

cyclical learning environment in which experiential performance knowledge is passed down as an oral tradition from generation to generation while pedagogical training is incidental.

Some ways in which the current studio model mitigates insularity are through studio and master classes, which are often the main avenue for student interaction with their peers. Studio teachers can also engage on the national level with organizations like MTNA.<sup>133</sup> However, these classes often default to the same power balance – now performed in a public forum. Uninhibited peer-to-peer collaboration rarely happens under a teacher’s watchful eye, and the exchange of ideas remains contained in the classical standard. Decentering the power in this dynamic can facilitate student agency and creativity.<sup>134</sup> This can be achieved through greater student autonomy to research and collaborate with cross-departmental cohorts. The Cornish College of the Arts semesterly showcase festival Scores of Sounds, for example, gives students of multiple performance genres the opportunity to share projects with peers of all disciplines. This allows them to build community and collaborate with peers of different artistic backgrounds.<sup>135</sup> Having been absorbed into the academic institution, performance degree programs can also take cues from neighbors in STEM. Dr. Heather Taves of Wilfrid Laurier University suggests giving students more autonomy to develop their creative voices through self-directed, open-ended, and collaborative projects.<sup>136</sup> She also proposes inviting greater student input in the shaping of their curriculum by shifting auditions toward prospective students’ creative and scholarly aspirations,

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<sup>133</sup> “MTNA: Music Teachers National Association,” MTNA, accessed April 5, 2026, <https://www.mtna.org/index.html>.

<sup>134</sup> Diana Dumlavwalla, “Revisiting the Applied Piano Studio Model” in *The Applied Studio Model in Higher Music Education: Critical Perspectives and Opportunities*, edited by Kelly A. Parkes and Ryan Daniel (Routledge, 2025), 150.

<sup>135</sup> “Scores of Sound,” Seattle University, accessed March 30, 2026, <https://events.scoresseattleu.edu/event/scores-of-sound>.

<sup>136</sup> Diana Dumlavwalla, “Revisiting the Applied Piano Studio Model,” 158.

in addition to performance skill.<sup>137</sup> Student-led initiatives can reinvigorate programs and empower students to explore new ideas and engage in artistic cultural exchange.

Pedagogues may then balance student-empowering action with a reimagining of their own pedagogical practices. Daniel and Parkes found that teachers with formal pedagogical training tended to favor student-centered objectives and provided more systematic and varied methods of student assessment.<sup>138</sup> Music education degree requirements generally include coursework that discusses approaches to teaching and educational psychology—ideas to which performance majors may not be formally exposed. Maureen Yuen further highlights a need for “strategies of self-reflection, community engagement, explicitly detailing guidelines, systematic and empirical inquiry, taking a broader cultural perspective, and promoting culturally sustaining pedagogy... as pragmatic approaches to reimagine this traditional model.”<sup>139</sup> In this vein, performance degree programs should more strongly emphasize pedagogical education in the training of their musicians. This education should focus not only instrument-specific pedagogy but also on the science of teaching itself. Exposing future performance pedagogues to this kind of coursework better supports their professional development and provides a more concrete framework around which they can shape their own teaching methods.

### **3) Embrace multiple disciplines**

Able-bodied musicians are responsible for broadening their understanding of their diverse audiences and students, and they can do this through multi-disciplinary engagement. The musician as performer, teacher and therapist can look to education pedagogy as a framework for

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<sup>137</sup> Diana Dumlavwalla, “Revisiting the Applied Piano Studio Model,” 158.

<sup>138</sup> Diana Dumlavwalla, “Revisiting the Applied Piano Studio Model,” 149.

<sup>139</sup> Maureen Yuen, “Challenging Tradition: Examining Access and Equity in the Master-Apprentice Studio Model,” in *Higher Music Education: Critical Perspectives and Opportunities*, edited by Kelly A. Parkes and Ryan Daniel (Routledge, 2025), 143.

their own practice. Pickard highlights Kevin Kumashiro's four typologies of anti-oppressive education "as potential vehicles for achieving these ambitious and sorely necessary aims for social justice in music therapy curricula."<sup>140</sup> Kumashiro classifies four pedagogical aims: Education for the Other, Education About the Other, Education That is Critical of Privileging and Othering, and Education that Changes Students and Society.<sup>141</sup> These processes fit neatly into Young's call for consciousness raising while also challenging dominant narratives that stigmatize Otherness. With them, Kumashiro charges us with engaging with marginalized perspectives and questioning our privilege as able-bodied people. Further, empathetic understanding built through anti-oppressive pedagogy confirms the inherent justice of understanding disability through a social lens rather than medical. Applying this foundation to music therapy, for example, shifts the aims of therapy away from ableist remediation to something more compassionate that encourages curiosity and connection over pathologizing.

