

# Music to My Ears



Nancy M. Williams, nonfiction writer, speaker, classical pianist and hearing health advocate, earned a bachelor's degree from Stanford University in Economics and an M.B.A. from Harvard Business School. She worked for a number of years in marketing for telecom and mobile phone companies.

Her days now are spent on non-fiction writing and the piano. In 2009, despite a significant hearing loss, she became a performing member of the New York Piano Society and has performed in three of the Society's concerts in New Jersey and New York City. Her repertoire includes Chopin, Schumann, Beethoven and Debussy. In 2012, she debuted in recital at Carnegie Hall.

Throughout her adulthood, her hearing loss slowly worsened and she now has a bilateral moderate hearing loss, sloping to severe in the high frequencies. She wears two digital hearing aids. Nancy is currently penning her memoir about her return to the piano in 2005 as an adult after a 25-year hiatus.

Nancy is the recipient of the 2009 Lamar York Nonfiction Prize. She is the founding editor of *Grand Piano Passion*, an online magazine for all pianists, lovers of classical piano music, musicians with hearing loss, and seekers of their passion. Pianists from ages 16 and up, from beginners to performers, come from all over the world to make up this community of musicians with hearing loss.

Nancy serves on the Hearing Health Foundation's board. She has participated in the Hearing Loss Association of America New York City Walk4Hearing. She lives with her husband and two teen-aged children in Montclair, New Jersey.

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By Barbara Chertok

*HLAA Member Barbara Chertok interviewed Nancy Williams, an HLAA member who despite a hearing loss, is an accomplished pianist and much more. Discover what inspired Nancy to reclaim her passions.*

### **What caused your hearing loss and when did it begin?**

Although I wasn't diagnosed by an audiologist until age six, my parents suspect that I was essentially born with a hearing loss. My loss is genetic, as a result of a mutation in the Connexin 26 gene. For much of my childhood, my hearing loss was confined to the high frequencies, and my hearing in the low-to-mid frequencies was normal. In seventh grade, I was fitted with my first hearing aid, a behind-the-ear model, bulky by today's standards.

### **In an article you wrote, you revealed you not only denied your hearing loss to others but even to yourself. Now, you tell people about your hearing loss. What brought on the change?**

I have to credit reclaiming the piano for helping me to be open about my hearing loss. Returning to the piano shortly after my 40th birthday spurred my desire to write about the intimate relationship between music and hearing, sound and silence. I wrote an article for my online magazine, *Grand Piano Passion*, about how wearing hearing aids figured into my piano recital.

After reading that piece, a friend asked me to attend, as a member of the press, a reception by the Hearing Health Foundation (HHF), a New York-based nonprofit funding research for a cure for hearing loss. At the reception, I was elated by the prospect of a cure. For the first time in my life, I was in the company of a large group of people with hearing loss.

### **Every time someone with hearing loss unveils their condition and asks for what they need, we as a community take another step toward loosening the stigma. »**

Shortly thereafter, I joined the HHF Board. Becoming an active member of the hearing loss community solidified my commitment to write openly about my hearing loss, yet the catalyst was my love for playing the piano.

### **If people question how you can perform on the piano or interpret what the composer has written when you have a significant hearing loss, how do you respond?**

I am fortunate in that no one has directly questioned my ability to play, although occasionally I have worried that people might be voicing those objections to themselves. I think the best way for me to respond to the potential objections is to simply play, demonstrating to people my love of the piano.

The Association of Adult Musicians with Hearing Loss, founded by Wendy Cheng, a violist with cochlear implants in both ears, has a similar strategy. Their recent CD, *Hear This!*, is an inspiring example of musicians with hearing loss putting forth their music.

### **You claim to have a 'listening profit' when it comes to your piano playing. Would you explain that for us?**

I coined the term 'listening profit' as a counterpoint to the much more familiar term 'hearing loss.' The act of listening is quite different from the act of hearing. Lindsey Dryden, a gifted filmmaker who is deaf in one ear and created the movie *Lost and Sound*, remarked in a *Grand Piano Passion*

interview that she often wondered whether she was good on the piano as a child precisely because she was partially deaf.

I believe that people with hearing loss listen more keenly and more consciously than musicians without hearing loss. I have found that striving to overcome the disability of not hearing is part of what aids my musicality.

### **Do you have tinnitus [ringing in the ears] and does it interfere with your piano playing?**

My tinnitus is very mild. I am not sure whether that is because I have worn hearing aids for most of my life and using amplification can help mitigate the symptoms of tinnitus (the Hearing Health Foundation, where I serve on the board, has a great treatment of this topic), or whether I have just been lucky. Occasionally I hear a rapping sound in my left ear, but my mild tinnitus does not interfere with my playing.

### **You have written about the stigma against hearing loss being real. What do you feel it will take to eradicate this stigma?**

I think the most important ingredient in eradicating the stigma against hearing loss is for people who are functional in society but nonetheless suffer from hearing loss to be more candid about their condition. That is easier said than done, because our society stereotypes people with hearing loss as slow, out of touch, thickheaded, and unlikely to accomplish much.

