

PIANO FOUR-HANDS, “ONCE AGAIN”



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Abstract

This work arises from the long and passionate research the author has been conducting as member of a professional piano duo in order to understand why the piano four-hands repertoire has always been stigmatized as an “inferior genre” despite its unquestionable beauty, and to shed light on the contemporary repertoire for this medium, which is at present almost unknown, unperformed and undiscussed, despite it embodies masterpieces of undoubted artistic value.

To do so, the work focuses at first upon the technical challenges, the distinctive features, the possibilities of expression as well as the limitations that characterize the piano four-hands repertoire, explaining why they are of a completely unique order and why they make the medium itself so distinctive and so controversial at the same time.

The script then explores the medium also from a more historical point of view, setting it into its social-cultural-musical context and deeply investigating that process that has brought it from being considered one of the most fascinating socio-cultural phenomenas of the 19th century to its almost complete extinction at the beginning of the 20th century, with the ultimate scope of analyzing what’s left of it nowadays and its role in the current musical scene.

The results of the investigation point out that once the historical and sociological factors that have allowed the extreme popularity of the medium fell short, it could finally assume a completely new value and be a site of compositional and performance innovation which absolutely deserves to be discovered, performed and analyzed.

The outputs of this dissertation have also inspired the young Chinese composer Ching-Fang Teng to write “Entanglement”, a proper homage to the medium and to its endless compositional potential.

Introduction

Declaration by author

This thesis is composed of my original work, and contains no material previously published or written by another person except where due reference has been made in the text. I have clearly stated the contribution by others to jointly-authored works that I have included in my thesis.

Need for the study

The thesis is situated within the paradigm of artistic research, and the **professional experience of the Dirac Piano Duo (DPD)**, of which the author is a member, constitute the research context.

It has its origins in the long and passionate research the author has been conducting since the birth of DPD in order to deepen the complex aspects that make the piano four-hands medium so unique in the history of music, to master this special medium from a technical point of view, and to find tools to overcome the many different difficulties encountered during the path.

Since the very beginning of its professional experience indeed, the DPD had to face matters of various nature, such as:

- a new, never experienced individual approach to the piano, with new rules to be discovered and understood;
- The choice of performing a repertoire that for long time has been stigmatized apparently without any reason as “inferior” by programmers, musicians and public, despite its unquestionable beauty and value;
- The difficulty in offering a personal concert proposal to the public consisting of new, exciting contemporary: very often this kind of repertoire, almost completely unknown, has been refused by the concert programmers in favor of the most standard and well-known one, more appreciated by the public.

The need of **understanding the dynamics behind these practical issues** inspired the author to formulate the research questions and to develop a much broader and organic research topic.

Topic and research questions

The piano duet literature has experienced huge evolutions in the way it was written by the composers and conceived by the public through the centuries, from its being considered as one of the most fascinating musical-cultural phenomenas in 19th century, till its almost disappearance in the first half of the 20th century and its rehabilitation in the last few decades: we are in fact assisting at a flourishing of great new pieces for this medium and most of them are extremely innovative in their performative concept.

The research elaborates on the topic trying to answer the following **questions**:

1. Why did this process happen? Which are the social-cultural-musical reasons?
2. Can we properly talk about an actual “renaissance” of the four-hands genre? If yes, why?
3. Is the piano four-hands a unique medium that gives unique advantages and possibilities of expression compared to the piano solo medium, the two-pianos medium and any kind of chamber music ensemble? If yes, which are the features that make it special?
4. How does four-hands piano music fit into the current contemporary music scene? Is it true that composers of the 20th-21st century are managing to transform the medium and enhancing its distinctive features even more than the composers of the past? If yes, which are the most iconic pieces in this regard?
5. Is there room nowadays for new piano four-hands literature? Can it still be a site of compositional and performance innovation?
6. Why can a concert program made of contemporary four-hands pieces be an extremely valid and effective proposal in the current musical scene?

Organization

The work attempts to answer the questions above mentioned in the following way:

- **Chapter 1** focuses upon the technical challenges, the distinctive features, the possibilities of expression as well as the limitations that characterize the piano four-hands repertoire, explaining why they are of a completely unique order and why they make the medium itself so distinctive and so controversial at the same time. The reader will become familiar with concepts like balance, physical proximity, choreography of gestures, textural expansion, pedaling through the experience of the author as a member of the DPD and through some interviews given by important duettists and composers.
- **Chapter 2** aims to contextualize the piano four hands medium in the (music) society of 17th, 18th, 19th and the beginning of the 20th centuries. The following aspects are going to be analyzed in detail:
 - The socio-cultural role of the medium, its origins, its evolution and the reasons of its decline (appropriate emphasis is given to Adorno's theories written in 1933).
 - The most important composers (in short).
 - Four-hands repertoire as concert-medium: the stigma, the rivalry with the two-pianos medium, the most important duettists, the reception of public and critic.
- **Chapter 3** frames the medium in the contemporary music scene. It analyzes the reasons and the results of its renaissance started on the 70s, underlining the transformations the medium has undergone and identifying it as a limitless site of compositional and performance innovation.
- In **Chapter 4** a selection of iconic pieces is presented, chosen with the aim of creating a high-quality, personal and well-thought concert proposal of DPD, able to fit the needs of the current musical scene. A new piece, "Entanglement" by Ching-Fang Teng, commission by DPD is presented.

Limitations

The script is born from the practical needs above mentioned and has the main aim of answering the above mentioned questions. A complete history of piano duet repertoire and performance is beyond the scope of this study, as well as there is no intention to provide the reader with an extensive catalogue of the composers and the works written for the medium. The pieces mentioned and analyzed are the result of a personal search and of the author's taste.

Procedure and methodology

Both the theoretical considerations and the more practical issues are illustrated through the professional experience of the author as a member of DPD and through the analysis and the careful examination of scores, videos, related literature, interviews with composers and with some of the personalities that have devoted their career to exploit and revive this medium in the last decades.

The author shares the output of her personal research with the trust that it could help to raise awareness about the topic, fill in gaps in the related literature, make up the general lack of attention towards the contemporary repertoire and encourage the composition of new adventurous pieces for the medium.

Chapter 1: Piano four-hands duo: features, virtues and limitations

Purposes of the chapter

Playing piano four-hands (also known as “piano duet”) repertoire is a complex and unique experience, different from any kind of other chamber music interaction. Many times during this dissertation I will be analyzing in detail the technical features of the medium, the specific challenges, the limitations and the virtues it comprises, the solutions and the approaches the composers adopted to enhance the medium itself, and the matter is so unique that not even the most refined solo pianist or chamber musician can fully understand it without a proper detailed explanation.

The reader who wants to deeply grasp the outcomes of this research needs indeed to get an idea as precise as possible about how it feels like to play on the same instrument “shoulder to shoulder” with a fellow pianist, that’s why I decided to dedicate this first chapter to an extensive description of all these matters, collecting my experience and the interviews of some of the most important piano duettists, researchers and composers on the music scene who, next to the clear description of the limitations, always underline the reasons why they decided to focus on the medium. I trust this effort will allow the readers to face the topic with the needed knowledge and hopefully with the same enthusiasm I have.

Clarifications on the terminology

First of all it has to be noted that when two pianists decide to join their forces and play as a duo, the piano four-hands setting is not the only option they may consider to choose (someone could even state that it could be the last option they may consider to choose!): there is of course a very significant amount of works written for the two pianos setting and it is so extensive, challenging and precious that the most important piano duettists usually decide to specialize and perform both the repertoires. It is customary to see famous piano duettists playing on two pianos, then sit shoulder to shoulder and share one instrument, then use again the second piano, everything in

the same recital. Please note that no other instrumentalist has this choice: you can see e.g. a two cellos duo, but it's absolutely rare to see two cellists sharing the same instrument. This has enormous consequences on the amount of repertoire and especially on the incredible variety of skills a piano duettist needs to develop.

The **two mediums** have in fact completely different features as well as distinct set of playing requirements and they have had the biggest rivalry through the centuries (see next chapter). It is not in the interest of this study to focus on the two pianos medium, but it will be often mentioned, therefore a clarification on the terminology needs to be made.

In fact, as Richard Leppert states in one of his well known articles, "There's a degree of terminological ambiguity in the history of the keyboard duet, since duet, while invariably referring to two performers, could designate either one or two instruments"¹. The vocabulary used to distinguish the two mediums changes indeed from age to age, from author to author, but in my study I will call under the name of **"piano duet"** or **"piano four-hands"** repertoire those works intended to be played by two players playing on the same piano at the same time, where the pianist who plays in the high register will be called "primo", and the other player will be indicated under the name of "secondo". I will define instead **"two-pianos"** repertoire the works played on two different pianos.

