

7. NOT JUST A PIANIST. HOW CONTEMPORARY MUSIC TRAIN PIANISTS INTO PERFORMERS

Adriana Toacsen - Ponta³⁴

Abstract: *New music is a creation in continuous evolution and transformation. Thus, representative works for solo piano have taken the pianist into an experimental zone that compels the performer to embark on a journey in which they gradually learn a multitude of roles.*

Key words: *contemporary music, contemporary performance, the new pianist*

1. Introduction

Over the years, concert halls have evolved into architectural masterpieces. It appears that philharmonics worldwide consistently seek to collaborate with exceptional contemporary architects whenever feasible. This assertion is corroborated by esteemed venues such as Herzog & de Meuron's Elbphilharmonie, Rem Koolhaas's Casa da Música, Jean Nouvel's DR Byen Concert Hall and Philharmonie de Paris, Zaha Hadid's Dubai Opera House, and even forthcoming projects like the Vltava Philharmonic, designed by the Danish firm BIG - Bjarke Ingels Group.

These initiatives not only elevate the reputation of music by aligning it with superior architectural standards, thereby increasing its recognition, but also create opportunities to construct venues featuring multiple concert halls, enhanced acoustics, and greater seating capacity. First, let's consider the connection with high-quality architecture. This partnership often turns the building into a museum-like attraction, commonly visited by tourists who might not have the money, time, or foresight to buy tickets in advance for a musical event during their short stay in the city.

Consequently, the institution enhances its public visibility through direct engagement with visitors and generates additional revenue via ticket sales for building tours. Newly constructed buildings significantly benefit from enhanced acoustics. As technical conditions improve annually, new establishments can incorporate these advancements effectively. While some older concert halls were originally multipurpose spaces, others were specifically designed for musical performances. However, modernizing these venues with state-of-the-art technologies necessitates substantial financial investment and the temporary cessation of concert activities to facilitate thorough renovations.

The seating capacity of concert halls has been expanded in recent architectural projects. The Pierre Boulez Hall in the Philharmonie de Paris has a capacity of 2,400 seats, which initially caused public concern. However, the institution aimed to demonstrate that these concerns were unfounded. The management strategy implemented during the first ten years resulted in significant attendance figures. In a city with a population of over 1.2 million people, the Philharmonie alone houses three concert halls, in addition to venues such as Salle Pleyel, Cité de la Musique, two opera houses, and Fondation Vuitton. After its first ten years, Philharmonie de

³⁴ Lecturer PhD., National University of Music, București, România, email: adrianatoacsen@gmail.com

Paris director Olivier Mantei reported an average event occupancy rate of 92%, approximately 450 events per year, and four resident ensembles.

The Parisian example demonstrates how such initiatives can promote cultural competition. During the years 2013-2014, two significant cultural edifices were inaugurated in the French capital: Fondation Louis Vuitton, designed by Frank Gehry, and Philharmonie de Paris, designed by Jean Nouvel. Urban folklore suggests that the architects' rivalry over the inauguration dates led to an exceptional construction effort. Fondation Louis Vuitton ultimately opened first, providing Paris with not only a new exhibition space but also a concert hall with remarkable organization.

This venue epitomizes the Cinderella myth – during the day, it serves as a public space with a cafeteria and relaxation areas, while in the evening, it transforms into a fully-equipped concert hall. The inaugural concert was a grand ceremony, featuring a distinguished repertoire and the renowned pianist Lang Lang on October 24, 2014. From a technical perspective, recent years have seen concert halls evolve into versatile venues capable of hosting various types of events. These spaces allow organizers to integrate both visual and audio effects into their productions, creating truly immersive experiences.

2. Discussions

In this period, as audiences gain access to an increasingly diverse array of concert venues, compositional styles are experiencing an unprecedented phase of diversification. The piano repertoire is being enriched with works that present challenges not only for the performers but also for the organizers. This evolution fosters a new relationship among event organizers, performers, and the audience within the concert hall.

Consider **Banshee** by Henry Cowell, a composition created over a century ago in 1925. One of the composer's initial unconventional instructions is to hold down the sustain pedal for the entire duration of the piece. According to recordings available on YouTube, this requirement has been met by employing a stage assistant who maintains pressure on the pedal throughout the performance. Over time, performers have addressed this need by using a rubber wedge to keep the pedal in the pressed position.

