



except I really did have to go out and play. But, in the middle of these black thoughts, I suddenly realised that there, in a dark corner of the changing room, was an old upright piano. Could I? Would it? Amazingly, most the notes worked, and even more miraculously, it was *almost* in tune. So we got a team of burly farmers out of the audience to manhandle the piano downstairs and out onto the stage, to rapturous applause. In all honesty, though, it was still probably the worst piano on which I've ever had to play a solo recital.'

Melvyn Tan has had more than his fair share of instrument disasters: 'At a concert in Germany some years ago I was performing on a five-octave fortepiano when in the second half the strings started to break. First one, then another. Altogether, about a dozen broke throughout the second half, and even worse, I very nearly got scarred in the face by one of them. The maker of the instrument was there too but she didn't know what was going on. She burst into tears!

'And on another occasion I was performing on an original Schantz piano, the sort of instrument favoured by Haydn and Mozart. The bridge was cracked, so there was this awful buzz when anything was played. The only thing that would solve the problem was for someone to sit at the other end of the piano and press his right or left hand on to a particular part of the bridge. This poor person had to do this for the whole recital! Of course the audience loved it. Audiences always love a little disaster!'

Peter Katin suffered a piano disaster of a different kind in Yorkshire: 'Arriving in town I was met by a rather miserable reception committee who told me that the reason they were miserable was that everyone had caught a flu. It was gratifying, therefore, to be told that the hall was sold out, so I was taken there, and the director insisted on announcing me, something I normally find quite unnecessary. However, it did give me the chance of observing that the piano was closed, and as I usually make up something light-hearted to say on such an occasion, I marched on, announced that I didn't get paid any more for physical labour, and in the ensuing laughter, I tugged at the lid and found that the piano was in fact locked. This caused the audience to believe that I meant this as a cabaret act, and whatever I said made them almost hysterical.

'Still, all we had to do (I thought) was to find someone who had the key. But this was easier said than done, as the secretary had the key and had gone home with it, and with flu. But this, I told the audience, would only delay the start of the recital by a few minutes. I was wrong, as the secretary lived over 25 miles away. Having asked if there was anyone in the house who could pick locks, I decided that the only thing to do was to have the interval then and there, while the key was being retrieved. This was welcomed, as they wanted nothing so much as a cup of tea. The key was finally brought to the hall, and I then gave the recital without a further interval.'

Grace under fire

Is a concert pianist allowed to mind when these situations arise? Can a performer make a fuss without turning into a prima donna? To be fair, everything is usually arranged in complete good faith by a promoter.

I had been asked to do a big gala fundraiser performance of *Beloved Clara*, an evening of words and music in which the piano plays a prominent role. The distinguished actors Edward Fox and Joanna David joined me for the performance, and as we walked on stage to rehearse, everyone around us remarked upon the 'exquisitely beautiful piano'. A tiny baby grand awaited me. A heart-sinking moment. The organisers had chosen it (again, in all good faith) to remain 'in keeping with the setting of a words and music evening', and it was embossed with so much ornate art that it resembled the Sistine Chapel more than a musical instrument. It would have been perfect

in a museum, or in a drawing room of a country house but it was in no way capable of being used as a recital instrument.

Lessons in coping with awkward concert situations can start young. Leon McCawley was a teenager when he encountered his first major hurdle. 'As a 17-year-old I was engaged to play Rachmaninov's Third Concerto with the London Schools Symphony Orchestra at the Barbican. On the day of the concert, the piano lift broke down, so I had to rehearse on the upright from the green room! Fortunately the lift was working for the concert and I played on the concert Steinway, but with no prior rehearsal.'

A pianist also learns quickly to cope with the backstage misunderstandings. On many occasions I've turned up to a venue where the piano is locked and the key has disappeared; there's nowhere to park; there's no dressing room; no towel in the dressing room (if there is one) and nowhere to hang your concert clothes.

Oh, and the mobile phone (the one with the tuneful Nokia ringtone) that rang in the opening piano solo of the slow movement of Beethoven's Third Concerto at the Hallé Proms. I have to tell you that the owner picked it up and answered it.

Turning up with the wrong repertoire is a situation that haunts every performing musician. It's a nightmare we've all had, but for Andreas Boyde it became a reality: 'At short notice I was scheduled to tour in the UK with the Bolshoi Orchestra playing Tchaikovsky's Second Piano Concerto. At the beginning of the rehearsal I indicated to music director Mark Ermler that I was ready for the orchestra to start. He gave me a friendly nod in return. Wonderful! We can finally begin.'

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However, he kept looking at me. Another smile from me, but he remained expectant. Why would he not conduct the tutti introduction? By now a bit impatient, Mark pointed at his music, as his English was rudimentary – so was my Russian. So I got up and checked his score: It was indeed the Second Piano Concerto – but Rachmaninov's! Every performer knows a variation of the story about the pianist prepared to perform the Beethoven's Third Concerto with the orchestra fixed to play the Fourth. An urban myth? Not for me, it was a very real nightmare. But it turned out okay and we toured with the Tchaikovsky.'

And what do you do when confronted with your greatest phobia while on stage?

My life-long (and somewhat irrational) fear of birds was twice tested to its maximum. Both were during live radio broadcasts where stopping was simply not an option. Just imagine the first scene: the Crystal Palace Bowl, a balmy summer's evening, people picnicking by the lake and Grieg's Piano Concerto wafting over the water. As I reached the cadenza, a heron flew on to the stage. Much to the amusement of the orchestra, the bird headed straight for the piano where it remained for what seemed like a lifetime. Circling around me with an arrogant nonchalance, it finally landed by my feet. Thoughts of running off stage went through my head, but the presence of the Classic FM microphone at the side of the piano somehow kept me breathing. And as if that wasn't enough, a year later, during a live BBC broadcast, I was joined on stage by a dive-bombing pigeon. It certainly diverted the audience. It also diverted me. Inexplicably, I kept going but the memory still haunts me.

A pianist's lot is certainly not always a happy one! ■

Lucy Parham's latest project of words and music, 'Nocturne – the Romantic Life of Chopin', premieres at Wigmore Hall next year. She directs the Schumann200 Festival at King's Place in 2010.

