

Piano Death and Life

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Figure 1 Photograph on the front page of *The New York Times*, July 30, 2012.
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WHAT IS HAPPENING IN THIS photograph (Figure 1)? On the front page of the Monday, July 30th, 2012 issue of *The New York Times*, the photo appeared with the caption: “Bryan O’Mara tossing out a piano in Southampton, Pa.” But the accompanying article by reporter Daniel J. Wakin told a different story, one in which the pianos were no mere recipients of human actions, but rather authors of their own doings:

The Knabe baby grand did a cartwheel and landed on its back, legs poking into the air. A Lester upright thudded onto its side with a final groan of strings, a death-rattling chord.... The site, a trash-transfer station in this town 20 miles north of Philadelphia, is just one place where pianos go to die.¹

¹ Daniel J. Wakin, “For More Pianos, Last Note is Thud in the Dump,” *The New York Times*, July 30, 2012, A1.

In Wakin's anthropomorphic language, the piano is not the passive object, but the active subject of the picture. On its deathbed, the piano comes to life.

Wakin was not alone in perceiving the piano as more animate than inanimate, more person than thing. Readers wrote in with tributes to their own instruments: "I thought of that piano as my mom's beloved friend," wrote one. Another described a Baldwin medium grand as "a wonderful family member for 50 years in our home." "A person does feel a bit silly treating a piano like a pet," reflected another on her decision to withhold her instrument from a new home where it would likely be ill-treated, "but goodness, I can't help it!" Yet others responded directly to the scenes of mass piano dumping reported in the story, their meditations on death veering from spiritual hopefulness ("I pray that all these pianos wind up in heaven," "we should not cry so much ... but instead have celebratory funerals for them") to moral panic (likening the "frightening horror story" to news of "Hitler Death Camps").²

Owing in part to the capacity of musical instruments to elicit such reactions, the destruction of musical instruments has become a familiar trope of experimental music. After cringing at a performance in which a gamelan was disassembled and its pots filled with water, philosopher Stephen Davies reflected on musical works in which instruments are abused:

we could not be made uneasy or shocked by such behavior unless we were disposed to think there is something wrong about damaging or destroying musical instruments. The artists concerned deliberately set out to exploit that attitude of concern, either to horrify the audience members for the sake of appearing outrageous or to jolt them into noticing an art-political point.³

Making similar observations about instrument-abusive works by Fluxus artists George Maciunas and Nam June Paik, Philip Auslander identifies "violence against violins and pianos as a specifically cultural ritual, the object of which is to desecrate an aesthetic order—that of high art—by smashing its sacred artifacts in its own sacred spaces."⁴

But it is one thing to witness such smashing of artifacts on the elevated plane

² Online comments on Daniel J. Wakin, "For More Pianos, Last Note is Thud in the Dump," *The New York Times*, July 29, 2012, <http://www.nytimes.com/2012/07/30/arts/music/for-more-pianos-last-note-is-thud-in-the-dump.html> (accessed October, 20, 2017).

³ Stephen Davies, "What is the Sound of One Piano Plummeting?" *Themes in the Philosophy of Music* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), 110.

⁴ Philip Auslander, "Fluxus Art-Amusement: The Music of the Future?" *Contours of the Theatrical Avant-Garde: Performance and Textuality*, ed. James M. Harding (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2000), 126–27.

of performance art, where it is ultimately governed by authorial intent and in the service of aesthetic and political effect. It is quite another to see instruments destroyed in the unceremonious act of trash disposal, their fate determined by market forces and practical exigencies. And while the special animacy musical instruments acquire through their being played has been widely noted—in Carolyn Abbate’s words, a musical instrument is “an object given life as long as a master plays it”—relatively scant attention has been paid to the “life” of instruments that persists or arises outside the parameters of performance.⁵ By bringing normally unseen scenes of piano dumping into public view, and thereby putting large-scale piano “death” on display, Wakin’s story and others like it have provided a rare platform for collective reflection on piano “life.”

Of course, not everyone reacted to such scenes with shock and dismay. Some commenters on Wakin’s story took a more dispassionate view, pointing out that “pianos are consumer goods ... [which] will pretty much inevitably become trash someday,” that many of the dumped pianos belong “in a landfill replaced by a better instrument,” or even that “technology marches on”: “the harpsichord was replaced by the piano, the piano is being replaced by electronic keyboards ... it is called progress.”⁶ These reactions, premised on the inevitability of piano demise on both the individual level (objects wear out) and the species level (technologies become obsolete), reveal the contingency attending anthropomorphic perceptions of piano-being. As Jeffrey Sconce has argued with regard to discourses that invest electronic media technologies with animacy and even sentience, such notions circulate “not as timeless expressions of some undying electronic superstition, but as a permeable language in which to express a culture’s changing social relationship to a historical sequence of technologies.”⁷ As this article will demonstrate, the long history of recognizing a person-like status for domestic keyboard instruments helps explain shocked reactions to piano dumping, the undignified nature of which implies a lack of regard for the instruments’ “souls.” But these reactions are also a function of relationships to piano materiality that have shifted with changes in the piano industry and its marketing. Moreover, they have to do with the specific context of the early twenty-first century, when the survival of traditional pianos appears to be threatened by their digital substitutes.

