[Snap Judgment]

[upbeat music]

**Glynn:** If you're like me, at some point over the past few months, when everyone on the big screen was wearing tights and a cape, you said to yourself, self, "You know what? Enough watching these superhero movies. It's time to make your own superhero." You figure you write something up, send it off the Marvel. Then a couple of days later, collect that big check, right? But when you actually sit down, you realize, it's harder than it seems to create a new hero. Super speed, super strength, it's all been done. You need a new twist. Your champion's got to be able to wreck shop in sexy and spectacular ways. And just when you figure out the perfect power and you're just about to hit send, [gasps] oh, no. You forgot the most important thing. Every hero needs a weakness. Superman has his kryptonite, the Hulk doesn't like magic, Aquaman's no help on dry land. But it's more than that. See, a good hero needs some darkness. Needs to have the one they couldn't say with all that power. Needs to have the thing that no matter how much they want it, no matter how hard they try, they still can't have.

That's why today on Snap Judgment, we proudly present the Repertoire. Amazing storytelling about that which is just out of reach. But know this, nothing's out of reach for you. Why? Because you're listening to Snap Judgment.

[upbeat music]

Now, we all remember that first time hearing a piece of music that changed everything. For today's story, we're going across the pond where for teenager, Nicholas McCarthy, it was just another day. Until something catches Nicholas's ear, something that he's never heard before. Snap Judgment.

**Nicholas:** I was in my school assembly at the age of 14 when my friend, who was a very accomplished pianist, she was playing a piece of Beethoven, which I'd never heard. It was Beethoven's Waldstein sonata.

[Waldstein sonata playing]

The moment I heard this, I was really just transfixed and probably the first time in my life that I'd sat up and really was wowed by something.

[Waldstein sonata playing]

I was really blown away by everything about the piano, even as an instrument, how it looks, the big, black, shiny piano with the white keys and the technicalities of it, the ability to make the piano almost sound like an orchestra.

[Waldstein sonata playing]

There's such huge soundscape that you can get out of this one instrument. It was just that moment, really, that definitely was the catalyst that would obviously change my life. The first thing I did was I went home and I told my mum and dad about this moment. And then, I said to my mom and dad, I want to be a concert pianist. Of course, my mom and dad were, "Really?" So, they bought me a little digital keyboard. All videogames and things kind of fell by the wayside, and I was just at this keyboard all the time, and I was experimenting and listening. I might have heard something on television and then I'll try to recreate the tune on the piano. So, I was using my ears a lot.

I remember playing Debussy's *Clair de lune*, which I'd kind of arranged for left hand. My dad shouted up the stairs, "Nick, turned the radio down," and I was quite cross. I was a bit like, "Hang on a minute. I've been working really hard on this." I shouted up the stairs, I said, "Daddy, it's not the radio. It's me." All of a sudden, he came upstairs with my mom and they said, "Was that really you?" I played it to them again and then they were like, "Oh, wow, what do we need to do? Do you want piano lessons?" That was the first time that they'd asked that. Of course, the answer was, yes.

I have my left hand and then my right hand, I've obviously got my shoulder, my arm. I've got a small amount of my upper forearm and then it stops. If I had two hands, my left hand would predominantly be below this note. So, anything [playing piano keys] all the way to the base. How I used to play and how I first started playing would be with my little arm and my left hand. So basically, anything with a one-note melody line in the right hand, I'd be able to play with my little arm, like this one for instance. [playing piano keys] And then, my left hand would obviously play the accompaniment as it was written. [playing piano keys] So then, together. [playing piano]

After a few years of piano lessons with a wonderful local piano teacher, she came to me and my parents and she said, "Look, I've taken Nicholas as far as I can take him. I really want to see Nicholas fly. I want him to go to a specialist music school." Now, luckily, my friend, who initially inspired me playing the Beethoven sonata, she went to a local piano school. So, I was like, "This is going to be brilliant. I can go there. I already know her. It's going to be a perfect, perfect combination." I was encouraged to call up the headmistress and try to arrange an audition. I mustered up the courage to dial the number, and I was greeted on the phone by a very stern sounding-- I don't know if you've seen the film, *Matilda*, but Miss Trunchbull kind of comes to mind. She had such a stern, almost Victorian style to her voice.

I basically said, "My name's Nicholas McCarthy. I have one hand. I'd love to come and audition." She stopped me and she said, "Yes. I have heard of you, but I can't see you and I can't audition you because how can you possibly play scales with two hands?" I then said, "Well, I can't play scales with both hands. I've only got my left hand, and I don't want to play scales, I want to play music." There was this long silence and then the phone went dead. She'd hung up the phone.

