

Heleen plays her special adapted piano

Playing music often is a severe struggle. Lots of professional musicians break down under the burden of RSI and other medical symptoms of their neck and shoulders. There are all kinds of adapted wind instruments like clarinets, baritone saxophones and trombones which make music that is ergonomical safe possible. Sometimes the shape of an instrument is radically changed. Besides 'normal transverse flutes' there are for instance transverse flutes, which look like a swan's neck. But what to do when you like to play the piano and your legs are paralysed?

'I think it is a good pleasure to you to play the piano' said Heleen's mother one day. And like many other children Heleen van Tilburg started to play the piano at the age of ten. She liked it, but there was one complication: Heleen is born with spina bifida and she can't use her legs very well.

In the beginning playing the piano was not such a big problem; the music pieces were quite simple and she did not have to use the pedals to muffle the sound. Heleen made progress, the music became more complicated and now and then she had to use the right pedal. She decided to use her left foot for the right pedal and she succeeded.

When Heleen got in her teens she was busy with many other interests and pleasures and she went to university. Her student room was too small to house a piano, so Heleen stopped playing.

She finished her study, found a job, earned money, moved to a bigger house and again the desire to have a piano reared its head. In between she became a wheelchair user, because walking became more and more difficult. She made her house suitable for her wheelchair, and bought a new piano and again she started with piano lessons.

This time she was no longer content playing simple music without using the pedals, she needed a challenge. The question was how to play Beethoven or Chopin sitting in a wheelchair, without using the pedals?

For many technical problems there are solutions she knew and she decided to find one. Ok, she could change her piano for an electrical one, but that was not what she wanted. Her first step was a visit to a rehabilitation centre, which had a room for music therapy. In the centre she found a special adapted piano. Instead of using one's feet for the pedals one could use a special electric switch at one's arms. And there was another mechanical solution: using a special pedal with one's breastbone instead of one's feet. 'It looked like a torture instrument' Heleen says. 'But playing is for fun and not to have a feeling of torture.' Her second step was to have a look at the Internet. She discovered Michiel van Loon's website, www.pianoman.nl Van Loon is not only a piano tuner, he also manufactures special adaptations for pianists with RSI and other medical problems and he has connections with an international network of piano technicians. When she met him the ball started rolling.

Van Loon looked at her possibilities, impossibilities and wishes and selected what was the best Pedal Adapter for her. In the long run he created a special system concentrated at Heleen's situation. The system consists of a solenoid (a linear electromotor inside the piano), an operating system, a power supply and a special pedal stick. Besides those special elements inside the piano there is another special instrument, a minuscule switch. Heleen wears glasses. When she starts playing she puts a special designed hair slide on one side of her glasses. Inside of that hair slide

Van Loon has assembled a minuscule electric switch with a mercury ball. This minuscule switch stimulates different special magnets in the elements inside the piano to do their pedal work.

As from now Heleen moves her head instead of her legs when she uses the pedals.

The adaptation at first sight looks intricate, but some details of the adaptation are really funny and simple. For instance the hair slide: a simple solution that she bought at the chemist at the corner of the street. The minuscule switch comes from an ordinary shop, which sells construction materials.

If you are interested just have a look a www.pianoman.nl. At the Dutch site you can see photos of the special elements van Loon used for the adaptation. Besides that you can see Heleen playing her piano. If you want information you can send a mail to Michiel van Loon.

The adaptation costs about Euro 1100. In Holland social security only pays when you are a professional musician.

And what about Heleen? She plays the piano by fits and starts, especially classical easy pieces. The pedals no longer are restrictions; she can play what she wants. At this moment her favourite number is Spinning Song by Elmenreich. Sometimes she plays quatre mains with a friend. Playing quatre mains really is great fun.

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