

Sunday 12 April 2026 / 3pm

Piano Greats: Nicholas McCarthy

When war broke out in August 1914, the 27-year old Paul Wittgenstein abandoned his career as a concert pianist and enlisted in the Austro-Hungarian army. Less than three weeks later, he was in a Russian prison camp with a shattered right arm. And that, in a nutshell, is how Paul Wittgenstein became a one-armed pianist. For two decades after the war he approached the world's greatest living composers and challenged them to meet his demands.

But the idea of writing piano music for a single hand was not entirely new. The 22-year-old Scriabin had suffered a (non-permanent) injury to his own right hand (he'd been practising too hard) when he wrote his *Nocturne* Op. 9 in 1894. And Wittgenstein made his own arrangements too: his own transcription of Liszt's stupendous 1867 arrangement of Wagner's *Liebeshod* is the sort of piece that would be in the recital repertoire of any 20th century virtuoso. Richard Strauss's *Morgen* is a rather more gentle love-song. Written in May 1894 as a wedding-gift to his wife Pauline, its melody resembles a delicate, slowly opening flower. Meanwhile, the deeply romantic Sonata by hugely prolific German composer Carl Reinecke dates from 1884 and is in the full four classical movements – including an atmospheric *Andante* based on the Hungarian folksong *Ne menj rózsám a tarlóra*.

Art never stands still, and Nicholas McCarthy has himself commissioned and championed new music for the left hand. *Galilean Moons* was composed for him in 2019 by the British composer Julie Cooper – who describes it (in her own words) as:

...a piano soundscape inspired by Nicholas, and also by the 50th Anniversary in July 2019 of Neil Armstrong walking on the moon. Fascinated by all things astronomical, I came across the beautiful four largest moons discovered in early 1610 by Galilei Galileo orbiting Jupiter...

As ever, the music tells the rest of the story, just as the galloping supernatural drama of Schubert's song *Erlkönig* speaks powerfully in Liszt's transcription from 1838 (adapted for one hand by Liszt's friend and compatriot Count Géza Zichy, who lost an arm while hunting). But Brahms's transcription of the mighty *Chaconne* from Bach's D minor Partita for unaccompanied violin is even more imposing. "On one stave, for a small instrument, [Bach] writes a whole world of the deepest thoughts and most powerful feelings" wrote Brahms to his lifelong friend (and fellow-pianist) Clara Schumann. He created it as a gift for her in March 1852 after she had a cut finger on her right hand. By restricting himself to the left hand, Brahms emulates Bach's self-discipline in writing for the four strings of the violin.

And finally, a flourish. By early 1903 the student Béla Bartók was already a superb pianist, and as a "thank you" to his teacher István Thoman he composed a sweeping, grandly romantic piano piece for the left hand alone. Bartók had both hands but (as he told his mother), he wanted to show that even with one, he could make it sound "as if I was playing with three hands". Later that spring he played it to a sell-out crowd in his home town of Nagyszentmiklós. A delegation of girls from the audience presented the young star with a laurel wreath, tied with red ribbons.

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Nicholas McCarthy

One of the world's most inspirational pianists, Nicholas McCarthy was born in 1989 without his right hand and has gone on to achieve international acclaim through extraordinary talent, determination, and a pioneering spirit. Overcoming widespread discouragement in his early years, Nicholas defied expectations to pursue his passion for the piano, culminating in his graduation from the Royal College of Music, London in July 2012—making history as the first one-handed pianist to graduate in the institution's 130-year history.

In recognition of his remarkable achievements, he was awarded Honorary Membership of the Royal College of Music in 2018 by its then President, HRH The Prince of Wales (now HM King Charles III), who remains the College's Patron.

As one of the few professional classical artists with a disability, Nicholas is a passionate advocate for the rich and often overlooked left-hand alone repertoire - a body of work that emerged in the 19th century and expanded significantly following the First World War, when many injured soldiers continued their musical careers through left-hand compositions.

A defining moment in Nicholas's career came with his performance at the Closing Ceremony of the London 2012 Paralympic Games, where he appeared with the British Paraorchestra and Coldplay, playing live to a global audience of over 500 million.

Since then, he has performed extensively worldwide, both in recital and with major orchestras, in many of the world's leading concert halls. His debut at Queen Elizabeth Hall drew acclaim from *The Sunday Times*, which wrote: "So dazzling with one hand, he doesn't need another."

In 2023, he returned to the Belfast International Arts Festival, performing Ravel's *Piano Concerto for the Left Hand* and Britten's *Diversions* with the Ulster Orchestra—the first time since Paul Wittgenstein (the original commissioner of both works) performed them together in 1951. The concert was later broadcast on BBC Radio 3's Afternoon Concert.

Outside the concert stage, Nicholas is a sought-after motivational speaker, regularly delivering keynote talks for leading global organisations and institutions. He has presented three TEDx talks and hosted numerous programmes for BBC Radio 3 and BBC Four, including presenting the BBC Proms and The Leeds International Piano Competition for BBC4 television. His most recent radio project, "Zichy, Wittgenstein & Me", explored the history of left-hand piano repertoire and aired to critical praise.

In collaboration with the Associated Board of the Royal Schools of Music (ABRSM), Nicholas launched the world's first graded syllabus for one-handed pianists in August 2024, covering Initial Grade to Grade 5—a groundbreaking resource that didn't exist when he began his own piano journey.

The 2024/25 season included debuts with the Royal Philharmonic Orchestra, Bournemouth Symphony Orchestra, London Symphony Orchestra, and a recital debut at the Wiener Konzerthaus. In July, Nicholas gave his BBC Proms debut at the Royal Albert Hall, performing Ravel's Left Hand Concerto with the Bournemouth Symphony Orchestra and Mark Wigglesworth—only the second time in Proms history that this piece has been performed by a one-handed pianist, following Paul Wittgenstein in 1951.

"A debut from a phenomenal one-handed pianist... its mercurial bursts of finger leaping and treble twinkling still require a one-handed pianist with phenomenal agility and control. McCarthy easily provided both... it was McCarthy's lovely encore... that best displayed the fluidity and delicacy that seemed to be effortlessly at his command."

— *The Times*

Looking ahead, Nicholas will perform with the Melbourne Symphony Orchestra this autumn, and will make his South Korean concerto debut in December. In 2026 he will make his recital debuts at the Berlin Konzerthaus and The Glasshouse as well as concerto debuts with the BBC National Orchestra of Wales, Aurora Orchestra and the Slovak State Philharmonic.