⁵ Carolyn Abbate, *In Search of Opera* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001), 6.

⁶ Online comments on Daniel J. Wakin, “For More Pianos.”

⁷ Jeffrey Sconce, *Haunted Media: Electronic Presence from Telegraphy to Television* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2000), 10.

Piano Mortality

Piano technicians today put the typical lifespan of a piano at 80–90 years. With time and use, especially with changes in humidity and temperature, piano materials deteriorate—wood weakens and cracks, tuning pins come loose, felt and leather wear thin, strings break. When an instrument is considered “beyond repair” is not just a matter of material deterioration, however, but also of economics. As the house organ of the Piano Technicians Guild puts it, “not all pianos are *worth the expense* of reconditioning or rebuilding” (emphasis added).⁸ For most pianos, the 80–90 year mark encompasses the moment at which material deterioration has seriously compromised tuning, tone quality, and touch, and the cost of restoring the instrument to playable condition would exceed the cost of replacing it with a new instrument of comparable quality.

In recent years, piano haulers have reported an uptick in piano disposal, which tracks with the fact that sales of new instruments reached their peak in the early twentieth century. But the trashing of pianos is not a new phenomenon. Since the 1960s, piano-destructive performances have been predicated on the ready availability of discarded pianos. Such was the case for Annea Lockwood’s “Piano Burning” (1968), which unfolds as its title suggests. “Piano Burning” became the first in a series of “scores for piano transplants,” all of which involved situating a piano outdoors (hence “transplanted” from its native indoor environments) and awaiting its ultimate destruction (another features a “piano drowning”). Lockwood prefaced these scores by specifying that “all pianos used should already be beyond repair.”⁹ As Lockwood explained to an interviewer about the genesis of “Piano Burning,”

I happened to know that there was at that point a particular garbage dump in Wandsworth, London, which specialized in pianos that people wanted to get rid of. It was a piano graveyard basically, all uprights that peoples’ grandmothers had owned, which were long since defunct and replaced by the telly. So I knew that pianos would be available.¹⁰

In this light, Lockwood’s piano-destructive works seem not to desecrate an

⁸ “Rebuilding/Reconditioning,” *Piano Technicians Guild*, accessed October 20, 2017, http://www.ptg.org/Scripts/4Disapi.dll/4DCGI/cms/review.html?Action=CMS_Document&DocID=63&MenuKey=Menu7.

⁹ Annea Lockwood, *Scores for Piano Transplants*, accessed October 20, 2017, <http://www.annealockwood.com/compositions/piano-transplants/>.

¹⁰ Frank J. Oteri, “Annea Lockwood Beside the Hudson River,” *New Music Box*, January 1, 2004, <http://www.newmusicbox.org/articles/annea-lockwood-beside-the-hudson-river/7/>.

aesthetic order, but to salvage an already cast-off object and invest its end with artistic significance.

The “Baker House Piano Drop”—a tradition at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology wherein a piano is dropped from the roof of Baker House dormitory—is similarly a product of readily available discarded pianos. The first Piano Drop took place in 1972, at which time a Baker House tutor, Steve Leighton, collected free or inexpensive pianos advertised in the newspaper and fixed them up in order to supply every floor of the dormitory with a piano. A byproduct of Leighton’s project was the presence of unsalvageable instruments in the dorm. Student resident Charlie Bruno came up with the idea of putting an unplayable upright to use by dropping it from the roof.¹¹ (A photo of the original Piano Drop suggests Bruno took inspiration from the falling piano gag featured in Looney Toons cartoons: the word “ACME”—the company from which Looney Toons characters acquired supplies—is stamped on the piano.) Accounts of recent iterations of the Piano Drop consistently describe the pianos’ conditions as “unplayable,” “non-working,” or “irreparable.”¹²

Videos of recent Piano Drops now circulate on YouTube, drawing comments from viewers around the world. These comments tend to follow a pattern: many viewers express outrage at the piano drop, often in terms of disgust or disappointment in the people and culture that would allow such wasteful destruction of an instrument that someone would want to play or restore. A handful of others reply repeatedly to these comments to explain that the piano dropped was properly considered trash, being unplayable and beyond economically viable repair. Some initially outraged commenters accept this explanation; others do not, insisting that a piano is never beyond repair, never beyond its musical usefulness.¹³

The feeling that a piano should never die and the sense of outrage that a piano would ever be thrown out with the trash permeate stories about pianos going to the dump. The front-page placement of Wakin’s story for *The New York Times*

¹¹ “Baker House – The Historical Collection,” accessed October 20, 2017, <https://web.archive.org/web/20170406112341/http://mit81.com/baker/content/piano-drops>.

¹² See, for instance, Jullian Fennimore, “MIT’s Annual Piano Drop a Smashing Success as Usual,” *Wicked Local Cambridge*, April 24, 2009, <http://cambridge.wickedlocal.com/x126911613/MITs-annual-piano-drop-a-smashing-success-as-usual>, and Steve Annear, “MIT Students Bring Back Tradition of Tossing Piano Off Building,” *Boston Globe*, April 26, 2017, <https://www.bostonglobe.com/metro/2017/04/26/mit-students-bring-back-tradition-tossing-piano-off-building/1fXYDASM5jFR9DkLEvkC8K/story.html>.