Contemporary arts disciplines seek to achieve this through artistic collaboration and challenging "expertise" hierarchy. Fox and MacPherson champion Inclusive Arts Practice, in which learning and non-learning disabled artists create art together.<sup>142</sup> These processes "thus intend to support a mutually beneficial two-way creative exchange that enables all the artists involved to learn (and unlearn) from each other. Through redefining this role, and shedding the notion of the formally trained 'expert' artist, we try to explore the valuable and skilful contribution that learning-disabled artists can bring to the arts."<sup>143</sup> Like in Bakan's work with the

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<sup>140</sup> Beth Pickard, "Anti-oppressive pedagogy as an opportunity for consciousness raising in the music therapy profession: A critical disability studies perspective," *British Journal of Music Therapy* 26, no. 1 (2022): 5–15, 12.

<sup>141</sup> Kevin K. Kumashiro, "Toward a Theory of Anti-Oppressive Education," *Review of Educational Research* 70, no. 1 (2000): 25–53. <https://doi.org/10.3102/00346543070001025>.

<sup>142</sup> Alice Fox, *Inclusive Arts Practice and Research: A Critical Manifesto*, 1st ed, edited by Hannah Macpherson. (Routledge, 2015).

<sup>143</sup> Fox, *Inclusive Arts Practice and Research*, 2.

ARTISM ensemble, Fox and MacPherson clarify that their approach differs from the remedial motivations of art and occupational therapy; instead, the creative process itself is the goal.

Artistic practices like Inclusive Arts and ARTISM model equitable participation.<sup>144</sup> This style of participation also directly challenges the master-apprentice model.

Other creative arts programs engage directly with critical disabilities studies. The Creative Therapeutic Arts degree developed out of the Therapeutic Studies department of a South Wales university, where students engage practically with participatory arts practices.<sup>145</sup> What makes this program stand above other therapeutic-minded goals is its grounding in the social model of disabilities, where the students' creative endeavors acts as "a transformative means to counter the pervasiveness of the medical and personal tragedy models or common-sense understandings of disability."<sup>146</sup> The curriculum is shaped by an arts practice which prioritizes community engagement and a social understanding of difference.

#### **4) Restructuring curriculum**

Decentering the applied studio model as the dominant mode of instrumental education would require larger curriculum reform. The performance curriculum needs to better reflect how the modern classical musician fits into a new media landscape and how arts philosophies are changing.

Arts programs in the UK, for instance, are currently developing a Participatory Arts

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<sup>144</sup> Annemarie Kok, *Pioneering Participatory Art Practices: Tracing Actors, Associations and Interactions across the Long Sixties*. 1st ed. Transcript Verlag, 2024. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/jj.15336982>

<sup>145</sup> Pickard, "The Process, Challenges and Opportunities of Developing an Undergraduate Curriculum in Creative and Therapeutic Arts," 100.

<sup>146</sup> Pickard, "The Process, Challenges and Opportunities of Developing an Undergraduate Curriculum in Creative and Therapeutic Arts," 112.

philosophy to inform a newly expanded, socially engaged arts discipline.<sup>147</sup> This philosophy is founded on the following priorities:<sup>148</sup>

- Inclusive practice should be at the heart of what we teach and practice.
- Reflective, ethical processes are paramount.
- Emphasis should be on evidence-based, professional practice.
- Graduates should be autonomous and self-sufficient.
- There should be transparent and reciprocal links with industry

Underpinning these priorities is the central theme of Critical Disabilities Studies—that difference is socially constructed—that also aligns with Young’s call for social responsibility. Pickard further argues that this lens, and the ways it deconstructs ideas of “normalcy” and “otherness,” is paramount to socially responsible and relevant art education.<sup>149</sup> This framework acts as the basis of an anti-oppressive academic structure. Notably, these objectives also share compatibility with Kumashiro’s pedagogical typologies, especially their emphasis on inclusivity, reflection, and ethical processes. Prioritizing student autonomy and professional development further aligns with the same goals advocates have for disabled autonomy. In this we see the utility in applying this social critique to arenas not only for activism but also to the restructuring of educational spaces. We can therefore use this framework to rethink the professional aims of performance degree programs, and, by refocusing on socially conscious practices, better integrate music programs into the institution of academia.