It was as if someone had just punctured me with a pin. Everything had gone out of me. All of my hope, all of my excitement about my next chapter had just vanished very quickly in one phone call that ended so abruptly. I couldn't bring myself to go to the piano. I couldn't bring myself to play because I felt kind of, "What's the point?" I had this plan, and that plan was snatched away from me.

It was about three weeks afterwards after the phone call, and I was walking home from school, and I just had one of these kind of epiphanies where I thought, "Hang on a second. How many billions of people are in the world, and I'm allowing one of them who's never seen me play, to stop me trying to achieve my dream?" I think it was about the fact I wasn't even given the chance to be good enough, that was the thing that started to create some anger bubbling up inside of me.

When I got over myself, I suppose, and when I started to play the piano again, when I started to fall back in love with music again, I then decided to apply for a different music school because I was determined, I was going to go and study piano. I knew I needed to go and further my education. It was very much down to me in Google looking, "Okay, music schools, London," and seeing what comes up. And then I looked and Guildhall was on this list on Google, and I thought I was able to apply, so I thought I'll put the application in. I didn't tick yes to the disability box on the form because I'd learnt my lesson from my previous non-audition. I thought, "No, I'm going to get in the door. I want to be in the room." I was just excited to have this opportunity of at least being seen by a panel of judges, at least getting the opportunity to audition. I didn't know what I was walking into, really.

I remember that audition day very well, and really all I'd done in preparation for that was just do what I usually would do. I didn't know about the correct ways of practice or just how much preparation you need to put in for a performance or for an audition.

I walked into the audition room and a big Steinway Concert Grand at one side. I was so nervous. There were three judges on the panel. All the eyes glanced to my empty right sleeve. I had like a cardigan on, and my cardigan sleeve was flapping around because I don't have an arm there. All of their eyes darted to that. And I said, "My name is Nicholas McCarthy. I have one hand, but I'm here to play for you." I could see they were all a bit shellshocked, I suppose. "Okay."

The feeling of this piano, it felt so different. It felt kind of so alien. I found it incredibly hard to play. I'd only played on a keyboard, so my fingers weren't strong enough basically. I played and I tried and played well. I was pleased with how I played. They asked me to come and sit down with them. I went over to the table and it was here that they were telling me about left-hand repertoire. This one specific judge was really explaining different pieces to me and explaining different concertos that were available which, of course, at that time I just didn't know. That was really my first kind of knowledge, if you like, of left-hand repertoire. I wasn't interested in left-hand repertoire at all. I didn't want to explore it. I was so evasive. I was so, "No, I don't want to do that," because I'd worked so hard at playing these pieces that I'd grown to know and love.

I'd made such a connection with Mozart, with Mendelssohn, with Beethoven, all of these composers that I'd grown to love, and they have become part of my life. I felt like, "Oh, I really don't want to say goodbye to these composers, really." It was a sadness. It was almost like breaking up with someone. It was a week later or 10 days later or something, I received a letter and I opened it and I was offered a place, but on a condition that I specialized in left-hand repertoire, which, of course, I accepted but I was very reticent about it.

Going into Guildhall and seeing my contemporaries who were playing piano concertos and had played at some of the big concert halls in London, there was me who played the piano for all of a hot minute. My technique was all over the place, and my level certainly wasn't anywhere near theirs. It made me think, "Oh, wow, this bar is very high and I need to improve." Outside of the technical amazement that I had, there was also the other challenge of actually trying to find your footing socially. There were a lot of people there who I just couldn't gel with. We had nothing in common at all. I'd crack a joke and they'd look at me with blank faces. There was just no commonality in that sense.

With some of the staff as well, I felt like they were questioning why I was there. "Why is he here? He's got one hand. What's he going to do? He's not going to become a concert pianist. It's silly. Why's he even been accepted?" I could hear the mutterings of that with the faculty.

[piano music playing]

I was introduced to a piece by my teacher, a Russian composer, actually, called Alexander Scriabin. When he was 18 years old, he wrote two pieces for left hand alone because he injured his right hand as a student. He wrote the beautiful *Prelude and Nocturnes*. This was the first piece where I was like, "Oh, my God, I'd love to learn this."

I remember rushing to the music shop, which was just underneath the Junior Guildhall, and I rushed downstairs and they had it in. I remember reading it on the train, looking at the score. I couldn't wait to get to my piano at home, but I was just working out, thinking, "How is this possible with one hand? It just looks such a two-handed piece. It looks so incredibly tough."

This piece being introduced to me sparked this kind of thirst for discovering left-hand repertoire. Discovering left-hand repertoire that I liked, that was really the key thing for me.

