

'A Pianist's Story' by Gill Backhouse

edited by Sally Daunt for BDA Music

This is adapted from the original chapter in *Music and Dyslexia: Opening New Doors* edited by T.R. Miles, & J. Westcombe, (2001), London: Whurr Publishers. This version is produced with the permission of the author and the publishers of the book: Wiley Publishing, Inc. The late Gill Backhouse was a chartered psychologist.

Aims of the article

- To give an insight into the difficulties that can be experienced by dyslexic musicians, even at the highest levels and from this:
- To suggest strategies that can be used to help **all** musicians.
- To challenge good music teachers to think about their approaches when working with **all** pupils.

All people, all dyslexic people and all musicians are different.

The problems and strategies outlined here may not fit or help everyone, but some may. Although many points are specific to the piano, much of the material is relevant to all musicians, whatever their instrument or voice.

The teachers who succeeded with the pianist described here (known as PM) did so because,

They listened to their pupil

They re-thought their ('standard') approaches and

Together they found strategies that worked for her.

Introduction

PM is a professional musician and pianist. At the age of 36, she discovered that she was severely dyslexic, although she had achieved a degree in engineering and later, when tested by an Educational Psychologist (Gill Backhouse), the results of diagnostic tests showed PM to be highly intelligent, with a Full-Scale IQ in the 'Superior' range, that is the top 2% of the general population.

In terms of music PM had always had difficulties with **sight-reading** and **memory** but had never linked these to her earlier struggles at school. She felt throughout her life that,

my words cannot often enough say what I want them to say.
Only my music - which I can now see comes from other
quarters of the brain - can express the feelings that I cannot
put words to.

Understanding that she was and is dyslexic did much to explain her earlier struggles and ways of thinking.

Features of this dyslexic musician

Although clearly a fine musician, PM's performance was often wooden, faltering, or inaccurate. When she knew the music well her musicality shone through, both as a professional accompanist and soloist.

Sight reading and learning new music was a real challenge.

Memorisation was very difficult. Diagnostic assessment (by an educational psychologist) showed very poor short-term memory, a feature very common in dyslexic individuals. For many dyslexic musicians, errors in music may result, not from a lack of deep understanding of the musical ideas and themes but from problems with memory.

Achievements required **huge** amounts of work: throughout her professional life as a musician PM achieved success only by working up to 16 hours a day.

This (and the problems of apparent failure) created feelings of low self-esteem: a common 'secondary' feature of dyslexia.

Piano lessons and approaches

Lessons with her first teacher were an ordeal for PM: traditional methods of teaching musical notation failed.

Later, lessons with a different teacher were better because **she**, the pupil, was allowed to take the lead. The key to success was teaching the way the **pupil** felt was best for her, rather than teaching the way the teacher had always done, which in this case didn't work for the pupil.

Her later teacher (a famous pianist), who coached her as a professional solo pianist seemed to understand the way in which she learned and **adapted his approach to suit her.**

A dyslexic approach to music: pattern, shape and a holistic view

PM perceived music quite differently from many colleagues.

She saw **patterns and shapes** in music, of which other musicians seemed largely unaware. This is a feature shared by other dyslexic musicians.

Approaching a new piece of music

For a dyslexic person, approaching a piece may need to be done in a very different way from the conventional building up bar by bar, slowly

and (in the case of keyboards) separate hands. **The holistic view (the 'big picture') is crucial.**

Decoding the score may never be automatic enough for a dyslexic musician to allow real focus on the **music** initially (until the music has been learned) rather than the **notes**.

Self-awareness

Understanding that a person is dyslexic and understanding their learning style can be a big step forward both for that person and their teacher(s). Once PM 'found how my mind works' she was 'able to function on that wavelength'.

To succeed, a dyslexic musician probably needs to

- Stop worrying that others may learn things differently.
- Identify and develop an individual learning style and strengths as a musician.
- Have great drive and determination.
- Be able to cope with criticism.
- Aim for good health, adequate rest and relaxation and know how to pace him or herself.

Strategies

These are strategies used by PM but expressed in a way that can be used by any musician, dyslexic or not.

Technique

- Motor skills and motor memory are vitally important.
- Perfect control (for pianists) stems from the

development of highly refined finger movements, with a small curve in each finger and constant contact with the keyboard.

- The keys should be *hugged* – avoid ‘attacking’ or flamboyant styles where fingers or arms are lifted high.
- Spend much time on planning and writing fingering on the score: this can link the distances and patterns on the keyboard with the performer’s own image of the music.
- The goal must be to move round the keyboard at will **without looking** - trusting motor skills and memory: putting trust in fingers and spatial awareness.
- Reading the score is arduous but essential when learning a piece or checking for accuracy, so the eyes must stay on the music. Try practising with the lid propped half open, playing with the eyes closed, or with the keyboard screened.
- This is a particularly valuable method when learning contrapuntal music where it is essential that each voice is tracked and melodically shaped.
- Once a piece is known and can be played fluently try putting a mirror on the music desk to ‘pin down’ the eyes in the same way as the fingers are bound to the keyboard. This will help the performer to listen to what is being played in a more focused way.

