

## The Art of Page Turning

Many people have tales of page-turners' mistakes. It is a very difficult job to do well. These mistakes can ruin a concert, and performances of chamber music, lieder recitals, and particularly of 20th Century and contemporary music, rely very heavily upon the efficiency of the turner. There have been several radio programs on BBC radio over the years about page-turning disasters, and they must make those who put themselves in the firing line cringe with embarrassment.

That said, performers should be conscious of and thankful when the job is done well. It is all too easy to take it for granted if no problems occur, and we are often guilty of not noticing or acknowledging it under those circumstances, and go hairless with impatience when things do go wrong (we behave similarly towards piano tuners).

I have regularly been indebted to a great music-lover whose page-turning activities have extended to working with several prominent artists, including in recording sessions. I know that to some degree he does this as an antidote to his professional life, but it is also something he treats as a major contribution to the concerts, inspires confidence at the same time as being discreet, and is invaluable to the artists alongside whom he sits.

I would also like to mention the two lieder recitals I have recently given with Elizabeth Watts - one in the Netherlands and the other in London - for which the job of page-turning was a huge responsibility - involving multiple duplicated copies and repeated sections (nineteen separate works in all) - and both respective page-turners rose to the challenge extremely professionally.

It is worth noting here that the job of page-turning is sometimes massively complicated by the way music is published. Two examples:

Firstly, a 20th Century two-piano work - a piece of fiendishly difficult and fast-moving music in variation form that involves a section of eight bars being repeated. The first two of these bars is at the bottom of the right hand page, leaving the other six over the page; thus, the repeat sign rears its head after about three seconds of turning the page, by which time the unsuspecting page-turner has already sat down. Then, after turning back the page, he or she realises that the page needs to be re-turned after two bars - maybe one second later. This situation re-appears later in the same piece. With any degree of nervousness, at the very least a stage show of leaping up and down and panicking is inevitable, and at its worst could lead to the music falling off the stand (and has done).

The second example is of a solo piano work of which I gave the first performance some years ago. Again, extremely complex, one of the movements is modeled to some extent on the form of a Schubert German Dance. Section A is in two halves, each half being repeated. Then follows Section B, also in two halves, each half being repeated. Section A then returns - this time without repeats. We then go straight to Section C, omitting Section B. Section C is also in two halves, each half being repeated. Section A then returns again, this time with repeats. We then go into Section B, without repeats, and then onto Section D ..... and on and on like this until both performer and page turner are halfway to insanity. If the publisher had printed out the whole thing in the order in which it needs to be played (which was not subject to any possibility of modification), complete with written out repeats, performance would be straightforward and confident, at the end of which the page-turner would not be feeling homicidal and the composer mortified. As it was, none of the repeats are written out, and there is a sea of da capo and 'go to' signs etc at the end of each section (in particular at the end of Section A - a moment of such

unbelievable apprehension as to which section was then going to be presented before me, that it makes most performance experiences seem like a picnic). The result was that the page-turner had to be a virtuoso with the left hand, turning backwards and forwards about eight times, rendering total fearlessness a sine qua non - an ability to appear in front of the listening public as if she had no idea what she was doing, given the degree of to-ing and fro-ing required. That this made the public performance of this movement a complete theatrical farce was inevitable from the lack of forethought.

On the other hand, page turners would do well to refrain from volunteering if they suffer from stage-fright, or are intimidated by the performers. Being able to read music is only the beginning and bears as much relationship to being a helpful page-turner as being able to read a score does to being a great conductor - i.e. it is just the most basic fundamental, on top of which there are many further areas of expertise needed.

A priority for a page-turner should be that they attend a rehearsal - not all of it, but enough to know the personalities and particular ways of working of the artists, to see the music and establish if there are any practical difficulties with the copies (not only to turn back the corners to prevent sheets sticking together and to find out about repeats, but also to establish the type of paper, whether or not the sheets are well-bound or tend to turn back on their own - with certain publications, this can happen constantly, however much effort you put into flattening the score - and whether or not the lighting works for both the artist and the page-turner; if not, there is a guaranteed disaster ahead.)

If they do come to rehearsal, even for just a few minutes - assuming that the artist is a reasonable person to deal with - everything should work with no problems.

