

MUSIC SINCE 1900

The Spectral Piano

*From Liszt, Scriabin, and Debussy
to the Digital Age*

MARILYN NONKEN

CAMBRIDGE

The Spectral Piano

The most influential compositional movement of the past fifty years, spectralism was informed by digital technology but also extended the aesthetics of pianist-composers such as Franz Liszt, Alexander Scriabin, and Claude Debussy. Students of Olivier Messiaen such as Tristan Murail and Gérard Grisey sought to create a cooperative committed to exploring the evolution of timbre in time as a basis for the musical experience. In *The Spectral Piano*, Marilyn Nonken shows how the spectral attitude was influenced by developments in technology but also continued a tradition of performative and compositional virtuosity. Nonken explores shared fascinations with the musical experience, which united spectralists with their Romantic and early modern predecessors. Examining Murail's *Territoires de l'oubli*, Jonathan Harvey's *Tombeau de Messiaen*, Joshua Fineberg's *Veils*, and Edmund Campion's *A Complete Wealth of Time*, she reveals how spectral concerns relate not only to the past but also to contemporary developments in philosophical aesthetics.

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Music since 1900

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Marilyn Nonken

The Spectral Piano: From Liszt, Scriabin, and Debussy to the Digital Age

The Spectral Piano

*From Liszt, Scriabin, and Debussy to the
Digital Age*

Marilyn Nonken

With a contributory chapter by Hugues Dufourt



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Acknowledgments

The Spectral Piano explores an attitude towards the piano that evolved over the course of the twentieth century, has transformed the repertoire, and continues to influence those who engage with it. In writing this book, I have benefited from the insights of performers, composers, theorists, musicologists, sound technicians, and nonmusicians alike, all of whom contributed their time and knowledge with an unusual generosity of spirit. The passion with which they joined me in my work and voiced their concerns both challenged me and encouraged me to take heart. Their shared enthusiasm continually renewed my belief that this topic will continue to captivate musicians well into the twenty-first century.

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- 1841 Liszt, *Réminiscences de Don Juan*, S.418
- 1851 Liszt, *Douze études d'exécution transcendante*, S.139
- 1855 Liszt, *Années de pèlerinage*, S.160 ("Première année: Suisse")
- 1858 Liszt, *Années de pèlerinage*, S.161 ("Deuxième année: Italie")
- 1874 Liszt, *Die Glocken des Straßburger Münsters*, S.6
- 1881 Liszt, *Nuages gris*, S.199
- 1883 Liszt, *Années de pèlerinage*, S.163 ("Troisième année")
- 1885 Liszt, *Bagatelle sans tonalité*, S.216a
- 1886 Liszt, *Unstern!*, S.208
- 1902 Debussy, *Pelléas et Mélisande*
- 1903 Debussy, *Estampes*
- 1904 Debussy, *L'isle joyeuse*
Busoni, Piano Concerto, Op. 39
- 1905 Debussy, *Images I*
Debussy, *La mer*
- 1906–1920 Ravel, *La valse*
- 1907 Debussy, *Images II*
- 1909 Schoenberg, *Drei Klavierstücke*, Op. 11
- 1909–1910 Scriabin, *Prométhée*
- 1910 Debussy, *Préludes I*
Busoni, *Fantasia contrappuntistica*
- 1911–1912 Scriabin, *Poème-nocturne*, Op. 61
Scriabin, Sonata no. 6, Op. 62
- 1913 Debussy, *Préludes II*
Scriabin, Sonata no. 9, Op. 68
Scriabin, Sonata no. 10, Op. 70
- 1914 Scriabin, *Vers la flamme*, Op. 72
Scriabin, *Etudes*, Op. 74
- 1923 Cowell, *Aeolian Harp*
- 1924 Viñes, *Menuet spectral (à la mémoire de Maurice Ravel)*
Gershwin, *Rhapsody in Blue*
- 1925 Cowell, *The Banshee*
- 1928 Ravel, *Boléro*
- 1928–1929 Messiaen, *Préludes*