Sight-reading

Although this can be a major problem for dyslexic musicians, if a person aspires to a career in classical music the need to read music accurately is crucial. So, the following points need to be considered:

- This is and will always be hard work and necessitates an extremely conscientious approach.
- Accuracy must be checked over and over again, a hard task for

those who process scores slowly.

- Sight-reading may operate at a much slower pace than actual playing (performance) so it can be unhelpful to refer to the score while rehearsing. As PM said, 'It is a distraction that gets in the way of the music'.
- If your aim is not professional standard classical performance then consider improvisation and extemporisation as in jazz and popular music.

Learning new music: some suggestions

- First, ascertain the deep structure and meaning of the music. Focussing on **structure** in music and using the 'architecture' of the music as a starting point can be useful because of the strong sense of **pattern and shape** in music that many dyslexic musicians have.
- PM describes forming her own template of a piece (prising it from the page): creating a clear picture of each composition, perhaps thinking of it as a journey through a 3-dimensional landscape of structures, milestones, landmarks and colours. Rhythms can thus 'lock into' the spatial form of a piece and if errors are made, the overall shape of the piece will allow the performer to continue.

Annotate the score

- Study its form and communicative purpose - is it a dance or march, a song or a lament?
- Become intensely aware of the harmony, phrasing and shapes in the music by writing them all on the score.
Which keys are used and which scales are formed by particular passages? If the bass notes of a section are in a certain scale with an added accidental, make a note of this.
- Note whether a passage has slipped up or down a semitone from a certain point.

- Mark the phrase lengths - these are more important than the notes - and where they are unequal (for example, two of four bars and one of five).
- Such annotation can be crucial when internalizing the music.
- A second stage can be to work out the fingering for each section on the keyboard in every particular and write it down.
- Play the piece right through, at the correct tempo, to get the feel of it. Then start to rehearse, always playing both hands together, until a very advanced stage in the process. The focus must be on **keeping the whole piece in mind** from beginning to end.
- Also play each piece at speed, hands together, while learning it – preserving an image of the whole piece from beginning to end – **a holistic view**. This piece of advice was reiterated by the cellist Robert Cohen at a master class given in August 2014. He was not referring to dyslexic performers but to **all** performers, and on any instrument.
- Try studying the score of a new piece **away from the instrument** to begin with (perhaps for up to 2 weeks).
- When the piece is secure, record it and ask friends to listen. Feedback is important now. Ask if they were entertained or moved and what meaning was conveyed to them.
- Lastly, work on accuracy: check every single note and rest by playing with the score and using a tape recorder. The music world's preoccupation with accuracy does not suit dyslexic musicians – 'It is our Achilles' heel', says PM.
- The last few weeks before a performance should be used to check and fix the detail and work on communicating what the composer meant. The basic learning must be done well before.
- Because the memorisation of sound patterns in all their complexity and detail can be very important, to ensure that there is no discrepancy between what is heard and what the memory tells the brain to expect, tuning of instruments must be extremely good. PM,

for example was **fanatical** about her piano being tuned to perfection. For her this mattered almost more than anything else.

Lessons for all music teachers

From her own experience as a highly dyslexic musician, PM realised that there are many things that **all** music teachers can usefully 'take on board' with **all** pupils:

- Every pupil is unique.
- 'Received opinion' about teaching methods and resources is not always helpful.
- If, as a teacher, you find something difficult, you may well be able to teach that thing extremely well!
- Don't worry too much about the pupil naming notes correctly (for dyslexic people this may be difficult) – show them/find them on a keyboard (or other instrument) instead.
- For students long accustomed to focusing on technical mastery (which PM scathingly refers to as 'a mere accurate reproduction of the notes on the page'), thinking about structure and phrasing can be a revelation.
- Forced by a learning difficulty to focus on music at a level beyond the notes, PM found that it brought an intense musicality to her concert performances.

It may do for you or your students too!

A useful book

Sloboda J.A. (1985), *The Musical Mind: the Cognitive Psychology of Music*.
Published by Oxford University Press.

For more detail about PM's story and about the psychological reasoning behind the points expressed above, see: Chapter 9 of *Music and Dyslexia: Opening New Doors* edited by T.R. Miles, & J. Westcombe, J. (2001). Published by Whurr Publishers.

If you have queries about music and dyslexia, please contact BDA Music

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