

Movement to Sound Sound to Movement

Interpreting Multimedia
Piano Compositions

edited by Rei Nakamura, Marion Saxer, and Simon Tönies

This publication was generously funded by the Goethe University Frankfurt



Kindly supported by Steidinger Apparatebau GmbH, Global Forest e.V.,
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Wolke Verlag, Hofheim
Printed in Germany
Typesetting in Simoncini Garamond
Cover design: Friedwalt Donner, Alonissos
Cover photo: Stefan Prins
ISBN 978-3-95593-099-8

www.wolke-verlag.de

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Preface

This book is an experiment. In 2007, pianist Rei Nakamura – one of the distinguished performers of contemporary music – launched the project “Movement to Sound, Sound to Movement”. Her idea was to commission and select pieces in various multimedia settings and bundle them to a yearly changing concert program. Today, Nakamura has premiered 25 compositions for the project, each of which addressing the relationship between performer, technology and audience, sound and gesture, acoustical instrument and electronic setting.

In 2017, ten years after the first concert, Rei and the Frankfurt musicologist Marion Saxer decided to collaborate on this book. It was intended to serve several purposes at once: to take stock of the project from a performer’s perspective, to provide a work catalogue for others to explore, to conserve an ephemeral musical corpus that relies on the live performance situation and, most importantly, to reflect on the aesthetic implications of these settings by analysing some exemplary works. In summer 2018, as a preparation for this book, Rei and Marion held a seminar in Frankfurt about multimedia piano compositions. Over the past two years, the concept gradually took shape. I became involved, first as a lecturer, then, as Marion’s illness worsened, as a co-editor. It came as a shock for all of us, when Marion passed away in early 2020. We dedicate this book to her and to her inspiring passion for experimental music. It wouldn’t have been possible without her input, nor would it have been possible without the generous help of Goethe University Frankfurt. Of course, we would also like to thank everyone else who contributed to this book, especially: the authors themselves; the composers and performers; our publisher Peter Mischung for his effort and patience; Alistair Zaldua for translation and proofreading; our co-reviewer, Sebastian Rose; Thomas Betzwieser; and Frank Pfeifer.

With Rei’s repertoire as a central theme, the essays collected in this volume shed light on the opportunities and challenges of media-integrated piano composition. It thus offers insights into one of the most pressing areas of contemporary music. Some of the questions are: How do performers deal with these challenges that are seldom taught at music academies? What does media integration mean for composers today? What position do audio-visual concepts take for the change of aesthetic contexts of experience? The programmatic title *Interpreting multimedia piano compositions* is to be understood in a double sense: Firstly, ‘interpreting’

means analysing, reflecting on and talking about music. That's what we do. But it also denotes the artistic performance on stage as a thematic focal point.

The rather unusual outline – dialogue between musicological analysis and contextualisation on the one hand, artistic self-reflection on the other – is mirrored in the three sections of the book: after Björn Gottstein who, as director of the Donaueschingen Musiktage, has supported and curated multimedia works, and an introduction to “Movement to Sound, Sound to Movement” by Rei Nakamura, the first part presents insights into a selection of multimedia works from a musicological perspective.

Anne Holzmüller asks how technology is addressed in Stefans Prins' *Piano Hero* cycle. Instead of forcing the four pieces into an ubiquitous hermeneutic narrative, Holzmüller traces several thematic or conceptual paradigms – technology, sound, mirror, immersion and 'meta-poetic' self-reference – concluding that 'the music doesn't only reflect on the role of technology in society but also on its own epistemological and aesthetic preconditions'.

On a similar note, Simon Tönies complements the explicit, Žižek-inspired hermeneutics of Federico Reuben's *On Violence* by considering the piece as a 'choreography of performative roles'. He describes the dichotomy between political reference and autonomous theatricality as an essential conflict and therefore self-criticising potential of the piece.

