

A slam dunk



I can't dunk a basketball.

Let's be honest—I can't even get close to the rim of a regulation height (ten foot) hoop. I'm not much of a basketball player to begin with, so this doesn't bother me too much, but it sure would be fun to be able to “throw one down”

like a professional.

I may be rationalizing here, but I'm pretty sure that no matter how much I practiced, worked out, did exercises, and tried to improve, I would never be able to dunk a basketball. I don't have the body type for it (translation: I'm not very tall). I could certainly work to improve my vertical jump, which might currently clear a modest phone book, but even a tripling of my current jump would leave me a long way from executing a respectable monster jam.

In high school, I often played pickup basketball with some friends, none of whom could dunk either. Our small town wasn't exactly a breeding ground for future NBAers. We did have fun, however, when we went to the elementary school gym and played using their eight-foot baskets. We could dunk, and it made us feel like “real” basketball players!

I don't worry too much about my lack of dunking prowess, and I don't take it personally. I don't have the natural height or athleticism of a LeBron James, but I do have other, non-basketball related talents. I can play the piano (not as well as I would like, but practice will help), and I love teaching others how to enjoy making music on this wonderful instrument.

I may not be tall, but I can reach a tenth. Comfortably. I've never had to roll the opening of the Gershwin Second Prelude, and I've never done anything special to achieve this span. No extra stretching exercises, workouts, or mechanical aids. I'm fortunate enough to have a hand that naturally covers a large span.

As you'll read in this issue's feature article, much of the piano playing population cannot reach tenths, ninths, or in some cases even octaves comfortably. On modern instruments this can cause real struggle, frustration, and injury. And just like my dunking abilities, there is nothing these pianists can do to

“increase” their hand span. Misguided attempts to circumvent mother nature and stretch a hand beyond its normal capacities are not going to end well.

As a teacher, even one who can reach a tenth, it is important for me to remember what it feels like for students who have smaller hands. It is important for me to do everything I can to help all of my students play with natural comfort and ease, and I should take care to avoid putting undue stress on their playing mechanisms. It is my job to help students improve the things they *can* change with practice, and I need to be sure that I don't (perhaps unknowingly) try to send the message that a smaller hand is a deficiency or fault of a student. I can't make a student with a smaller hand reach farther any more than I can make myself dunk a basketball.

You might think that my dunking analogy isn't quite fair—not an apples-to-apples comparison to playing the piano. And you might be right. Basketball is a sport, predicated on athletic ability that naturally relates to body type. I don't think piano playing is a sport, and I don't think it should have anything to do with body type. I make the comparison, however, to remind us that not every *body* can do everything, and it isn't always as simple as more work or more practice.

I'm excited about the opportunities that smaller-sized keyboards present for our profession and for the musical world. I'm excited about the opportunities these keyboard create to help pianists play comfortably and avoid injury. I'm excited about the practice applications and the fact that these keyboards can help pianists direct more focus to tone and artistry.

Everyone should have the opportunity to play the piano, and everyone should be able to play it beautifully and artistically. The only thing that matters is the quality of the sound that is produced. Pianists are constantly re-fingering passages and redistributing notes between hands to improve the sounds they create. If this is OK, then why not resize the keys to help pianists with smaller hands? If this results in more beautiful piano playing in the world, then I am all for it. ▲