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≡ The Oxford Handbook of
MUSIC AND DISABILITY
STUDIES

THE OXFORD HANDBOOK OF

MUSIC AND
DISABILITY
STUDIES

Edited by

BLAKE HOWE,
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and

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OXFORD
UNIVERSITY PRESS

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UNIVERSITY PRESS

Oxford University Press is a department of the University of Oxford. It furthers the University's objective of excellence in research, scholarship, and education by publishing worldwide.

Oxford New York
Auckland Cape Town Dar es Salaam Hong Kong Karachi
Kuala Lumpur Madrid Melbourne Mexico City Nairobi
New Delhi Shanghai Taipei Toronto

With offices in
Argentina Austria Brazil Chile Czech Republic France Greece
Guatemala Hungary Italy Japan Poland Portugal Singapore
South Korea Switzerland Thailand Turkey Ukraine Vietnam

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Published in the United States of America by
Oxford University Press
198 Madison Avenue, New York, NY 10016

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Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data
The Oxford handbook of music and disability studies /
edited by Blake Howe, Stephanie Jensen-Moulton, Neil Lerner, and Joseph Straus.
pages cm

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN 978-0-19-933144-4 (hardcover : alk. paper) 1. People with disabilities in music.
2. Disability studies. 3. Musicians with disabilities. I. Howe, Blake.
II. Jensen-Moulton, Stephanie. III. Lerner, Neil William, 1966- IV. Straus, Joseph Nathan.
ML3916.O96 2016
780.87—dc23
2015013132

1 3 5 7 9 8 6 4 2

Printed in the United States of America
on acid-free paper

CONTENTS

<i>Acknowledgments</i>	xi
<i>Contributors</i>	xiii
<i>About the Companion Website</i>	xix

Introduction: Disability Studies in Music, Music in Disability Studies	1
BLAKE HOWE, STEPHANIE JENSEN-MOULTON, NEIL LERNER, AND JOSEPH STRAUS	

PART 1 DISABILITY COMMUNITIES

1. Toward an Ethnographic Model of Disability in the Ethnomusicology of Autism	15
MICHAEL B. BAKAN	
2. Music, Intellectual Disability, and Human Flourishing	37
LICIA CARLSON	
3. Imagined Hearing: Music-Making in Deaf Culture	54
JEANNETTE DiBERNARDO JONES	
4. Musical Expression among Deaf and Hearing Song Signers	73
ANABEL MALER	
5. The Politics of Sound: Music and Blindness in France, 1750–1830	92
INGRID SYKES	
6. “They Say We Exchanged Our Eyes for the Xylophone”: Resisting Tropes of Disability as Spiritual Deviance in Birifor Music	112
BRIAN HOGAN	
7. Understanding Is Seeing: Music Analysis and Blindness	131
SHERSTEN JOHNSON	

PART 2 PERFORMING DISABILITY

8. Mechanized Bodies: Technology and Supplements
in Björk's Electronica 155
JENNIFER IVERSON
9. Subhuman or Superhuman? (Musical) Assistive Technology,
Performance Enhancement, and the Aesthetic/Moral Debate 176
LAURIE STRAS
10. Disabling Music Performance 191
BLAKE HOWE
11. Musical and Bodily Difference in Cirque du Soleil 210
STEPHANIE JENSEN-MOULTON
12. Punk Rock and Disability: Crippling Subculture 226
GEORGE MCKAY
13. Moving Experiences: Blindness and the Performing Self
in Imre Ungár's Chopin 246
STEFAN SUNANDAN HONISCH
14. Stevie Wonder's Tactile Keyboard Mediation, Black Key
Compositional Development, and the Quest for
Creative Autonomy 272
WILL FULTON
15. Oh, the Stories We Tell! Performer-Audience-Disability 293
MICHAEL BECKERMAN
16. The Dancing Ground: Embodied Knowledge, Disability,
and Visibility in New Orleans Second Lines 305
DANIELLA SANTORO

PART 3 RACE, GENDER, SEXUALITY

17. A Cannon-Shaped Man with an Amphibian Voice: Castrato
and Disability in Eighteenth-Century France 329
HEDY LAW
18. Sexuality, Trauma, and Dissociated Expression 345
FRED EVERETT MAUS

CHAPTER 13

MOVING EXPERIENCES

Blindness and the Performing Self in Imre Ungár's Chopin

STEFAN SUNANDAN HONISCH

INTRODUCTION:

“PORTRAIT À SON PIANO . . .”