Unique features, issues and merits of the medium

The most effective and evocative description of the piano four-hands medium has been given in my opinion by Edward T. Cones in his book "The Composer's Voice"²:

"The aim of four-hands music should be to evoke a single persona, not by the interaction of two agents, but by the blending of the two players into a single four-handed monster"

¹ Leppert, Richard: "Four Hands, Three Hearts: A Commentary", p. 6

² Cone, Edward T.: "The Composer's Voice", p. 135

Please reflect about how strong the image of the “monster” is: a monster is so because it has got by nature a defective, non-symmetrical body and the two players experience fully this feeling when they tent to become part of this exceptional creature.

This powerful description directly leads to the acknowledgment that the genre, as we said, presents technical challenges of a completely unique order and it couldn't be otherwise, since this is the only kind of musical encounter in which two people, using the full resources of a single instrument, effectively perform music originally written or especially arranged for that combination³.

One of those for sure concerns the perception and the creation of the **balance** by the two players. A pianist in fact is accustomed in every circumstance (whether he/she performs solo pieces or chamber music repertoire) to control with his/her own hands all the registers of the instrument. It is probably one of the most difficult aspect of piano playing: a student spends most of his/her practice time on learning how to deal with the polyphonic nature of the instrument, which means basically being able to shape with the same attention all the voices, to balance and layer them in the most appropriate way, distributing them among the left and the right hand with the help of a correct fingering, the right movements of the arms, the pedal.

But when the keyboard is shared, the duo produces what the ear is used to hearing as the product of one person (without forgetting a substantial textural expansion of course), so each pianist, no matter if he is *primo* or *secondo* player, loses completely all the typical referring points experienced till then, and is forced to re-educate again ears as well as hands.

The outer hands, *primo*'s right and *secondo*'s left, keep their typical role, but they have to take a very subtle and difficult challenge: the left hand of the *secondo* will play as always the role of the bass, but it will have to support the texture of three hands instead of one, so the pianist will have to work hard in terms of quality of touch in order to adjust it to the new setting.

The same applies in a different way to the “par excellence” soprano voice, played in the piano duet by the right hand of the *primo* player, which will have to achieve a more powerful and bright touch in order to “shine” over the massive sound created by the other three hands.

³ McGraw, Cameron: “Piano Duet Repertoire, Music Originally Written for One Piano, Four Hands”, preface by the author, p.13

The so-called “middle hands” instead require even more attention because they have to learn to play completely different roles: *primo*’s left will not play the soprano but the viola line, and *secondo*’s right hand will be the second violin instead of the bass.

They have to, exactly like the inner voices of a string quartet, cooperate and blend in the most refined way in order to allow the soprano to sing without effort, and this can happen in piano duet only after having solved some practical issues concerning the choreography of the movements, especially if **middle-hands interchanges** are present.



Fig.1: Visible hands interchange in “The Mozart family” by Johann Nepomuk della Croce in 1780-81.

It is not rare indeed to find in piano four-hands pieces spots where the middle-hands interchange their position creating real “invasions” in the partner’s area: in those moments the hand movements have to be “consciously planned and coordinated between the duettists in such a

way that the arm and torso movements do not disturb the other partner's playing"⁴, which most of the times represents a real challenge (**fig.1**).

This technique has been used more and more through the centuries: from a scarce use in the 18th century (i.e. Mozart used it only once, in the third movement of the Sonata in C major K19d), we assist to a more frequent use of it by composers of the second half of the 19th century like Brahms ("Hungarian Dances") and Dvořák, ("Slovenic Dances") but it was only in the early 20th century that French composers (i.e. Debussy in "Six épigraphes antiques", Ravel in "Ma mere l'Oye", Poulenc in his "Sonata for piano four-hands") began to explore new and imaginative ways as to how the four hands could be distributed ⁵ with purposes that were merely musical.

Analyzing in detail some of the pieces where was applied it is possible to notice that not always there are clear and convincing musical reasons behind that choice:

"Howard Ferguson writes that 'a change in distribution is bound to produce a change of tonal balance, not only between the hands of each individual player but also between two partners'. Nevertheless, it also provided a closer physical contact between the four-handers, sometimes not only seemingly for the sake of music. Ernst Lubin notes that 'perhaps it is more than a mere accident that so much piano duet music involves a crossing of the hands between the partners, even where it may not be absolutely required by the music itself'.⁶

No matter if it was used with the intention of creating a special musical nuance, a delicate "tonal change" or it had extra-musical implications like a subtle flirting or the shameless ambition to simply astonish the public with acrobatic choreographies (see next chapter), the middle-hands interchanges contribute to increase that **physical proximity and restriction** that is a constant in piano four-hands playing and doesn't allow to have the same freedom in the arms experienced in the solo playing. If the pianists want to obtain it together with a consequent remarkable sound quality, they should try to fit as comfortably as possible in the "monster's structure", which is possible only by planning consciously a proper choreography of movements and practicing it as much as every other aspect of the playing.

⁴ Oinas, Cecilia: "From four-handed monster to all-embracing Vishnu: the case of 'middle hands'" within a piano four hands duo", p. 3

⁵ Oinas, p.7

⁶ Oinas, pp. 3-4

The crucial importance of this practicing process is evidenced by many duettists and researchers in the field.

Eva-Maria Zimmermann (partner of Keisuke Nakagoshi in ZOFO, world-wide famous piano duo) declared in an interview ⁷:

“The challenge of playing piano-four-hands is that the space you have for yourself is limited, but if you work around each other in a graceful way, it actually does not need to be something negative. When we rehearse really well and intensively, I still feel free—completely free with my movements.”

Also the young but internationally acclaimed duettists Greg Anderson and Elizabeth Joy Roe (members of the Anderson&Roe piano duo) in their foreword to the Second Edition of book “Piano Duet Repertoire, Music Originally Written for One Piano, Four Hands” by Cameron McGraw (indispensable tool for the knowledge of the piano duet repertoire) jokingly allude to their difficulties in this regard:

“A single wrong note (have mercy!) yields torn knuckles and bloodied keys. A mis- directed arm leads to a black eye. We should know—we've done it ourselves, repeatedly.” ⁸

And I myself as a member of Dirac Piano duo can testify to how frustrating it could be to spend most of the practicing time on how to find strategies to fit as comfortably as possible in the keyboard, working constantly around continuous limitations of expression.

One of the thorniest problems I had personally to face more often was concerning the **pedalling**: the *secondo* player needs in fact to consider the *primo*'s part as well when choosing the pedalling, one more stressful issue the pianist is not usually used to face in other circumstances. One of the most challenging pieces I've ever experienced is “Petite Poucet”, second piece of the gorgeous Suite “Ma mère l'Oye” by Maurice Ravel, where the extreme difficulty of rendering faithfully the little steps on the piano is made even harder by the continuous interlocking of the middle hands and the hard choice of a good pedalling strategy.

⁷ Molloy, Maggie: “Album review: ZOFO Plays Terry Riley”, <https://www.secondinversion.org/tag/piano-four-hands/> (last access 05-06-20)

⁸ McGraw: Foreword By Anderson&Roe, p.11

I would be a liar if I wouldn't admit that sometimes I even dreamt of the comfort I can benefit from being the only pianist at the keyboard.

So, at this point a question may arise spontaneously from the reader's mind: "Why do you do that then, why pianists and composers over the centuries chose to grapple with such a challenging, limiting, sometimes even irritating medium?"

I could answer that at least till the 19th century there were specific **practical, socio-cultural, pedagogical reasons** (they will be indeed thoroughly explained in the next chapter).

An other answer is for sure that the piano four-hands medium meets some composers' exigence to **"expand" the texture of the composition in order to obtain an increase of power in the performances** as a spontaneous consequence of the symphonic nature of the piano, which of course can produce many more voices than a single pianist could ever control; about this the Australian composer Carl Vine (born in 1954) wrote on his own program notes for one of the greatest contemporary pieces for the medium, his "Sonata for piano Four-hands" (2009):

"In my earlier piano sonatas I occasionally wished that the soloist could grow an extra hand to manage all of the requisite notes. In the long run, adding an extra player seemed more prudent, and it now seems odd to me that the 'four hand sonata' has enjoyed so little popularity since the nineteenth century" ⁹

And in this respect Eva Zimmerman even denies the discussion concerning any limitation, claiming:

"With piano, the musical possibilities are so vast that sometimes your biggest limitation is the fact you only have two hands". ¹⁰

They are indeed absolutely right but I think that the most sincere and substantial answer to the question is this one instead:

⁹ Vine, Carl: "Sonata for piano Four-hands" edited by Faber Music, program notes.