If not, there are likely to be regrets all round. Although some may find these episodes funny, they are actually a great shame. They spoil the concert, and create huge embarrassment for the protagonists. We tend to look back with humour at concerts that went wrong because it detracts from the agony of failure, and the page-turner is a very soft target - an easy scapegoat - usually when they are safely somewhere else. This is as unfair as it is hypocritical.

## **My own efforts**

I, myself, have page-turned in concert only twice since I became a professional performer.

The first time was in 1981, in the middle of a highly entertaining and enlightening mixture of jazz-influenced music and jazz itself with Simon Rattle and the London Sinfonietta in the Queen Elizabeth Hall London. My role somehow got extended from playing Gershwin's Rhapsody in Blue, Bernstein's Prelude Fugue and Riffs and band piano in some Paul Whiteman numbers, to helping out with stage management and turning the pages for S. Rattle for a performance of a new number by Tony Hymas. It was a manuscript piano part, incomplete, written down sketchily, and was very small. My heart went out to all those who have turned for me over the years as I began to regret volunteering.

The other time was during the Messiaen Centenary Year of 2008, when I was invited to play the composer's Turangalila Symphony with the Dresden Staatskapelle conducted by Myung Whun Chung. It turned out that in between performances of this epic work, there were also two performances of Messiaen's Quartet for the End of Time in a beautiful old church in Görlitz - the town nearest to Stalag VIII-A, where the work was written under appalling circumstances. [Here is a link to a Facebook entry devoted to the visit to the remains of the camp:

<https://www.facebook.com/media/set/?set=a.323164941079977.75682.180757148654091&type=1>] This was played by Maestro Chung with principals of the Dresden Staatskapelle, and he asked me to page turn.

It was one of the most emotional concert experiences of my life - not only was it a great performance, but it was imbued with an unbelievable sense of history. It highlights one of the commonest potential traps for a music-loving page-turner to fall into - that of becoming so involved in the music that the turning can suffer. (As far as I know, it didn't, but I was aware of having to remind myself as the performance progressed. Forcing objectivity upon oneself is something one is used to as a performer, but that is a very different situation - as one has been doing it for a lifetime - as opposed to once or twice.)

## **Serious issues**

Nobody who has page-turned as well as he or she is able deserves to be pilloried on a website, and I am not going to do it. In any case, we all make mistakes, and unfortunate things will always happen; the pages might stick together, the music might be blown off the stand - or the pages blown back - by air-conditioning that was not turned on during the rehearsal, the turner might lose his or her place, etc. etc. There is nothing funny about any of it, and there is nothing to feel annoyed about if every attempt was made to do it as well as possible.

However, I do not understand why certain things happen. They are not explained away by nervousness, nor excused as unfortunate mistakes.

The first example concerns a performance of a very difficult piece for soloists and orchestra - one of the greatest works of the Second Viennese School. It was presented in a major venue as part of a festival devoted to the composer, broadcast on radio. The orchestra's management provided one of its own librarians to page-turn. Said librarian you might expect to have a modicum of understanding of what it is like to perform from music.

During the rehearsal, at the end of each and every right hand page the page-turner covered the bottom line with the right hand, turned the page so slowly that I was looking at its edge for about 5 seconds, then smoothed down the next page very carefully by pressing with both hands on the top line of the next page, completely hiding it from view. This meant that for the first and last lines per double page (for the most part in this particular work, approximately one third of the music) I was completely in the dark as to what was written other than from the depths of my memory; fortunately it is a good memory, but this work is not something I would recommend playing without a score.

I did of course try to explain why the procedure was a problem, but in the concert nothing had changed at all, and there was a potential train-wreck around every thirty seconds for the whole of the first and third movements.

The second example also concerns a live radio broadcast - this time it was Bartok's Sonata for Two Pianos and Percussion. The two page turners were undergraduate music students who did not feel it necessary to attend the rehearsal, and were unfamiliar with this masterpiece. Thus they had to be nursed through the performance and given more attention than any other aspect of the concert. The result was that a performance that could have been watertight and a real privilege to be involved in, considering the calibre of the four performers, was scrappy and nerve-wracking from beginning to end, with the pages going over at a variety of times unrelated to the music.

A third example concerns a two-piano recital with my wife, Elaine, during which the page-turning committee member who had been volunteered to turn for her seemed to be competing with her for audience attention. Whether this was in terms of looks, or self-importance, I do not know; it may have been merely a display of pure exhibitionism. It certainly stemmed from a desperate desire to be noticed. The result was mayhem – the pages were not turned at the right time, the light was obscured, at one point the music fell onto the keyboard, the audience was distracted, and the amount of upset was considerable. Needless to say she hadn't been to the rehearsal.

