

Speak out! Five-and-a-half minutes with composer, pianist, teacher, and editor, Keith Porter-Snell

Keith, this column is generally reserved for composers, but you are much more than this as a pianist, composer, teacher, and editor. Which hat do you like best?

That's a difficult question. I think of myself first as a pianist, but that's because it's the genesis for everything else I do. Teaching has been an inexhaustible fascination for me since I started teaching in my mid-teens. Composing is an extension of my teaching – I compose only for students, not for the sake of composition. Editing gives me a way to immerse myself in music that I love, much of which my focal dystonia prevents me from playing as freely as I'd like. So, I don't think I have a favorite – it all works together, and I love having the balance and variety.

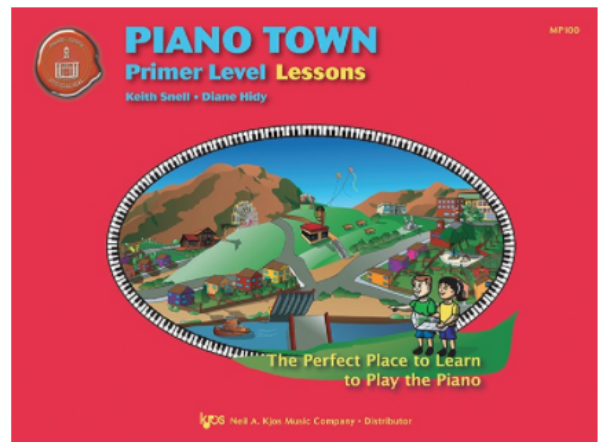
For the *Piano Town* method books on the Kjos website, you are listed first on some levels, and Diane Hidy is listed first on other levels. Can you tell me how your friendship and collaboration began and what projects you've done together over the years?

If our names appear in different orders on the Kjos website, that is unintentional – there is no meaning to it.

Diane and I have known each other for a very long. We met because we studied with the same teachers: first in the San Francisco Bay Area, with Tanya Ury, and then at the University of Southern California with John Perry. We have been best friends ever since.

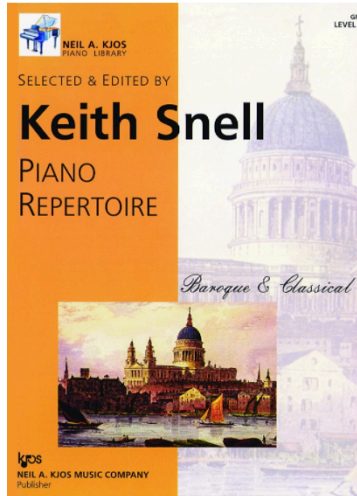
Our first collaboration was when I started my recording company, Academy Records. She was the only pianist I knew who could handle the volume of repertoire I was requesting. She also understood the concept that her performances were models for students and teachers. In other words, that she was not giving virtuoso concert performances, but realistic and appropriate interpretations. (I chuckle when people tell me that they don't let their students listen to recordings because they don't want them to imitate the performance. I think, "Yeah, what a tragedy if my students sounded like Diane.") We discovered along the way how much we loved working together. We consider ourselves incredibly fortunate to be able to have such a great friendship and be able to enjoy working together. It's a rare gift.

Besides the CDs, our other huge collaboration was writing *Piano Town*. We had a lot of joy writing this together, and we wanted to do our very best to produce a method that reflected our shared teaching values.



What was your first published book or piece?

My first book with Kjos was "Beethoven: Selected Works for Piano". However, in my first few years with Kjos, we always released three new books at a time to build the *Master Composer Library*. Along with the publication of the Beethoven was "Clementi: Six Sonatinas, Op. 36", and "Debussy: Selected Works for Piano".



How did you get started editing music and how did your relationship with Kjos begin ?

I started my company, *Academy Records*, in 1992. Our first CDs were of works readily available in many editions, such as the *Sonatinas* by Clementi, the *Two-Part Inventions* by Bach, popular works of Beethoven and Debussy, to name just a few. It then occurred to me that it might be useful to record some CDs that were edition specific. I knew that the four *Piano Literature* books edited by Jane and James Bastien were not only excellent collections of music, but also quite popular with teachers, and I wondered if it might not be a good fit to have CDs that correlated with those books. I suggested it to Jane, whom I had met in the Spring of 93, that we make CDs to go with the Bastien *Piano*

