

# Pianist to Pianist

## 1 • Schumann's Hand

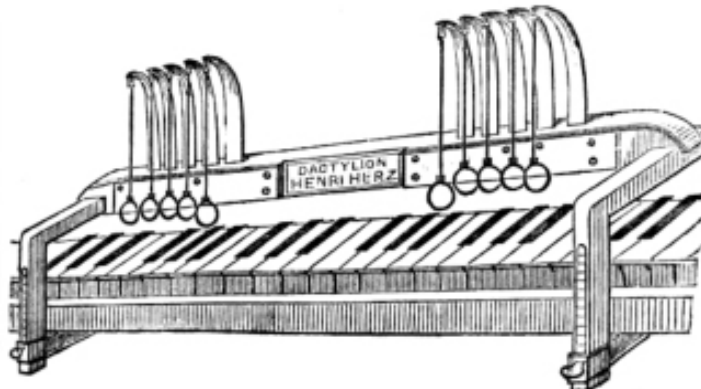
It is common knowledge, not only for pianists, that Robert Schumann hurt his hand with a mechanical device. We know that for a fact, it makes sense, it is a good story: The musical genius, who in order to advance his ability at the keyboard, to compete with the great performers of his time, challenges fate by endeavoring something unnatural, and subsequently suffering a tragic loss. Icarus. But: It's not true.

It's a myth, a great story, but not true. Some time ago, while researching mechanical devices, I found an essay by the British music scholar Eric Sams (1926 – 2004), who in 1971 (!) published an Essay in Musical Times (an English music journal, in continuous print since 1844) titled: "Schumann's hand injury." That 40 year old and apparently completely ignored essay makes an irresistible argument against the notion that Schumann hurt his hand with a mechanical device. A true myth buster.

Here is my version of the story based on the Eric Sams' essay: Schumann suffered from many afflictions – in Sams' words: continuous general malaise, tinnitus, vertigo, insomnia, headache, depression, premonitions of insanity, numbness, cramp, difficulty in writing, speech disturbance, memory failure, a stroke, pains in bones and joints, florid psychosis, giddiness, general paralysis of the insane, and deterioration to death – to which one might add: manic depressive schizophrenia, a suicide attempt, and a hand problem, which I am sure didn't seem like such a big deal considering this list.

The main reason for this dreadful list can be found, besides of the general tendencies of Schumann's sensitive soul, in the history of Schumann's affliction with Syphilis and the subsequent attempt of a cure with mercury - inhalation of mercury fumes, known to modern medicine as severe mercury poisoning. The destructive force of the treatment with mercury in combination with Schumann's feeble constitution created, amongst many other ailments, the unfortunate condition of his hand: The 2nd and 3rd fingers were paralyzed, at first a little and then more and more. Seeking help Schumann tried all kinds of remedies including a) "putting the affected part into the thoracic or abdominal cavity of a freshly-slaughtered animal and keeping it there as long as the natural warmth lasted" – when I tell this in conversation people usually think I am joking -, b) a homeopathic powder (kleines Pülverchen), c) a herbal bandage (Kräuterverband), and d) a fateful albeit harmless mechanical device.

He probably constructed a device based on existing designs and models; most likely (in my opinion) the just invented Dactylion (ca. 1836) by celebrated contemporary pianist, composer, and pedagogue Henry Herz.



It is not clear whether Schumann actually got a Dactylion, but it seems that he made a contraption isolating one finger at a time; a smaller, simpler version, similar to the contemporary "Happy Fingers" device by Tiziano Poli. (A slightly unfortunate name for a wonderful device that prompted me to rename it the "Finger Guillotine")



I doubt that Schumann had the ability to construct such a fine and delicate machine as the "Happy Fingers" and instead probably just tied a rope around his finger and hoisted it up through some pulley with a small weight on the other side. This kind of device is not meant to isolate one finger into an immobile position (part of the usual misconception of what Schumann was endeavoring) while moving the other: a classic holding exercise, but rather to activate the Lumbricalis muscle, the little and essential finger mover inside our palm: actually a very good idea.

In any case: such a device could not be responsible for the demise of Schumann's hand and fingers, it seems obvious that his hand condition was not related to the use of any mechanical apparatus. I urge all to read the essay by Eric Sams and to make your own conclusions:

[http://www.ericams.org/sams\\_schumannhand\\_eng.htm](http://www.ericams.org/sams_schumannhand_eng.htm)

For me this story poses more questions than answers, not at all about Schumann's hand injury, but about issues of the systematic development of virtuoso piano technique (and a little about epistemology). This is the first entry in PianistToPianist.com, a weblog of thoughts, ideas, concepts, observations, suggestions, research, methodology, discoveries, rules, exceptions, aphorisms, and secrets from pianist to pianist.