¹⁰ Molloy: "Album review: ZOFO Plays Terry Riley"

When the two pianists have really mastered the medium and have overcome the numerous obstacles, they really merged into one persona during that process and they can have available the **most intimate form of chamber music** imaginable (as well as the most amusing), where physical sensations are encountered not only by touching the instrument but also by sensing the **physical presence of the duo partner** ¹¹. In this respect, another declaration of Eva Zimmermann deserves mention:

“In ‘regular’ chamber music, the pianist is separated from the other players due to the positioning of the piano, or through the instrument itself. In my experience playing piano quartets, I often felt that the string players had this wonderful circle of communication and that I as a pianist was an outsider—this has nothing to do with personality—it’s just how the players have to be positioned. [There’s] none of that when we play one-piano-four-hands. There’s a very direct communication going on and I feel part of a team as I never did before.”¹²

This special feature, coupled with the uniqueness of the instrument itself, brings the **interactive side of the chamber music process on a next-level in many aspects, both musical and extramusical** and it is indeed the task of my research to investigate the extraordinary possible outputs deriving from that potentiality (see chapter 4).

¹¹ Oinas, p. 15

¹² Soiseth, Dustin: “Zofo champions new piano-four-hands rep in San Francisco” in New music box <https://nmbx.newmusicusa.org/zofo-champions-new-piano-four-hands-rep-in-san-francisco/>

Chapter 2: brief history of the piano four-hands until 1950

From the origins to the explosion of the medium as a “social institution”

It is commonly thought that the piano four-hands medium was born in the second half of the 18th century and then it has spread with the same speed and the same impetus as the “modern piano” did, founding his place in the middle class’ living rooms of all Europe.

But, to be fair, even if they are extremely rare, there are much earlier examples that belong to the tradition of **Elizabethan virginalist school** and date back to the beginning of 1600, when the English composer Nicholas Carleton (ca. 1570/75-1630) wrote one of the earliest keyboard duets ever composed, indicating that his “Verse for two” was to be played on one virginal or organ and Thoma

Written for the small harpsichord of the period with its range of only five and a half octaves, these pieces are amazingly effective, considering the restricted compass of their activity. But they stand as charming, unexplained isolates of the late English Renaissance, separated stylistically and spiritually from the next appearance of four-hand writing by an unaccountable gap of more than a century ¹³.

It’s not that hard to guess why: harpsichords are not well adapted to duet playing. Some have abbreviated keyboards, some have more than one keyboard, and all have hand stops or pedals which must be assigned to a player before even a reading, let alone a performance, is attempted. “You have to keep track of who’s where when,” said in an interview Mary Alderdice, harpsichordist and conductor for the Jupiter Symphony Orchestra, known for her performances of early works of Mozart and Haydn with Jens Nygaard, the group’s music director, “You have to be extra-careful with attacks because that point at which the pluck happens is so emphatic and explosive. You find ways to roll the entrance chord together. Since the harpsichord has no damper pedal, the hardest thing is to sustain a beautiful singing melody” ¹⁴. Still despite these obvious limitations, Johann Sebastian Bach seemed to find inspiring the idea of the two performers (but

¹³ McGraw, Cameron: “Piano Duet Repertoire, Music Originally Written for One Piano, Four Hands”, Preface, by the author, p.13

¹⁴ Kandel, Leslie: “The ins and outs of piano duet”, p. 23

not on the same keyboard), and wrote three concertos for two harpsichords, three for three, and one for four, giving birth to a genre which, as we will see, ran side by side with the piano four hands, gaining ground when that was weak and viceversa.

Starting from the **second half of the 18th century** approximately, many famous pianists begun progressively to compose piano duets, to teach them and to add them to their private recitals' programs (the partner could be a student as well as an other professional pianists): in 1751 Niccolò Jommelli composed a "Sonata in C a quatre mains sur un Clavecin"; In 1765 in the Hickford's Great Room in London a 9-year-old Wolfgang Mozart and his sister Nannerl played together on a two-manual harpsichord Mozart's first duet, a four-hand Sonata in C (K. 19d). This was the first public duet recital on record and after that Mozart used to teach and perform piano four hands pieces very frequently, and so did other influential personalities of the time such as George Wagenseil, Abbe Johan Sterkel, Muzio Clementi. The growing popularity of the genre during those years is witnessed by an enormous amount of publications, the first of which dates back to 1777 and is Dr Charles Burney's "Two sonatas or duets for two performers on one pianoforte or harpsichord", where in the preface the author feels the urge to explain both the pedagogical and the practical virtues of this new genre, highlighting that it is much more practical then playing on two different instruments, because they rarely find place in the same room and they are very difficult to tune exactly in the same way.

All of this piano duet activity made it easy for Johann Cramer and Johann Dussek, in 1791, to persuade piano builder John Broadwood to **extend the piano's range** from five to six octaves. Since pianos were built by hand, the range and the other aspects of the instruments were not yet standardized. By 1794 six-octave pianos were common, and in 1803, Broadwood made slightly wider instruments (6 and an half octaves), which were known as "duet range keyboards". By 1850 they were seven octaves and, finally, by 1870 pianos had the now standard 88 keys. There is a strong implication here that piano duets played significant role in the early expansion of the piano's range. Duettists were striving for a richer, fuller sound and, incidentally yet importantly, they found it much more practical and comfortable for two people to play side by side at the wider keyboard! ¹⁵

¹⁵ Weekley, Dallas and Arganbright, Nancy: "The Piano DUET: A Medium for Today", pp. 16-17

From that moment on an **explosion of the medium as a proper phenomena** has occurred. We undoubtedly owe this to its virtues and to the incredible amount of original masterworks and transcriptions that have been written through the centuries by the greatest composers (Haydn, Beethoven, Schumann, Schubert, Brahms, Mendelssohn, Debussy, Fauré, Rachmaninoff, just to mention some of them) but also (and this is much more of an interest for my investigation) thanks to a wide series of favorable **historical and social developments**, some of which the duettists Dallas Weekley and Nancy Arganbright have analyzed in the journal article “The Piano DUET: A Medium for Today” in such a concrete form that deserves to be quoted verbatim ¹⁶:

“The changes in dress style during the 1780s had an indirect effect upon the popularity of the piano duet. Elaborate wigs faded from fashion and shorter, natural hair became the mode; corsets (which had held both men and women in rigid posture) began to be perceived as being unhealthy; and the hooped petticoat and “false hips” (panniers) gave way to the less restrictive bustle. Soon the stiff, rigid garments were replaced by simpler attire patterned after the ancient Greek and Roman styles. This new and simpler style of clothing made it much easier to perform side-by-side at the piano. The first 15 years of the 19th century were dominated by the Napoleonic Wars, and this misfortune indirectly contributed to the growth of the piano duet. The French soldiers invaded Vienna in 1805 and again in 1809. The high taxes levied by Napoleon against the Austrians for the war effort (and related costs) caused the country to go bankrupt in 1811. Wealthy families which had enjoyed hiring an orchestra or chamber musicians for their homes, could no longer afford such luxury, so piano duets became a substitute form of entertainment. Almost as soon as a symphony, chamber work or even an opera was introduced to the public, either the composer or his assistant would issue a duet version of it. By the 19th century, duets were rivaling piano solos in popularity”

By the beginning of the 19th century it was a common use of every respectable **bourgeois family** in Europe to own a piano at the latest model and to place it in the middle of the parlor, the room where public and private were constantly meeting; it is there where during the day in the silence of the house the cultivated daughters (and not only) were taking music classes from the best pianists of the time; it is there where they used to practice duets (the “salon music” par excellence) with their fellow; it is there and not anymore in the royal courts or in the living rooms of the aristocracy where the most important cultural and social events of every city were taking place, starting with

¹⁶ Ibid.

gatherings of artists and intellectuals, concerts given by the major composers or by amateurs, to conclude with balls, readings, receptions, entertainments and simple conversations.

The piano itself became in this way the central institution of almost every public event of the house and, consequently, a clear status symbol of the new dominant class.

As the quintessential domestic instrument of the nineteenth-century bourgeoisie, the piano played its part in the increasingly common hoarding behaviors of the emerging market economy. Industrially produced, by mid-century it was available virtually everywhere.

More to the point, and thanks to endless advertising, the piano was broadly perceived not simply as a desirable possession but as a socially necessary one-and entirely without regard to whether anyone actually ever touched the keys. The piano, as furniture, staked a highly visible claim for one's economic potential to consume, to lead a life defined by tangible accoutrement. If played, the instrument's relation to market driven modernity was further overdetermined. There were lessons to be paid for; there was music to buy-torrents of it churned out for decades on end and made to help form, and then to suit, many different tastes ¹⁷.

