



A Conversation on *Piano Hero #1–4 (2011–2017)*

Berlin Schöneberg, March 2018

STEFAN PRINS, ANNE HOLZMÜLLER

This conversation is related to the essay by Anne Holzmüller *The Politics of Poetry. Piano Hero (2011/2017) by Stefan Prins* included in *Nuove musiche*, no. 5, 2018, in the context of the project *Writing <--> Technology. Composers 1973–1983* (G. Albert, A. Valle, eds., *Nuove musiche*, 5–7).

ANNE HOLZMÜLLER You've been working on the *Piano Hero* cycle for seven years. Would you say that it reflects some kind of artistic development you've made during that time?

STEFAN PRINS Yes, the entire cycle roughly coincides with my time at Harvard. I think it does show what's happened musically for me in that time. One of those things was that my love for sound and my interest in manipulating the flow of time grew. *Piano Hero #1*, which was composed just before I started at Harvard, was my first piece with video, and as such, a kind of study for *Generation Kill*. Both of these pieces had a complicated setup with a lot of possibilities. And I needed a lot of time to find my way through that labyrinth and discover how I could make a composition within these conceptual and technological boundaries. After those pieces, I felt the urge to pay more attention to sounds and how they structure time.

A. H. The specific quality of the sound, instead of its semantics?

S. P. Yes, exactly. *Piano Hero #2*, for example, is a transition piece in that sense. It's trying to break out of one world and find a foothold in another one. I think I was able to plant my feet more firmly in that new world with *Piano Hero #3* and *#4*, which show my renewed interests for sound and time, addressing the psychology of the listener in different ways.

In my music of the past six to seven years, I've been looking for different ways to deal

with time, to make it more flexible. I was searching for a richness that would balance out the strongly developed conceptual frameworks of these pieces.

A. H. You said that your increasing interest in sound culminated in *Piano Hero* #4. It's not entirely clear to me why *Piano Hero* #4 should be the vanishing point of this development. There is less sound in *Piano Hero* #4, whereas in *Piano Hero* #1, #2 and #3, sound and the juxtaposing of the acoustic and the virtual or electronic sound spheres are very important.

S. P. The sonic dimension of *Piano Hero* #4 is actually very simple – basically there are only chords – so it might seem a bit contradictory to the evolution that I described. I don't think it's a one-directional evolution but rather a cyclical movement. When I finish a piece, the best case scenario is that I've made improvements in one dimension while something from another dimension may have been left behind. And I then want to balance that out again in the next piece.

A. H. Like in a dialectic structure?

S. P. It's like building, let's say, the Eiffel Tower: the four legs on which the tower rests, need to have the same length. If you want to raise the tower and lengthen one leg a bit, you have to make the other legs longer too to keep it in balance. But if you lengthen one of these other legs a bit too long, you need to raise the other legs again – ad infinitum.

Piano Hero #4 is in a way more connected to *Piano Hero* #1 than to #3, but at the same time, the way I dealt with psychological time in *Piano Hero* #4 is more connected to #3 than to #1, I think. I also think that psychological time has to do with space, at least to a certain degree.

By space, I don't only mean the acoustic space of a room, but also the psychological space attached to the medium that you use to record and play back sounds. For example, it's very different to record people playing cricket on Tempelhofer Feld with a smartphone than to record them with high quality recording equipment. In *Piano Hero* #3 and #4, I used different methods to record sounds, and use these recordings in different moments. It creates different acoustic and psychological spaces.

A. H. I remember that in the past, you've compared the *Piano Hero* cycle to a development from hybrid bodies towards hybrid spaces. How does that development come about, and how does it show in the pieces?

S. P. Throughout the cycle, there is a stepwise opening up and hybridization of space. For example, *Piano Hero* #4 ends in a space external to the concert hall, literally in the open, whereas *Piano Hero* #1 doesn't refer to anything outside of the hall – besides of course on a conceptual level, where there are references to avatars and computer games. In *Piano Hero* #3, there are also quite a few examples of hybrid spaces or augmented spaces. To start with, you have the setup: a computer-controlled feedback system in which the piano functions as a filter. So the resonant body of the piano, this very small, confined space, is activated and becomes a focal point, a vibrating space. When the

strings start to vibrate because of the feedback, and the objects on them begin to vibrate as well, it is as if the space has become possessed. After a first section in which only this computer-controlled feedback system is creating sound, in interaction with the piano and the pianist, the piece opens up and the loudspeakers around the audience amplify the vibrating objects in the piano and play back the soundtrack. In this way, a virtual space around the audience is created, and it interacts with the resonating, hybridized body of the piano. It's a rather dramatic shift in the cycle: in *Piano Hero #1* and #2, all sounds come from the stage, frontally, through the P.A. In *Piano Hero #3*, the sound starts to surround and immerse you through a surround speaker setup. But there are a lot of movements into other spaces, and combinations of different spaces.