IN the holdings of the Bibliothèque Nationale de France, there are two black and white photographs of a young man seated at a piano (see Figure 13.1). In the first image, the stark illumination of the man's face and hands establishes distance between his body and the indistinct background, pushing the darkness away from the viewer's attention, even as the polarity between the pianist's self and the wholly “other” environment paradoxically weakens the lines separating physical, bodily, and musical spaces. The keyboard on which the man's fingers rest, along with the music he makes, seems to be on the verge of dissolving. In this ambiguous representation, the visual, the kinesthetic, and the sonic dance together to an unfamiliar music of the body in the world.

In the second photograph, the relationship between the pianist and the space he inhabits has been substantially demystified. The musician and his instrument are situated in a well-lit room, a bounded space in which the movements of body and of music, contrasted by the stasis of the room, are drawn into unity by the light that floods the image. Lightness dominates, ensuring that the boundaries of physical, bodily, and musical spaces are not, as in the first photograph, transgressed under the cover of darkness.

In both images, the man himself, elegantly attired in a suit and tie (complete with pocket square), projects an air of serenity, his upper body oriented slightly toward the camera. Hovering in the regions between sound and silence, lightness and darkness, blindness and sightedness, these photographs capture a pianist in meditation—absorbed, perhaps, by an inner music, fragments of which he seizes at the piano.¹ The caption (identical for both photographs) tells us that the pianist is Imre Ungár, a



FIGURE 13.1 Photographs dated 1932, of Imre Ungár. The caption reads: "Portrait à son piano de Imre Ungár, jeune pianist hongrois de 23 ans, aveugle de naissance, gagnant sur 92 concurrents du Congrès International Chopin de Varsovie en mars 1932" ("Portrait at his piano of Imre Ungár, a young twenty-three-year-old Hungarian pianist, blind since birth, winner ahead of ninety-two competitors of the International Chopin Competition in Warsaw in March 1932"). The photographs, consecutively foliated as MON 6335 and MON 6336, are available in digitized format from the Bibliothèque Nationale de France: <http://gallica.bnf.fr/ark:/12148/btv1b9050482x>.

twenty-three-year-old Hungarian pianist, "blind since birth" and a laureate of the 1932 Frédéric Chopin International Piano Competition in Warsaw.²

This caption gestures toward the historical significance of these portraits. As visual artifacts, the images provide us with a contemporaneous glimpse of the first blind pianist to secure a major prize at a prestigious international piano competition.³ However, the photographs also point toward the larger theoretical domains of the performance of music and the performance of disability, which lie beyond the circumscribed context of music competitions and which constitute the intersecting themes for this essay. In order to understand how Imre Ungár's life and career were shaped by the simultaneous performance of music and disability (Straus 2011, 126), this essay begins with a biographical sketch that marks his position within the history of twentieth-century pianism and,



FIGURE 13.1 Continued.

more narrowly, within a subhistory of blind pianism.⁴ Having secured this anchor point, my study will turn to the question of how Ungár's playing was received and understood by fellow musicians and critics. To these two "selves" of Imre Ungár, the "historical self" and the "received self," my essay adds the "performing self" (Cumming 2000), the emergent musical subjectivity projected by Ungár through his translation of bodily movement without sight into extraordinary musical performance.⁵ This, then, is the path of inquiry that stretches ahead, a path horizoned at every turn by the performance of disability and the performance of music.