- 1934 Varèse, *Ecuatorial*
- 1940–1941 Messiaen, *Quatuor pour la fin du temps*
- 1943 Messiaen, *Visions de l'amen*
- 1944 Messiaen, *Vingt regards sur l'enfant Jésus*
- 1946 Boulez, *Première sonate*
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- 1948 Boulez, *Deuxième sonate*
Cage, *Sonatas and Interludes*
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- 1948–1962 Nancarrow, *Studies for Player Piano*, nos. 1–30
- 1949 Messiaen, “Mode de valeurs et d'intensités” (*Quatre études de rythme*)
- 1950–1951 Goeyvaerts, *Nummer 1* (Sonata for Two Pianos)
- 1951 Stockhausen, *Kreuzspiel*
- 1951–1952 Boulez, *Structures Ia*
- 1952 Fano, *Sonate pour deux pianos*
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Stockhausen, *Klavierstücke I–IV*
- 1954 Varèse, *Déserts*
- 1955 Boulez, *Le marteau sans maître*
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- 1955–1957 Boulez, *Troisième sonate*
- 1956–1958 Messiaen, *Catalogue d'oiseaux*
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- 1958 Varèse, *Poème électronique*
- 1959 Scelsi, *Quattro pezzi per orchestra (su una nota sola)*
- 1959–1960 Messiaen, *Chronochromie*
- 1961 Xenakis, *Herma*
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- 1962 Johnston, *Knocking Piece*
Messiaen, *Sept haïkaï*
- 1963 Messiaen, *Couleurs de la cité céleste*
- 1964 Johnston, Sonata for Microtonal Piano
- 1965–1992 Nancarrow, *Studies for Player Piano*, nos. 31–51
- 1967 Murail, *Comme un oeil suspendu et poli par le songe ...*
Ligeti, *Lontano*
- 1968 Stockhausen, *Stimmung*
The Beatles, *Revolution no. 9*
- 1968–1969 Ligeti, *Ramifications*

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- 1969 Cage, *Cheap Imitation*
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- 1970 Davidovsky, *Synchronisms no. 6*
Lachenmann, *Guero*
Stockhausen, *Mantra*
Tenney, *Spectral Canon for Conlon Nancarrow*
Feldman, *Madame Press Died Last Week at Ninety*
- 1971 Messiaen, *La fauvette des jardins*
- 1972 Crumb, *Makrokosmos I*
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- 1973 Crumb, *Makrokosmos II*
Xenakis, *Evryali*
- 1974 Babbitt, *Reflections*
Lévinas, *Appels*
Grisey, *Périodes (Les espaces acoustiques II)*
- 1975 Rzewski, *The People United Will Never Be Defeated!*
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- 1976 Grisey, *Prologue (Les espaces acoustiques I)*
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Murail, *Mémoire/Erosion*
- 1977 Chowning, *Stria*
Feldman, *Piano*
Finnissy, *English Country Tunes*
Grisey, *Modulations (Les espaces acoustiques IV)*
Lévinas, *Voix dans un vaisseau d'airain*
Murail, *Territoires de l'oubli*
Vivier, *Shiraz*
- 1978 Adams, *Phrygian Gates*
Murail, *Ethers*
Grisey, *Modulations*
- 1978–1979 Dufourt, *Saturne*
Lévinas, *Ouverture pour une fête étrange*
- 1980 Carter, *Night Fantasies*
Harvey, *Mortuos plango, vivos voco*
Murail, *Gondwana*
Grisey, *Transitoires (Les espaces acoustiques V)*
- 1981 Ferneyhough, *Lemma-Icon-Epigram*
Feldman, *Triadic Memories*
Xenakis, *Mists*
- 1984 Harvey, *Bhakti*

