

#3

PRE-GESTURE, GESTURE AND SOUND ON [NO] PIANO: MUSIC FROM SOMEWHERE

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...real space is neither its topos nor its instrument. This music is not here or there; as soon as it sounds, it is all-present and all-penetrating [...]. Therefore let us call this music, from a spatial perspective, a music from somewhere...

—(Craenen, 2014, p. 30)

3.1 Introduction

Let this initial quote be the starting point to talk about *Music from Somewhere*, a piece written in 2017 (reviewed in 2019) by the composer Fran MM Cabeza de Vaca.¹ *Music from Somewhere*, for pianist's hands, lights and stereo audio tape, shows us a simple scenic display to amplify the previous moment to the sound emission of the piano, working with the silence as material that precedes the music that is yet to come, the one that is in this other place.

Bringing that specific moment to the forefront means that the movement and gesture become our main visual input, focusing on that virtual place where the performer is just before the sound materializes. The performer explores the different ways to connect the body to the instrument, linking it not only to the visible gestures, but also to the previous state where the invisible movement stays: the pre-gesture.

My background as a performer started with a classical piano education in a music *conservatoire*. Later on, I specialized in contemporary music, combining it with specific interest in free improvisation and sound art.² As the performer of this piece, I found that

¹The video documentation of the work is accessible here: <https://vimeo.com/449604575>

²To learn more: <https://www.haizelizarazu.com/en/>



Figure 3.1: *Music from Somewhere* by Fran MM Cabeza de Vaca (Video ©Marta Azparren, 2020)

Music from Somewhere posed some questions from the very beginning of its conception: How do I relate myself to the piano when it is not physically present? How are my pianistic movements linked to the score when the resulting sound is not a consequence of the notation? All these lines converge in the self-consciousness of my moving body, on the proprioceptive process of the pianistic gestures that I have acquired through all my student years. *Music from Somewhere* challenges the pianist to rethink all the mechanic and automatized movements, the visible and the invisible, the different kinds of memories we develop, and creates a new space where sound, silence, gesture and pre-gesture are inter-connected.

3.2 The invisible: score and pre-gesture

There are many different kinds of scores, ranging from traditional staff notation systems to graphical scores, to video- or aural-scores. All of them are related to sound and show us various ways of representing it. When digging into other artistic disciplines, however, such as dance, theatre or performance, we can also find the score concept—not related to sound, but to movement and/or actions. Richard Schechner (2002) links the score to what he terms ‘proto-performance’ (p. 234). He describes the proto-performance (or ‘proto-p’) as something that precedes and/or gives rise to a performance: a starting point or, more commonly, a bunch of starting points (Schechner, 2002, p. 225).

The score in *Music from Somewhere* is twofold in this way: it is a video-score that is synced with the music (tape) that uses—mainly—two different kind of notations: gestural/positional (Figure 3.2) and traditional musical notation (Figure 3.3). The former clearly asks the performer for an imitation kind of response: do what you see. The latter,



Figure 3.2: *Gestural notation on Music from Somewhere (Score excerpt)*



Figure 3.3: *Traditional musical notation on Music from Somewhere (Score excerpt)*

apparently essentially traditional piano notation, asks the performer for a very different type of work: they need to find a gestural approach to the given piano score excerpts. Many of them belong to pieces that I have, at some point in my life, already studied and played; for example, works from the traditional, well-known piano repertoire, such as Beethoven's piano sonatas, Webern's op.27 Variations or Debussy's *Études* (among others). All these different pieces are therefore linked to my own experience. To my own memory. Of course, we can't talk about memory as a single concept, as it has many different layers: aural, tactile, emotional, analytical, muscular... but all of these layers converge at one common point: the body. As Paul Craenen (2014) explains,

besides being a perceptual filter that determines what can be perceived and experienced, the body also functions as an active and reactive memory. Mimetic theories have already made us aware of the close relationship between action and perception, the ability to perceive, and muscle memory. (p. 265)