This essay contemplates what it means to perform blindness as an embodied experience of movement through physical and musical space, rather than as an expression of tragic loss, social isolation, and suffering. This shift in emphasis, from visual limitation to kinesthetic possibility, raises the question of how navigating the world without sight imprints the sensibilities of blind musicians in ways that transcend familiar discourses about their heightened aural sensitivity and that dispel anxieties concerning their reduced capacity for fluent movement (Ferguson 2007, Hollins 1936, Michalko 1998, Scott 1991). How might a blind pianist, for example, make music move in ways that remake the relationship between the performance of music and the performance of disability, between the musical space claimed by the performer and the physical space inhabited by the performer's body?⁶ The focal point for this discussion is Ungár's recording of Frédéric Chopin's Prelude in B Minor Op. 28 No. 6. Guided on the one

- expression" (80) (see also Angermüller 2001); Alfred Hollins (1865–1942), who studied with Hans von Bülow (Hollins 1936); Edward Baxter Perry (1855–1924), who counted Clara Schumann and Franz Liszt among his teachers; and Edward Isaacs (1881–1953). The history of international music competitions offers a rich terrain for studying the participation of disabled performers and in particular of blind pianists (Alink 1990). While the intense media coverage of the blind pianist Nobuyuki Tsujii's shared gold medal with the sighted pianist Haochen Zhang at the 2009 Van Cliburn International Piano Competition has, to a degree, brought the contours of this larger history into view, systematic excavation of its sociocultural, political, and aesthetic levels awaits future study (Ivry 2009; Oda 2009; Tsujii 2009; Yoshihara 2009).
5. The descriptor "extraordinary" in this context acknowledges Rosemarie Garland-Thomson (1997), who describes "extraordinary bodies" as those defined through "social relationships in which one group is legitimated by possessing valued physical characteristics and maintains its ascendancy and its self-identity by systematically imposing the role of cultural or corporeal inferiority on others" (7). In this essay, I argue that Ungár's interpretation of Chopin's Prelude in B Minor, as well as his pianism more generally, is "extraordinary" in the sense that his music-making must be understood in relation to and in opposition against the social relationships that maintain sightedness as a privileged sensory ability, relegating blind pianists to the status of disabled other. The ambiguity that intersects historical and sociocultural narratives of blindness—on the one hand valorizing blind people for their supposedly heightened powers of perception, while on the other hand reducing them to the status of social outcasts enveloped in tragedy (Sacks 2007, Straus 2011)—plays out within a larger representational system in which disability serves "as the master trope of human disqualification" (Mitchell and Snyder 2000, 3).
 6. The idea that a blind person "makes" his or her own space has been explored in the context of visual art. In their analysis of a painting by Susan Dorothea White titled "The Blind Woman of Annandale" (1998), Patrick J. Devlieger and Hubert Froyen (2006) explain that—in contrast to the artist's own projections of blindness as a negative experience that bars her subject from full participation in the world, restricting her movements "and rendering her vulnerable"—this image suggests "the dynamism with which [the painting's subject] 'makes space. . . .' Movement, positioning, and tactile pointing make the space real" (30).
 7. Isolation from the external world and an aura of spirituality are two recurring motifs in the reception of blindness throughout history, both presumed to be inevitable consequences of an inability to see the external world. As Moshe Barasch (2001) explains, "So far as our knowledge and imagination can reach back into past ages, we find that there was probably no time and no society in which the blind were not tinged with some mystery. In many cultures . . . they were believed to have some contact with other worlds, with a reality different from the one in which we regularly live and altogether beyond the reach of other human beings" (7).
 8. Rod Michalko (1998) discards the binary opposition between sightedness and blindness, arguing that "blindness is not a shadow of sight but is, like sight itself, cast in the mystery of the eye destined for the development of an imaginative relation to perception, to making and remaking something of the world and to making and remaking its place in it" (152).
 9. "Discourse," as it is used here, follows the French philosopher Michel Foucault's (1972) definition. For Foucault, discourses are "practices that systematically form the objects of which they speak." In other words, discourses do not simply name phenomena that