

# 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.

The image displays a musical staff with 16 notes, numbered 1 through 16. The notes are: 1 (C), 2 (C), 3 (G), 4 (E), 5 (C), 6 (E), 7 (G), 8 (C), 9 (D), 10 (E), 11 (F), 12 (G), 13 (A), 14 (B), 15 (C), 16 (C). The notes are grouped into pairs with brackets and labeled with interval names. The labels above the staff are: octave ↓ (1-2), perfect fourth ↓ (3-4), minor third ↓ (4-5), supermajor second ↓ (5-6), "lesser tone" ↓ (6-7), lesser undecimal neutral second ↓ (7-8), lesser tridecimal 2/3-tone ↓ (8-9), and just diatonic semitone ↓ (9-10). The labels below the staff are: perfect fifth ↑ (1-2), major third ↑ (3-4), subminor third ↑ (4-5), "greater tone" ↑ (5-6), greater undecimal neutral second ↑ (6-7), greater tridecimal 2/3-tone ↑ (7-8), and septimal diatonic semitone ↑ (9-10). The notes are written on a treble clef staff, with the first two notes (1 and 2) on the first line (C4), and the remaining notes on the first space (C4) and the first line (C4).

# Sound Production

- Articulation and combination with pedal
- Simultaneity = 88 notes, but limited
  - 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

- Copyright / Public Domain / Living Writer
- 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*.