I didn't know that there were 3000 works for left hand alone. I'd google and find out that this composer wrote this in the 19th century and there's no recordings of it. I wanted to hear what it sounded like. I wanted to see what the score looked like.

A lot of the repertoire was out of print. So, I used to have to write to some Italian publishing house to say, "Can we get this put back into print?" There were real challenges, but I enjoyed them. It was like a treasure hunt. It was finding treasure for me. Every time I found something, it literally was like Christmas. It was like the best moment ever because, "Oh, my God, it's amazing." Because there's no recordings of this music, I was often the first person to be seeing it.

When I did some research on piano concertos, I then saw Prokofiev's Fourth Piano Concerto, "Ah, that was commissioned by Paul Wittgenstein." I saw two pieces by Richard Strauss. "Ah, that's Paul Wittgenstein." I then [unintelligible [00:14:51] Concerto, "Ah, that's Paul Wittgenstein." I kept seeing pieces with this name at the top, Paul Wittgenstein. This name was just kind of there all the time in my peripheries. I wasn't looking for him, he was almost looking for me it felt like. It just filled me with intrigue.

[upbeat music]

**Glynn:** When Snap returns, as Nicholas begins to embrace the left-handed repertoire, he's about to discover the influence that he didn't know he needed. Stay tuned.

[upbeat music]

Welcome back to Snap Judgment. You're listening to the Repertoire episode. When last we left, Nicholas McCarthy's deep dive down the rabbit hole of left-hand piano had led him to the works of one name, Paul Wittgenstein.

Snap Judgment.

**Nicholas:** I remember me with my laptop and it was stormy outside and I just thought, "Oh, I'll just type in Paul Wittgenstein." I just got on this trail of discovery. I fell down the rabbit hole of what happened to him.

Paul Wittgenstein was part of the very famous, wealthy, and influential family, the Wittgenstein family. Paul Wittgenstein's dad was a steel tycoon. Paul Wittgenstein always wanted to become a concert pianist, but again, because of their stature, Paul Wittgenstein was forbidden from being a constant pianist. Being an artist of any kind, if you're from one of those families, was very much looked down upon. So, he didn't pursue his dream of becoming a concert pianist until his father died. And he gave his two-handed concert debut and to rave reviews because he was a fantastic pianist. He'd worked hard his whole life.

And then, the First World War happened and he went and fought in the Austro-Hungarian army. Very quickly, he was entrapped just outside of a town in a forest, and he took a Russian bullet into the right shoulder. He was rushed to a prisoner of war camp where obviously it was very crudely amputated, his right hand. From then, he was shipped across Siberia until he was in a Siberian prisoner of war camp. It was here where he managed to get some charcoal and an old crate, and he charcoaled on the underside of this crate, piano keys. He worked tirelessly to see how he could think of his two-handed repertoire, how he could reconfigure it for left hand alone.

**Paul:** The satisfaction to be able to say, I can do with one hand something which other people need two, that's the greatest satisfaction one has in that case.

**Nicholas:** Luckily for him, he was repatriated back to Vienna. Once he was back home, he set to work and get commissions in for just left hand alone. He also arranged quite a lot of solo piano pieces but arranged them for left hand alone. He published three volumes of left-hand repertoire and to find these volumes of his, was just magical.

So, I kind of started to have a bit of an affinity with him.

**Interviewer:** It requires tremendous drive and endurance.

**Paul:** And some talent-- [crosstalk]

**Interviewer:** And talent.

**Paul:** I mean, you must have double the talent and double the energy in order to make up for half the hand.

**Nicholas:** He performed with orchestras all over the world, so it gave me a huge sense of, I can do the same." It made me feel like I wasn't just a foreign object. Someone had already walked in the shoes that I hope to walk in one day. And it gave me that possibility, "This is possible. I can do that because there's nothing different about me and Wittgenstein." We both play with our left hand alone. That really ignited this new chapter of my piano playing career, which was obviously being a left-hand-alone specialist.

I had an awful lot of catching up to do. I had an awful lot of technical work which needed to be sorted in order to play this incredibly difficult left-hand repertoire. Whereas normally, if you have two hands, you start with simpler pieces, then you get to intermediate, then you get to advance, whereas all the left-hand repertoire is advanced.

With that comes a huge amount of physicality. I have to stretch from right to the bottom of the piano, right to the top of the piano, in such quick succession, so it almost sounds like it's happened at the same time. We're creating an illusion that you, the listener, are actually hearing two or even three hands at the piano.

I was coming to the end of my time at the Junior Guildhall. I'd been there since I was 17. By this point, I was approaching 19. And I already had submitted my applications for conservatoires.

