PERFECT TOUCH

Many visually impaired musicians learn by ear, but what about those who want to study the original score? Learning music through Braille is a painstaking but rewarding process, finds *Femke Colborne*

THE USE OF BRAILLE IS IN decline. In the 1950s, around half of all blind schoolchildren in the US were able to use the system; today, that figure is around one in ten. With the rise of text-to-speech technologies, an increasing number of visually impaired people are opting to learn by listening, rather than deciphering rows of dots. Blind and partially sighted musicians also have all manner of technology at their fingertips to help them access and create music. With all these new developments, is there still a place for Braille in the music world?

The answer is yes, according to blind French pianist Bernard D'Ascoli. D'Ascoli, 56, studied in Marseille with Pierre Barbizet and has won awards including third prize in the Leeds International Piano Competition. 'Today, it is more tempting than ever for people to learn by ear,' he says. 'But a fantastic ear can be your worst enemy, because you don't make an effort to read the original text. There is even more danger of that today, with all the recording options we have available. Learning by ear can be fine for jazz or light music, but for professional classical work, you can't escape the need for knowledge of what the text says. If you learn by listening to others play, you are interpreting an interpretation.'

BRAILLE WAS INVENTED IN 1824 by Frenchman Louis Braille, who went blind following a childhood accident. He initially created the system, which uses a series of 'raised dots', to represent the French alphabet. Each character is made from up to six dots, positioned in two columns of three. A blind person can read by passing their fingers over the characters, which represent the letters of the alphabet and punctuation marks. Braille, who was a keen musician himself and played the organ and the cello, later went on to adapt his system so that it could be used to represent sheet music.

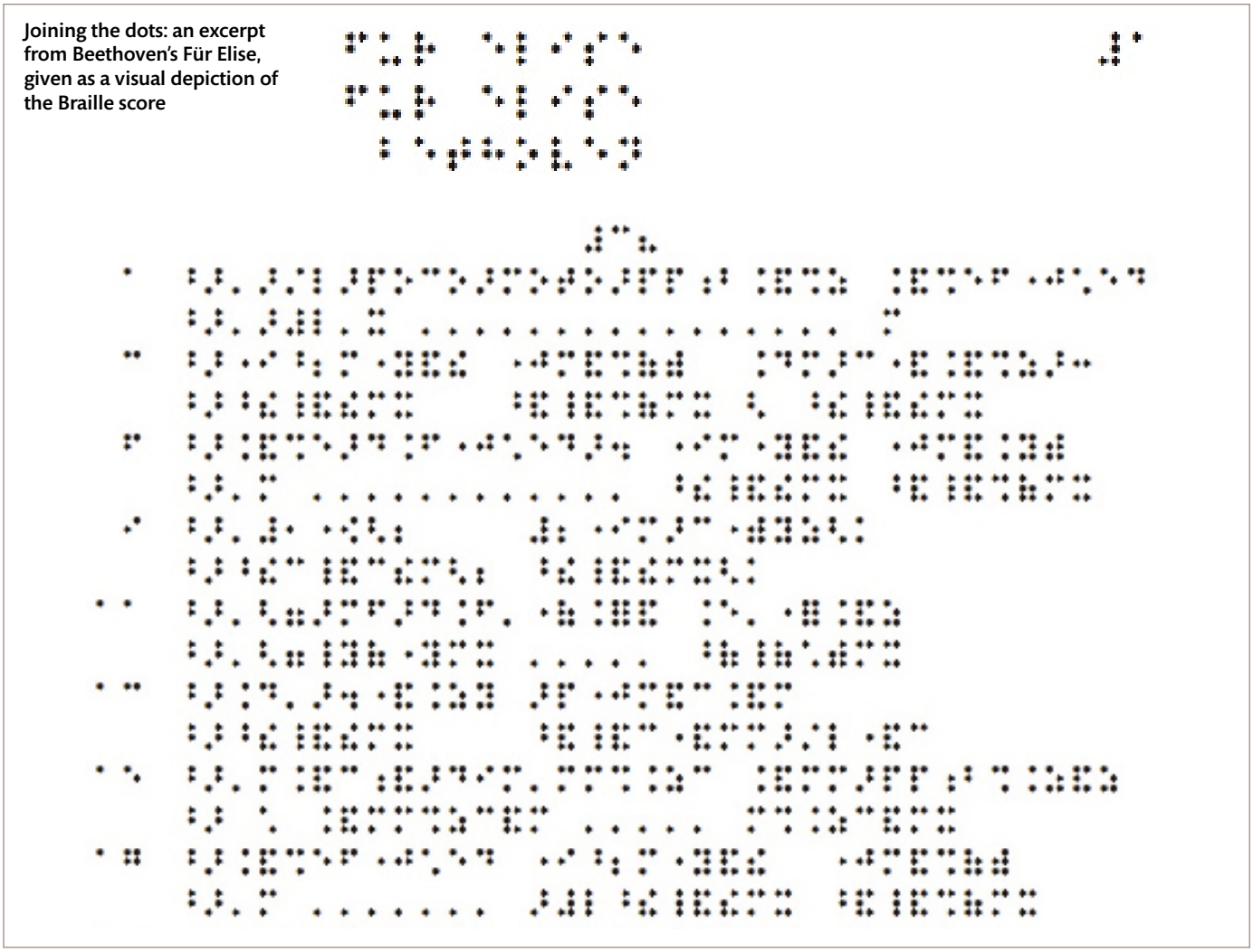
Braille music uses 64 possible dot combinations to represent not only notes but also dynamic markings, key signatures, articulation marks and any other instructions in the score. As a result, each dot combination can mean several different things depending on the context it appears in. For example, the dot combination for an E natural is the same as the dot combination for 'forte'. To make matters even more complicated, musical notes have different dot combinations from their corresponding letters in the English language.