¹³ See, for example, Scott Lipscomb, “Piano Drop – MIT,” April 26, 2012, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZECY9M69I5U>.

suggests a newsworthiness proportional to the shock value of the phenomenon. A 2016 radio documentary on discarded pianos in Vancouver puts the surprise occasioned by their demise into words: “It turns out that like all living, breathing things, pianos are not immortal.”¹⁴

The idea that pianos might, or even should, be immortal emerged in the early twentieth century, amidst dramatic transformations in the piano industry. Jody Berland has argued for the significance of the rise of player pianos, which promised access to music without all that tedious practicing. Player-piano manufacturers encouraged those who already owned a piano to trade in their instrument for the new kind that anyone could play. In the rivalry between player and traditional pianos, Berland identifies an exemplary instance of obsolescence as theorized by Marshall McLuhan. For McLuhan, a medium’s becoming obsolete was not its ending, but a beginning: as Berland explains, “when a medium is displaced by a new medium, it becomes a work of art.... Its former transparency as a medium disappears behind its newly foregrounded materiality.”¹⁵ With the rise of player pianos, the positioning of pianos shifted: where emphasis had been on “the instrument as a marvelously intricate manufacturing achievement, advertisers now associated the acoustic piano with fantasies of exquisite taste and individual expressiveness.”¹⁶

Berland’s suggestion that player pianos prompted a transformation of the piano from a “medium” or “technology” into a “work of art” is compelling, but requires amendment on two counts. First, competition not only with player pianos, but also with cheaper non-player pianos spurred identification of select instruments as works of art. According to a *Chambers’s Journal* article of 1849, the piano existed exclusively as “an heirloom of the wealthy.”¹⁷ Within the decade, however, the spectrum of piano prices was widening and the new availability of less costly pianos was celebrated for the broader access to music it enabled. In 1855, *Chambers’s Journal* described instruments of “fine tone and modest price” available to people of “small means” such as the “needy clerk, the poor teacher,

¹⁴ Willow Yamauchi, “Years ago, Canada produced beautiful pianos. Now we send them to the dump,” *CBC Radio*, October 2, 2016, <http://www.cbc.ca/radio/thesundayedition/email-madness-ralph-nader-farewell-to-the-upright-piano-gopnik-on-being-a-parent-1.3782876/100-years-ago-canada-produced-beautiful-pianos-now-we-send-them-to-the-dump-1.3782877>.

¹⁵ Jody Berland, “The Musicking Machine,” in *Residual Media*, ed. Charles Acland (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2007), 312.

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ “Pianos for the Million,” *Chambers’s Edinburgh Journal* 306 (November 10, 1849): 298.

the upper-class mechanic.”¹⁸ These instruments were hailed as “the very test and triumph of the pianoforte,” comparable in significance to the “daily press and cheap literature of the nineteenth century” as opposed to the “darkness of that time” when a scholar had to transcribe the classics by hand and a parish’s one and only bible was chained to a reading desk in the church. “We should not be sorry to see pianofortes still more cheaply wrought,” the writer added, so that they might be found even more frequently among the poorer classes.¹⁹ English musician and antiquarian Edward F. Rimbault concurred with this view, writing with enthusiasm in his 1860 history of the piano that

men of intellect are beginning to turn their attention to ‘cheap’ pianos; new and more simple actions are being invented; and the dawn of that day is visible when the ‘box of stretched strings,’ giving forth sweet sounds, shall be in every man’s house, his comfort, his solace, his companion—aye, his *friend*! Let us then look forward to that day.²⁰

In order to compete with cheaper instruments, manufacturers sought to educate and persuade consumers about the superior quality of more expensive instruments. Beckwith (an imprint of Sears, Roebuck & Co.) warned about a proliferation of manufacturers of cheap pianos who exploited consumers’ ignorance to charge high prices for low-quality products.²¹ A 1909 puff piece for Knabe pointed to a “difference between a piano created as a painstaking work of art and most of the instruments that are usually considered to be ‘high grade.’”²² The article countered the immediate appeal of a cheaper instrument with the notion of the piano as an investment that would hold, if not indeed increase, its monetary and artistic value indefinitely: “those of us who have to consider ways and means are the most concerned to find the piano that will endure, that will never have to be replaced, that will be increasingly through the years to

¹⁸ “The Story of a Familiar Friend,” *Chambers’s Journal of Popular Literature, Science and Arts* 24, no. 95 (October 27, 1855): 260.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 260.

²⁰ Edward F. Rimbault, *The Pianoforte, its Origin, Progress and Construction* (London: Robert Cocks and Co., 1860), 161.

²¹ Sears, Roebuck and Company, *Beckwith Pianos and Player Pianos* (ca. 1912), <http://antiquepianoshop.com/online-museum/sears-roebuck-company/>.

