

Ghosts in the Piano

Acoustic Feedback as a Musical Partner in a Grand Piano

In Spring 2025, American composer **Tom Gurin** developed a system for **generating expressive and dynamic acoustic feedback** within a grand piano. The setup combines an electric guitar pickup, an amplifier, and a tactile transducer placed on the soundboard or the metal frame of the instrument. We conducted a series of experiments that culminated in the premiere of Tom's work *Can you see me*, for two performers and amplified piano. In this piece, both performers engage exclusively with extended techniques—never playing notes from the keyboard. Wishing to expand Tom's concept, I continued our explorations through a series of improvisations examining the possible **interactions between acoustic feedback and keyboard playing**. Throughout this process, we came to realize that the behaviour of acoustic feedback—this non-human entity which, as Robert Ashley observed, is “the only sound intrinsic to electronic music” (Holmes 2008, 185)—**resists human control and prediction**. Its artificial voice unveils a hidden and complex world, ephemeral and unstable. Our experiments led us to ask the following question: **in what ways can acoustic feedback inside a grand piano function as a non-human musical agent, shaping compositional and improvisational processes?**

Collaborating with the feedback ecosystem of a grand piano means entering into a form of **negotiation**: a compositional practice grounded in **improvisation**, one that demands the performer listen and adapt in real time. Both Tom and I create music that can never appear the same twice, vanishing into the air as soon as it manifests—a form of collaboration with ghosts. The piano, too, is haunted—by the repertoire written for it and by the social expectations it carries. By silencing the keyboard, Tom turned the instrument into a **blank space**, focusing on the emergence of the acoustic-feedback ghosts. My improvisations, in contrast, aim to **connect these new electronic ghosts with the older musical ones**. By granting me permission to extend his work through my own improvisations, Tom also revived another ghost: the

Research Performances

performer's art of **expanding pre-existing pieces** through improvised preludes, cadenzas, or variations—an almost vanished practice that, perhaps, deserves to return and haunt the future of contemporary music performance.

References

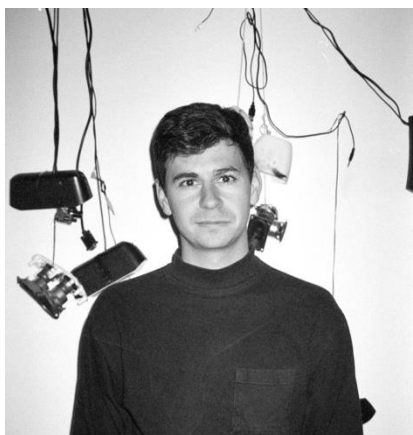
- COBUSSEN, Marcel. *The Field of Musical Improvisation*, Leiden University Presss, 2017
- ECK, Cathy (van). *Between air and electricity*. New York, Bloomsbury, 2017
- HOLMES, Thom. *Electronic and Experimental Music: technology, Music and Culture*. New York: Routledge, 2008.
- KEMPER, Jakko. "Glitch, the Post-digital Aesthetic of Failure and Twenty-First-Century Media", in *European Journal of Cultural Studies* 2023, Vol. 26(1) 47–63



Johann VACHER
KU Leuven - Orpheus Instituut Ghent
(BE) / HEM Genève (CH)
johann.vacher@gmail.com

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.

Research Performances



Tom GURIN
Independant composer (Bordeaux, FR)
thomas.gurin@gmail.com

Tom Gurin is a composer, multimedia artist, and carillonist. He holds a master's degree (2025) in music composition and computer music from the Haute école de musique de Genève and a bachelor's degree (2018) in music composition from Yale University. He also holds a superior diploma in composition from the École Normale de Musique de Paris and an artist diploma from the Royal Carillon School in Belgium. He studied composition privately with Allain Gaussin in Paris. Tom's musical scores range from traditional orchestration to interactive video games. He has presented his work in cabaret shows, at art galleries, and in contemporary music festivals. He is a 2025 Tremplin Leenaards / HEM Prize winner, a past multimedia (sound and sculpture) laureate at the Cité internationale des arts in Paris, a Mortimer Hays-Brandeis Traveling Fellowship recipient, a Fulbright scholar, a Harriet Hale Woolley Scholar, and a Fellow of the Belgian-American Educational Foundation.