Taking recent piano pieces by Mark Barden and Christian Winther Christensen as an example, Rainer Nonnenmann focuses on performer physicality, his proposition being that these pieces 'shift the common focus from the resultant sound to the player's concrete haptic-tactile handling of the keyboard'. In his close reading of the score, Nonnenman also draws attention to the listener's experience.

Marion Saxer discusses Annesley Black's *4238 de Bullion* from a media theorist's perspective. A thorough analysis of the piece aims to 'disclose the medial forms of interaction that are at work'. Saxer shows how, through different techniques, *4238* circumvent the listener's capability of distinguishing between medial differences and how this reflects on our medial perception in everyday life.

Bastian Zimmermann focuses on the 'new and ambivalent spaces of hearing and seeing' enabled by Michael Beil's *Mach Sieben* audio-visual set-up. The symmetrical structure and the confrontation of the live performance with its pre-recorded retrograde is, as Zimmermann argues, only gradually discovered by the audience, shifting the attention to the contingent frame and preconditions of a concert situation.

Diego Ramos Rodríguez dives deeper into the notational aspects of multimedia works, specifically with regard to composition and performance practice. By choosing three distinct pieces as a starting point, he shows not only how 'each composition defines its own notational elements and ways of reading them', but

also how notation tries to connect the different medial layers and to stage the performer's physicality.

Sebastian Rose closes the first section with an historical excursus about the aesthetics of automated pianos in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. He argues that an increasingly 'troubled relationship' between humans and machines along with a renegotiation of medial settings during the past century still resonate in contemporary music production and perception.

By creating experimental concert situations that undermine habits of interpretation and reception, media-integrated approaches raise the question of the emergence and requirement of new interpretative strategies. The second part therefore shifts the emphasis towards the performer's perspective.

After a short backstage view by Catherine Vickers on curating the Piano + Festival at the ZKM Karlsruhe, Rei Nakamura talks about the collaboration process between composer and performer that plays an essential role in many pieces of her repertoire. Her conclusion that performing multimedia works is a complex, rather holistic task is further exemplified in her second text "Rethinking Interpretation". Here, Nakamura describes her experience with concrete technical challenges like click tracks or real time notation and demonstrates how an interpretative approach can be tailored around an individual piece. She closes with some personal considerations about concert dramaturgy.

Sebastian Kobler explains the development of Orm Finnendahl's *Versatzstücke* and how he had to adapt the rehearsal process to its specific challenges. He also sheds light on the more experimental stages of the composition where he and the composer tried to find acoustical equivalences to the sound of the electronics on the piano.

As an epilogue, Ernst Surberg offers an intriguing and uniquely poetic approach to one of the leitmotifs of this book: the estranged and bizarre live interaction between human performer and electronics on stage.

The third part combines three essays by multimedia composers. Annesley Black uses John Cage's and Merce Cunningham's *Variations V* as a reference to theorise about the relation between humans and technology in multimedia art, specifically with regard to her piece *4238 de Bullion*. Black states that in her work technology is to a lesser extent an extension of the body than an element that comes into 'conflict' with it.

Johannes Kreidler shares some observations around the role of interpretation for him as a composer. He starts with some general considerations about topics such as notation, rehearsing, improvisation and recording to then specify his ideas with regard to his *Study* for piano, audio and video playback. In a live situation the results can, as Kreidler puts it, 'go beyond the demands of the written score'.

Stefan Prins discusses the compositional and performative strategies in his *Piano Hero* cycle. He emphasises the importance of the performer's physical presence in contrast to the video projection and outlines how, over the four pieces, the performer is confronted with a gradually diminishing agency. It becomes clear that, for Prins, composing, as well as performing in multimedia settings, demand that this relationship be constantly evaluated.

In the appendix, 33 pieces from Rei's project have been documented along with short descriptions (mostly by their respective composer). Anyone interested in playing or studying recent multimedia piano compositions is invited to explore this selection of works. If we can inspire more artists, researchers and institutions to engage with non-conventional settings, the experiment of putting together this book was a success.

Simon Tönies, Frankfurt, 2021