On the occasion on which I played one of the most significant piano concertos written in recent years four times with one of the world's greatest orchestras – in some peoples' minds, THE greatest – the page turning was undertaken by a guy from the box office, whom I was assured was very experienced. Again, no show at the rehearsal. The end of the work is very memorable, occurring on the right hand page. At the end of the first performance, the page was whipped over very quickly and noisily (as indeed all the previous ones had been), displaying rather obviously two pages of completely blank paper – something that would have been clearly visible from the audience, and somewhat undermining of the drama of the end of the work. It was, of course, mentioned, bearing in mind the subsequent three performances. The same thing happened at all of those three performances.

No, dear reader, it is not an amusing incident when it goes wrong. It is an impediment of sometimes huge proportions that needs to be thought about a lot more carefully in many cases. On the occasions when it works well, the page-turners deserve far more appreciation than they often receive - to take audience applause, to be given flowers, and to be included as part of the large group of people who came together to create the event. We should also remember that they are also usually giving their services - which is really not right - and are putting themselves in the firing line in a situation that involves them being in full view of the public for as long as the performers themselves.

## **The lighter side**

Having said all that, there have been some amusing incidents across the years - amusing not because of incompetence or because the concerts suffered, but merely because of the personalities involved.

The first anecdote concerns a 1978 performance of Stravinsky's *Les Noces*. As the score includes four pianos, we needed four page-turners. Generously provided by a local school, they were very attractive 6th Form schoolgirls all studying for music A Level. For the performance they were dressed to kill, with fluttering, heavily mascara-ed-up eyelashes, complete with very large staring eyes (possibly caused by nervousness), lashings of make-up, pushup bras, miniskirts, and hair that had been straightened (in the cases of the ones with wavy hair) and curled (in the cases of the ones with straight hair) [why do they do that?].

The four pianists were all males in their twenties, and to pretend that these girls were not distracting would be disingenuous, to say the least.

*Les Noces* is a very complicated work, and was printed quite unclearly on parts that were very well-used and scruffy. However, the girls were very capable of following it, although underneath their teenage bravado they were probably very nervous of getting it wrong.

Thus, in the performance (as opposed to the rehearsal, in which there was no problem), at the end of each page, they all stared very openly at our faces for signs that we were ready for the page turns, instead of looking at the copies. It could be that they had professed worrying about it to someone, who had advised them to forget reading the music and to wait for a nod from their respective pianist. We were all conscious of those large beady eyes belonging to girls dressed as if they were going out on the pull, as we tried to concentrate on playing the complex rhythms of a very difficult work.

By the end we all felt like we had done five rounds with Mike Tyson. I wonder where those girls, who will by now be in their fifties, are now, and if they remember the occasion.

My personal favourite page-turning story concerns a Regional Contemporary Music Network tour of the UK that I took on in March 1983. It consisted of nineteen performances of the same program in a variety of concert clubs around England. Here is the program:

George Benjamin Sonata (1977)  
Webern Variations Opus 27  
Berg Sonata Opus 1  
INTERVAL  
Liszt Bagatelle without Tonality  
Liszt Sonata in B minor

I needed a page-turner for the Benjamin. My wife, Elaine, turned for almost all the concerts, but was unable to attend two of them, and I rang the two promoters concerned if there was anyone available. I was apprehensive, as the work is phenomenally difficult to follow, extremely dissonant and fast moving in ever-changing bar lengths without printed time-signatures.

The two venues were in the North of England and the concerts were on two adjacent days.

The first concert came and went without much incident, although the page-turner understandably did not know what had hit him when he saw the score. There were inevitably a few moments of tension in the performance, but he did a great job under the circumstances.

The second venue had asked a local piano teacher – an extremely prim lady of about 75, who turned up dressed to the nines even for the rehearsal – to render her services. She had the personality of a strict retired school head-mistress.

Until the moment I began to play the Benjamin for her in the afternoon of the concert, I continued to worry about what would happen. However, at the end of the first page my worries dissolved; she was totally assured and precise, turned the page with no fuss at all, and seemed to know instinctively the exact split second at which to turn quickly.

She stood throughout the rehearsal, which worried me given her age, even though we did not go through most of the music, but she seemed very energetic and happy with the situation. Thus I was very confident that all would be well in the evening, and she went off for her tea.