I always had my sights set on the Royal College of Music. I visited the Royal Albert Hall in London to watch a concert, and the Royal College of Music is that mirror image to the Royal Albert Hall. And obviously the Royal Abbot Hall being one of the most iconic music venues of the world. In Prince Consort Road, which is where Royal College of Music is, I could hear the students practicing and pianos playing and singers singing all of the practice rims, which kind of echo down Prince Consort Road. I remember standing outside the Royal Albert Hall and looking at the Royal College of Music and hearing these lucky students thinking, "Wow, what an amazing place to study. How lucky and talented they were to be studying there." It was that moment I thought, "I would love to study at the Royal College of Music."

So, I really wanted to audition there. Obviously, I knew it was going to be a huge challenge because I knew the Royal College didn't take many pianists a year. Seven, eight, nine pianists for each year group, perhaps, but I was determined.

I almost visualized myself there, so much so that the kind of prospect of not being accepted there felt very foreign to me. I decided to audition for all of the conservatoires that I possibly could, namely for the fact that I'm a big believer of don't put all your eggs in one basket.

I was working incredibly hard for these audition rounds that were coming up, which I knew were going to be the biggest auditions of my life. I was already practicing maybe three hours a day around my kind of schoolwork and studies and things. I doubled it, so I was doing six hours a day. I'd never practiced so much in my life.

About three, four weeks before my auditions started, I got a letter summoning me and my mom and dad into the Junior Guildhall to have a conversation. We went into this kind of big boardroom, and I just had that very heavy feeling. Basically, the head of Guildhall kind of said about what's coming up for me with my auditions. They basically said, do I think that's the best route for me to go down? My teacher then started saying, "It's incredibly hard when you're at conservatoire, you're expected to know lots and lots of repertoire all the time, and your technique still isn't good enough, really, to be attending any of these conservatoires. My concern would just be that you get left behind." It was all dressed up in concern, but reading between the lines, it was more that they weren't in my corner, they just didn't feel like I was going to get in. They encouraged me to withdraw my auditions from all of the conservatoires.

I remember driving home with my mom and dad back to our house, and just the tears rolling down my face and remembered feeling to myself, "Well, what now? Where is the instruction manual to tell me this is the decision that you have to make?" Because I'm being told by people that I should respect that I'm not going to get into these conservatoires. But my gut feeling was telling me that I need to do those auditions. It reminded me of earlier in my life when I wanted to audition for that first music school and the dial tone of that phone ringing around my head. I remembered that and I thought to myself, "I didn't let that one moment determine everything else. What if I don't listen to these two people now? What if I actually listen to my gut again and do the auditions? Worst-case scenario, I don't get offered a place and they're right, but what if they weren't right?" And that was my whole thing. What if? What if? What if?

The drive to prove somebody wrong, the drive to show somebody that, "You know what? You misjudged me. You've misjudged what I can do." That is what drove me to do my auditions. That drove me to practice morning, noon, and night. And I really did. Any waking minute was spent at the piano. Perfecting, drilling, mornings before breakfast, lunchtimes break time. Whenever I could steal even 20 minutes, I was at the piano.

So, I started doing the audition rounds. My Royal College audition was the last audition of my audition rounds. You always save the best to last, but this was the one I was hooking everything on. This is the one where I really wanted to go. I didn't sleep at all the night before, which is awful because you're laying in bed thinking, "I need to sleep. I've got a really important day tomorrow," and my brain was absolutely not allowing me to sleep.

[intriguing music]

My first round audition, I just wore all black. I just wore black trousers and a black shirt. I just thought, "Right, there we go." Walking from the Royal Albert Hall, approaching the Royal College of Music, hearing the musicians who were already studying there, it just filled me with that sense that I was meant to be there. Of course, I was hugely nervous, nerves beyond the scale. But I'd visualized this moment, my audition, my walking through the Royal College doors, it definitely centered me and gave me a sense of calm and gave me a sense of, "You can do this. You've got this. Go in and do your thing."

My name gets called. There were two judges there who were both professors at the Royal College. I went in and I just handed them my scores. I told them what I was going to play and I sat at the piano and played.

[piano playing]

And they give nothing away. "Thank you very much. Thank you. Would you mind waiting outside?" I waited outside for what felt like days, full of nerves, blood pumping, adrenaline still coursing through thinking, "Am I going to be asked to go and give my second audition, or am I about to be told, 'Thank you. We're sorry, you can go home?'" Knowing that my dream of going to Royal College would be over. So, I waited and waited. Professor Nigel Clayton who came out, he said, "We'd like you to wait for about an hour and do your second audition." I've done the first audition. Now, this is the real important one. This sent my nerves to kind of another level. I went downstairs. I had a drink of water and try to calm my nerves down as I had about an hour to wait until my next audition.

