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Building a Piano Concert Repertoire that Incorporates Extended Techniques

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Abstract

In Malaysia, the most commonly used piano syllabi used by piano teachers have been the Associated Board of the Royal Schools of Music (ABRSM), Trinity College London (TRINITY), and London College of Music Examinations (LCM). A quick survey on the exam syllabi shows that even though there are pieces from the 20th century, almost none of the pieces use extended techniques, or techniques beyond the conventional sense. Coming from a classical piano background herself, the researcher would like to set an example for the younger generation in Malaysia by including piano works that use extended techniques in her recital through a practice-led research, having the recital itself as part of the research output. The main objective of this research is to build a concert repertoire for piano that includes different kinds of extended techniques, with a sub objective to showcase how notable composers like Henry Cowell, György Kurtág, and Frederic Rzewski incorporate extended techniques in their compositions written for the grand piano since the early 20th century.

Keywords: *Henry Cowell, Inside the Piano, Piano Extended Techniques, Piano Repertoire, Tone Clusters*

Introduction

Some commonly used techniques of classical piano include basic playing techniques such as legato playing, staccato playing, and chords playing on the keyboard, as well as pedalling (Chang, 2017). Extended techniques mean techniques beyond these usual techniques. The term extended technique can be defined as “an unconventional technique of playing a musical instrument” (Ishii, 2005, p. 1). According to Jean-Francois Proulx (2009), extended piano techniques appeared in the early 20th century, mostly in the United States.

In Malaysia, the most common piano syllabi used by piano teachers have been the Associated Board of the Royal Schools of Music (ABRSM), Trinity College London (TRINITY), and London College of Music Examinations (LCM). A quick search on the syllabi shows that even though there are exam pieces from the twentieth century, almost none of the pieces use extended techniques, or techniques beyond the conventional sense. The researcher herself has gone through a similar process by taking ABRSM piano exam up till Grade 8, and TRINITY exam up till the LTCL (Licentiate of Trinity College, London) level.

Statement of Problem

Many piano students are not exposed to repertoire using extended techniques because of their lack of knowledge and experience playing contemporary repertoire apart from the European classical tradition (Orduz, 2011). This motivates the researcher to build and expand from a classical piano student repertoire to a concert repertoire that features extended techniques for the piano, culminating in the form of a piano recital as part of the research output. For this purpose, a few piano pieces from the 20th and 21st century were selected for this recital. The recital programme features works by Henry Cowell, György Kurtág, and Frederic Rzewski to showcase how these notable composers incorporated extended techniques in their compositions written for acoustic grand piano since the early 20th century. It is hoped that this performance of a recital featuring the use of extended techniques can inspire and motivate piano students in Malaysia to also include similar type of pieces in their future recitals.

Method

The practice-led research method is employed as the researcher who conducts the project is also the practitioner herself. Conscious steps are taken in this research process, in which “knowledge is used, or knowledge is searched for and articulated in the process” (Coumans, 2003, p. 65). The creative process is documented by the practitioner-researcher which is made transparent “by capturing each step the practitioner-researcher takes in the process, both consciously and unconsciously” (Nimkulrat, 2007, para. 8). In a practice-led research, the artist demonstrates that he “possesses sufficient knowledge to justify the choices he has made” (Coumans, 2003, p. 66).

One of the important choices the practitioner-researcher has to make in this research is to select appropriate piano works in creating and developing a recital programme based on her research interest and the performance theme. The first research output of this ongoing research is a 40-minute piano recital featuring works that incorporate different types of extended techniques.