A. H. What role do field recordings play in this spatial development?

S. P. What I find really interesting about these field recordings is that you are listening to someone listening. You know that the composer was in that particular space in a particular moment, was listening to the sounds and decided to record them, opening up a little window into his/her personal world. So there is a second-degree listening, which opens another psychological dimension, too. That's also why I used the recording of applause after the electronics solo in *Flesh+Prosthesis #0-2*. When the applause appears, suddenly a space opens up in between the concert space in which you're sitting and the music you're hearing: you're listening to people listening!

A. H. So, the development starts at a confined concert-space and a focus on the hybrid body in *Piano Hero #1* and turns towards more and more hybridized spaces.

S. P. The first time I use field recordings in the cycle is in *Piano Hero #3*. Often, I hybridise the spaces they invoke by combining them, or combining them with electronic and piano sounds. There is also the moment when two sawtooth waves, with very high, almost similar frequencies, create so-called difference tones in the listener's ears, or head. This activates yet another space, the most narrow space that we can experience actually: the space between our ears, in our head. Space truly collapses at that point. Which brings me to the importance of the audience in the *Piano Hero* cycle. It is addressed in different, sometimes rather direct ways throughout the cycle. The moment when the difference tones emerge suddenly makes you aware of your own body and existence within the "theatrical machine". It is an acoustic analogy to what happens visually in *Piano Hero #4*, when the audience sees itself on the screen.

A. H. Many of your pieces, such as *Generation Kill* from 2012 or *Mirror Box Extensions* from 2015, are linked to the idea of confronting virtual realities and recorded sounds with acoustic sound and with physical presences on stage. This confrontation of technology and physical presence can be and consequently has been read as a comment on the impact of technological progress on society, as a political comment, in a way.

Georg Friedrich Haas recently said in an interview¹ that music in general can hardly be political, because it cannot address or speak against personalities. Certainly, there's a

¹ <https://van.atavist.com/haas-interview> (7/5/2018).

specific notion of what music is or can be behind this statement, a notion that might be rather limited to the abstract sonic dimensions of music. But I have the feeling that your music is very reflective and, yes, in a way political, without even crossing the borders of a rather narrow concept of music. And I have the idea that you achieve it by reflecting music itself, by being auto-referential and referential at the same time.

The *Piano Hero* cycle is a beautiful example of this strategy, because it relates to the history of music and the coming about of a certain genre and its traditions – the role of the performer, the role of time and space, the role of listening traditions. And it links them to society. It's meta-poetic, that is, self-reflective and auto-referential. And at the same time it is referential, political.

S. P. Yes, I think that has always been really important to me. In my heart, I am a musician. I am in love with sound, time, and structure, with music. But at the same time, I want to write music that *does* connect to this world. It's the marriage between those two or the tension between those two forces that is important to me.

A. H. And you have found a way to combine the two...

S. P. I think it's a struggle with each new piece, to find a way to do so. In some pieces, for example in *Generation Kill*, there is a bit more weight on the political layer. On the other hand, a piece like *Piano Hero* #3 is more abstract. I think in every piece I try to find a solution for this and every piece deals with it in some way. The result is different in every piece.

A. H. In *Piano Hero*, your way of being political is rather indirect. It seems to reflect certain aspects of society rather than commenting on or judging them. Are these, then, the boundaries of a composer? According to Haas, you cannot speak against Donald Trump, for example.

S. P. Well, I think you can, it's just not what I want to do right now. I don't want to lose one of the elemental forces that music has, this poetological dimension you mentioned before. Even though I want my work to reflect on the world in which it is created, I also really care about the abstract power of music.

A. H. In *Piano Hero* #3 the mirror – or rather, the illuminated piano lid functioning as a mirror – replaces the visual part of the video screen. But to me it also seems to become an important conceptual motif, in a structural way, even, as far as it links the analogue and the technological, the present and the virtual, and reflects the one back onto the other. But also in a more poetic way. In early modernism, the illusionist qualities of mirrors were considered black magic, or necromantic. Athansius Kircher has been accused of practicing black magic, “Schwarzkünstelei”, because he investigated and described the mechanics of the “laterna magica”. The idea of the mirror has always been linked to the illusionist sphere as a kind of ghostly, parallel world. In *Piano Hero*, the mirror motif beautifully brings together the idea of technological progress and emotional reactions to it, back then and also now, fascination for its magic as well as skeptical or even fearful impulses against it.

