

# *The Piano*

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## Abstract

A pianist experiences the *thingness* of the piano as an extension of the body. Although contact occurs only through the player's extremities, the piano invites the use of the whole body to transmit emotion, transport the player into the body and mind of a composer, and transform the pianist's ability to hear.

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My grand piano is a black wooden box balanced on three tapering legs that rest on brass wheels. From the side it looks smooth and sleek. The roundness of the piano's curve welcomes me like the open arms of a comforting parent or an inviting lover. But the corner of the open lid sticks out, preventing my body from touching the most beautiful part of the curve. Instead, the piano invites me to keep my distance as I sit apart from it on the bench. Despite its smooth polished beauty, not a single centimetre of the piano's wooden case is meant to be touched. The only point of access is the zebra-striped keyboard on one end. This end is square and looks precisely laid out for a specific purpose; it invites me to press a key with the tip of one of my ten fingers. These fingers and the balls of my feet are the only parts of my body that actually make contact with the instrument. Despite this minimal contact and as a pianist, I experience the piano as an extension of myself. The piano invites me to join it to form a piano-person dyad. Like the keyboard of a computer, the piano's keyboard transmits the smallest finger movements into large events. Every key is a trigger for a cascade of sound. Like Merleau-Ponty's (1962) typist, I experience the piano not as an object but as "a present and real part of my living body" (p. 144). Through it, I project my possibilities in a way that "qualitatively affects [my] perceptual experience such that the keyboard is presented as a place through which music 'appears in the world'" (Berendzen, 2014, p. 192). Indeed, it is impossible to speak of the piano as a *thing* apart from my bodily space.

A heavy lid shields the piano's inner workings from view. It does not invite me in; there is no handle, no sign that says, "Open here." The piano hides its guts the way a shiny sports car gives no hint of the hard-working pistons pumping under the hood. To lift the piano's lid requires the effort of my entire body; pushing it skyward reveals gleaming strings pegged to an inflexible steel frame. The solidity of the lid gives my body a taste of the enormous weight of the

entire piano. I struggle to hold up the lid with one arm while I reach for the prop-stick with the other. A moment of trepidation ensues as the stick rises to meet just the right place on the underside of the lid, just as a mechanic carefully secures the prop to keep a car's hood from crashing down on someone's fingers. Like a car, the piano permits me to look inside it, for example, when something goes wrong—a string out of tune or a weird vibration. But under normal circumstances I do not venture under the hood. My fingers and feet experience the piano from the outside but its sounds fill my being entirely, pushing away other thoughts and feelings. The piano is a piece of technology in the way Franklin (1990) conceived of technology; it is not an artifact but a “system that entails far more than its individual material components” (p. 2). It is what I bring to the object—the music coursing through my mind's eyes and ears, my knowing hands on the keys—that conjures its *thingness* into existence.

The piano is an emotional prosthetic that transforms feelings into sound through the silent actions of my arms, hands, fingers, and feet. Unlike singing or writing, there is no need to assign words to be deciphered by the listener. The meaning is direct, like the simstim unit William Gibson's (1984) cyberspace cowboy in his novel *Neuromancer* uses to experience neural impulses that replicate the physical sensations of another person. The piano transmits joy and mourning, playfulness and gravitas, rage and resignation as the pianist creates myriad combinations of sounds that are loud and soft, long and short, sudden and gentle.

To perform these sounds requires me to control my entire body so my fingers and feet touch the piano in precise ways. As my wrist rises to hover my fingers over the keyboard, I may hear the note just before I strike the key. The key feels cool and smooth under my touch; it has just the right amount of grip to let my fingertip make a secure but unencumbered landing. My legs support the core by remaining anchored on the floor. The balls of my feet extend onto the pedals, pressing and releasing with gentle control like a driver easing through a busy parking lot. The right foot lives on the sustain pedal, lifting and lowering the damper felts that permit or deny the strings the freedom of vibration. When the felts are up, the strings ring and ring, the sound decaying back to silence over a span long enough to suspend my thoughts like a paper airplane drifting gently to earth. Lifting my toes cuts off the sound, creating a split second of silence to prepare the ear for the next event. My abdomen supports my arms' large movements across the keyboard. My arms are suspended like those of a marionette, waiting to be dropped to the keys. The velocity and weight with which they fall determine the emotional quality of the sound.