²² Albert Shaw, ed., “A Secret of Home,” *The American Review of Reviews Write-up Supplement* 39 (January-June 1909): 46.

come a delight to the ear, the eye, the touch,—a *permanently valuable addition to our homes*.”²³

Arguments for differences in piano quality required attention to, and a degree of expertise in evaluating, the materiality of the instrument. Ultimately, however (and here is the second revision of Berland’s argument), rather than foregrounding the piano’s materiality as McLuhan’s theory of “obsolescence” would predict, the tactical repositioning of the piano as work of art often involved its *dematerialization*. In the 1920s, Steinway launched an advertising campaign that linked its instruments to the “Immortals of Music”—figures such as Wagner, Liszt, Rachmaninoff, and Rubinstein who favored Steinway instruments. Previously, Steinway ads had typically shown images of their instruments in full view. The “immortals” campaign, by contrast, featured portraits of great musicians at the keyboard with most of the instrument out of frame, if it was featured at all. In some instances, the musician’s portrait was replaced by a painting from the “Steinway Collection” of art. Similarly, where advertising copy had previously highlighted Steinway’s patents and manufacturing facilities, such material conditions were now only mentioned in order to be transcended. As one ad explained, “when you buy a piano you do not buy a thing of wood and steel, of wires and keys—it is music that you buy—the greatest of the arts.”²⁴ Whereas Steinway had previously given advice on instrument conservation, noting “it is evident that if the piano is to remain in good order for many years, good care must be taken of it,” a Steinway was now declared to be “the immortal instrument of the Immortals of Music.”²⁵

Online reactions to piano dumping and the MIT piano drop make it clear that, for many, the expectation of immortality applies indiscriminately to all pianos, regardless of quality or condition. This stance often depends on a certain distance from the instruments—on the piano as an idea and symbol of music rather than as a material object useful insofar as it is able to realize specific musical objectives. But dismay at discarded pianos also thrives on a degree of closeness, an attachment to the piano as a family member or friend, a kind of person. And so part of the shocked reaction to piano dumping stems from surprise that such companions are not immortal after all. Another part stems from the sheer

²³ Ibid., 47.

²⁴ “Steinway: The Instrument of the Immortals [ad picturing Richard Wagner],” *The New York Times*, December 11, 1921, 44.

²⁵ See ad reproduced in Ronald V. Ratcliff, *Steinway* (San Francisco: Chronicle Books, 1989), 46; “Steinway: The Instrument of the Immortals [ad picturing Sergei Rachmaninoff],” *The Literary Digest*, December 4, 1920, 77.

indignity of the pianos' end, from the affront caused by such blatant disrespect for the sanctity of piano "life."

Piano Souls

As forms of instrument destruction, piano dumping and musical works that feature piano abuse both put the sanctity of piano "life" at issue. Writing of such works, Stephen Davies argues that, "we respond to the misuse of musical instruments in respects that are like our reaction to human injury ... because we view the musical instrument as extending the musician's body and inner life."²⁶ Davies draws support from the work of Lydia Goehr, who showed that as part of a nineteenth-century effort by instrumentalists to elevate their performance to the level of singing (which represented true musicality), players "began to speak of their instruments as humanized, as biological, as expressing the inner qualities of human souls.... Instruments were being thought of as immediate extensions of bodies; bodies extensions of souls."²⁷

There is ample nineteenth-century evidence for the 'extension of the performer's soul' conception of musical instruments. Several years before the Schumann and Liszt-era commentators cited by Goehr, G. W. F. Hegel clearly articulated the conception in his *Lectures on Aesthetics* (1835). Hegel contrasted the human voice, "the sounding of the soul itself," with other instruments where "a vibration is set up in a body indifferent to the soul and its expression."²⁸ But Hegel went on to explain that in highly virtuosic instrumental performance, "the externality of the instrument disappears altogether.... In this virtuosity the foreign instrument appears as a perfectly developed organ of the artistic soul and its very own property." Hegel reported having experienced this effect himself in a guitar performance, where the tastelessness of the battle-imitative music, the ignorance of the performer and the triviality of the instrument all faded away as he witnessed the guitarist "put into his instrument his whole soul."²⁹

In responding to scenes of pianos going to the dump, however, commenters did not describe pianos in such prosthetic terms. They spoke instead of the piano

²⁶ Davies, "What is the Sound of One Piano Plummeting?," 117.

²⁷ Lydia Goehr, *The Quest for Voice* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), 120–21.

²⁸ Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, *Aesthetics: Lectures on Fine Art*, trans. T. M. Knox (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1975), 92. This passage from Hegel is also discussed by Amanda Lalonde, "The Music of the Living-Dead," *Music and Letters* 96, no. 4 (2015): 609.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 957.

as friend, family member, pet, loved one, and as having its *own* soul. Goehr is dismissive of such attributions of soul and vitality to musical instruments, writing that “when performers speak of pulling the energy or soul out of their instrument, what I think they really mean is that they are putting their energy into it. The way not to see a violin as an external, mechanical instrument is to see it as an extension of yourself, the violinist.”³⁰ But the ‘soul-possessing’ conception of musical instruments is surely deserving of consideration: it too is an enacted mode of understanding human-instrument relationships that provides a viable means of apprehending a musical instrument as more than a mechanical tool. Rather than assuming that only people have souls, which may on occasion be extended to or through instruments, it is worth considering how people have construed relations among souls, human bodies, and keyboard instruments, and in particular how the latter might be imagined to have souls independent of their human players.