The information is given in a linear format, so a blind pianist must learn the pitch, fingering, dynamic and any articulation markings on each note before moving on to the next. As a result, learning music through Braille is a painstaking process that requires tremendous patience. Pianists have an advantage over other musicians because they can learn the left and right hand parts separately, reading with one hand and playing with the other; but it can still take several weeks to learn a full score. With this in mind, it's not surprising that many musicians are eschewing Braille in favour of faster and more instantly satisfying methods of learning. Nobuyuki Tsujii, the 25-year-old blind Japanese pianist with a growing army of fans across the globe, is one notable example – he's never made a secret of the fact that he learns by ear.

KEVIN KERN, THE 55-YEAR-OLD American pianist, composer and recording artist of new-age music, can read literary Braille but has never used music Braille. 'As a boy, when I was studying classical piano, I would go to my lessons and my teacher would speak into a tape recorder, play the notes and speak the fingerings,' he says. 'My ears were very fast and I found the Braille system byzantine. It is intensely context-sensitive and there is a lot of doubling up. I tried but it was no good and I don't see how it could ever be efficient.'

D'Ascoli admits that Braille has its limitations. 'You can never have a global view of the score,' he explains. 'I often say it's like listening to a novel being read out loud, but having each word spelled rather than read out. It's harder to make sense of and harder to get pleasure from. It is slow to read and you can't read at the speed you will perform at.

'You can't isolate any particular element, such as the dynamics, because everything is mixed up. That has consequences for the way you conceive the score because all the markings are given the same importance



Joining the dots: an excerpt from Beethoven's Für Elise, given as a visual depiction of the Braille score

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as the notes. When sighted people read a score, they often learn the notes first and then come back to the other markings later. When you are reading Braille, there is no way you can overlook the markings. Psychologically, that makes a difference, because all the elements are on an equal footing.'

But D'Ascoli believes this can be an advantage as well as a disadvantage. 'My wife is a sighted pianist and it's interesting to compare our learning styles,' he says. 'I have to learn the music in depth immediately, in a logical way. I need to know it before I play it, not the other way around. I learn in a logical way, relying on my tactile and analytical memory. That pushes you to understand the inner logic of the music, and in that way maybe you come closer to what the composer actually experienced when he was writing the music.'

Other musicians who use Braille agree that despite its limitations, the system still has an important place in music. Blind Italian pianist Antonio Quatraro, 68, studied at the Rome Conservatoire and has had a long career as a performer and teacher. He says: 'You need a lot of patience, but all good work requires patience. These days we want everything quickly and all at once, but the short way is not always the best. If you want to learn English, you can learn it by ear, but what are you going to do if you want to write?

'We can't see the future, of course, but I don't think there will ever be a better way, unless we are able to send data directly to the brain. And even if there was a new way, there would still be a place for Braille. The pen and paper are still very much alive despite the rise of email and SMS messaging. Shortcuts are not always the most productive way.' ♪

Several computer programs have emerged to help blind musicians access and create Braille music. In Europe, the Braille Music Editor and Braille Music Reader enable musicians to convert digital scores into Braille. The results can be read using an electronic Braille reading device, which can be plugged into a USB port.

In the US, Dancing Dots was founded in 1982 by American musician and computer programmer Bill McCann. Its products include the Goodfeel Braille music translator, the Lime Aloud editing suite and Cake Talking for Sonar (too complicated to explain here, but see www.dancingdots.com for more details). Crucially, this technology enables musicians to both hear the notes, listen to the markings read out loud and feel the Braille at the same time.

Not all blind musicians can afford to buy their own software – but a growing network of not-for-profit projects, such as the Braille Sheet Music project (www.braillesheetmusic.com), are emerging to help make this software available to as many musicians as possible. Musicians can send sheet music to the project, where it is converted using the software and edited by volunteers.