Being able to play the piano as an **“amateur”** was a way to demonstrate one's own culture and artistic-intellectual accomplishment both for females and males. But it is important not to consider negatively and with a “modern point of view” the concept of “amateur”: not rarely in fact many of those people were taught by the best composers and were spending a substantial part of their time in an attentive and constant daily practice with which often they could reach such a high technical and musical level on the instruments to boast an understanding of the music that only those who actively play it on a certain level could have.

A musical training was indeed an essential part of a young, well-born lady's education, and it was taken very seriously.

The level of acquaintance of the piano amateurs at that time is also witnessed by the quite high complexity of famous works' transcriptions circulating in the market at that time: if they wouldn't have matched perfectly the average pianistic level they wouldn't have sold so well probably, and we know that almost all those collections were bestsellers at the time.

For many years the critics didn't take this aspects enough into account and assumed that the composers, in the act of writing the so-called **“salon music”** (term always used derogatorily),

¹⁷ Leppert, Richard: “Four Hands, Three Hearts: A Commentary”, pp. 6-7

necessarily had to limit artistically themselves all the time in order to adjust their talent to the restricted skills of rich and untalented amateurs (intended not only as non-professional, but also as certainly not skilled enough), and consequently evaluated this repertoire (of which the piano duo is the first example) as a “second class” one, as more feminine than other genres and in fact as less worthy of study, investigation and performance in today’s concert halls.

Only in the last few decades the piano duet repertoire (and with it all the salon music) has been



Fig. 2 Gustave Caillebotte: “The piano lesson”, 1881

completely revalued based on the right premise that what really gives extra value to this genre is the fact that it has been composed in the most total **adherence** possible to the belonging social context: almost every score has been written for a specific occasion, with a specific aim, or it has been dedicated to a specific player of which the composer probably knew very well the distinctive musical qualities and the technical problem. It is music that, contrary to what happens today, carefully and necessarily looked always at the surrounding reality in all its aspects, being perfectly and constantly reflected in it and

this is exactly what makes it unique of its

kind. It must be admitted that a professional virtuoso of the piano could perform more technically and musically challenging pieces, but this assumption doesn’t prevent us from recognizing the right value of the salon music (and specifically to piano four-hands music, even more intimate and genuine) which, even after centuries, thanks to the above-mentioned reasons, is still perceived as **more authentic** than other kinds of repertoire written for example for a performing context intended in a more modern exception or for a bigger ensemble (like symphonic or operatic repertoire) where, maybe, the composer could express with more completeness his genius instead.



Fig.3 Vladimir Makovsky: “Four-hands” (1889)

That’s why, on the condition of freeing ourselves from surpassed prejudices, we can get to consider that the piano four-hands genre not only contributed to create a music public made of people used to be **actively involved in the music making** (often with professional-like results), enabling it to develop a musical taste and expertise that today’s amateurs could never have, but we can really state that it has been the real **“soul” of an entire historical period and of its dominant social class.**

Like few other musical forms, four-hand piano could cross national, social, and economic boundaries, bringing together poor students and the daughters of the

bourgeoisie, or crowned heads and penniless virtuosi. But it also became something far more serious: a central institution of the home, mediating between inside and outside, family and society, labor and leisure, nature and nurture. And writers, composers, musicians, philosophers, journalists, pamphleteers, and painters took note: in the art (*see fig. 2 and 3*), literature (William Thackeray, Charles Dickens, Thomas Mann, Jane Austen), and philosophy (Adorno) of the age, four-hand playing emerged as a common motif, something that allowed them to interrogate the very nature of the self, the family, the community and the state. In the four hands rushing up and down the same keyboard, the nineteenth century espied, or thought to espy, an astonishing array of things ¹⁸.

All this is witnessed as we already mentioned by an incredibly flourishing of famous work’s **transcriptions** for piano duets (more readable and faithful than the arrangements for piano solo and of course, more technically accessible to amateurs) in the editorial market.

¹⁸ Daub, Adrian: “Four-Handed Monsters: Four-Hand Piano Playing and Nineteenth-Century Culture”, abstract.

In fact this genre was a great way to disseminate and hear new and old music, like the modern act of purchasing a CD but as we said, with more active participation. From string quartets to orchestral works these reductions allowed musicians and their audience to hear and experience a broader range of works, which they may not have otherwise had the opportunity to. We've been fortunate over time to have had brilliant pianist-composers such as Mozart, Beethoven, Schubert, Brahms, Schumann, Dvořák, and Grieg to Grainger to Rachmaninov, Stravinsky, Ravel, Fauré and Debussy who made arrangements of their own works and of others ¹⁹. Nowadays for obvious reasons concert duettists usually prefer to perform on stage the original music for the medium, but it can still happen to hear in concert some of these transcriptions that were once true and proper bestsellers: as the duettists Christina & Michelle Naughton brilliantly declared in a note with the intention of shedding light on their choice to perform piano four-hands transcriptions, "Just as a black and white photo can capture beauty and detail not readily apparent in color, transcribing the spectacular orchestration to piano alone reveals additional rhythmic and tonal aspects of the masterpiece ²⁰". It need to be noticed also that sometimes we assist also in the reverse tendency: the piano four-hands repertoire is so vast and so precious that sometimes it has been even transcribed by the author itself for orchestra, and it's probably not a case that in some cases they overshadowed the original forms. For example, a set of Sixteen Waltzes Op.39, composed by Brahms were originally written for piano duet, but is often heard in its orchestral form. Dvořák's two sets of Slavonic Dances are also heard often in the orchestral versions, and he arranged a number of his four-hands compositions for orchestra including Legends, Op.59, and From the Bohemian Forest, Op.68 ²¹. The same fate has befallen the celebrated work by Ravel, "Ma Mère l'Oye" (1910), which nowadays is an integral part of the most famous orchestral repertoire of all times.

On the other side of the spectrum, the duet genre has coaxed the inner child from even the weightiest of composers. Schubert, Schumann, Bizet, Debussy, Ravel, and Fauré (**fig. 4**) all wrote **duet music for the young ones** in their lives, and the results amount to a treasure trove of

¹⁹ Young, Timothy: "Timothy Young's top seven works for piano four hands" (10-10-20)

²⁰ Naughton, Christina & Michelle: note on "Short Ride in a Fast Machine"'s transcription for piano four-hands. <https://www.boosey.com/shop/prod/John-Adams-Preben-Antonsen-Short-Ride-in-a-Fast-Machine-Piano-4-Hands-Piano-4-Hands/2365342> (last access 25-09-20)

²¹ Lubin, Ernest: "The Piano Duet: A Guide for Pianists", pag. 132-133

delights for children and adults alike. Schubert gifted a duet (Children's March) to his friend's young son on the occasion of his birthday; it is quaint to imagine Schubert arriving at the birthday party with a gift-wrapped musical score in hand, ready to place alongside a mound of toys. Then there Ravel, who dedicated the above mentioned “Ma Mère l’Oye” suite to one of his dear friends' children, Mimi ²².



Fig. 4 Gabriel Fauré playing Piano Four Hands with Mademoiselle Lombard in Trevano (1913)

To end this description of the cultural framework in which the medium got established, we have to mention also that it was often regarded with extreme suspicion, just because of the potential moral precariousness resulting from the close proximity of colliding fingers between young people.

Playing piano four hands was indeed often understood as a **socially acceptable way of flirting** in a time when unmarried couples weren't allowed much privacy and the composers, well aware

²² McGraw, Cameron: preface, pag. 4

of the situation, took advantage of the forced intimacy by crafting pieces that caused the hands to overlap and interlock, generating as much contact as possible.

The nineteenth-century public was particularly captivated by the infinitely amorous, blush-inducing circumstances presented by the medium, as is manifest in the fiction, theater, paintings, anecdotes, and music of the day. Two individuals, seated together at the same piano, were granted the rare social blessing for public, non-marital intimacy, grazing hands, whispering musical requests alongside sweet nothings, breathing in synchronicity, laughing as one mishap after the next bonded them as potential lovers. Edvard Grieg first confessed his love to his duet partner while rehearsing with her; the two eventually married. And as Robert Schumann poetically stated, "A four-hand piece allows reveries together with provided she plays the piano. ²³"

In Charles de Bernard's novel "Gerfaut" from 1838, the secret lovers meet and start to play a waltz together. But the man only plays the bass part with his left hand, and the lady the primo part melody with her right hand. The narrator in Bernard's novel then asks archly: "Well, what could two such underemployed hands directly next to each other do?".