Literature books. She really liked the idea, having recently acquired all of the Academy Records CDs. Jane suggested that I call her publisher, Neil Kjos, and set up a meeting to propose the project. I flew down to San Diego, with my business partner, and we had a meeting with Neil, his son Mark, and Jane. Everyone was "onboard", and we proceeded with the project, again enlisting Diane as the recording artist. As we were finishing-up the CD for the fourth *Piano Literature* book, I had a life-altering conversation with Neil Kjos. I was at the printers, going over details of the CD liner, and needed to confirm some details with Neil before we went to press. After we sorted the liner issues, Neil proposed a project to me. He had always wanted to publish a series of books which would compete with the Alfred Masterworks editions, and have a noted editor for Kjos Publishing in the way that Alfred Publishing had Willard Palmer. So, he suggested that we put books with the CDs that Academy Records had already made, with me as editor of the books. The idea was that once we did that, if all seemed to go well, we could proceed from there, simultaneously creating new books with CDs and building a large library.

After we had made good inroads with the *Master Composer Library*, I suggested to Neil that we I would like to create a graded series of literature, from Prep through Level 10, and thus the *Piano Repertoire* series was born, followed closely by the correlated *Fundamentals of Piano Theory*, and *Scale Skills*.

Neil then suggested that I write a method. Once Diane and I finished *Piano Town*, I revisited the *Piano Repertoire* series and created the "all-in-one" version, *Essential*

Piano Repertoire. And, finally, the *Beginning Piano Repertoire*, which can be used in place of a method for a more mature student.

Throughout all of this, we continued, and continue, to add to the *Master Composer Library*.

Why did you see the need to provide new books for piano teachers?

To be honest, I never thought as much about providing for other teachers as I did for providing materials that I wanted/needed for my own students. The fact that teachers like the books and CDs is wonderful, and I'm truly grateful, and I've done my best to create useful materials for all sorts of students. But, every book or CD has been something that got its start by my thinking, "I wish I had..."

What was your early music training like?

My first teacher was my mother. She was a very fine pianist, and received her degrees at the New England Conservatory of Music. Upon moving to California, she worked intensely with Marcus Gordon, a student of Joseph and Rosina Lhévinne. So, my foundation in technique and sound production was very much in the Russian Romantic tradition. She started me when I was four, with a charming book called "Timothy's Tunes"; after that, the Leila Fletcher course (which I absolutely loved!) with some Francis Clark materials mixed in (I especially liked "Pencil Play"). My first experiences with piano literature were in *Music by the Masters*, selected and edited by Russell Lanning, and the Francis Clark *Piano Literature* books.

When I was 13, I enrolled in the Preparatory Department of the San Francisco Conservatory of Music. There I had theory and solfège classes, chorus, and piano lessons with Milton Salkind, who was at that time president of the conservatory. After a couple of years with Mr. Salkind, I transferred to Tanya Ury, which, as I mentioned before, is how I met Diane.

I spent the Summers at the Boston University Tanglewood Institute in Lenox Mass., where I studied with Maria Clodes. She had a profound effect on my playing, musicianship, and life in general, and I consider her, along with my mother and John Perry, as one of my primary teachers. She was Brazilian, but trained in Europe (Salzburg, Lisbon, and London), so gave me a good exposure to European traditions (along with a big dose of Brazilian fire), which provided an excellent balance to my Russian training background.

Of course, through all my early years, my mother's influence as a teacher and pianist was present. I would sit in the studio to do my school homework while she was teaching and absorb each and every lesson. As a result, my familiarity with student literature was unusually large by the time I graduated high school. This gave me a good foundation not only for teaching, but the type of teaching materials I would produce later on.

What did your early music career entail?

I started playing concerts professionally when I was 16, and the following ten years were devoted to building a concert career through practicing, studying, performing as often as possible, and entering competitions. Things progressed steadily and well, especially when I was 21 and won the Joanna Hodges International Piano Competition, which provided some excellent opportunities, including my debut in London. This opened doors for developing my career with increased bookings and a recording contract. However, by the time I was 25, focal dystonia was affecting my right hand to the degree that I had to stop playing.

Concurrently with my pursuits as a concert artist, I was always teaching piano as well. I began teaching piano lessons when I was 15 (supervised by my mother), and never stopped. Even when I was at USC, I always kept a half dozen or so students. I began to visualize my life being divided equally between teaching and playing. I loved both. I gravitated towards musicians who were famous as teachers as much as those who were great performers.

You currently live in Bath, England and are working on your doctorate there. Can you tell us about your left-hand project?

My doctoral project is to create an anthology that is a critical performance edition of piano music for the left hand alone, specifically music for the left hand that is less familiar or unknown. In other words, the Scriabin Nocturne, the Bach/Brahms Chaconne, and the Ravel Concerto will NOT be included. I've managed to collect hundreds of works for the left hand alone that most people don't know about—some better than others, but quite a few that are very good pieces which deserve to be heard and known. Along with the critical performance edition, I will also record all of the music.