- 1985 Grisey, *Epilogue (Les espaces acoustiques VI)*
Feldman, *For Bunita Marcus*
- 1986 Grisey, *Talea*
- 1990 Champion, *A Complete Wealth of Time*
- 1991 Fineberg, *Lightning*
- 1992 Murail, *Cloches d'adieu, et un sourire ...*
Lucier, *Music for Piano with Slow Sweep, Pure Wave Oscillators*
Troncin, *Seul*
- 1993 Murail, *La mandragore*
Troncin, *Ciel ouvert*
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- 1994 Harvey, *Tombeau de Messiaen*
Harvey, *Advaya*
Lindberg, *Concerto for Piano and Orchestra*
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- 1998 Harvey, *Homage to Cage, à Chopin (und Ligeti ist auch dabei)*
- 2000 Dufourt, *Rastlose Liebe*
Lindberg, *Jubilees*
- 2001 Fineberg, *Veils*
- 2002 Murail, *Les travaux et les jours*
- 2003 Harvey, *Bird Concerto with Pianosong*
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- 2006 Dufourt, *Erlkönig*
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- 2008 Dufourt, *La ligne gravissant la chute (Hommage à Chopin)*
- 2010 Lévinas, *Concerto pour un piano-espace no. 2 (revised)*
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Chronological list of works

- 2011 Dufourt, *Vent d'automne*
2012 Murail, *Le désenchantement du monde*
Fineberg, *Grisaille*
Dufourt, *On the Wings of the Morning*

1 An intimate history

The Spectral Piano explores the relationship of theory and technology to compositional and performance practices. It is an admittedly biased history of spectral music written from the perspective of an American pianist, in response to the repertoire I have explored and the composers with whom I have been fortunate to work. A larger, comprehensive history of the spectral attitude; its composers and their predecessors; and the repertoire of spectral and protospectral orchestral, electroacoustic, and instrumental music remains to be written. But an examination of the piano and the composers compelled to write for it offers a frame within which to contextualize the spectral attitude as both a contemporary phenomenon and a compositional approach rooted in the cultural, technological, and scientific developments of the past 200 years. A thoughtful appreciation of this history will in turn foster an appreciation of the attitudes towards sound, nature, and physicality that define spectralism in relation to the aesthetics of the late-Romantic and early-modern composers.

This is a story of transformation: how the conception of an instrument and its practice evolves and what inspires that evolution. It is an intimate history that tells, above all, a story of individuals and affinities, not eras. I will delineate the aesthetic trajectories of composers who shared an interest in specific aspects of the musical experience and explored them in their music, conscious, to paraphrase the composer Tristan Murail (b. 1947), of both the weight of history and the trivialities of fashion.

Although it is said that “history is written by the winners,” my purpose in writing this book is not to single out particular composers as “the winners.” As a pianist committed to the performance of works representative of many styles, I have never seen it as my role to identify any *Zukunftsmusik* or the “best” piece among a given group of pieces. Besides, I’m not certain what, if anything, is to be won: as composer and computer-music pioneer Jean-Claude Risset (b. 1938) tersely stated, “music is not an arms race” (Risset, 1996b). My role is to reveal the familial resemblances among various attitudes towards the craft of composition in general and to examine them in relation to the art of keyboard performance in particular.

The summer before attending conservatory, when I was seventeen years old, I studied with the pianist Armand Basile (b. 1922). In the 1950s and 1960s, then at the height of his powers, Basile was an acclaimed soloist and

chamber musician. Hailed as “a pianist of exceptional talents and terrific promise ... [whose] varied tone colors ... were more than enough to reveal a gifted pianist” (Steinfirst, 1943), Basile was appointed to the guest faculty at the Eastman School of Music and toured widely with violinist Abram Loft. By the time I came to work with him, his career had long since ended badly. He was almost entirely blind, plagued by poor health, and mournful of a life in music crippled by his own erratic performances and a form of self-sabotage, what his closest collaborators called a fatal “unwillingness to recognize that promotion of a concert career ... takes significant investment in printing and publicity” (Loft, 2003: 135). While his professional career had been a disappointment, he was still passionate about the repertoire and obsessed with the pursuit of different pianistic colors and harmonic-timbral transformations. I recall his fascination with sound as though it were yesterday that we sat together. I had never heard anyone speak about music in this fashion, treating sound itself as a material graspable, malleable, manipulable in time. My strongest memory is of our work together on Scriabin’s tenth sonata. In lessons, we would play all the notes in a measure at tempo, then catch their resonance in the pedal and simply wait, sitting silently and listening to their decay. In retrospect, I see that he was far more interested in teaching me how to listen to the piano than how to play the instrument in any traditional sense. Neely Bruce (b. 1944), an American composer who studied piano with Basile at Eastman in the 1960s, recalled Basile’s insistence that his students always practice at tempo – even if it meant proceeding only a few measures at a time – to learn to hear the distinctive sound of each phrase and grasp specific acoustic phenomena relating to tone color observable only in real time. As I became versed in a broader repertoire, I became aware that there were certain composers, like Scriabin, Liszt, and Debussy, whose music was particularly suited to Basile’s approach, rewarding the pianist intrigued by the temporal nature of timbral color. Other composers’ music, approached from this perspective, offered no rewards. Their music was “about” other things, not the sonorous world unique to the piano and the environment it offered for musical exploration.