During my performance of this piece, I seized the opportunity to enhance the audience's experience by involving them directly. This approach is advantageous in several ways. Firstly, it fosters communication with the audience, thereby creating a more dynamic atmosphere. Secondly, inviting an audience member to join the performer on stage allows them to briefly experience the perspective of a performer, bridging the gap between the stage and the audience.

Thirdly, I believe that involving the audience in such a technical “action,” one that temporarily transforms them into performers, strengthens the connection within the composer-performer-audience triad, allowing that person to experience the emotions of performing. Finally, and perhaps most importantly, both the audience member invited on stage and the rest of the attendees may leave with a new kind of attachment to contemporary events, and perhaps even with the desire to attend more concerts—either in hopes of another chance to step on stage or of being surprised

by another engaging request.

From a technical perspective, given that this piece requires the pianist to interact solely with the piano strings, *Banshee* poses a significant challenge for organizers. The necessity for amplification increases with the size of the concert hall. It would be insightful to learn about the premiere location of the piece and the conditions under which it was performed. When I had the chance to perform it for the first time, the event was not amplified, but that was because it took place in a hall with a maximum capacity of 75 seats, and also because I had a vision that placed the audience in a new arrangement.

The concert space was in a hall without a stage, so I was able to position the piano in the center of the room, allowing the audience to surround me. This way, the listeners were much closer than usual, which resulted in a heightened perception of the sound effects. Additionally, I coordinated the moment with the organizers to create an enhanced auditory experience. We turned off the hall lights and left only two small lamps, positioned so that only I—the pianist—had just enough light to carry out my performance with professional integrity.

4'33" by John Cage is another piece that challenges the audience with new experiences, helping them discover new aspects of performance and possibly even reception. It is said that the composition of this piece in 1952 was influenced by Cage's invitation to Harvard in the late 1940s, where he participated in a study taking place at the prestigious institution. The study involved constructing a completely soundproof room—an *Anechoic Chamber*. Accounts from that time claim that after spending time inside the chamber, Cage emerged saying that perfect soundproofing was impossible because he could still hear two sounds.

Specialists believed that these were the nervous system and circulatory system, which, in the "perfect silence" of Harvard's chamber, became perceptible—especially to a musician. A few years subsequent to this event, Cage released the notable composition *4'33"*, a seminal piece that elevated silence to an unprecedented artistic status. Within this work, silence is utilized as the sole instrument. The historical context is noteworthy—occurring shortly after the conclusion of World War II. *4'33"* may also be interpreted as a protest against the atrocities of war, which were all marked by the fearful sounds of air raid sirens, explosions, machine gunfire, and cries of distress or grief.

The location of the premiere is a crucial detail. Pianist and composer David Tudor performed this groundbreaking piece for the first time on August 29, 1952, at Maverick Concert Hall in New York. By 1952, illustrious concert halls such as Carnegie Hall in New York, the Musikverein in Vienna, and the Salle Pleyel in Paris were already renowned for their exceptional acoustics. The famed Parisian hall benefited from the expertise of acoustician Gustave Lyon during its construction, thereby establishing a lasting legacy. At that time, recital halls occasionally suffered from suboptimal acoustic conditions or inadequate soundproofing. This raises the question of whether Cage's work maintains its relevance today and if it can still be effectively performed under contemporary conditions.

Another important consideration is the audience's relationship with silence and their current behaviors in a concert setting. In the 21st century, maintaining a quiet atmosphere is increasingly challenged by electronic watches, some of which emit

loud chimes on the hour. Even mechanical clocks can pose a problem, as certain models have distinctly audible ticking sounds. Mobile phones also need to be accounted for; while they are essential for various functions, they can cause significant disruptions if not properly silenced during concerts.

Furthermore, I have personal experience with this piece and have developed a scenario to assist in guiding the audience. The initial task for the performer involves determining how to measure time, a detail meticulously specified by Cage. He allocated precise durations to each of the three sections: 30 seconds, 2 minutes and 23 seconds, and 1 minute and 40 seconds. The transition between these sections is indicated by the composer's recommendation that the performer turn the page at the conclusion of each movement.