Also Friedrich Nietzsche wrote on – and composed – four-hand pieces, saying that they "may be taken as a divining rod for a good marriage. ²⁴"

But as the story confirmed, this world made of balls and receptions was grounded on very weak basis, and of course it couldn't last forever. The middle class' wellness and customs as they were known in the nineteenth century were literally destroyed by the First world war's bombs, and since then the society knew such deep changes to appear, in few years, irreparably transformed.

The deep crisis of the medium in the first half of the 20th century

When you are dealing with a medium so practically linked to the socio-cultural context of a specific society, you need to expect to see it disappearing or radically changing once that social structure is altered. And this is exactly what in a very predictable way happened to the piano four-hands medium respectively in the first and in the beginning of the second half of the 20th century (the transformations mentioned and in the next chapter further discussed are still occurring

²³ McGraw, Cameron: foreword by Anderson&Roe, pag. 9-10

²⁴ Sloan, Nate: "Stanford scholar reveals the surprising cultural history of four-hand piano playing", <https://news.stanford.edu/news/2014/december/piano-monster-daub-120814.html> (last access 10-02-21)

today): this amazing repertoire just vanished from the newest musical context as if it had never been the undisputed star of the past century.

This phenomenon is not difficult at all to understand because it is evident for everyone that in the twentieth century the condition of art music in Western culture has undergone a transformation that no one could have envisaged in the previous century. The reasons for this transformation are many and varied including the influence of technology, the media, multiculturalism, commercialism, the increased emphasis on visual media and various philosophical, ideological and social changes ²⁵. Let's briefly look into the most relevant aspects for a better understanding of the disappearance of the piano four-hands medium.

First of all, the two World Wars radically changed the profile of the bourgeois and this led inevitably to the **failure of the idea itself of the salon as a symbolic point of connection between private and public life** of a cultivated individual (for further connections between this concept and the piano four-hands practice, read Adorno's speculations in the next paragraph).

Rich families lose the routine of organizing all kinds of social (and musical) events at home, **women undertook their path towards independence** and started to spend their days at work instead of behind the keyboard; their education from then on hardly included any significant musical skill; unmarried couples could finally gain more and more privacy, without the need of spending so much time practicing duets.

But the houses didn't become quite all at once: if the people stopped playing so much at home is also because of the advent of the **gramophone**, a great means of listening effortlessly to any kind of music from the comfort of your own sofa as many time as wanted. If on the one hand this incredible technological step forward has revolutionized forever the reproduction and the distribution of music exposing the audiences to a wider range of music than ever before, on the other hand it broke forever the relation between content and context of a musical performance and it destroyed the connection between a performance and the end product on a record ²⁶, representing one of the most serious revolutions in classical music's performance practice of all times. It removed almost at all the need for do-it-yourself performances at home, in the same

²⁵ https://www.newworldencyclopedia.org/entry/Twentieth-century_music (last access 15-01-21)

²⁶ Dahl, Per: "The rise and fall of literacy in classical music: an essay on musical notation", pag. 75

way television and transportation cut down many other do-it-yourself pastime; it replaced four-hands transcriptions as a way of hearing orchestral music.

The result of this “from the piano bench to the audience seats” process is that in few decades a wide range of good amateurs was inevitably transformed into passive listeners, and the generations after them didn’t have any reason for revitalizing that practice, which in fact got lost forever. Adorno was one of the first intellectuals who reflected about the reasons and the consequences of this phenomena (see next paragraph), but many recent studies keep confirming that the more we are exposed to music due to the technology progresses (from radio to cd, to mP3, to Spotify and so on), the less the listener is encouraged to develop critical skills (see Adorno’s critical theory), with the result that the average listeners lack more and more of “literacy” in classical music, meaning the ability and the cognitive instruments to identify, understand, interpret a musical context in order to develop a certain knowledge²⁷: the real literacy in classical music is created by a deep understanding of the matter, which is mostly reached by an active, practical participation and by the personal contact with the notated score.

So for the listed above reasons **the music making moved gradually but completely from the salon to a public space, the concert venue**, where the public needs to pay the ticket, politely sits on a chair and silently witnesses the performance. An invisible, never witnessed before wall was built between the public and the artist, with his unreachable virtuoso skills and his severe attitude, as rare and as far as a divinity.

The **piano four hands repertoire, despite its recognized beauty, was inevitably stigmatized** and not considered ideal for a “concert-venue program” because associated to the salon, to an amateurs-practice and consequently shelved as old-fashioned, dilettantish, too easy to perform for the new figure of the pianist-divinity (and as I already mentioned, despite the “renaissance” of the medium after the 50’s and its total rehabilitation of the last decades, as part of a piano four-hands duo I can still feel a bit of that stigma from concert programmers and also other pianists, sometimes).

²⁷ Ibid, pag. 67

The growing popularity of the two-pianos repertoire

The fact that the “divo” wasn’t supposed to share the keyboard with anyone else didn’t mean that the great piano soloists didn’t accept at all the idea of sharing the stage with colleagues: many of them started to come together to create **performing piano-duo teams**, but they deliberately choose to perform almost only **two pianos repertoire**. Some duos used to include a limited amount of four-hand piano duet literature on their programs. However, contemporary journal articles and interviews demonstrate that, even though professional duo teams occasionally were including it on their programs, most still did not view the duet literature as a concert medium²⁸.

It is easy to understand why the stigma we talked about didn’t involve at all the “other” piano duo repertoire, to be performed on two different pianos, and it is also easy to understand why it started to know big popularity only at the beginning of the 20th, exactly when the performance practice and way to consume music went through the tremendous transformations we have tried to analyze: collaborations between great piano soloists used to attract the paying public even more than a solo concert; the appearance of two grand pianos on a stage was glamorous; people enjoyed the showmanship involved, the all atmosphere of “grandeur” around it.

We need to acknowledge that until the twentieth century, the repertoire for two pianos was sadly inadequate. Before then it consisted of virtually twenty-two works—if we consider major two-piano composers—by Pasquini, Couperin, the Bach family, Clementi, Mozart, Schumann, Chopin, Brahms, Debussy, Rachmaninoff. Even the standard twentieth-century repertoire contains five times the number of works written during the previous three hundred years. The growing interest among composers for two-piano works was linked to the increasing number of duo-pianists on the concert circuit. They established and maintained the standard repertoire and composed new works for two pianos ²⁹. Many great composers in the past century (Stravinsky, Bartók, Boulez, Britten, Busoni, Messiaen, Milhaud, Stockhausen, Cage, Adams, Berio, Glass, Ives...) decided to write down works for this medium, ignoring music for two performers on one keyboard.

²⁸ Dreisbach, Kimberly: “The contributions of Dallas Weekly and Nancy Arganbright to piano duet performance and literature”, pag. 35-36

²⁹ Villemin, Stéphane: “Four hands, two pianos looking for a repertoire. <http://www.scena.org/lsm/sm7-1/duo-en.html> (last access 10-02-21)

Proof of this sudden popularity can be found also in the words of Josef and Rosina Lhevinne, one of the very first famous piano duo, a husband and wife team who performed occasionally as a duo team in addition to their teaching at Juilliard and Josef's notable solo performances. In an *Etude* article from 1933, the Lhevinnes spoke to the growing popularity of two-piano literature and why they preferred playing it to duets:

"Two piano playing is practically virgin territory and this, perhaps, is its chief interest. The possibilities of entertainment and instruction, both to the performers and their hearers, are virtually limitless.

If the emphasis has thus far been laid upon four-handed playing upon two pianos, it is because that work is of greater interest to us than four hands at one piano. Musically, its scope is richer. And, from that point of view of the playing itself, the players have greater freedom, for each one can draw upon both bass and treble, and each one is master of his own pedaling!" ³⁰

To make even more clear the general attitude of rejection for the piano four-hands medium in that time, particular significance has the case of an other important piano duo, the one formed by Lhevinne's student Robert Fizdale and Arthur Gold: they performed as a team from 1944-1982 and their careers were built exclusively on their work as a team, rather than their ensemble performances acting as a supplement to larger solo careers. In their concerts four-hands repertoire was performed, but always on two pianos, which nowadays sounds absolutely nonsense ³¹.

But the ultimate word against the medium has been given in 1941 by Stephen West in his article "The Art of Piano Ensemble", where he enhances the qualities of the two-pianos medium at the expense of the four-hands:

"Two-piano playing is as different from ordinary duet playing (four hands at one piano) as it is from solo work. Its ultimate beauty lies in the richness of sonority and volume released by the two instruments, and this can never be duplicated on one alone. Also, when working at one piano, the two players sit too close for complete freedom. Again, one plays the Primo (or important) part

³⁰ Lhevinne, Josef and Rosina: "Four Hands that Play as Two...", pag. 809.