Furthermore, it is very important to mention that the score excerpts do not try to represent the resulting sound, as traditional scores do, but rather set a trigger to the action of approaching the written sound. Or, to put it another way, they explore the silence that exists just before the sound is produced (the music of the piece is in a great part a composition of the many different silences of many different piano performances). Hence, no actual piano performance gesture is desired in the first half of the piece. Taking all these considerations into account, performing the aforementioned score sketches lead me to re-visit them, remember them in all the possible ways: aurally, gesturally, emotionally. During the performance of the piece, no piano is there to respond with a resulting sound, or to feel its physical resistance. Therefore, the study process goes back to the real piano; not to practising the score itself, but to practising the feeling, the perception of playing those different piano scores. Very little time is given to change from one score to another, from one style to another, from one memory to another. Hence, the focus of the practice process relies on the awareness of your own body, on the previous state of playing the notated sound, on what I call the *pre-gesture*.

The pre-gesture is the invisible gesture that precedes the visible one. It is a starting point, an impulse. Much like the definition that Schechner makes about the proto-performance. It is very interesting to observe, too, how in this same line, the author gives a special emphasis to the concept of pre-expressivity (Schechner, 2002, p. 226), a term related to the theatre author and director Eugenio Barba (previously developed by his teacher, Jerzy Grotowski).³ It all makes reference to this previous body state—body presence—that the performer needs to train in order to actually perform the play, text, work or dance.

The same way that a performer/actor trains the presence of their own body, the tensions preceding the actions (the in-tension) in order to acquire an incorporated knowledge through the body, the performer/pianist in *Music from Somewhere* needs to dig until the pre-gesture level, the preceding action, the previous mind-body state, in order to perform the pianistic gestures without either a piano or a resulting sound. Figure 3.4 shows how I recorded myself playing the different score excerpts; I used this as a helping tool to memorize the visual gesture as seen from the outside (added to the proprioceptive feeling of the pre-gesture).

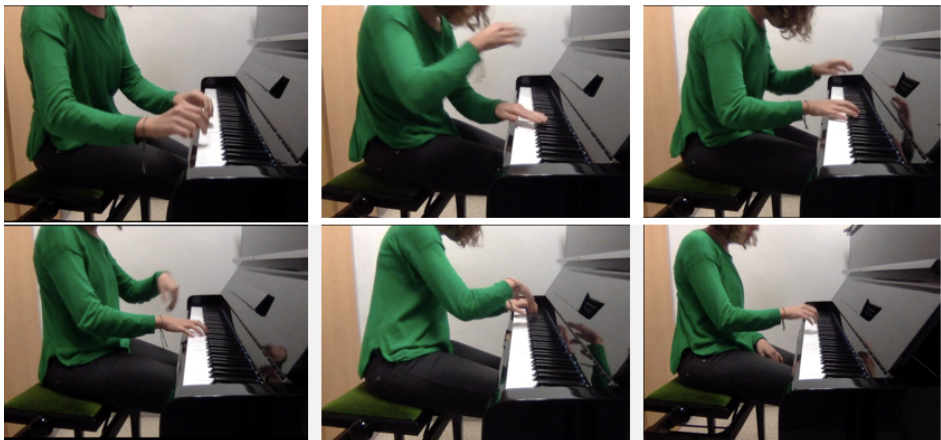


Figure 3.4: **Music from Somewhere: screenshots of the video documentation during the study process** (Photo: Lizarazu, 2020, CC BY)

All these concepts (proto-performance, pre-gesture, pre-expressivity) circle around the same point. On the subject of this previous state of the body Paulo de Assis (2018) provides a very interesting analysis about Simondon's key concept of *transduction* and how the body could be understood as a transducer in music-making (pp. 137–157). Terms such as *structural germ* or *micro-haecceity* (related to the Simondonian notion of *individuation*) illuminate these energy and state changes of the performing body and give us a clue about how we might apply it to the musical realm. In his words,

³To learn more, see Barba, Eugenio & Savarese, Nicola. *A Dictionary of Theater Anthropology: the secret art of the performer*. Routledge, New York (1991)