To minimize disruption to the performance, I opted against placing a visible timer on the piano. Instead, I used a stopwatch on the piano bench, where it remained discreetly out of audience view. My concern was that a timer on the piano might disturb the piece's atmosphere. However, for my subsequent performance of 4'33", I intend to explore the use of a visible timer projected in the concert hall, which could be operated without any distracting gestures being noticeable to the audience. During my initial performance of the piece, I utilized the concert hall's numerous windows to influence the acoustics. On this occasion, I aimed to manipulate the sonic outcome to enhance the sound diversity. With the assistance of a composer colleague, I meticulously organized the three sections. We carefully planned each pause, directing my colleague to open a different window for each movement.

Initially, we opened the door leading to the concert hall lobby, resulting in a subtle and almost imperceptible alteration. Given that it was an evening concert, the interior sounds of the building were minimal. For the second part, we opened a window facing the park, allowing gentle outdoor sounds to filter into the hall. Lastly, for the third section, we opened a window toward the busy street. The street noises were naturally subdued by a garden that also served as a parking lot, functioning as a natural *sourdine* (mute). I made these adjustments because the hall's acoustics did not provide the same conditions as a perfectly silent room. Consequently, I determined that the performer's intervention was necessary. Today, I would still strive to create a variety of silences but would involve the audience in these interventions—potentially inviting a different individual for each of the three sections.

Guero, composed by the German composer Helmut Lachenmann, was written in 1969 and revised in 1988. It is likely not a coincidence that this piece introduces a novel approach to utilizing the piano, particularly when considering that *Pression* for cello was created in the same year, and *Dal Niente* for clarinet followed in 1970. These two years appear to represent a period of significant exploration and innovation in new methods of musical expression. In *Guero*, the composer has crafted a piece where, similar to Cowell's *Banshee* but employing a distinctly different approach from that of the American composer, the pianist performs the entire composition without pressing any keys.

All sounds are generated by the pianist's fingernails gliding either along the length or the height of the keys. It is only at the conclusion of the piece that two distinct sounds emerge:

- The activation of the sustain pedal, which the German composer elevates to the status of a musical sound.
- Two plucked notes in the first octave of the piano, which are the only relatively traditional sounds heard throughout the approximately four-minute piece.

The notation is also completely reinvented, with the traditional stave being replaced by three lines, the upper one primarily serves to mark the passage of time. The piece includes a metronome marking that indicates the quarter note equals approximately 60 BPM. One of the most striking aspects of the notation is that, at the beginning of the piece, despite its highly original notational system, Lachenmann still writes the clefs, as in any traditional score. Even more, he assigns three different clefs for the two hands.

Another notable feature of the notation is Lachenmann's meticulous organization of the score, where time is divided into equal sections on the first stave line. The composer essentially acts as a graphic artist in structuring the score. Despite this rigorous framework, the performer has flexibility—both in terms of the approximate pitch range and the duration of the gliding movements. These freedoms appear to be intentional by the composer to allow for the performer's creativity. It is also evident that he understood from the outset how challenging the piece would be due to the following factors:

- The highly unconventional notation, which makes it difficult to read and assimilate.
- The extreme precision of dynamic markings, with the dynamic range spanning from *ppp* to *fff*.
- The significant physical challenge for the pianist's hands, as the fingernails are employed in an entirely unprecedented way.

The audience plays a crucial role in this performance, as maintaining silence in the concert hall is essential. Even when *Guero* is amplified to enhance the sounds produced by the performer, it remains challenging to fully experience without near-perfect silence.

The audience holds the responsibility of engaging with and accepting innovative forms of music. A composition where, for approximately four minutes, all sounds are generated exclusively by the pianist's fingernails is classified as experimental music. Such pieces require the audience to abandon conventional expectations of a musical performance—an endeavor that can be challenging. Additionally, unlike traditionally composed pieces, Lachenmann's work is more difficult for the audience to follow, as this type of performance involves minimal physical movement from the pianist.