S. P. The mirror is indeed really important to me, in a few different ways. My fascination for the mirror, and perhaps even more for the half-transparent mirror, probably also originates from the phenomenon of the “selfie”.

A. H. So rather the narcissist than the illusionist moment?

S. P. It's both, really, but perhaps I am more fascinated by this more psychological, narcissistic part of it, which for me is very much connected to the technology of today and how we use technology. These days, you don't go to a monument and marvel at it with your own eyes, but you experience it for the most part through the screen of your smartphone or tablet. Perhaps this fascination for mirrors comes from a fascination for screens too. In *Mirror Box Extensions*, the screen is very important, in different ways and identities. Throughout the piece, it transforms. First, it is the frame through which we experience reality, when the accomplices in the audience who are ‘operating’ the tablets, take pictures with them of what is happening on stage and you are automatically drawn into that frame. Then it becomes a virtual space, when the accomplices show prerecorded videos of the musicians from different perspectives to what we have live, as if we're seeing their avatars. And finally, it turns into a mirror, when the accomplices take selfies with them, together with their fellow audience members. My fascination comes from that technological perspective and from what it does to the way we live and how it invites us to become more narcissistic or to constantly reflect ourselves.

But you're absolutely right that *the mirror* is a very important metaphor and element in my work. It is something that is present in each of the *Piano Heroes*. In #1, there is the mirroring of the pianist, but from behind, anonymously, without seeing his/her head. In #2, this perspective has become part of a panopticon, a surveilling eye consisting of 4 technological eyes, shown in a 2x2 splitscreen. In #3, the mirror is, as you noticed, analogue – and there is also a kind of acoustic mirror. And in #4, there are a few different mirrors active: the pianist is mirrored – but it's the illusion of a mirror (the cheater is cheated), and then the audience is mirrored.

A. H. Another mirroring motif is how you deal with resonance: In melting together the electronic sounds and the resonance of the grand piano in *Piano Hero* #2, the technological is reflected back onto the physical.

S. P. And definitely also in #3, when the resonance becomes hybridized through the electronics and through the computer-controlled feedback. Feedback happens because the resonant frequencies are amplified. And in #4, the resonances in the grand piano are physically activated by the soundwaves of the virtual pianos and the final field recording, all transmitted through the speaker that is standing just below the piano, pointed upwards.

A. H. So the mirror becomes an extensional medium in this idea of a hybrid, right?

S. P. Right! You know what I just realized? The theme of the thesis I wrote when I graduated as a physical engineer, did I ever tell you what it was?

A. H. You told me once, but I cannot recall it.

S. P. Let's see if I can pronounce the title without mistakes (*laughing*): *Coherence-Properties of semiconductor lasers with optical feedback*. We researched what happens when you have a laser beam coming out of a semiconductor laser, but then you place a mirror perpendicular to the beam and shoot it back into the laser – something you're not supposed to do of course – and we looked at what happened to the coherence properties of the laser light at that point. So, again the mirror! And it's about feedback too!

A. H. Feedback is a kind of mirroring as well.

S. P. I never thought of that connection actually until just now. That's interesting... And you cannot have resonance without space, so that immediately brings the spatial dimension into play, whether that space is a little box, or a piano, or a big room. Or a semiconductor crystal. Otherwise, there is no resonance.

A. H. I remember a conversation we had, after I had listened to *Piano Hero # 1* for the first time in 2011. I told you that I was surprised to sense a kind of almost romantic pathos in the 'cadenza'. I felt the same in #4 in the video recording at the end. There was something overwhelming to that moment. And your references indeed date back to the era of the "Hammerklavier" sonata of Beethoven, the era of the sublime.

S. P. Anne, don't forget that I grew up on Mahler, Schubert, Prokof'ev, Stravinsky (*laughing*). It's definitely part of the way I got to know music and of what I love about music. For a long time, I was scared of that pathos. I'm actually still scared of it. I don't want my music to be bombastic or have too much pathos.

A. H. But it's beautiful, it is something about your music that I really appreciate. And it's all very well dosed and, again, rather abstract.

S. P. I'm glad you think so. I do experience it as lingering danger though. But at the same time, it's a part of my identity. I became much more at peace with it over the past few years.

When I first met Stefan in 2011, he had just finished Piano Hero #1 and was working on #2. We both had just picked up our studies at Harvard, he as a graduate student with Chaya Czernowin, me as a Visiting Fellow in musicology working on my PhD thesis. In that year we had many extensive conversations about music, our work and in particular, Stefan's approach to composing. These conversations influenced my own perspective on music, music history, and aesthetics. Seven years later, in 2017, when the idea for a shared article came about, I had just picked up my current research project on immersive modes of listening in the late eighteenth century and he had just finished Piano Hero #4 as the last piece of the cycle.

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