I know people who work in worlds ranging from music to finance who are unwilling to be candid about their hearing loss for this exact reason. So it's up to each person to decide how much candor they can risk. Every time someone with hearing loss unveils their condition and asks for what they need, we as a community take another step toward loosening the stigma. I believe we will be greatly helped by our

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current generation of children, who sport cochlear implant bling and other hearing aid fashions.

### **Do you feel a special kinship with Beethoven because of your mutual hearing loss? Do you hear the music within as he did?**

I hesitate to answer this question in which Beethoven and I appear in the same sentence. However, he is one of my favorite composers, and the second movement of his *Fifth Piano Concerto* is about as close to heaven as I am able to get. I have always felt a tremendous empathy for the anguish he must have experienced as he lost both his hearing and the society of those close to him.

It fascinates me that we can in a sense hear music in our brain, and that is in essence how Beethoven managed to compose while he was deaf. I am able to hear within my mind the piano music that I study closely. In the years since my hearing loss was first diagnosed, my audiogram has been slowly worsening, such that my hearing loss is now moderate in both ears, sloping

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to severe in the high frequencies. I've tried to consciously develop the skill of hearing within, with the thought that if someday I am unable to hear at all, I still will be able to hear my music.

### **You founded *Grand Piano Passion*, an online magazine. What is its mission and purpose?**

*Grand Piano Passion* celebrates all who make music despite a hearing loss, no matter their instrument, level, or age. We profile both amateur and professional musicians who have a hearing loss, and we also cover the best books and articles in this field. One of my favorite series is Hearing Health Affirmations, articles that showcase

the positive affirmations of musicians with hearing loss. Also not to be missed is a series called Practice Listening by Jay Alan Zimmerman, a deaf composer who has been called 'Broadway's Beethoven.'

### **Do you use any assistive listening devices when you listen to music?**

I purchased the Phonak ComPilot, which I use while using my iPhone—the ComPilot pipes sound directly from my iPhone into my hearing aid—as well as for listening to classical piano music on my computer. Listening to music is a big part of my job as the founding editor of *Grand Piano Passion*, so the ComPilot has been very useful for me when I review albums for my online magazine.

### **You refer to yourself as an 'amateur' pianist, yet you have performed at Carnegie Hall. Why is that?**

In 2012, I took a master class on performance and our final recital was held at Carnegie Hall. Short of my wedding day and the birth of my two children, this was the best day of my life. I got a wonderful taste of the life of a concert pianist.

Although I am not a concert pianist in the strict sense of the term, performing [on] the piano is increasingly occupying a larger part of my professional life. I speak on finding your passion, and often my speaking engagements include performing a select repertoire on the piano. By sharing my music, I am able to demonstrate both via sound and emotion just how powerful a passion can be. I presented my workshop "Finding Your Calling... Despite a Hearing Loss" at the HLAA Convention 2014 in Austin this summer.

### **Do you ever choose to learn a piece of music because it falls within the range of the hearing you have in the lower frequencies and not in the higher**



At Convention 2014 in Austin, TX, Nancy Williams presented her workshop, "Finding Your Calling... Despite a Hearing Loss."

## **frequencies where your hearing loss is more significant?**

The frequency range of a piece of classical piano music is most definitely a consideration for me. For example, the wonderful fioritura, or series of grace notes, which concludes Chopin's *Nocturne in E-Flat Major* begins on the second highest C on the piano keyboard, a region where even with my hearing aids I hear mostly the little plunk of the key hitting the key bed. I play these notes mostly by touch. When I studied Debussy's *Clair de Lune*, a shimmering meditation on nighttime that is beloved by many pianists, I chose not to perfect the music, one reason being the concentration of notes in the upper end of the keyboard.

## **You returned to the piano after a 25-year hiatus. How much of your former repertoire were you able to retain?**

When I first returned to the piano, the only note I could remember was middle C, that note on its own line, between the two staves. I had to count all other notes from middle C. I had forgotten the notes, along with all the repertoire I had studied and performed as a teenager, as a defensive mechanism of sorts against reclaiming the piano. I think many adults carry a passion deep within, and excavating it can take a lot of commitment. I'm happy to say that now I have relearned Debussy's *Reverie*, a piece I first performed in recital when I was 13, and now is one of my favorite pieces in my repertoire.

## **When you play the piano, whether for your teacher or in a concert, does it worry you that you might miss hearing a wrong note because of your hearing loss?**

This is an interesting question because it gets at the distinction between hearing and listening. As a pianist, even if I physically hear myself play a wrong note, unless I am listening attentively to the music, the wrong note could

escape my notice. So I think the bigger challenge is to truly listen to the music, both its melody and accompanying harmony.

## **What would you tell a budding pianist with hearing loss embarking on a career in music?**

There are inspiring examples of pianists with hearing loss, such as Kori Linae Carothers, Jennifer Castellano, and Ricker Choi (whom we have featured in *Grand Piano Passion*).