Wrists, hands, and fingers display a fluid motion, down and up, down and up. To make the piano speak they must fall, not press. I feel the action as freedom like water poured from a spout and not sucked from a wet cloth. My wrists absorb the shock when the key hits the bottom of its trajectory and then rise into the air to prepare for the next keystroke. Each finger becomes strong and round just in time for the soft pad at the very end of the fingertip to strike the key. When not playing, the finger relaxes. As I sing the melody in my head, my fingers follow along and I relax a little more arm muscle into each melody note to give it weight and sonority. When I play the clarinet, a leap from a very low note to a very high note requires a tiny movement of a few fingers along with a slight tightening of my lips on the mouthpiece. To accomplish the same leap on the piano my hand must make a grander journey to map the shape of the music.

With training and practice, I concentrate not on positioning and moving my body but on creating melody and harmony. In driving a familiar car to visit a friend, I focus on the road, on other drivers, and perhaps on the upcoming meeting, but the operation of the car itself does not command detailed noticing unless it malfunctions. Heidegger (1962) would say that for me the piano, like the car, is ready-to-hand. Playing, the piano itself falls away, and the music remains. I

automatically vary the force and acceleration with which I strike the keys, communicating through subtle adjustments in the weight of the falling arm, the speed with which the finger grabs a key, the angle of the finger on the key, and the rotation of the wrist as the fingers move from key to key. To speak sadness, my fingers move between the pitches that harmonize minor thirds, feeling contracted compared with the usual span for a happier tonality. The melody sounds plaintive because I add microseconds to the time between each successive note, stretching the spaces wider than the listener expects. Then I push the tempo, compressing the time to rush into the next phrase. I breathe through my fingers—long ragged inhalations followed by rapid sighs. My left hand stretches wide to play the low bass octaves just as a patient unclenches her hands to dissipate her pain. In my right hand a melodic leap of an octave also requires a stretch that precipitates an emotional release in my body and brain.

The piano rarely transforms from ready-to-hand to its unwelcome cousin, present-at-hand, where I must focus on the limitations of the instrument rather than on the music I wish it to perform. Yet this happens to me now, in the third movement of Beethoven's Sonata Op. 31 No. 2 in D minor. The music calls for an enormous and very fast leap of the right hand from high up on the keyboard to very low. As I try the leap, my right bicep collides with the side of my right breast. I am startled into the awareness that this music was written by a man whose bicep had a clear path anywhere it wished to go. I attempt the leap again to see if I can smooth it out. Nope, boob. I could try shifting my bum rearward to create a bigger space between the keyboard and my body for my arm to move but this would push my foot too far from the pedal. This music requires me to sit as Beethoven sat. My body's figuration has limits; it cannot do everything the composer's body could do. But it is close enough, like wearing the clothes of a friend who is nearly the same size. To play the music of another is, like the simstim unit, both exhilarating and risky. Can I, through my fingers at the keyboard as dictated by a grieving composer, touch the deepest pain of loss?

Despite the enormous size of the instrument and the involvement of the whole body, it is only the tips of my fingers and the balls of my feet that actually contact the piano. Imagine if it had been designed so the player sat atop the cabinet to feel its vibrations, just as Beethoven leaned on his instrument to compose after he lost his hearing! Other instruments we hold in our hands or blow into, but the piano permits no such physical intimacy. To play a video game I make small movements on a computer keyboard to become the character on the screen just as my piano playing puts me in the skin of a composer. My attention focuses not my fingers but on the action on the screen. Any comfort I experience at the computer comes not from the minimal physical contact but from the journey of my mind into a landscape both expanded and constrained by the choices of the game's software architects. In the same way, my distance from the mechanisms of the piano's inner workings channels my attention along the sonic journey permitted by the seven octaves of keys within my reach. Like a computer programmer who was historically restricted to zeros and ones, I too am constrained by a palette of semitones. While I may sometimes hear in my mind even finer gradations of sound, my fingers must choose the closest half tone to the note I want. As time passes, just as citizens of a world dominated by zeros and ones become acculturated to stark binaries in constructs that range from gender to politics, my pianist's ear has been moulded to hear the degrees of the chromatic scale. As I dwell within the piano-person dyad, this black wooden box transforms my body's ability to hear.

## **References**

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