³¹ Dreisbach, pag 36-37

while the other takes the Secondo (or obbligato) throughout the entire duet, a circumstance which nullifies the possibility of balance between the voices. And, lastly, the technical resources of the two players at one piano are decidedly limited. Four-hand duets are very pleasing to hear, and they provide a measure of ensemble training which is decidedly better than none at all; still, in order to explore the fullest possibilities of piano ensemble work, two pianos are just twice as valuable as one” ³²

This negative reception by artists, public and critics provoked a huge impact on the editorial market, which as seen in the previous century owed much of his fortune to the piano four-hands publications: since that repertoire was seldom heard in concert and was becoming less popular as a home activity, publishers trimmed their lists, making the music less available to buyers. “I’m sorry to say that lately the trend in sales seems to be down”, are the words of Joseph Patelson, president of the Joseph Patelson Music House Ltd in an interview of the time. “In former years, all the big publishers had pretty good lists of four-hand works, including symphonies and chamber music. But now most of the German editions are out of print. Any time we get second-hand copies they’re snapped up right away. The music is not to be bought, and speaking generally, we have nothing to sell in that department. ³³”

For very long time the repertoire itself was largely unavailable in the market. It was considered only a distant memory, but this doesn’t mean that none was bitterly regretting it.

“Vierhändig, noch einmal” by Theodor W. Adorno

The ultimate and most authoritative witnessing of the decline of the piano duets practice has been given indeed by Theodor W. Adorno (1903-1969), the celebrated German philosopher, sociologist, psychologist, musicologist, and composer through his essay “Vierhändig, Noch Einmal” (“Piano duets, Once Again”) written in 1933.

In this brief essay Adorno compares the dark present, where “playing four-hand has become a gesture of memory” ³⁴, with the sweetness of his childhood, fully experienced in the context of an upper-bourgeois family house, constantly filled with piano music. He narrates how he had been

³² West, Stephen “The Art of Piano Ensemble”, pag. 5.

³³ Kandel, Leslie: “The ins and outs of piano duet”, pag. 25

³⁴ Adorno, Theodor W. “Vierhändig, noch einmal”, quoted in pag. 16 of Richard Leppert, “Four Hands, Three Hearts”: A Commentary.

educated very early to play piano duets (even to turn pages before he was able to play and read notes) by his mother Maria, his aunt Agatha, a very good pianist, and his piano teacher, Frau Drescher. The remembrance of the true enjoyment derived from that practice gives him the cue to make more complex and **philosophical considerations about the decline of the medium and its deep consequences** from not only a musical but also a cultural and social point of view. Almost 90 years are passed since then, and we can unanimously declare that Adorno's reflections were tremendously right.

For Adorno, the piano four-hands medium symbolizes the supreme amatorial practice at home of the bourgeois, so its decline and the advent of means like the **gramophone** inescapably leads to the disappearance of a deep and **active understanding** of the classical music by the audience (with the exception of the professional musicians).

In *"four hands, three hearts": a commentary*, a wonderful article written by Richard Leppert, the author often quotes Adorno himself making a sublime explication of his thoughts:

"Even though his (of the amateur) touch is "questionable," even though there will be "faltering and false notes", what matters is "an active relation to the works," something lost to the passive auditors in the concert hall who "in an intoxicated state listened" to the flawless playing of the professionals-what he would elsewhere and later refer to as the "barbarism of perfection," a form of fetishistic technocratic discipline and musical purity commonly under the reign of a conductor's steely, Führer-like (his word) control." ³⁵

To make it even clearer, these are Adorno's proper premonitory words:

"...This dilettantism is nothing but the echo and the degenerate product of the true music-making tradition. It remains to be asked for whom the last artist will meaningfully play once the last dilettante who still dreams of being an artist has died out." ³⁶

Later on in the essay, Adorno insists a lot also on the possibility the piano four-hands medium gives to play transcriptions of orchestral works, enlarging the topic of his dissertation with even

³⁵ Leppert, Richard "Four Hands, Three Hearts": pp. 13-14

³⁶ Adorno, "Vierhändig, noch einmal", quoted in pag. 33 of "Theodor W. Adorno: One Last Genius" By Detlev Claussen.

broader philosophical considerations, to extent of suggesting this medium as the most sublime example of **synthesis between individuality and community**, because it allows the individual to express freely him or herself, maintaining the “collective property” of the music:

“(Adorno) invokes Paul Bekker’s “theory of the community-forming force of the symphonic”, insisting that community and individuality can each ultimately survive only as a unit. The reduction of four-hand music from the orchestral mass of perhaps eighty players to just two drives home the point. That is, Adorno hears a socially revealing relation between two forms of performance of the same music. The “community” of the orchestra submerges the individual voice in order to make possible the whole; the performance of the same music four-hand brings to the surface the voice of the individual while at the same time preserving allusion to the communal circumstances upon which the music depends”.³⁷

Adorno didn’t propose in his essay any possible solution to the matter: he knew his favorite medium couldn’t survive the radical socio-cultural changes of the 20th century. He only limits himself to closing his eyes and remembering those marvelous times where in order to be owned music had to be earned by *making* it “**noch einmal, immer noch einmal**” (“once again, always once again”), accordingly to the principles he stated in his important philosophical form “Critical Theory”.

³⁷ Leppert, “Four Hands, Three Hearts”: pp. 14-15

Chapter 3: The renaissance of the genre in the last decades of the 20th century

The current revival of the medium



Fig. 5 Bela de Kristo: "A quatre mains", 1966

Nowadays the piano four-hands medium is generally recognized as one of the most valid pedagogical tools for pianists and as a very enjoyable concert medium (**fig. 5**). There is a good amount of professional concert-duets, and even the most world-wide famous pianists often join their forces to perform standard four-hands repertoire, now well-know, extremely appreciated by the public, and often preferred by concert programmers to the two-pianos one also for mere economical reasons.

Print music stores carry a wide variety of both standard and educational piano duet literature, workshops on piano duets are common at professional conferences, and in 2008 the Music Teachers National Association added a piano duet category to their highly-competitive national competitions ³⁸.

Starting in the last decades of the 20th century, composers showed again more and more interest in the medium and managed to reinvent it and transform it completely, giving birth to all kinds of different pieces, from very recreational ones to the most serious and experimenting ones.

There is no source that can extensively document the steps of this slow but decisive process that has brought the medium to a current revival, and is very difficult to individuate the concrete reasons or the origins of it: as many other examples in the history of music, what has been forgotten finds naturally its way to come back to the scenery and to reclaim the dignity deserved.

The changing approach towards the medium

As a matter of fact, from around 1940 it is possible to document a new interest about the medium: many authors started to add in their dissertations about solo piano music significant chapters about four-hands original repertoire and its performance practice, adding warm statements of encouragement to get more acquainted with the repertoire and to use it both as a pedagogical tool and as concert medium (examples of this attitude can be found in *“Music for the Piano: A Handbook of Concert and Teaching Material from 1580 to 1952”* written in 1954 by James Friskin and Irwin Freundlich or in the work dated 1940 *“Four Hands-One Piano: A List of Works for Duet Players”* by Alec Rowley).

An other enthusiastic opinion about the medium can be found in the journal *“Etude”* published in 1944, where Ralph Berkowitz begins an article, *“Original Music for Four Hands: A Reference Article of Real Value to Teachers”*, with the following statement:

“Few piano masterworks are as little known as those for two players at one instrument. Many pianists as well as music lovers are probably unaware of the richness and variety of original music for four hands, a repertoire considerably larger than that for two pianos.”

³⁸ Dreisbach: pag. 13

There is a peculiar misconception in most people's minds concerning piano duets. These are generally thought to consist of orchestral and chamber music arrangements, and, perhaps, some salon pieces by Moszkowski and Scharwenka. Most duet collections, as a matter of fact, are made up of these very things. Yet almost all the great masters composed four-hand music; and in some instances one may discover truly remarkable works in this medium. The finest of these compositions are much more than piano pieces set for a larger range than one pianist can manage. The great piano duets are essentially great pieces of chamber music.”³⁹

The beginnings of a real change in the perception of the duet as a viable performance medium can be seen in Ernest Lubin's book, the first one entirely dedicated to piano duets, *“The Piano Duet: A Guide for Pianists”*, published in 1970 and many times quoted in this dissertation. Much of his introduction is dedicated to factors that brought the four-hand piano duet into favor and that consequently brought about its decline. After making a fleeting reference to “a mass of flotsam and jetsam in the form of innumerable salon pieces”, Lubin then describes the history of the piano duet through the literature of standard composers and makes several pleas for readers to consider the literature as worthy of artistic concert performance ⁴⁰.