In 1972, George Crumb released the first volume of **Makrokosmos**, a composition that would eventually encompass four volumes, with the final volume being published seven years later. Influenced by Crumb's admiration for composers Béla Bartók and Claude Debussy, the four volumes were composed for pianist David Burge, who had also commissioned Crumb's suite *Five Pieces for Piano*. Crumb was both impressed and inspired by the premiere performance of this suite. The second part of the first volume begins with **The Phantom Gondolier**. This piece benefits from a concert hall with suitable technical conditions for amplifying the piano's sound. The composition involves complex extended techniques,

presenting a significant challenge for the performer. The sequence of innovations is noticeable and can be observed by both general audiences and music enthusiasts in the concert hall.

The initial challenge for the pianist involves their positioning to the instrument. Given that the composer has condensed into approximately three minutes both traditional sounds—created by pressing the keys—and sounds produced by plucking the strings, using glissandi, or striking the strings, the performer is required to stand throughout the performance rather than remain seated at the piano bench. The presence of glissandi and even trills that must be performed directly on the piano strings makes it impossible to use traditional plucking or fingernail techniques. In these cases, Crumb provided a solution—an unusual one—by indicating in the score that the index and middle fingers should use thimbles. My experience as a contemporary pianist had already led me in this direction on another occasion, so I already had the appropriate thimbles³⁵.

However, the most interesting challenge that Crumb presents to pianists in *The Phantom Gondolier* is not the use of thimbles, but rather the demand for the performer to use their voice. The score includes instructions such as: "*Pianist hums: a ghostly moaning sound, half sung like an incantation, hissing, pianist hums; a more intense groaning, pianist sings: macabre, obscene.*" Producing vocal sounds in Crumb's work involves details that are not related to traditional singing but rather to the theatrical aspect of performing avant-garde music. From my personal experience, I must admit that I successfully overcame this challenge only because I had previously performed several pieces that required me to use my voice³⁶. Thus, when I finally encountered the famous gondolier, I was well prepared to embrace this new stage in my journey with contemporary music.

Another composition with a strong impact on the audience is **Reverberation Study** by Jörg Widmann. This piece was composed in 2003 and performed by pianist Irene Russo on December 13 in Freiburg. As indicated by the title, the focus is on sound vibrations, producing diverse sounds through experimental techniques. The work of the German composer serves as a significant source of creativity, both in sound production methods and in the exploration of the instrument.

The first page of the score serves as a "map" of the instrument and functions as a legend for the performer. Widmann assigns different numbers and separate staves to the areas of the piano used as a resonance box, creating a specific system for organizing the score. This results in a solo piano work having up to four staves, as Widmann's system sometimes requires just a single line from the traditional staff. The piece is especially remarkable for the audience as it transforms the entire instrument into a resonance chamber. The pianist utilizes nearly every centimeter of the piano to create sounds, making a comprehensive exploration of the instrument—the performance begins at the tail of the piano and concludes on the lower strings.

Throughout this innovative journey, the pianist employs their hands in various

³⁵ In 2021, I performed *Mirror Spiders* by composer Șerban Marcu at the Meridian International Festival. At the end of the piece, the pianist must play with his right hand on the wood at the end of the keyboard, with fingers 3-5 wearing thimbles. I must admit that it was not an easy task to find the right thimbles, as they were of different sizes, most of the time a little too wide for my fingers, and the speed at which I had to play the rhythms written in the score required them to be quite fixed on the fingertips.

³⁶ Diana Rotaru – *Monster under my bed*, Gabriel Mălăncioiu – *Typoncello*, Cristian Bence-Muk - *Schizophrenia*

manners. The score specifies different types of strikes to be performed with the fist, fingers, the piano lid, and even **knives**. Knives are sound-producing tools incorporated by the composer at the end of the piece. Widmann provides precise instructions on how to use them: "**As if spreading butter on a slice of bread.**" Furthermore, the knives are not only used on the strings but also as percussion instruments, with several moments in the score requiring the pianist to strike the piano's soundboard using the handle of the knife.