It seems that someone else was also concerned by her standing for so long, and by the time we went together onto the stage for the performance, she had been provided, unbeknownst to either of us and anonymously, with an extremely comfortable low-slung luxuriously comfortable armchair. It had been placed in a position to the left of the piano stool and just behind - i.e. in the normal place for a page turner's more familiar less comfortable chair. The lady somewhat

foolishly and probably more out of habit than anything else, accordingly sat down in the chair as I took my opening bow.

I started the Benjamin, very quickly arriving at the end of the first page. Nothing happened, except for some rather helplessly wild movements from the chair at the side of me. Fortunately the first page finishes with a silence for enough time for me to get the page over myself. During the next two pages, I became aware of the fact that she was desperately trying to get up out of the chair, but couldn't; there was series of gasping noises and increasingly desperate rocking movements as she tried to catapult herself out of the chair so that she could reach the music. However, she was wrapped in the luxurious folds of the armchair, which seemed to be emulating a Venus flytrap. She didn't make it, and again I turned for myself – this time rather hurriedly, as the notes did not accommodate it this time.

OK, you are thinking, I should have stopped, helped her out of the chair, and started again, and you would be right; it is indeed what I should have done. However, I didn't, and to this day it has been to my regret that I failed her in this way, by continuing the performance and hoping for the best at around three lines from the bottom of each right hand page.

When I reached the middle of page 5, on which the music gets increasingly more wild, she was so determined to get up and resume her duties that she made a huge lunge towards the keyboard and smashed her left forearm down onto the lower octave. This produced a fortissimo tone-cluster comprising most of the notes of the bottom octave of the piano, lasting approximately 10 seconds, that appeared to fit in with the style of the music – I am sure George would disagree, but I am also sure he would see the humour of the situation. She managed to lever herself up, using the keys, onto her feet, upon which she stayed for the rest of the sonata, turning as efficiently as she had during the afternoon.

I felt very embarrassed at the whole episode, but she was herself very amused by it, after we had got over the fact that the first five pages had been slightly side-lined by the theatrical shenanigans going on to my left.

Then there was the piano duet recital – also with Elaine – and the guy with the extraordinarily deep voice that carried and boomed to the back of the venue whenever he said 'Oh, sorry' after each and every page turn that he missed. This was virtually all of them, caused by the above-mentioned over-involvement in the music; I know this to be true, as he was an ex-pupil of mine, and we discussed it later.

He was the one who pointed out the terrible practical confusion that can be caused in duet recitals when the secondo part is printed on the left and the primo on the right – if the turner follows the secondo part he/she needs to turn at the bottom of the LEFT HAND page. This of course seems elementary when you think about it, but habit plays such a strong part when the adrenalin is flowing. It is exacerbated when the recital consists of music published like that mixed in with music published the other way – i.e. with the primo and secondo parts printed together like a score.

One more anecdote, this time stretching back to the 1960s: when I was 11 or so, my father joined the St Werburgh's Amateur Dramatics Society in South Manchester, where I was a boy soprano in the choir. I became heavily involved as an adjunct to my father, who played several leading roles. I was helping the stage manager build props (or rather hindering him) for Arthur Lovegrove's "Goodnight Mrs. Puffin" when my father and the then director of the group came and asked me to play the church hall's upright piano during the intermissions of the forthcoming performances.

So during the runs of two plays I found myself plonking through assorted Palm Court favourites such as La Paloma, The Posthorn Gallop, I Dreamt I Dwelt in Marble Halls, The Johnny Heykens Serenade, and The Song of the Volga Boatmen. This, whilst the members of the audience had coffee and talked thirteen to the dozen all the way through the interval.

[Just as an aside, it is my memory that the audiences for these events were always good – the Am Dram never worried for one second about getting a good house; it was just taken for granted. I do hope this happy situation remains.]

My father had asked one of my aunts – his brother's wife – to turn the pages for me, as she had played the piano quite well in her youth. She was about 60 years old at the time. I started to play and she turned the first page perfectly well. I was about four bars into the second page, and she spoke, loudly enough for anyone who was listening to the music to hear. "Peter, what do you say?" she demanded.

I didn't know what she was talking about at first, and then it clicked. I spent the rest of the interval saying, "Thank you, Auntie Norah," after each page was duly turned. Quite right too...