Recital Programme

The level of difficulty in the 40-minute recital programme as shown below ranges from beginner to intermediate level

Title of works	Duration
1. <i>Allegro Barbaro</i> (1911) by Bela Bartok (1881-1945)	3.30
2. <i>Aeolian Harp</i> (1923) by Henry Cowell (1897-1965)	4.00
3. Selections from <i>Játékok</i> by György Kurtág (b.1926) from Volume 1 (1973) - Perpetuum mobile (2.10) - Dot-strumming (0.35) - Walking (0.35) - Scherzando (0.30) - Hommage a Tchaikovsky (1.30) from Volume 3 - Stop and Go (1.00)	6.20
4. <i>Ancient Music</i> (1986) by Ge Gan-Ru (b.1954) - Drum	7.00
5. Selections from <i>The Road</i> by Frederic Rzewski (b. 1938) - Mile 47 – A Walk In The Woods (8.00) - Mile 49 – The Weak and The Strong (5.30)	14.30
6. <i>Constellations I and II</i> by Diana Burrell (1948)	3.00
TOTAL DURATION	40.00

Table 1. Piano Recital Programme Featuring Extended Techniques

Literature Review

Extended Piano Techniques on the Keyboard

Extended techniques on the keyboard include the use of tone clusters and playing keys with body parts other than the fingers (Hinkley, 2017).

American composer Henry Cowell (1897-1965) was the man who introduced the word “cluster” to a specific musical term. In his first published article *Harmonic Development in Music* (1921), he regarded “cluster” as “a convenient term to indicate two or more minor seconds in juxtaposition, struck simultaneously and used as a unit” (Hicks, 1993).

Eight volume compilation of piano pieces called *Játékok* (also referred to *Spiele* or Games) by György Kurtág (b. 1926) include pieces for solo piano and four hands (or more) with tone clusters. The concept of musical games unfolds in different ways. “They can be analyzed as performative games, in which ‘playing’ is interpreted as the more obvious act of performing the pieces, but also

related to the idea of 'playfulness', therefore treating the piano almost as a toy..." (Coelho, 2014, p. iv). Example of pieces from *Játékok* that include tone clusters are *Flowers We Are*, *Frail Flowers*, *Dot-strumming*, *Walking*, *Scherzando*, *Fifths and Fourths* and *Palm Strokes*, *Hommage a Tchaikovsky*, and *Stop and Go*. Another example is *Winnsboro Cotton Mill Blues* by Frederic Rzewski, which begins with alternating bass notes and the whole chords with the forearms (Talento, 2017).

Extended Piano Techniques Inside the Piano

Extended techniques involving the inside of the piano include striking various parts of the piano's construction or directly manipulating the strings (Hinkley, 2017). Ishii (2005) expresses that "strings also can be struck by the fingertips, fingernails, palms, and foreign objects such as soft and hard drum sticks" (p. 29).

One composer who had explored this kind of extended techniques was Henry Cowell. He used the term "string piano" as his performing device as he was the first composer who played inside the piano directly on the strings. According to Vaes (2009), Cowell introduced string piano and announced "a new way of piano strings." (p. 672). He explored new piano sounds incorporating playing techniques like plucking, scraping, strumming, scratching, and stroking the inside strings of the piano, playing glissando across several strings or along a single string, and stopping the strings to alter the pitch or produce harmonic (Ishii, 2005). "The overall impression is that of a texture rather than of a chordal sonority consisting of separable fixed pitch elements" (Salzman, 1988, p.142).

Pizzicato techniques refer to plucking strings with the fingertip or with the fingernail to produce different timbres. The sound varies according to where the string is plucked close to the pins. According to Proulx (2009), "to play a pizzicato, the pianist can use any finger to pull the desired string firmly (but somewhat gently!) with flexible arms and wrists, and release it immediately in the same motion to let it vibrate as naturally as possible" (p. 35). One example of pizzicato technique is the piano work *Aeolian Harp* by Henry Cowell. *Aeolian Harp* is closely related to this research because of the non-traditional playing techniques used that produce a surprisingly unique timbre of the sound. *Aeolian Harp* also involves other string techniques like strumming on the strings of the piano.

On Cowell's 1963 Folkways recording, the composer himself claimed:

When I wanted to compose a piece around the idea of an Aeolian harp, which is a tiny wind harp to be hung in a window so that the wind will produce sound from the silk strings, the tones of the piano seemed a little bit too crass. So it suggested itself to me that if one could only play the harmonies on the strings of the piano directly, that you could have those gusty differences between loud and extreme soft that you might get a real Aeolian harp. And so a method of playing the chords on the strings was worked out. (Track 20)

Choreography

Proulx (2009) categorizes choreography as one of the extended piano techniques. Involving the pianist's movements, choreography includes percussion techniques and may also include vocal techniques. According to Hinkley (2017), "choreography primarily includes unusual playing positions, but it also includes techniques like stomping one's feet or clapping one's hands. Pianists are also required to perform various vocal techniques, including singing, whispering, whistling, and a variety of other effects" (p. 3).