Can you tell us when you started having trouble with your right hand?

I was about 23 when the trouble started. It was very subtle at first, but after about two years, it became quite disabling. I could and can still play a bit with my right hand, but nothing close to what I would expect for myself in a public performance. Focal dystonia is a neurological disorder, and has makes my right hand, particularly fingers 2 and 3, unstable and unreliable. Between the ages of 23-25, I kept performing, but was very careful and calculated about what music I would play—some things were easier to manage a work-around than others. I do remember having to cancel a Tchaikovsky concerto. This was very hard. When I called my mother to tell her about it, I just started bawling. But, on the flip side, I made my recording of Carnival of the Animals in London for Virgin Records during this time. It went quite well, and was a top selling

CD for many years. But, eventually, I knew that day would come when I had to stop. When I was 26, I just didn't take any new engagements, and let what I had just run out.

Have you found it possible to do collaborative work in the past few decades?

I have done collaborative work. I've played the great *Suite for Two Violins, 'Cello, and Piano Left Hand* by Erich Korngold quite a few times now. I've played the G Major Quintet by Franz Schmidt once. And, in 2014, I gave the US premiere, in San Francisco, of Stephen Hough's *Sonata for 'Cello and Piano Left Hand*. Stephen gave the world premiere in London, then I took it to the US. I've played it several times since. It's quite an effective piece, and audiences respond well to it.

You're still a performing pianist! What have you played in the last year?

Well, actually in the last year I haven't played at all. I became quite ill last April, and was rushed into emergency surgery for a splenectomy. So, I had to cancel everything for a few months. I'm fully recovered now, and ready to hit the road for the remainder of 2018. I'll be playing in Halifax (UK), Los Angeles (for the MTAC conference), Bath, and Rio de Janeiro. Just prior to being ill, I played the Ravel left hand concerto in Albuquerque, and was filmed in Baltimore for a documentary on Paul Wittgenstein.

Did anyone discourage you along the way?

That's a funny question. No, I don't think so. Well, my dad, who was not a musician nor particularly musical, felt concerned for my financial future when I was a child, and wanted me to pursue a field that was less specialized and more "profitable". But, after he came to hear me play in Europe when I was 21, he stopped moaning about that.

But really, I've only ever received encouragement, at every stage of my career and life. But I suppose I prefer to focus on what people say that is a compliment and selectively forget the negative!

What accomplishment are you most proud of?

Yikes, don't think I could pick just one.

Please tell us your process for editing, including any apps or software/hardware you use regularly.

I use Sibelius for creating scores. I always begin by getting whatever sources are available, such as autograph and first editions if possible, and every and any modern edition in print. I begin fresh by inputting the music into Sibelius so that I can create my own edition by comparing the available sources, as well as draw upon my own teaching and/or performing experience with the music.

20th and 21st century composers are more exact, detailed, and consistent in their use of expression and articulation markings, and wrong notes or misprints are somewhat rare.



What part of editing do you dislike the most?

It depends on the era of the music. The more modern the music, the fewer decisions there are for me to make. 20th and 21st century composers are more exact, detailed, and consistent in their use of expression and articulation markings, and wrong notes or misprints are somewhat rare. However, the further back we go, there tend to be fewer markings, and those that are there follow different editing and publishing conventions than what we use today. It can also be more difficult to determine between what might be a "wrong note" verses a deliberate variation – we have less information upon which to make an evaluation.

In Bach, we have almost no expression or articulation marks, and the few that are there are very generalized. In Mozart, we have enigmatic and often inconsistent articulations, and again fairly generalized expression marks. And yet, when I try to unravel Mozart and iron-out the inconsistencies, and modernize the slurs, it doesn't even look like Mozart to my eyes. Beethoven has the most inconsistencies, although he is more specific than Bach or Mozart with articulation and expression marks. Chopin's music often has many variants found between different editions published during his lifetime, making choices for a modern edition even more challenging. For me, making decisions that reflect the intent of the composer, while doing my best to make things logical, consistent, and also reflect my opinion, or provide help and suggestions, is the great challenge. I'm not creating "urtext" editions (I actually don't think there is such thing, really – even a so called "urtext" still requires the same decision-making process). Someone who buys mine, or for that matter any edited version of music, is paying for the editor's opinion. It's not a perfect or exact science, and our tools (i.e. the markings we use for expression and articulation) are limited and inexact. After all, music isn't on the page, is it? Conveying sound that exists in time on a silent page that exists outside of time is inherently challenging. But, it's what we have, and what we do to create our art, so we carry on and do our best.

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