



Steve Layton (1956-) The Composer Plays IV Works for Imaginary Piano

The fourth installment of *The Composer Plays* collects works composed and realized in 2005 and 2006 at my studio in Seattle, Washington. Unlike traditional methods of composition and performance, all the tracks here combine performance and composition in the same moment. Each part is composed directly to the digital version of a “piano roll” -- which, beyond the traditional markings for pitch, duration and articulation, holds all of my own personal nuances of performance. This means that the “score” holds not only the “notes”, but my own realization as well. The moment the score is finished I can play and record the performance realization in a single recording “take”.

None of the performances take place on a traditional instruments, not even the strongly-featured piano. Rather, all of the parts are played simultaneously by a single Alesis QSR synthesizer (except for certain parts created from audio recordings) driven by the sequencer score, with a digital reverb creating the “hall”.

While some may consider all of this to be simply “machine music”, I think of it as nothing of the kind. The score is composed in every way identically to how we composers have done so for centuries with pen and paper; but in addition the score records my own “touch” in every note, something not possible before the coming of digital sequencers. And the synthesizer is no more a “machine” than a violin is. Both are truly instruments, each designed to create and channel vibrations from within their body into the air and ear, all of it the impetus of a human agency.

Some may also argue that I've given up the experience of hearing the pieces performed “live”, by “real” interpreters. Some part of that is true (though most of these pieces could easily be performed by others, if anyone wanted to take the time to work up a more traditional score); but in my mind it's more of a trade than a giving-up. In some ways the experience is *more* intimate; in each piece the connection is absolutely direct from the composer's mind, hand and ear to that of his audience, and all one-on-one.

-- Steve Layton / Seattle, March 2007

1. Igor Stravinsky: Piano-Rag Music (1919; realized 2006) (1920 Chester edition)

In 1919, Ragtime and Jazz music were still quite new sounds, especially in Europe. Stravinsky had only encountered them a couple years previously, and then only in sheet music brought back from America by Ernest Ansermet. As Stravinsky wrote in *Expositions and Developments*: "...as I had never actually heard any of the music performed, I borrowed its rhythmic style not as played, but as written. I *could* imagine jazz sound, however, or so I liked to think..." About this piece he wrote in his *Chronicle of My Life*: "What fascinated me most of all in the work was that the different rhythmic episodes were dictated by the fingers themselves. My own fingers seemed to enjoy it so much that I began to practice the piece; not that I wanted to perform it in public ... but simply for my personal satisfaction."

2. O, Hebdomeros (2006)

One of a number of pieces (*Taishun Forecast*, also on this album, is another) I've made recently, that use altered audio recordings as a kind of "bed" or ground-plan, that I simply and intuitively follow to create the instrumental parts that ride on top of it. In this case, a few seconds of a voice speaking on an old test record from the 1950s is stretched out to around 15 minutes. All connection with speech is lost; only vague and slowly unfolding murmurs at various frequencies mixed with a few spikes of noise. My job was simply to let my imagination roam this field, suggesting notes and figures along the way. The title is an homage to a wonderful surrealist book of the same name, written by Giorgio de Chirico. Both works share something of the feeling of a pointless yet somehow pregnant plot unfolding just outside our capacity to understand.

3. Purple Ball, Purple Balloon (2005)

I was halfway through this solo piano piece when they discovered the cancer that was to kill my mother two months later. All I could do after the funeral was come back to it and finish with this new knowledge. The purple ball actually appeared from nowhere on my sister's yard the day of the funeral. Purple was my mother's favorite color, and my sister was convinced it was a sign that my mother was still close. At the end of the service, we each released a single purple balloon into a very hot and bright sky, and watched them rise and slowly disappear towards the distant northern horizon.

4. November (2005)

For piano four-hands. The first – and for the first three minutes, almost the *only* idea – is a progression of three chords, obsessively repeated, reexamined and reconfigured. Even after, most of the developments are tied to some aspect of these chords. The title is simply the month the piece was composed in, but I think something of the season's forbidding and stormy nature is in there.

5. Turned Upon Itself (2006)

Solo piano, though the intricate figures that open the piece might technically be impossible for a real pianist's fingers. These figures wind in ways that make it hard to extricate the strands; but slowly, different lines are teased out a set against each other in a larger space.

6. For Fire is the Proof of All Colors (2006)

For two pianos. Like *November*, the piece begins with another obsessive gesture; this time the play between two chords, each one held by one of the pianos. The separation between the pianos suggests a number of kinds of spatial polyphony, meetings, compliments, oppositions and contradictions.

7. Taishun Forecast (2006)

Composed in the last days of 2006, the piece is a small concerto for piano, orchestra, (strings, brass, clarinets, and tubular bells) and altered recording in the manner of *O, Hebdomeros*. In November, my Chinese musician/poet friend Yan Jun was in Taiwan for a series of performances. In free moments while there, he would make field recordings of sound that interested him. One of these was of a collection of wind-chimes at a garage in Taishun Street. I used a small fragment of this recording, great expanded and slowed, as the “bed” to guide my composition. The “forecast” is in both the rushing energy and uncertainty of the piece and of course the new year to come.

All pieces © 2005, 2006 by Steve Layton (ASCAP).

All pieces composed, performed and recorded by Steve Layton at NiwoSound Studio, Seattle.

Sequencer: Voyetra Record Producer Pro

Synthesizer: Alesis QSR

Reverb: Alesis Microverb 4

Recorder/Editor: Goldwave

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