Widmann's work also addresses another significant issue—the evolution of musical instruments. Over time, pianos have been designed with enhanced protective measures to prevent various accidents. Consequently, it is no longer possible to slam the piano lid shut, either accidentally or intentionally. This poses a challenge for the German composer's piece, which includes a moment at the end of the first section where the lid is intended to be slammed shut to produce a specific sound. Modern pianos are now fitted with small silicone dampers that prevent the lid from being slammed, both when opened and closed. This makes it impossible to comply with the composer's original instruction.

One of the advantages of performing contemporary works is the ability to communicate with the composer, and I firmly believe that this interaction must take place. In this context, I see a trio of key elements. First, the performer benefits by receiving guidance directly from the composer, who provides valuable interpretative insights. Second, the composer benefits because the moment a piece is brought to life on the instrument can reveal new artistic directions that may not have been initially imagined. And third, the score itself can evolve—through collaborations with different pianists, leading to small adjustments or perhaps even a new edition of the work.

The concept that the audience can and should be part of the performance was useful in one of my later concerts. To enhance connection with the audience at the Meridian International Festival, I designed a recital as an ongoing conversation with the listeners. The concert was named *Piano Express* and depicted a train journey through the world of music, with stops at various musical stations. To support this idea, I brought a suitcase on stage and suggested waiting for a train. With full support from my partners at the *Paul Constantinescu* Philharmonic, who were incredible throughout the project, they even provided a bench from their courtyard. We placed it in the piano's recess, creating a friendly and informal setting to engage with the audience.

This connection was necessary not only to engage in conversation and ask them questions but also to make them feel comfortable enough to want to formulate answers or ask me questions in return. The highlight of the event was Mihai Măniceanu's piece **Preludio și Toccată Numerico**, a work for prepared piano composed in [year missing]. The performer must place two chains inside the piano, in the bass string area, to produce a sound that mimics the distortion of an electric guitar. To better engage the audience with the performed works, I asked for two volunteers from the audience who were willing to place the chains inside the piano under my careful guidance. To my delight, not only did two brave participants step forward, but I was also pleased that they were of different ages—one was a teenager, and the other was around 40 years old.

Of course, I could have placed the chains myself, but I believed that involving the audience was a form of communication and connection that could only strengthen the performer-audience relationship. The most pleasant discovery of the evening was that the audience paid close attention to my explanation of what a prepared piano is, and the accessories needed for such a performance. One of the most common and feared mistakes in such a situation is that the performer might forget to remove the objects altering the sound from the piano. That evening, I "forgot" on purpose and was pleasantly surprised to find that the audience not only understood the preparation mechanism of the piano but also felt comfortable enough to intervene and remind me that I had not removed the chains from the piano.

The last piece I want to mention is a work by Romanian composer Cătălin Crețu – **Piano Interactions II “Bells & Mechanisms.**” I must confess that I am happy to declare that I had the honor and pleasure of performing its world premiere. This cycle is based primarily on an antithesis between the acoustic piano and the "electronics" part, being, according to the score, a piece composed for sensors, prepared piano, and electronic medium. In this study, I will focus on a single part of the cycle – *Pendulum*. It is a piece composed for prepared piano and sensor. If until now we have had the opportunity to observe the audience's reaction to prepared piano, it's time to discuss the impact of sensors. Such works have become relevant in the second half of the 20th century.

What is interesting about Crețu's work is that, due to the type of sensor used and the way the range unfolds on the piano keyboard, the piece can transform into one for the sensor and the right hand, the left hand, or they can alternate. So far, in terms of universal music history, valuable works for the right hand have not been preserved. For the left hand, universal culture has been enriched with several works due to the tragedy experienced by pianist Paul Wittgenstein³⁷ during World War II. Often, works for piano and electronic medium (sensors) cannot be performed at any time as they depend on the presence of a technician or the composer for the concert to function properly. Depending on the specifics of the piece, the sensors can be recorded on a tape that can accompany the artist's performance on stage. This was the solution accepted by the composer at my request, allowing me to perform the piece not only with an active sensor.