For people with hearing loss who have a passion for the piano, or any instrument for that matter, I wholeheartedly encourage them to pursue their callings. Passions help all of us to develop the whole person. Many adults find that when they activate long dormant callings, they realign other parts of their life, strengthening their professions, forming new friendships, and even growing closer to their families and the people they love most deeply. **HLM**

*Barbara Liss Chertok lost her hearing suddenly in 1957 at age 21 from what was diagnosed 35 years later as*



*Cogan's syndrome, an autoimmune disorder. She hears with bilateral cochlear implants. She joined SHHH/HLAA in 1979 and is an active member of the*

*HLAA Sarasota Chapter. A former lipreading/speechreading teacher, she is a freelance writer/interviewer for Hearing Loss Magazine. She serves on the National Advisory Board of the American Hearing Research Foundation. Barbara can be reached at [barbchert@gmail.com](mailto:barbchert@gmail.com).*

When we asked our readers last fall for their workplace experiences to use in the January/February *Hearing Loss Magazine* on employment issues, Nancy Williams was one of the first to respond. This letter led to other things—her presentation at the HLAA Convention 2014 and this *Hearing Loss Magazine* interview with Barbara Chertok. See page 14 to read what Nancy wrote about her workplace experience.

### **Nancy Williams on the Web**

[www.grandpianopassion.com](http://www.grandpianopassion.com)  
[www.Facebook.com/NancyWilliamsPiano](https://www.facebook.com/NancyWilliamsPiano)  
[www.Twitter.com/NWilliamsPiano](https://www.twitter.com/NWilliamsPiano)  
[www.youtube.com/nancywilliamsplano](https://www.youtube.com/nancywilliamsplano)

### **Relevant Links**

**Association of Adult Musicians with Hearing Loss**

[aamhl.org](http://aamhl.org)

**Hearing Health Foundation**

[hearinghealthfoundation.org](http://hearinghealthfoundation.org)

**Interview with Amateur Pianist Ricker Choi**

<http://bit.ly/GrandPianoPassion-Choi>

**Hearing Aids at My Piano Recital by Nancy Williams**

<http://bit.ly/PianoRecital-Williams>

**A Different Way of Listening—Lindsey Dryden on Hearing Loss, Her Music and Her Documentary**

<http://bit.ly/LindseyDryden-HearingLoss>



By Nancy M. Williams

## A Listening Profit

**M**y first career was in management consulting and high-tech marketing, and for the 20 years that I was in that line of work, I spent a lot of time and energy trying to hide my hearing loss. I faked my way through some meetings, pretending to hear people speaking at the other end of the conference table, when in reality their words were unintelligible. I wore my hair long, over my ears, to hide my hearing aids. I cringed whenever my aids squeaked with feedback, fearing someone might guess my secret.

Sometimes my policy of hiding my loss required an actual sleight of hand. Once when I was interviewing for a new job, while I was waiting outside the hiring executive's office, the battery in my right hearing aid went dead. Without missing a beat, I deftly pulled a fresh battery out of the pack, inserted it into the aid, and fitted the aid back into my ear just before the executive walked out of his office to greet me.

For years I used to crow about that battery story to close friends and family, as though I were a female James Bond who had narrowly escaped detection. Looking back now, I see in that story something that was sad. Those years when I denied my loss, to others and even to myself, I was in a sense splitting off a part of myself.

Now I am in my second career, as a writer, a speaker, and a performing amateur pianist. My hearing loss does not define me but it is a fundamental part of my identity. When I'm in a situation where I can't hear, I generally tell people about my hearing loss. Often times the accommodations I need are easily achieved—a questioner removing his hand away from the lips, my moving up to the front of the room during a presentation or closer to the speakerphone during a conference call.

Still, it has only been about three years since I've gone public, if you will, and often admitting my hearing loss to people is difficult. Some react to my news with a barely concealed horror, as though I've just reported that my house was engulfed by a tsunami (especially horrifying since I live inland in New Jersey). Other times the difficulty comes from within—I worry people will question how I can perform the piano if I hear, not their rich analog world of sound, but rather digital sound piped through my aids. I worry they will question how I can interpret classical piano music if the top two octaves on the piano sound different to me than they do to people with normal hearing.

But the fact is that although I have a hearing loss, I have a “listening profit.” Like many people with a hearing loss, I listen more keenly, more attentively, even passionately. My piano teachers report that my strength as a pianist is my musicality, my ability to hear the music within and to transmit that internal song into sound by way of piano keys. I like to think that every time someone is moved by my playing, I chip away a tiny part of society's stigma against hearing loss.

The stigma against hearing loss is real, but so too is our need to hear. We need to speak up, in one on one conversations with co-workers, explaining our situation and specifically what we need. Looking back on my 20-year business career, I wish that I had informed my boss and my co-workers about that undeniable part of my identity. I might have found work less stressful and experienced more peace within. **HLM**

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