Writing for Piano

Sonic Boom Workshop: October 16, 2022 Michael Park, pianist and composer

Overview of Mechanisms

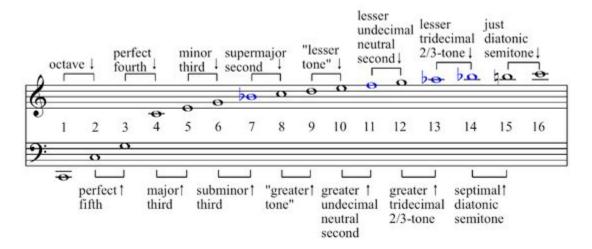
- Keyboard and Hammers
 - Action = 12-40 moving or secured parts required for hand-key contact to result in a sound
- Strings and Bridges
 - Steel and copper strings
 - Bridge placement varies by size and make of piano
- Pedal
 - Damper
 - Sostenuto
 - Una Corda

Strings and the Harmonic Series

Piano is basically a giant resonance box.

Using damper pedal gives access to sympathetic vibrations.

"Con Ped" gives performer freedom to use their best judgement.



Sound Production

- Articulation and combination with pedal
- Simultaneity = 88 notes, but limited
 - o 2 hand clusters spanning a 9th, or forearm clusters
 - My handspan = 9th comfortably
- Half Pedal

Chords and Voicing

What even is a chord?!?

(The secondary element in the melody/accompaniment texture)

- Any and all notes in a chord across all octaves
- Myriad ways of expressing that harmony
 - Triad
 - Arpeggio
 - Ostinato (Alberti Bass, Chopin LH)
- Go beyond basic triads!
- Octaves more and less powerful than you think!
- Chord Voicing
 - How a vertical chord is spread out
 - Possibility of making one voice of chord louder than others

Working with Text

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- Text Placement = under vocal line, dynamics go above
- Syllabication
 - Words are shown/connected via hyphens
 - Syllables are shown/connected via slurs and extension lines
 - Singers naturally phrase words and ideas together use slurs only if going against the flow
- Text takes longer to sing than to speak (longer than you'd think)
- Spoken Text:
 - Can be written rhythmically, but often sounds robotic (good for rhythmic coordination)
 - Can be written as basic prose (more natural)

Voice + Piano = (Art) Song?

- If piano plays melody and accompaniment, why do you need another melody?
- If piano and voice both have melody, what is their relationship?
- Can the voice do anything beyond melody?
- If you double voice + piano on the same melody, why do you hate me so?
- Considering this art form has been around for hundreds of years and has explored endless accompaniments etc., what are you bringing to the table?

Examples from:

A Spirit Alive in a Ready Body, by Michael Park and Ray Hsu

Blackmud by Yi-Ning Lo and Kim Trainor

Extended Techniques

Safe Practice of Piano Extended Techniques

2 page info sheet by Dr. Rachel Kiyo Iwaasa

Different Sound Production (articulation)

- Fingers: plucking, strumming, fingernails on string
- Other materials softer than materials to activate string

Alter the Sound Itself (tonal)

Block strings

Non-String Percussion

• Using other parts of piano: body, wood, non-sounding portions of strings, pegs, bridge

K.I.S.S. Principle for Extended Techniques

While I've worked with extended techniques and am generally comfortable with them, they are not where my passion lies.

I do not work with Prepared Piano. I am willing to work with temporary alterations.

A good guideline is to limit the implementation of those alterations to when the performer is entering/exiting the stage. Think of how uncomfortable it is for audience to sit and watch.

Resource Management for Ext. Tech.

There are physical restrictions to many extended techniques

- Specific pitches inside piano are tricky and difficult, requiring preparation
- Bridges are not standardized and often interfere with desired effect
- Most require pedal = one foot locked in place, limits reach within piano
- Movement from keyboard to piano-inside takes physical and mental adjustment. Build this into rhythmic flow of the piece.
- Learning/practicing ext. tech. takes much longer than traditional playing

Speaking While Playing

While there are some standout pieces like Rzewski's *De Profundis* and Tom Johnson's *Failing*, much of the repertoire for speaking pianist has been limited to percussive interjections, and occasionally including whistling/humming/singing.

Natural speech rhythm is increasingly being integrated, but limited by the ability of the performer.

This IS where my passion lies, and I'm particularly good at reciting/acting narrative text.

Examples from *Performing Memories*.