Anecdotally, Bruce recalled rumors that Basile’s prodigious technique and sensitivity to touch and its timbral consequence came from untold hours in which he was forced, as a young pianist, to practice on a Virgil Practice Clavier – an early-twentieth-century silent keyboard with no strings and weighted keys, which clicked in response to the pianist’s touch and could be adjusted to various degrees of tension. Basile’s obsession with tone color may have been linked to traumatic experiences at the keyboard: initially, those of a prodigy allowed to play but not hear his instrument, and, later, to those of an artist who could imagine brilliant colors but only produce

them through the hands of another pianist. His fascination with pianistic resonance may also be traced to his later studies in New York. As a young man, he studied at The Juilliard School with Olga Samaroff (1880–1948), an American student (born Lucy Mary Agnes Hickenlooper) of Debussy's teacher Antoine-François Marmontel (1816–1898); and with Eduard Steuermann (1892–1964), who had worked in Berlin with Ferruccio Busoni (1886–1924), the virtuoso pianist, composer, and editor of several volumes of the Franz Liszt-Stiftung's complete edition of the composer's works.

But I am skeptical of pianists who tout their pedagogical lineages. Certain pianists always seem ready to trace their heritage, teacher by teacher, back to Liszt, Czerny, and Beethoven, as if to indicate something more than a highly rarified form of "Chinese whispers" – often evoking a veritable *Reinheitsgebot* for what seems the sole purpose of rationalizing a narrow approach to repertoire selection and performance practice. Instead, I connect Basile to Debussy, Liszt, and Busoni to suggest the opposite: an outward-looking, adventurous attitude towards the instrument shared by a diverse array of composers and performers similarly enamored with the sheer sonic possibility and physicality of pianistic sound. Their attitude underlies a certain philosophy towards playing, writing for, and thinking about the piano that has led not to aesthetic paralysis and stylistic atrophy but to radical changes in compositional and performance practice.

In my early twenties, I specialized in the performance of music considered "difficult" (by myself, and other performers and listeners as well): the works of Arnold Schoenberg (1874–1951), Milton Babbitt (1916–2012), Pierre Boulez (b. 1925), Brian Ferneyhough (b. 1943), and Michael Finnissy (b. 1946), as well as their American protégés such as Jason Eckardt (b. 1971). I was drawn to their music's complexity and saw it as an aesthetic strength. I was also curious to know what attracted listeners and performers like myself to this repertoire, and what distinguished us from others who found the same music needlessly opaque and ungratifying, even punishing. By that time, I had studied at the Eastman School with David Burge (1930–2013), a student of the reclusive virtuoso, Pietro Scarpini (1911–1997) known for his performances of Busoni and Scriabin. Compared to his colleagues and contemporaries in the world of the conservatory, Burge was remarkably open-minded when it came to the music of his own time. Yet he dismissed the music of Ferneyhough and Wolfgang Rihm (b. 1952) as "self-indulgent complexity and sonic violence carried to an unnecessarily cruel level of intensity," and the piano music of Babbitt as "the product of intellectual tabulations rather than the expression of human feelings ... One begins to think of these pieces as calculations in sound rather than as music" (Burge, 1990: 245–249). I found the differences in our attitudes towards the musical