## Discussion

In addition to remodeling the studio tradition, foundational theory, history, and

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<sup>147</sup> Pickard, “The Process, Challenges and Opportunities of Developing an Undergraduate Curriculum in Creative and Therapeutic Arts,” 100-101.

<sup>148</sup> Pickard, “The Process, Challenges and Opportunities of Developing an Undergraduate Curriculum in Creative and Therapeutic Arts,” 101.

<sup>149</sup> Pickard, “The Process, Challenges and Opportunities of Developing an Undergraduate Curriculum in Creative and Therapeutic Arts,” 102.

performance courses should be accompanied by education on professional development. This can take shape as practicums which engage students with the local community, offering students production and leadership opportunities.

The Ball State University Prism Project is one such program that connects university students with the local arts scene.<sup>150</sup> In partnership with the music, theater, and dance departments, BSU students develop performing arts projects with disabled children ages 6-14 over the course of a semester, culminating in an end-of-term performance. For the participants, the program provides a safe space in which they can explore social skills through performing arts. The program affords university students valuable field experience in both performing arts event production and in working with children of differing abilities. The university students emerge from this program with a much more grounded, practical understanding of inclusive and reflective practices through their interaction with disabled children. Meanwhile, leading the production allows students to practice autonomy as educators and artists, all through a very concrete link to a local organization.

Another way to support student autonomy is to support their overall physical and mental wellness and longevity. As seen under the applied studio model, knowledge passes down linearly. This is clearly illustrated by student attitudes toward physical and psychological health; in the face of practice-induced injury or distress, students go first to their teacher before seeking medical attention.<sup>151</sup> Redmond and Tiernan's study on piano studio teachers further reveals that knowledge of healthy practices or troubleshooting issues is more often anecdotal than

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<sup>150</sup> "The Prism Project," Ball State University, accessed April 15, 2026, <https://sites.bsu.edu/prism-project/>.

<sup>151</sup> Sanchita Farruque and Alan H. D. Watson, "Chapter 19: Developing Expertise and Professionalism: Health and Well-being in Performing Musicians," in *Advanced Musical Performance: Investigations in Higher Education Learning*, 1st edition, edited by Ioulia Papageorgi and Graham Welch. (Routledge, 2014), 322.

empirical.<sup>152</sup> Rather than burden individual educators with becoming occupational health experts, it is the institutions that should promote physical and mental health through formalized wellness courses. Eyre also emphasizes that, “a reinforcement of the musician’s personal sense of well-being and existential coherence... connects personal, transpersonal, and social spaces... These spaces arise from and support one’s personal and professional identity as a musician.”<sup>153</sup> She points specifically to prevention of illness and injury as the key to a musician wellness model.<sup>154</sup> These can be accomplished through courses on occupational health that demystify “musculoskeletal problems, practice strategies, hearing preservation, vocal health and performance anxiety.”<sup>155</sup> On the other end, the Performing Arts Medicine Association also recommends deeper collaboration with health care providers to spread awareness of musician-specific occupational health problems.<sup>156</sup> Musicians who are empowered to better understand their own physical and mental health can build broader perspectives on how to engage with their profession healthily.

To incorporate a Participatory Arts philosophy into the modern music education curriculum, I propose we reframe musicianship coursework to encompass not only practical skills like ear training and theory but also professional skills. Some of these topics are sometimes touched on in seminars at professional development programs like summer festivals, but which may not be accessible to everyone. On top of the standard musical skills courses, I propose including a yearlong practical musicianship course that touches on topics to promote a

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<sup>152</sup> Margaret Redmond and Anne M Tiernan, “Knowledge and Practices of Piano Teachers in Preventing Playing-Related Injuries in High School Students,” *Medical Problems of Performing Artists* 16, no. 1 (2001): 32–38. <https://doi.org/10.21091/mppa.2001.1006>.

<sup>153</sup> Lillian, Eyre, *Guidelines for Music Therapy Practice in Mental Health*, 1st ed. (Barcelona Publishers, 2013), 865.

<sup>154</sup> Eyre, *Guidelines for Music Therapy Practice in Mental Health*, 864.

<sup>155</sup> Farruque and Watson, “Chapter 19: Developing Expertise and Professionalism” 324.