In 1981 another repeatedly mentioned, decisive work, *“Piano Duet Repertoire: Music Originally Written for One Piano, Four-Hands”* by Cameron Mc Grow, saw the light. It is an ambitious catalogue of works written for the medium preceded by a very important preface that provides the reader with decisive informations about the pieces mentioned (description of the style, level of difficulty for both the players, performing or pedagogical purposes etc).

Books on the piano duet that seem to wholly imply a full revival of the medium include also Howard Ferguson's *“Keyboard Duets from the 16th to the 20th century”*, published in 1995. It discusses the history of the medium through giving an overview of standard composers and repertoire as well as the large number of modern compositions brought about by the last decades' renewed interest ⁴¹.

³⁹ Berkowitz, Ralph: “Original Music for Four Hands: A Reference Article of Real Value to Teachers”, pag. 27

⁴⁰ Dreisbach, pag. 14

⁴¹ Ibid.

The contribution of Dallas Weekley and Nancy Arganbright

The process of revitalization of the medium owes its success also to the contribution of specific artists and to their unprecedented commitment to the piano duet.

About that, special consideration could not be given to the Weekley-Arganbright duo, which had the revitalization of this art as its primary professional goal and is considered by many sources responsible for a renaissance of the genre in the late 20th century ⁴².

The Americans Dallas Weekley (born 1933) and Nancy Arganbright (born 1936) are a husband and wife team that has dedicated their careers to the performance and study of the four-hand piano duet.

Trained as solo performers at Indiana University, they spent the years after their marriage in 1957 touring as duet performers. Following their 1964 Carnegie Hall debut they performed up to 50 engagements annually throughout the country and abroad, including such important venues as Brahms Hall in Vienna, Wigmore Hall in London, and the Kennedy Center before their professional retirement in 2001 (more than any other team in the history of duet concertizing).

In their recitals Weekley and Arganbright, promoted the duet literature of standard composers that was largely unavailable and unknown in the middle of the 20th century (in an interview they declared “no one is playing this repertoire in the all country at the moment”) employing several unique **performance practice decisions**, including performing from memory, primo control of the sustaining pedal, and **only performing standard literature originally composed for piano duet**.

In addition to concertizing with the standard duet literature, they recorded on the Golden Crest Label and commissioned piano duet concertos. Weekley and Arganbright gave the American premiere of Malcolm Arnold’s Concerto for Piano Duet and String Orchestra, Op. 32, and the world premiere of Michael Smolanoff’s Concerto for Piano Duet, Op. 29. They have also commissioned a work, A Concert of the Mysteries (II): Meditations for Two Pianists at One Piano and Orchestra, by David Kraehenbuhl.

At the beginning of their career, they suffered enormously their choice to be a four-hands duet: their first management company said they defied categorization, and put them in the **same**

⁴² The informations mentioned in these paragraph are a resume of Kimberly Dreisbach’s “The contributions of Dallas Weekly and Nancy Arganbright to piano duet performance and literature”.

category as jugglers and magicians. But with time they became more and more well-know, being the only four-hands duo in the concert scene of USA, with the practical advantage of performing much more often than the others (they needed only one piano on stage).

Their motivation to pursue that as their professional focus was for sure also practical, in fact, but as they stated it stemmed mostly from the overwhelmingly positive response of their audience. Arganbright describes:

“I really think the two things that were impetus and encouragement to us to keep going were, first, the quality of the music we were finding, that was so inspiring. And the second thing was the kind of responses we were getting when we played. It was very reinforcing. People were asking for more! They were saying, ‘This is really interesting! I have never heard piano played four hands at one instrument, and when can I hear you again?’” ⁴³

Their efforts and their confidence on the value of their decisions were rewarded in the best way possible: they got a great number of enthusiastic reviews that witness their success both in USA and in Europe which always underline how the quality and the dignity of that performance was in a way almost unexpected.

Here are reported some of the most significative in that sense, since they further represent the changing view toward piano duets .

From a review written in *“Four-Hand Piano Duo”*, La Libre Belgique, November 30, 1964 about a series a concerts in Belgium:

“In piano literature, four-hand music represents a poor relative. This is a fate that it certainly does not merit, as proved by Dallas Weekley and Nancy Arganbright. These two virtuoso artists were warmly applauded, and it was just, for the real artistic pleasure they afforded their very attentive and very interested listeners.”

In *“Four-Hand Piano at the Atelier”*, La Metropole, December 7, 1964 (about the tour previously mentioned).

⁴³ Ibid. pag. 65

“The program presented by Dallas Weekley and Nancy Arganbright had the particular interest of presenting works written originally for four hands, a form of execution seldom employed in our time. Having specialized in the presentation of these works, the two American artists displayed a real pianistic talent, each on his own account, and actually blended into one, to such a degree that they give the illusion of one body with four arms. The large audience showed them their satisfaction by vigorous applause.”

The ultimate conferment of full dignity was given by London Times reviewer in an article wisely called *“Piano Duettists who Justify their Choice of Medium”*:

*“When the four hands are those of Mr. Dallas Weekley and Miss Nancy Arganbright, they must be accorded **concert-hall status**.”* ⁴⁴

Aside from the performing part, their contribution to the body of educational duet literature is unparalleled, both in scope and in content: it consists of over **50 volumes of duet literature**, including both new scholarly editions of literature by standard composers and original compositions with a **pedagogical focus**. All of their publications incorporate the adaptations they made in their personal scores, including note redistributions, choreography indications for solving the logistical difficulties of close physical interaction between the inner hands of the pianists, and printing the music in score form. The works are known for their layout in score form, a unique approach influenced by their study of the original manuscripts of standard duet literature. In addition to their performing editions of standard literature, Weekley and Arganbright also composed educational duets with Kjos Publishing Company, including the Kjos Piano Duet Repertoire Series, an 11-level series of graded duets that corresponds to the graded series of solo literature. Weekley and Arganbright also toured the USA for Kjos Publishing Company giving spirited workshops for piano teachers, encouraging them to make duets a part of every student’s piano curriculum.

⁴⁴ Ibid. pag. 75-76

This duet team believed in careful academic study for their editions, and asserted that making duet literature accessible did not mean it was less deserving of careful study. Dallas Weekley's doctoral dissertation on the piano duets of Franz Schubert, "The One-Piano, Four-Hand Compositions of Franz Schubert: An Historical and Interpretive Analysis," led to time spent working in Vienna studying autograph editions and a relationship with famed Schubert scholar Otto Deutsch. This dissertation led to the publication of the book "Schubert's Music for Piano Four- Hands" (1900, co-written with his wife) that discusses Schubert's duet literature in the context of his entire output and his biography.

Weekley and Arganbright are also the co-authors of an other important book "**The Piano Duet: A Learning Guide**", a guide for duet performers and documents many of the logistical recommendations Weekley and Arganbright have gleaned from their years of performance.

The transformation of the medium into a site of compositional innovation

Around the 1970 the medium had obtained again full dignity: from that moment on the standard repertoire of original works for piano four-hands, finally admitted to the concert hall, had charmed the public with its potent romance, intimacy, physicality, theatricality and with its entertaining, sometimes folkloristic features, up until today.

This renewed interest consequently challenged contemporary composers to write again music for four-hands, but they had to confront with a radically changed world and with the fact that the historical and sociological factors that had allowed the extreme popularity of the medium in the previous century had fallen short.

This turned out to be an extremely positive aspect, since the medium didn't have anymore the functions and the limitations set by its previous "social role": it could finally assume a **completely new value** and its distinctive features could be fully taken into account and employed as a real source of inspiration for compositional and **performance experimentation**.

The nature and the extent of this transformation is witnessed by the words of the duo Anderson&Roe:

*"Piano duos are steadily commissioning more works for four hands at a single piano, compelling composers to investigate the rich potential of duet writing and **stretch it to unprecedented***

extremes. [...] Contemporary audiences are bound to find a four-hand piano team displaying a mash-up of the aforementioned themes catered to a 2,000-seat concert hall to be an acrobatic free-for-all wherein the duettists are engaged in an ever-evolving dance: a game of mischievous musical twister, then an erotic dalliance with pounding heartbeats, then an epic duel between fierce rivals, then a dazzling interplay of virtuosity, bravura, and exhilaration. [...] Then suddenly, without warning, one of the pianists dashes inside the piano, an explorer of the forbidden, plucking strings and grabbing harmonics, while the other raps the fall-board of the instrument, throws a knowing glance at the audience, and swivels around her partner to reach that impossible note in the blink of an eye. All the while, the audience is aghast and elated by the frenzy... The overall effect of such displays has impelled audiences to reconsider the genre as something truly valid and valuable, eroding negative stereotypes of duets as being exclusively precious, archaic, juvenile, or lacking in artfulness. The popularity of four-hand playing is roaring back with a vengeance: as that adage goes, everything old is new again.”⁴⁵

The new repertoire, output of this radical transformation, is extremely various in its scope and in its features, but usually has little to do with the past because it **lost inevitably its intimacy and its domestic dimension in favor of a more performative one**. The contemporary masterpieces for piano four-hands are written to be performed in concert halls for a public that can vary from the most broad one to the most “niche” one. They generally require always an extremely high-level pianism with **professional-like virtuoso skills**, no matter if the piece is meant just to entertain or is a more serious, conceptual or experimental one.