And then, my name was called, and I went in. I handed over my scores and I was playing my beloved Scriabin *Nocturne*, the first left-hand repertoire piece that I learned at the Junior Guildhall.

I went over to the big grand piano and I sat down and I just remember a cold sweat over my hand. I thought to myself, "Why couldn't I just be sweating anywhere else apart from my hand?" And then, I played.

[*Nocturne* playing]

My audition was a blur. I remember feeling a sense of, "Okay. That was good. That was fine. I was happy with it," and that was it. "Thank you very much, Nicholas, and hope to see you again." And that was all.

[*Nocturne* playing]

I remember being on the phone to my best friend at the time. And all of a sudden, I heard a ping, and it was a notification that there was an update on the portal. I didn't think this was going to be the Royal College because I'd only just done the audition two days before. Log in to the portal, and it's Royal College of Music. I clicked on it and you can't read it quick enough. [chuckles] All of a sudden, I just burst into tears because I read the words, "Congratulations, you've been offered a place." I just couldn't wait to tell my mom and dad, and I couldn't wait to tell all my friends and my family. And likewise, couldn't wait to tell my teacher and the head of Guildhall.

[piano playing]

I find myself in this position in the 21st century as being this left-hand-alone pianist, just like Wittgenstein was the left-hand-alone pianist in the 20th century. Now, I'm at this stage in my career where I am playing with big orchestras and I am playing even the same programs that Wittgenstein plays, playing two concertos in the same night, I do the same thing. So, I feel a real connection to that.

I really enjoy the process of listening to a piece of music and thinking, "How can this work for left hand alone?" I always bring myself back to Paul Wittgenstein in his prisoner of war camp with that charcoal with an upturned crate, and he was probably thinking similar.

There's mixed kind of reports and accounts of Wittgenstein as a man and his character. He was playing all this money to get this left-hand concerto. I know for a fact he paid Ravel to write the left-hand piano concerto, £30,000 in today's money. Obviously back then, that would have been humongous. He then didn't want another two-handed pianist to go along and then premiere it with their left hand. He's quoted saying, "You wouldn't build a house for another man to live in it." That was his stance.

I remember feeling very like, "Wow, what a selfish man. I would never be like that if I was in his position and if I had his amount of wealth." Obviously, I'm not the son of a wealthy steel magnet like Paul Wittgenstein, so I don't have vast amount of family money. But I absolutely love working with composers and I've commissioned quite a few composers now, and I'm always trying to expand this repertoire. Commissioning new left-hand repertoire is so important to me. My main aim is to try to leave a legacy for future left-hand pianists.

[piano playing]

[upbeat music]

**Glynn:** A huge thank you, Nicholas McCarthy, for sharing his story with Snap. Nicholas is the first and only left-hand-alone pianist to have graduated from London's Royal College of Music in its 140-year history. He has since gone on tour internationally and has recorded two studio albums. You can learn more about his career and music on our website, *snapjudgment.org*.

[upbeat music]

This story was a collaboration with our friends, Ilena Peng and Brendan Spiegel, at Narratively. You can find more amazing storytelling celebrating the diversity of humanity at *narratively.com*.

This story featured home and studio recordings by Nicholas McCarthy, as well as additional scoring by Dirk Schwarzhoff. It was produced by David Exumé and Bo Walsh.

[upbeat music]

You know this, listeners. Storytelling can change lives. If you want to change someone's life right now, send them an episode of Snap, the greatest gift in the world. But you should probably give them something else as well. You don't want to come off as a cheapskate. Snap Judgment is available on every podcast platform. *Snapjudgment.org.*

Snap is brought to you by the team that sees people the way they wish to be seen, except for the uber producer, Mr. Mark Ristich. He sees everyone wearing pink tutus. I don't know why. Nancy López, Pat Mesiti-Miller, Regina Bediako, David Exumé, Anna Sussman, Renzo Gorrio, Shaina Shealy, Teo Ducot, Flo Wiley, John Fecile, Marisa Dodge, Bo Walsh, Annie Nguyen, Zahra Noorbakhsh, and Doug Stuart.

And please note that this is not the news. No way is this the news. In fact, in the morning, you could ask your local coffee monger to please give you the noncaffeinated blend. After a few minutes, you could return and tell him to never give you the non-caffeinated blend. And you would still, even then, not be as far away from the news as this is. But this is PRX.

*[Transcript provided by SpeechDocs Podcast Transcription]*