The intuitions of “thing theory”—one of a variety of recent efforts to bring critical scrutiny to the distinct beings and powers of the material world—may help explain the peculiar piano vitality that arises at the scene of the garbage dump. Thing theorists such as Bill Brown, W. J. T. Mitchell, and Jane Bennett draw a distinction between “things” and “objects”—a distinction that separates not two different classes of stuff in the world, but rather two different ways of encountering that stuff. Objects exist in relation to human subjects; they appear with names, identities, functions, etc. that allow one to look through their physicality in order to focus on their significance for human endeavors. Things, by contrast, assert an existence somehow apart from and beyond human purposes and knowledge. For Bill Brown, a “thing” has a kind of excess, a “force as a sensuous presence or as a metaphysical presence” that exceeds the mere materiality or utility of an object.³¹ Furthermore, Brown finds that “we begin to confront the thingness of objects when they stop working for us... when their flow within the circuits of production and distribution, consumption and exhibition, has been arrested, however momentarily.”³²

Being discarded—becoming trash—is one way in which the normal flow of objects is brought to a halt. Arguing for the disruptive power of trash, Maurizio Boscagli writes that a discarded object is “dropped from the networks that give it economic and affective significance,” and instead “points beyond official

³⁰ Goehr, *Quest for Voice*, 122.

³¹ Bill Brown, “Thing Theory,” *Critical Inquiry* 28, no. 1 (2001): 5.

³² *Ibid.*, 4.

taxonomies of value.”³³ If official taxonomies of a piano’s value are monetary and artistic, the trashed piano points to alternative value-conferring networks based upon kinship and possession of a soul. In losing its usefulness as a musical object, the piano asserts an autonomous metaphysical presence.

Yet pianos do not fit the thing/object distinction as neatly as most objects contemplated by thing theorists, since pianos *habitually* assert a metaphysical presence. That is, pianos may come alive not only at the garbage dump, but also on the concert stage, in the parlor, and elsewhere. So it is perhaps not quite right to regard the piano’s two species of soul—one received temporarily from the performer, one native to the instrument—as fully independent. In her study of early nineteenth-century German conceptions of musical instruments, Amanda Lalonde suggests that the impression of an instrument being the extension of a player lingers beyond the time of performance: “in the Romantic experience, one cannot come across an instrument without calling to mind its latent resonance and the connotations of animation borne by sound.”³⁴ The ‘extension of the performer’s soul’ and ‘soul-possessing’ conceptions of musical instruments sometimes seem to blur together. In his *Musikalische Rhapsodien* (1786), for instance, the German musician and writer Christian Friedrich Daniel Schubart described the clavichord as both an extension of the player (“the soundboard of your heart,” “soft and responsive to every breath of the soul”), and a breathing, soul-possessing entity in its own right (“your clavichord breathes as sweetly as your heart”).³⁵

The identification of sound with animacy and inner life, so strongly present in the writings of early Romantics such as Johann Gottfried Herder and E. T. A. Hoffmann, is also evident in the earlier tradition of harpsichord mottoes. These sayings, often in Latin, typically appeared above the keywell of instruments from the mid sixteenth to the mid eighteenth centuries. As Thomas McGeary has shown, many mottoes invite us to imagine that they are ‘spoken’ by the instrument itself. For instance, the Latin motto “dum vixi tacui mortua dulce cano,” which appeared on a number of harpsichords, translates as “while living I was silent; now dead I sing sweetly.”³⁶ Like other first-person mottoes, this one invokes a

³³ Maurizia Boscagli, *Stuff Theory: Everyday Objects, Radical Materialism* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2014), 228.

³⁴ Lalonde, “The Music of the Living-Dead,” 607.

³⁵ Bernard Brauchli, *The Clavichord* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 174. For an illustration of how such discourse could also be applied to the harpsichord, see Matthew J. Hall’s article in this volume.

³⁶ Thomas McGeary, “Harpsichord Mottoes,” *Journal of the American Musical Instrument Society* 7 (1981): 8.

paradox: as E. K. Borthwick notes, it describes “in riddling terms” the fact that a creature or material, silent in life, gains a voice in death.³⁷ The paradoxical appearance of the phrase thus arises from the normal association of death with silence and stillness, sound with movement and life.

While such mottoes largely went out of fashion with the harpsichord, the ability to imagine an inner being—an “I”—for domestic keyboard instruments, and to ascribe subjectivity to such objects, persisted. The story of C. P. E. Bach parting with his Silbermann clavichord provides a well-known example. According to Dietrich Ewald von Grotthuß, the fortunate new owner of the instrument in 1781, C. P. E. Bach “felt like a father who had given away his beloved daughter: he was pleased, as he himself put it, ‘to see it in good hands,’ yet as he sent it off, he was overcome by a wistfulness as if a father was parting from his daughter.”³⁸ While the account describes a filial attachment between Bach and his instrument, it is worth noting how gender operates here to collapse the categories of person and property: as with a daughter, but unlike with a son, Bach’s parting with his clavichord takes the form of property transfer into the hands of another man.

