

Making a Sonic Portrait of an Innovative Piano

Drawing inspiration from 19th-century performance practices, how can one design a recital that highlights the properties of Paulello's 102-key piano?

Since the early 20th century, when Steinway set the standard for the modern piano, the design of the acoustic grand piano has remained largely unchanged. Generations of pianists and composers have become accustomed to working and performing on pianos with similar designs. This consistency enables performances to be reproduced with only minor adjustments across the world's major concert halls.

In the early 2000s, however, a few independent piano makers began to challenge these established design norms. Among them stands Stephen Paulello, who created a 102-key piano with extended resonance and a richer harmonic profile than traditional pianos. His instrument also allows full access to its parallel string layout. Faced with this innovative piano, how should a performer or composer respond? How can one create a sonic portrait of it — that is, how to design a recital that explores its technical and sonic characteristics?

My approach is to draw inspiration from 19th-century composer-performers like Carl Czerny, Clara Wieck, and Franz Liszt, who interpreted music beyond strict adherence to the written score. At that time, pianos varied greatly in design, and it was common practice to begin with an improvised prelude to warm up the fingers, familiarize oneself with the instrument, and introduce the upcoming piece. These musicians often added embellishments and cadenzas, creating unique interpretations with each performance.

For my recital on Paulello's piano, I sought to revive this practice. I chose pieces with a focus on improvisation and adapted them to highlight the instrument's distinctive features. Working closely with the piano maker and two composers, I explored the piano's extended registers, resonance, and tonal variations, using both traditional and contemporary techniques on the keyboard or inside the instrument. I then shaped the recital into a cohesive, singular artwork, with each piece flowing seamlessly into the next through improvised preludes and connective passages.

This approach connects historical performance practices with modern creative expression. It suggests that musical pieces can be viewed as unfinished works, open to adaptation, extension, or even recomposition during performance. From this perspective, originality lies not necessarily in the search of novelty but in the pursuit of distinctiveness.

Parallel Session



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Johann Vacher is a French pianist and composer. He studied piano at the Haute École de Musique in Geneva under Cedric Pescia and Pascal Devoyon. Currently, he teaches supplementary piano, keyboard harmony, orchestral score reading, and a seminar on contemporary music titled “Creativity and New Technologies” at the same institution. A specialist in modern and contemporary music, Johann performs in solo recitals, chamber ensembles, and as an orchestral pianist. He is pursuing a PhD at the Orpheus Institute in Ghent/LUCA Leuven, focusing on “Amplified Piano Music.” Passionate about the intersections between music and other art forms, Johann has conceived and premiered various musical productions as both a musician and actor with "Ensemble Caravelle." He is also a founding member and artistic co-director of the French Chamber Music Festival "Les Fieffés Musiciens", an annual event held each July since 2015.