Interestingly, the audience's needs and the constant connection they have with the visual aspect of concerts dictated how the sensor's activity would be presented to the public. The fact that the composer himself acknowledged that he imagined the piece with a strong visual influence and that the sensor in *Pendulum* was supposed to suggest a type of dance with the pianist's left hand – almost like a cobra dance returning to the straw basket, hypnotized by the music – is an extremely important detail for understanding the contemporary art of the 21st century. In this regard, I was instructed to perform with my left hand exactly those movements that would elicit the appropriate response from the sensor. As a performer, it is impressive to realize how sensitive these tools have become and that the

³⁷ He benefited from resources that allowed him to commission piano and orchestra concertos from the best composers of the time, even if the compositional style of some of them surpassed his own. The disputes between the pianist and Ravel regarding the *Concerto for the Left Hand* are well known. It is also already known that Prokofiev's concertante work for the left hand could not be performed on stage until the death of the [Austrian pianist], as he had locked away the composition, deciding never to perform it again.

implications of using them go beyond the strictly functionalist sense. The coming years will probably bear a strong imprint from the electronic sector, increasingly creative and responsive to human involvement.

3. Results

Over time, all performing arts have undergone changes that have proven to be more than beneficial. The primary quality of these transformations seems to be, consciously or not, an alignment of creations and the emotions they generate with the personality type of 21st-century individuals, and perhaps also an adaptation to their needs. In cinematographic art, we observe the emergence of works by directors such as Stanley Kubrick, Lars von Trier, Akira Kurosawa, and Yorgos Lanthimos. In ballet, the change imposed by figures like Pina Bausch, Preljocaj, and Theatrebin is evident. In opera, we increasingly discover the involvement of internationally renowned directors such as Tobias Kratzer or Lydia Steier, who influence the visual aspect of performances and, of course, the stage design.

What can be noticed when analyzing the type of creations produced by all the aforementioned names is a persistent use of artistic crossovers, a cinematographically meticulous attention to detail. Performers are challenged to surpass their areas of expertise and allow themselves to be guided toward boundary zones where they transform into multi-skilled artists: dancer-actors, musician-actors, actor-singers. All these new qualities of performers are also possible due to transformations in the venues where events take place—the architectural and technical requirements for a 21st-century performance hall have become impressively complex.

By carefully listening to the works discussed and revealed in the previous pages, we discover a new type of creation that involves various changes in contemporary performance, even regarding solo compositions. All the examples above were intentionally chosen to be compositions written for a single performer—in all these cases, solo piano works. First, we notice the need to utilize all of the piano's sound resources. The performer plays only on the piano strings in H. Cowell's *Banshee*, or only with fingernails on the piano keys in H. Lachenmann's *Guero*. The performer is also required to take on a percussive role in J. Widmann's *Reverberation Study*. We discover that the pianist becomes an actor in G. Crumb's *The Phantom Gondolier* and a director in J. Cage's *4'33"* and C. Crețu's *Pendulum*.

4. Conclusions

All these forms of artistic blending serve the creation process, then guide the performer toward a complete artistic structure. But perhaps most importantly, they lead the audience toward diverse, complex, and original experiences. Ultimately, the creator is the REPRESENTATIVE AUDIENCE that must be present in the hall at any type of performance, as a strong connection places them in an optimal position – where they know how to negotiate and educate an audience that does not have formal artistic studies. The creator is a thought leader, and opinions represent a stance that must always be adjusted in relation to various perspectives—perspectives that can only be judged if one assumes the role of the AUDIENCE.

References

1. Anghel, Irinel, 2018, *Orientări, Direcții, Curente al muzicii românești din a doua jumătate a secolului XX*, Eikon Publishing House, Bucharest
2. Manolache, Laura, 2001, *Amurgul Evului Tonal, Conceptele Consonanță - Disonanță de la Antagonism la Complementaritate*, Musical Publishing House Bucharest
3. Rotaru, Diana, 2022, *Transa Contemporană, Ipostaze ale repetiției în muzica nouă*, Musical Publishing House, Bucharest
4. Spitzer, Michael, 2022, *Omul Muzical, O istorie a Vieții pe Pământ*, Orion Publishing House, Bucharest
5. Sandu-Dediu, Valentina, 2010, *Alegeri, Atitudini, Afecte*, Didactic and Pedagogic Publishing House, R.A., Bucharest
6. Stanislavski, Konstantin, 2013, *Munca actorului cu sine însuși*, ediția 2021, Nemira Publishing House, Bucharest