Percussion techniques involve tapping on the different body parts of the piano. According to Proulx (2009), "one can strike any part with the tip of the fingers, the flat of the fingers, the nails, the palms or the knuckles; and one can allow any degree of rebound to take place in the striking reaction" (p. 96).

American composer and performer of avant-garde music, Frederic Rzewski, wrote a number of piano works that include this kind of extended technique. Some of his composition explore playing techniques such as body percussion, tapping the frame of the piano in addition to tone clusters. Good examples of these techniques include selections from his massive piano work *The Road*, which contains many percussion techniques.

A Walk In The Woods (Mile 47) from Part VI of *The Road* incorporates conventional and unconventional piano techniques in which half of the piece is to play melody and chords as usual while the other half involves tapping various rhythms on the body of the piano. The tapping involves various dynamics and articulation to bring out the different timbre of the piece. *The Weak and The Strong* (Mile 49) from Part VI uses percussion techniques throughout the entire piece. Although there is no melody in this piece, the rhythm, timbre, articulation and dynamics produced by the tapping of fingers and palm on the body of the piano tell the story of this piano work.

Extended Piano Techniques Inside the Piano with One Hand and On the Keyboard with the Other

This technique combines the use of keyboard and inside the piano whereby the pianist places one hand on the keyboard and one hand inside the piano simultaneously. Ishii (2005) provides a detail description on how the piano can be muted to modify its timbre:

The pianist places one hand on the string between the pins and the dampers, and strikes the corresponding keys with the other hand. The sound can be altered further by the amount of pressure; firm pressure produces a dull sound while light pressure changes the tone color slightly. The performer can also damp the string with the fingertips or the palm of one hand after the key has been depressed. In most cases, damping the strings is done very quickly after the key is struck. When the damping procedure is to be done slowly, the performer touches the string lightly, and then gradually increases the pressure (p. 17).

Conclusion

As stated, many piano students have not been exposed to repertoire using extended techniques and many piano exam syllabi do not usually include pieces with extended techniques. In arts, usually the artist is first being inspired before he or she inspires others. Indeed, the researcher herself was inspired to conduct a research on piano extended techniques because of her exposure to a piano performance given by pianist Yen-Lin Goh at the 2016 International Music and Performing Arts (IMPAC) conference hosted by the Faculty of Music and Performing Arts of Sultan Idris Education University, whereby the pianist performed her own composition and a contemporary piece by a living Dutch composer that explored not only different keyboard techniques, but also extended techniques, including those on the keys, on the keyboard frame and inside the strings. Similarly, the 40-minute piano recital given by the researcher has exposed some university students to 20th and 21st century piano repertoire and different extended techniques used in piano. As a result, some of the piano students who were present at the recital became curious of piano pieces that involve extended

techniques and were motivated to explore these types of works in their piano studies. The hope to inspire and motivate piano students in Malaysia was therefore achieved through the researcher's performance of the 40-minute recital showcasing the use of different types of piano extended techniques. The research is still on going. In the researcher's upcoming one-hour recital, the researcher hopes to invite more piano students so that more students can be exposed to these types of works and be inspired to explore these types of works themselves.

In addition to giving more exposure and more choices to piano students in building their piano repertoire, some studies have shown that there are benefits to learning extended piano techniques. A study on extended piano techniques carried out at Uludag University in Turkey has shown that the learning of extended techniques had caused positive effects on pianists (Demirci, Sungurtekin, Yilmaz, & Engu, 2015). It was believed that "these students trained with the modern piano techniques at the practicing stage of the project would adapt to these techniques, be able to perform compositions written with these techniques and appropriate for their levels and in this way develop appropriate viewpoints toward different playing techniques of the art of music in the following years and these different playing techniques would reinforce students' sense of self-confidence and increase their learning motivation levels" (Ismail & Sirin, 2013).

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