Analogously, early nineteenth-century treatises endow pianos with person-like status in relation to their owners. In 1801, the piano maker Nannette Streicher published a tract for owners of Streicher instruments that counseled kindness towards and a sense of equality with one’s piano. “Just as little as he tyrannizes his fortepiano,” Streicher wrote of the true musician, “so little, also, is he a slave to it.”³⁹ Since “he knows very well how to let his instrument speak,” the performer-instrument relationship assumes the form of a collaborative partnership.⁴⁰ By contrast, Streicher described an unworthy pianist as abusive towards the instrument: “he flies into a fiery passion and treats his instrument as if he were one seeking vengeance, has his arch-enemy in his hands, and with horrible delight will torture him slowly to death.”⁴¹

³⁷ E. K. Borthwick, “The Riddle of the Tortoise and the Lyre,” *Music and Letters* 51, no. 4 (1970): 373.

³⁸ Peter Wollny, “Introduction,” in *C. P. E. Bach: The Complete Works*, series I, vol. 8.1 (Los Altos: The Packard Humanities Institute, 2006), xvi–xvii. On anthropomorphic treatments of the clavichord as a confidant and being with agency, see Annette Richards, *The Free Fantasia and the Musical Picturesque* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 155–64.

³⁹ Nannette Streicher, *Kurze Bemerkungen über das Spielen, Stimmen und Erhalten der Fortpiano* (Vienna: Abertischen Schriften, 1801), trans. as *Brief Remarks on the Playing, Tuning, and Maintenance of Fortepianos* by Preethi De Silva, in *The Fortepiano Writings of Streicher, Dieudonné, and the Schiedmayers* (Lewiston, NY: Edwin Mellen Press, 2008), 60–61.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 63.

Personification of the piano as beloved or victimized object is familiar from the reception of Liszt, whose audiences found both treatments of the instrument equally exciting.⁴² Such perceptions of the piano in public had their counterparts in domestic spaces: in the context of a household, the piano figured as a companion who excelled at providing emotional support. In 1855, a *Chambers's Journal* article on the history of domestic keyboard instruments concluded by describing the piano as an instrument “which deserves our truest gratitude and affection, which celebrates our happiest, and soothes our saddest hours, and to which none amongst us can refuse the name of Our Familiar Friend.”⁴³

Such discourses implied that pianos possessed inner lives, but their depths were rarely plumbed. That task was left to fictional works like *A439: Being the Autobiography of a Piano* (1900), an imaginative novel written collaboratively by twenty-five musicians under the editorial guidance of Algernon Rose, a composer and partner in the piano firm of Broadwood and Sons. The book is narrated from the perspective of a grand piano, which recounts its life starting with its initial construction, proceeding through triumphs and tribulations (including a complete rebuild after fire damage), and ending with the joy of being played by the Queen herself. The first chapter, penned by Rose, describes how the piano became an individual subject, an “I.” The action, we learn, is the piano’s brain, and its insertion allows the instrument to consciously perceive the goings-on of its various parts. These parts produce a great cacophony as they complain to each other: soundboard to bridge, bridge to string, string to wrest-pin, stud and hitch-pin, each blaming another for its own discomfort and the discomfort it causes to others. Each part thus has sentience but also interdependence within a great network (“I am not responsible for myself,” says a string).⁴⁴ Finally, a regulator at work on the action puts an end to this internal pandemonium by installing the damper heads upon the strings. With this silencing of the piano’s individual parts, the piano becomes a coherent, integral whole: “I had ‘found’ myself!” the piano exclaims. “My soul, my palpitating, sexless, breathing soul, had been evolved! Within me, even as a pearl is embedded in the guileless oyster, my spiritual self had taken up its residence.”⁴⁵

Rose continues to reflect on the piano’s soul, relating it to the credit pianos should receive for their artistic work. The piano argues that “the music produced

⁴² See Dana Gooley, *The Virtuoso Liszt* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 106–13.

⁴³ “The Story of a Familiar Friend,” 260.

⁴⁴ Algernon Rose, ed., *A439: Being the Autobiography of a Piano* (London: Sands & Co., 1900), 23.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 24.

from me—by even a Liszt or a Rubinstein—could not be worth listening to, were it not for my soul, which imparts to the music its nobility.”⁴⁶ People who consider musical instruments mere tools for interpreting the works of composers thus make a grave mistake:

Think of our feelings—yes, we *have* feelings—when, after enabling a player, through our glorious tone, to get through a Beethoven sonata in public without breaking down, we find him applauded to the echo, and ourselves slighted and shut down with a bang. This treatment is iniquitous: for it is the instrument which has won the success, and not the pianist.⁴⁷

The piano admits that the precise location of the piano’s soul is difficult to define, though some say it is in a certain layer of pure silk within the hammerheads. At the time Rose was writing, the location of the piano’s soul was in fact a matter of debate. For most, the piano’s soul resided in the part of the instrument responsible for its tone quality, and this was thought to be the soundboard. In his *Geschichte des Claviers* (1868), the first part of which was devoted to the acoustics of the piano, the Leipzig Conservatory professor Oscar Paul argued for the decisive role of the soundboard in the piano’s tone: the piano’s strings had insufficient mass to be the source of the instrument’s tone, he reasoned, and so were instead responsible for stimulating the soundboard from which the true tone was emitted.⁴⁸

Siegfried Hansing, technical director at the piano firm Behr Brothers and Company, heard things differently. In *The Pianoforte and Its Acoustic Properties* (1888) he noted that the soundboard had been the subject of endless studies and experiments, yet remained poorly understood. That the soundboard bears chief responsibility for the piano’s tone he considered a myth. Instead, he argued that the strings (including the manner in which they were struck) primarily determined the tone quality, and the soundboard merely amplified the resultant sound.⁴⁹

To identify any single part of the piano as responsible for its tone is a quixotic goal. My interest here lies rather in the fact that the ideas of a piano soul and its relationship to instrumental tone came together to make such identification necessary. Far from shutting down speculation concerning its importance, the inability to find a satisfactory explanation of the soundboard’s contribution to

⁴⁶ Ibid., 25.