<sup>156</sup> Farruque and Watson, “Chapter 19: Developing Expertise and Professionalism” 324.

sustainable career as an instrumentalist. I conceptualize this as a three-unit, yearlong musicianship course:

**Unit 1:** Health education: occupational wellness topics

- Physical health
  - Anatomy: posture, musculoskeletal issues, fitness & physical therapy, instrument ergonomics, body mapping
  - Common injuries, recovery, prevention
  - Hearing and protection
- Mental health
  - Performance anxiety management
  - Psychological wellbeing

**Unit 2:** Pedagogy topics

- Instrumental pedagogy specific to instrument
- Education studies
  - Learning and development (child, adolescent, adult)
  - Approaches to teaching music (music education)
  - Current issues: topics in diversity and inclusion (disabilities studies, education history studies)
  - Teaching practicum capstone: work with local organizations or studios for leadership and practical experience

**Unit 3:** Professional development topics

- Music as a commercial business:
  - Freelancing as a career
  - Building a private studio
  - Building a non-profit (funding models)
  - Practicum: build a proposal/structure for a studio/organization

This curriculum is influenced by Kumashiro's anti-oppressive educational philosophy and acts on the social model of disability by empowering its students. It acts on the idea that community is an enabling force and provides students with the space to build that community through education, community engagement, and professional development. The goal is to provide students space to develop their own autonomy as musicians and educators.

This section illustrates ways we can make the ideas behind critical disability studies actionable, and to show that these ideas are needed in music and arts education curriculum. At the heart of it, we want our artists to have a deep understanding of the world and its inhabitants

because the art we create is a reflection of that world. In order to remain true to that vision, it is necessary to constantly question our own worldviews and internalized biases so that we can always act in the most compassionate way possible.

Performance education can avoid stagnation by engaging with ideas from other disciplines like the education field, STEM, and contemporary art. Through the actions detailed above, we can take responsibility for the traditions we have taken on through the long lineage of performance practice. We can direct our energy toward reimagining new collaborative processes and restructuring the curriculum to better serve anti-oppressive goals and promote musician wellness. This is how we not only strive for equitable participation but ensure musicians leave their degree programs empowered with knowledge of ethical and inclusive practices and a healthy connection with the musical world.

## CONCLUSION

Student disability disclosure rates have been steadily rising over the last decade, with the proportions nearly doubling from 5.4 percent to 12.9 percent between 2003 and 2018.<sup>157</sup> This may be due to a number of factors, such as increased access to care or social destigmatization. On the other hand, university employee disclosure rates are seeing a much smaller rise. A 2024 University of Washington disclosure document shows only a 1 percent increase in employee disclosure rates.<sup>158</sup> This discrepancy shows that while people feel on the whole safer to disclose and request accommodation, the marginalized are still not being properly supported.

With this paper I charge the music community with the responsibility of raising consciousness around ableist musical practices. By promoting a view of disability through the social lens, we have discussed how disabled musicians have adapted technologies to carve out a place in the mainstream music culture. Left-hand piano music demonstrates disability's social power through the creation of new art forms while BLV musicians' approaches to accessing music introduce methods that benefit all learners. These communities both illustrate the Universal Design idea that what is good for some can be good for all.

We can apply this idea to our education spaces, where current accommodation policies and assistive technologies do not yet adequately promote disabled autonomy and independence for its students. Part of the art of music is the sharing of music through education. Because we all double essentially as educators through the sharing of music, we have a responsibility as teachers to understand our students and our students' needs. It is not enough to let the system react passively to the evolving needs of its students; it is not enough to merely offer access to able-

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<sup>157</sup> Brown Brown, ed. *Lived Experiences of Ableism in Academia: Strategies for Inclusion in Higher Education*, (Policy Press, 2022), 2.

<sup>158</sup> "UW Diversity Blueprint 2022-2026," University of Washington, accessed March 20, 2026, [www.washington.edu/diversity/diversity-blueprint](http://www.washington.edu/diversity/diversity-blueprint).

bodied spaces without the proper tools to engage meaningfully. The goal must be to seek equity through participatory inclusivity. We can do this by encouraging greater community in our institutions between administration, faculty, and students, as well as rethinking our curriculum to better empower all parties.

We know that classical music needs to modernize and keep up with rapidly changing technologies and audiences. While there is still robust engagement, the community itself remains smaller and more insular in comparison to other cultural mediums. Musicians of this genre continually need to justify classical music's place in the modern world; this is sometimes fruitfully achieved by analyzing our canon through critical identity lenses such as gender or queer theory. These readings reframe our history in modern terms and bring the canon forward through time. In other ways, we can challenge the ways institutions have shaped our current practices. Classical performance today needs to challenge the hegemony in a way it has not before to stay relevant. One vital way forward is through greater inclusivity. I believe it is our responsibility as musicians, teachers, and artists to challenge our own learned assumptions to build a more compassionate understanding of the world beyond ourselves.

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