Micro-haeccities are high energy-loaded and high-speed-moving singularities that carry a force of potential from one position to the next. They make up the visible or audible part of artistic transductive processes. In their functioning as radical becoming they never appear as stable *beings*, remaining an impulse of virtuality from one actualisation to the next. If one thinks, or does, or experiences artistic performances with these operations in mind, the Deleuzian notion of *capture of forces* becomes more graspable than ever: the virtual becomes actual in order to be instantly dissolved into the virtual again. The pianist playing Schumann perfectly exemplifies such a capture: he or she is not merely reproducing a stratified, pre-existing entity, but operating a capture of forces (from the virtual) that produces a new individuation (actual) as a highly intensive becoming, which immediately—as soon as it is generated—points forward to other virtual pre- and after-individualities. (de Assis, 2018, p. 149)

As we see, the continuous contingencies that happen within a performance (*virtualities*) are a key concept in understanding how our body moves and behaves in the music-making process. The author refers to the *structural germ* as a potentiality: it is a structural consecutive potential; that is, it carries some sort of information, which sets the basic conditions for an event to happen (de Assis, 2018, p. 147). It is clear now how all the mentioned terms and theories help to facilitate an understanding of the body and its movements not only in the performance moment, but also in the previous non-visible states. *Music from Somewhere* explores all these pianistic pre-gestures as the main musical and working material. It challenges us to focus and to be conscious of them not only on a conceptual level, but also as an interaction process between the body and the instrument at the practical level.

3.3 The visible: gesture and space

At first sight, when watching *Music from Somewhere*, one can see that two main spaces are created and shown: the public space in front of the white panel, and the semiprivate space in the background, where a dim light and a distant music carries us. The public space is presented as the performing stage, where the hands, fingers and arms are shown. A kind of concert stage. The semiprivate space is presented as an intimate study place (home, studio), where the performer usually finds himself alone (even though the audience is able to ‘peep’ them through the panel hole). The proposition, here, is one of outside and inside; what the audience does or does not see. And between those two places, once again, a common agent: the performing body.

These two spaces have different purposes. On the one hand, it serves as a visual and clear separation for and between the audience and the performer, who hides behind the white panel. On the other hand, it physically creates the different places where sound exists in a performance, as we will elaborate in the following lines (the moment just before the sound, when it sounds, after the sound is heard/played). This second partition leads us to talk about the space in aural terms: the sound-space.

The first case scenario is the sound-space that happens before the note is played, before the hand actually touches the keyboard. This starting point (which itself consists of many starting points) is linked with the aforementioned pre-gesture, as we have seen. But that pre-gesture is not just a physical proprioceptive feeling, it contains all of the music

that is yet to come. To be at the pre-gesture level, the performer needs to be also at the multiple levels and ‘places’ that the piece has been before, since the first reading until the performance moment. For Mine Doğantan-Dack (2011), ‘the unity of the initiatory gesture and tone produced is also part of the listening experience, although the listener is not ahead of the music physically in the same way as the performer is’ (p. 259). The audience doesn’t just listen to the sound of the piano, or the various attacks of the pianist. The audience sees how the performer moves, how they approach every musical event, and also, how they enter the stage or enact in certain, idiosyncratic ways, the music that we’re about to experience. As Doğantan-Dack (2011) discerningly points out, ‘in fact, if we really are precise, it is not the attack that produces the sound, but the gesture bringing about the attack’ (p. 259).

It should now be clear for the reader how paramount this previous state of the performing body is—not only for the performer themselves, but also for the audience (that perceives it from a third person perspective) and for the resulting sound that comes after. As Doğantan-Dack (2011) explains:

(...) the performer starts to experience the tone much earlier not only mentally, but also physically, at the beginning of the fixating gesture, before the hammer contacts the string and the tone actually starts sounding. The kinaesthetic sensations that accompany the gesture result from the adjustment in muscular tonus that the pianist makes to prepare the impact, and this adjustment in turn is guided by an aural image of the desired tone, the goal of the gestural movement. Pianists know – must know – what kind of tone will ensure that their touch is able to produce the intended tone at all. (p. 258)

The sound-space concept has been examined for many decades now, from the architectural perspective as well as from both the listener’s and a music-making perspective. Often sound is introduced in this discourse as an isolated element, with the argument being that sound creates the space itself, like a sphere without fixed boundaries, space made by the thing itself, not space containing a thing (LaBelle 2010, xxi-xxii). Though this argument may be true in context, we might also think about the impact of the music-making body in the sound-space creation. It is important to think about spatiality not only in physical, three-dimensional terms, but also as a musical metaphor to understand the different moments and events that occur when the sounding body intervenes. Paul Craenen (2014) provides an extensive analysis on this subject, in which he traces music as a spatial phenomenon through different categories, such as: a) space *surrounding* the music; b) space *for* the music; c) space *of* the music (pp. 20–25).