⁴⁷ Ibid., 19.

⁴⁸ Oscar Paul, *Geschichte des Claviers vom Ursprunge bis zu den modernsten Formen dieses Instruments* (Leipzig, 1868), 13.

⁴⁹ Siegfried Hansing, *The Pianoforte and Its Acoustic Properties*, trans. Emmy Hansing-Perzina, 2nd ed. (New York: Schwerin, 1904), 96–103. (First edition 1888.)

tone counted in its favor. A 1909 article on the importance of musical sound to human life included a section headed “scientists cannot analyze the ‘soul,’” which explained that the rules for a good soundboard are incapable of being formulated, try though many had; only the wisdom of experience could “be depended on to fashion aright the soundboard,—the soul of the piano” so as to produce a phenomenon such as the “famous ‘Chickering tone.’”⁵⁰

Other parts of the piano have staked a claim as the site of the soul. Knabe located it in the action, an idea motivated by the significance the company attributed to the fact that they made all their own actions, unlike other piano manufacturers who outsourced the task.⁵¹ Anton Rubinstein is said to have remarked that “the more I play the more thoroughly I am convinced that the pedal is the soul of the piano; there are cases where the pedal is everything.”⁵² Nevertheless, the conventional wisdom remained that the “soundboard is the soul of the instrument.” Steinway chief piano technician Franz Mohr, for instance, repeats the idea, and credits Steinway pianos’ wide range of tonal possibilities to the instruments’ soundboards.⁵³

Piano Transubstantiation

Wakin’s story on piano dumping included a striking set of data: while only 41,000 pianos were sold in America in 2011, down from a peak of 365,000 in the early twentieth century, 2011 also saw the sale of 120,000 digital pianos and 1.1 million keyboards. Such digital substitutions and simulations call into question the essence of a piano. Should one celebrate the success of these forms of the piano, or decry their displacement of the “real” thing?

Pianos are one of many acoustic instruments whose electrified substitutes have been criticized as cold, lifeless, and soulless: their digital logic is held to reduce infinite nuance and variety to fixed and finite numbers. Accordingly, most of those moved to comment on Wakin’s article took little comfort in the rise of digital pianos

⁵⁰ Albert Shaw, ed., “Where Art is Greater than Science,” *Review of Reviews Write-up Supplement* 39 ([Jan.-June] 1909), 67.

⁵¹ Shaw, ed., “A Secret of Home,” 47.

⁵² Alexander Nikitich Bukhovstev, *Guide to the Proper Use of the Pianoforte Pedals with Examples out of the Historical Concerts of Anton Rubinstein*, trans. John A Preston (New York: Bosworth & Co., 1897), title page; reproduced in *The Art of Piano Pedaling: Two Classic Guides* (Mineola, NY: Dover Publications, 2003), 1.

⁵³ Franz Mohr, *My Life with the Great Pianists* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 1996), 126. Mohr repeats the idea in the documentary *Note by Note*.

and keyboards. Instead, the story and its reception mark a historical juncture at which discarding a piano (or several pianos) morphs easily into discarding *the* piano, the acoustic instrument all told. Reports of widespread piano dumping raise the possibility that the piano is going the way of the harpsichord and the clavichord—removed from the realm of quotidian experience to become a thing of the past, the province of specialists in historical performance.

The makers of digital and software pianos, on the other hand, have been working hard to establish that their products actually preserve the soul of acoustic pianos. Synthogy is an audio software company devoted to making “virtual” pianos, or software instruments, based on samples of acoustic pianos.⁵⁴ These samples, recorded from instruments like a Bösendorfer 290 Imperial Grand and a Steinway Model D Concert Grand, are figured as “the heart and soul” of the software instrument, augmented by digital processing that performs functions like smoothing the dynamic gradient.⁵⁵ Synthogy founder Joe Ierardi equates piano sound and soul when he remarks, “I think the big knock on a lot of digital instruments has been that they have no soul ... that there’s this barrier that they can’t create. And I think we are our most successful if people feel ... like, ‘Hey, what are they doing here? They stole the soul of this instrument?’ I mean, I would take that as a compliment.”⁵⁶

For others, the essence of the piano lies not in the sound alone, but also in the way it feels to play the instrument. Digital pianos like Yamaha’s AvantGrand strive to replicate both the sound and feel of an acoustic piano. The AvantGrand resembles a baby grand, but plays samples of a Yamaha CFX and a Bösendorfer Imperial. These are triggered using the same action as an acoustic piano: the hammers hit a padded bar rather than strings, and optical sensors measure the speed at which the hammers pass to trigger the appropriate samples. Yamaha markets the instrument as “innovation with soul,” a theme echoed by its endorsing artists. As Francesco Tristano says, “it definitely has a soul. I feel the sound is coming from within. I don’t know how.”⁵⁷ A reviewer in *The Economist* concurred that Yamaha had captured the feel of playing an acoustic instrument. Whereas

⁵⁴ “The Challenges of Making a Digital Piano Sound Real,” April 17, 2014, <http://www.bbc.com/news/av/technology-27062526/the-challenges-of-making-a-digital-piano-sound-real>.

⁵⁵ ILIO, “Ivory II – Grand Pianos: What Makes it Different,” November 19, 2015, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ieQ7osfDLAw>.

⁵⁶ “The Challenges of Making a Digital Piano Sound Real.”

⁵⁷ Yamaha Corporation, “Yamaha AvantGrand N3X: Interview with Francesco Tristano,” October 3, 2016, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QRo5aRXIz9s>

he regarded other digital pianos as “soulless digital imitations” and “lifeless imitations of the real thing,” he found the AvantGrand a viable substitute for an acoustic instrument, since it recreated “all the bangs and crashes that go on inside a real piano.”⁵⁸

Software and digital pianos thus stake out slightly different positions on the essence of the piano, placing different degrees of emphasis on the physicality of the instrument. But both rely on acoustic piano sound converted into digital information, making the claims made for both exemplary of what N. Katherine Hayles has identified as a defining characteristic of early twenty-first-century Western culture: “the belief that information can circulate unchanged among different material substrates,” such that it can “flow between different substrates without loss of meaning or form.”⁵⁹ Hayles illustrates this position with the so-called Turing test, devised by Alan Turing to establish whether machines can think. According to Turing, the answer is ‘yes’ if one cannot distinguish a human from a machine based on the way each answers one’s questions through a text interface. As Hayles argues, the real importance of the Turing test is not in whether the machine passes for human, but in accepting its premise, which requires the erasure of embodiment from what counts as “intelligence.” Similarly, claims that software or digital pianos possess the souls of acoustic pianos require dispensing with not only the idea that the “soundboard is the soul of the instrument,” but also with any essential relation between the materiality and the soul of a piano. In his review of the AvantGrand, *The Economist* writer imagines a Turing test for digital pianos, to establish whether they equal acoustic pianos. He suggests that most would pass only under conditions of listening alone, whereas the AvantGrand would also pass under conditions of playing the instrument.⁶⁰ Yet in both cases, any differences in piano materiality that cannot be detected under the test conditions are discounted as irrelevant.

Countering the capacity of software and digital pianos to replace acoustic pianos, however, is a new valorization of the specific qualities of piano wood, strings, and metal. Whereas the early decades of the twentieth century saw the materiality of pianos fade from public view, displaced by the piano as symbol of music, the early years of the twenty-first century have witnessed its dramatic return to the spotlight. While films about great pianists have been common for

⁵⁸ “No Strings Attached,” *The Economist*, February 27, 2009, <http://www.economist.com/node/13208736>.

⁵⁹ N. Katherine Hayles, *How We Became Posthuman* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999), 1, xi.

⁶⁰ “No Strings Attached.”

decades, a recent spate of movies has put the focus squarely on how pianos are made, maintained, and refurbished, making the piano documentary a veritable genre unto itself. *Pianomania* (2008) follows the work of a Steinway piano technician as he painstakingly prepares instruments for concerts and recording sessions, adhering to the artists' exacting specifications. *American Grand* (2013) and *Sitka: A Piano Documentary* (2015) focus on the challenges and rewards of rebuilding an old instrument. *Note by Note: the Making of Steinway L1037* (2007) intersperses the making of a Steinway grand in Steinway's Astoria factory with discussions with the musicians who play the instruments. One learns about both the craftsmanship that goes into a Steinway grand and musicians' appreciation for the unique "personality" of each instrument.

In *Note by Note*, the pianist Pierre-Laurent Aimard reflects on the variety of relationships pianists have to their pianos, as well as the status of these instruments within the system of classical music performance: there are

people in love with *their* instrument, people who will play only with *their* instrument. Other people that fight with or against the instrument. Other [people] that consider the instrument just as an instrument. But somewhere, the goal is higher. The goal [is] the pieces and the worlds they construct. It's an ideal world that is much higher than instruments. But the instruments allow [one] to open the door, of course.⁶¹

Such lofty goals notwithstanding, piano documentaries and dumping stories alike attest to a desire to value pianos not merely as instruments in service of musical works, but as beings in their own right. Jane Bennett has suggested that objects occasionally possess "the power to startle and provoke a gestalt shift in perception: what was trash becomes things, what was an instrument becomes a participant."⁶² Pianos at the garbage dump provoke precisely such a shift, bringing into focus myriad ways of relating to pianos as more than mere tools—ways that have long played an important role in the social world of pianos, but that, as Aimard's statement implies, have often been reduced to secondary or incidental importance. Yet, as the future of acoustic pianos remains in question, it may not be the musical works written for them that secure their continued existence so much as the human desire and capacity to form and sustain meaningful relationships with things.

⁶¹ Ben Niles, dir., *Note by Note: the Making of Steinway L1037* (New York: Docurama, 2007).

⁶² Jane Bennett, *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2010), 107.