The first category refers mainly to the characteristics that make musical activity recognizable in a society, meaning the role that music plays in our social, cultural, political and economic context. Here, the human body is found in a multiple layer scenario where audience, politicians, promoters, programmers, musicians all interact in creating this surrounding of the music as a metaphorical category (Craenen, 2014, pp. 20–21). The second sound-space is related to the instrumental space. This is where we find the music halls, venues, stages and all the specifics needed for the music performance to happen. It is also where the performing body first appears as a main character. Lastly, the space of music itself defines what we understand as the musical playing field. In the words of the author,

...the musical playing field (...) is a space that is constantly shifting, a space that behaves dynamically. It is an emerging space that unfolds as the music progresses. The musical playing field is a cultural and audio-motor space in which patterns of musical expectation, stylistic characteristics, and idiomatic sonorities encourage selection and variation. (Craenen, 2014, p. 23)

The space *of* music changes from piece to piece, from performer to performer, from instrument to instrument, even if the space *for* the music remains the same in all those changes. It is in this musical playing field where the listening and perceiving experiences carry us to other, more intimate sound-space metaphors: the music from *here*, music from *there* and music from *somewhere* (Craenen, 2014, pp. 26–30). Focusing on this last metaphor (which gives its name to and also partly motivated the piece we are analysing in this paper), this *somewhere* attempts to name that space where the music carries us, we listeners and performers, when sounding,. This place is formed not only by the sound, but also by the movement, the performing body that materializes that sound.

In *Music from Somewhere*, all these sound-space metaphors are presented through the gesture of the performer. First, the sound is being—wanting to be—materialized, present: *here*. As we have already seen, this is managed through the inner perception of the pre-gesture level. Secondly, once the performer's finger literally touches the table—the [no] piano—another sound-space is presented, the one where the sound is played and long gone at the same time: *there*. In that place, the visible pianistic gestures are more recognizable than ever. The attack, the intensity, the tension, the release of the notes is being shown as a consequence of the proprioceptive memory of the performer and their embodiment. The travel through these two places lead us, the performer and the audience, to this other place: *somewhere*. From a spatial perspective, a music from *somewhere* is conceived as a fluid, phantasmal space experienced kinetically (Craenen, 2014, p. 30).

The awareness of the different sound-spaces in relation to the present body (performers and audience) enables us to analyse the performing body, its gestures and movements as an independent and well established concept for theorization. It is in fact the co-presence of the bodies that makes the scenic realization possible and the one that set the ground for the first performative turns in the arts (Fischer-Lichte, 2004, p. 65). The importance of the gesture in relation to a musical instrument is a key component in the learning process of any musical piece at any musical level.

3.4 Conclusion

Music from Somewhere is a musical piece that uses the gesture and the performing body as musical material. It paradoxically explores the relation between the pianist and their instrument by eliminating the latter. This sets the focus on the movements that a pianist does not only when performing, but also when practising. The two main points that have been explored through this piece are the self-awareness of the pre-gesture and the creation of the sound-space through the gestures of the performing body.

Pre-gesture has been presented as an inner movement of the performer, a previous state of the performing body where all the music, information and possibilities live before the sound actually materializes. The concept is here connected to other artistic fields, such as

theatre and performance, where the body has been a more extensive subject of study than in the musical field (Schechner, 2002; Barba & Savarese, 1991; Lecoq, 2003). I argue about the importance of focusing on this previous state to understand the embodiment of pianistic gestures and the cognitive processes enacted in the study and practice of a musical piece or instrument.

In addition, pre-gesture also serves as a practical tool to perform and elaborate that metaphorical place where the music exists prior to its sounding. The actual materialization of the sound leads us, then, to this other sound-space, where sound exists and is gone at the same time, a fleeting moment where sound is barely localized. And in all of those sound-spaces, the performing body acts as an interface, a filter, a bridge to carry us to that *somewhere*, where all the music, the audience, the performers exist in a *non-spatial* space realm.

Acknowledgments

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