There is indeed a part of the recent repertoire that takes inspiration from the “old role” of the medium.

For example many composers, especially Americans, kept taking advantage of the more **entertaining features** of the medium and continued somehow the tradition of the so-called “saloon music”: Samuel Barber opened the way in that sense with his “*Souvenirs*” op.28 (1952), and has given way to other composers such as Copland and many others.

One brilliant recent example is “*Five Days from the Life of a Manic-Depressive*” (2006), by Paul Schoenfield (born 1947), a very “light” and amusing piece, that yet preserves its concert-dignity thanks to its extremely virtuosic nature and to the use of almost-romantic melodies combined with jazzy elements.

⁴⁵ Mc Grow: foreward by Anderson&Roe, pag. 11

This amusing trait of the medium has been even brought to an extreme by some duettist who conceived their performances as proper **musical cabaret shows** (see e.g. the activity of the pianist-comedian Victor Borge, Worbey & Farrell piano duo and others).

Also the fashion of **arrangements and transcriptions** for piano four-hands came back (see transcriptions of works by Adams, Nancarrow, Copland) with pieces of solid virtuosic substance meant to be performed in concert halls, and not for domestic use. Concerts proposing transcriptions of very famous orchestral works (e.g. Strawinsky's ballets) are nowadays in the norm.

Some composers instead challenged themselves in exploring to the extreme the enormous potentialities given by the uniqueness of the medium, creating **innovative works with extremely peculiar features**.

Worth of mention is for sure the Australian composer Carl Vine (born in 1954) who, with his monumental *Sonata for piano four-hands* (2009) pushed the textural expansion of the medium intending to create a very solid and rigorous piece over the edge.

More conceptual are significant works like "*Gravities, for piano four hands*" by Richard Felciano (1965), where an advanced rhythmic precision and accuracy is required, and "*Piano Four Hands*" (1958) by Morton Feldman, an aleatoric piece, with a high degree of rhythmic indeterminacy, that requires different rehearsal techniques than traditional repertoire: both the primo and the secondo players need to understand the overall sound of the work and learn to collaborate within unpredictable circumstances ⁴⁶.

In the words of Felciano himself: "The four-hand medium is exploited through the simultaneous use of wide registers and the employment of overlapping rhythms and dense textural blocks not otherwise available" ⁴⁷.

In a very serious vein is undoubtedly also the even more experimental (and probably most fascinating) part of the repertoire, where finally the pianists take full advantage of their physical proximity for creating proper theatrical choreographies and push to the extreme the experimentation in the use of extended techniques.

⁴⁶ Choi, Wooyoung Ellie: "Three twentieth-century American piano duets: a study of works by Morton Feldman, Richard Felciano and George Crumb", pag. 2

⁴⁷ Felciano, Richard: note on "*Gravities*", E. C. Schirmer Music Company Boston Massachusetts, 1956

Perfect examples in this sense are “*Celestial Mechanics (Makrokosmos IV)*” by George Crumb (1979), and “*Morsels*” by Joel Spiegelman (1967). These works contain some of the most modern piano techniques in the duet medium; in fact, the composers had had to abandon conventional notation in order to express their music. The piece includes such techniques as tapping directly on the strings and muting the string slightly to produce a harmonic. **The musical effects of this works are more successful in duets than in similar solo pieces;** when two people are available to manipulate, prepare, change, and play the instrument, the unusual techniques are much more attractive (for further implications in this respect see next chapter) ⁴⁸.

The highest confirm of this successful climbing to concert-hall status can be individuated also in the corpus of the few but very significant works written for **piano four-hands and orchestra**, where the duet assumes even the dignity of a proper “soloist”. Many of these works are mostly unknown and rarely performed, that’s why they particularly deserve mention and attention:

- Arnold, Malcolm: Concerto for Piano Duet and String Orchestra, Op. 32 (1969)
- Gillingham, David: Interplay, A Concerto for Piano Four Hands and Orchestra (2004)
- Kraehenbuhl, David: Mysteries (II), Meditations for Two Pianists at One Piano and Orchestra
- Imbrie, Andrew : Little Concerto for Piano Four-Hands and Orchestra
- Schnittke, Alfred: Concerto for Piano four hands and Chamber orchestra (1988)
- Smolanoff, Michael: *Concerto for Piano Duet, Op. 29*
- Sydeman, William 'Concerto for Piano Four Hands & Chamber Orchestra (1967)

⁴⁸ Landre, Nikki: “American Piano Duets”, pag. 9

Chapter 4: Further analysis on selected contemporary repertoire

“Digit #2” (2002-03), by Mayke Nass

Mayke Nas (born 1972) is a Dutch composer. She studied piano and composition with amongst others Martijn Padding, Daan Manneke, Alexandre Hrisanide and Bart van de Roer at the Koninklijk Conservatorium in Den Haag. She received commissions from amongst others Ensemble Modern (DE), Ragazze Kwartet, Radio Filharmonisch Orkest, Eighth Blackbird (USA), Liza Ferschtman, Slagwerk Den Haag, Nederlands Studenten Orkest, Koninklijk Concertgebouw Orkest, Blindman (BE), Nieuw Ensemble, Hexnut, Calefax, Neue Vocal Solisten Stuttgart (DE), Rotterdams Philharmonisch Orkest, Ensemble Continuum (CA), ASKO en Schönberg Ensemble and November Music⁴⁹. From the 2011-2012 season Mayke Nas was awarded an artist-in-residence fellowship in Berlin by the DAAD and from 2016 to 2018 Mayke Nas was Composer Laureate of the Netherlands, but, as she declares, she hesitates supplying people (both public as well as concert programmers) with this type of raw data since they don't say absolutely nothing meaningful about her compositional path and her ideas. She rather prefer presenting herself with her own music and her declarations about it.

Often reviewed as "the composer of mischief", it is clear from the very first listening to any piece by Nas that she likes to challenge the public, subjecting it always to new sonic and visual experiences with a mix of theatricality and the most avant-guard instrumental techniques. Her music titters on the edge of sound and noise, but now and then puts a firm fist on the table as well; often there's a comical side to it. Mayke Nas doesn't like over-seriousness, but playfulness and ambiguity. She explores the boundaries of music with fearless energy and imagination, that also characterizes her personality ⁵⁰. Irony, humor and attention to visual details are never far away in the compositions of Mayke Nas. But the two-firsts are not to be meant as a defense mechanism, as the composer emphasizes, it has to do with a pleasant confusion.

⁴⁹ Mayke Nass, official website <http://www.maykenas.nl/facts.html> (last access 10-01-21)

⁵⁰ Derks Thea: "Mayke Nas: 10 reasons to compose" in "Oorsprong, jaargang 4, nr 3" july 2003, Muziekgroep Nederland <http://www.maykenas.nl/text6.html>

Nothing better than her own words can explain the atmosphere she wants to create with her pieces:

*“I love to play with something that could be blood-curdlingly serious, which could even scare you, but in the same time could make you giggle nervously. The joke doesn't need to be noticed by people who want to listen to a purely serious piece of music. But I like it when there is an undercurrent with a wink or if there is a moment that could possibly jeopardize everything. That only makes a piece stronger. It is great if people recognize that wink, if they start having doubts if it is all meant seriously. Sometimes there is actual laughter in the hall, but it is not my goal to tell a joke. I am just driven by a longing for a fantastic soundsculpture, to put it romantically. [...] I want to play with what the audience sees as well as hears from the musicians. Often I know where the piece will be performed for the first time, so I can imagine how it will work then and there and base decisions on it.”*⁵¹

The **“wow effect”**, even if clearly searched by the composer, it is absolutely not her main goal, and this is what makes her music qualitatively higher than others: she always aims to **perform a meaningful act**. In her own words: “Something has to happen. Having a nice moment on an evening is maybe fun, but that is not good enough”. She is a searcher, interested in the questions more than in the answers, and with each new piece she endeavors to create something meaningful, something that opens a musical door and brings her (and the public) to places they haven't been before ⁵². She often claimed her non-belonging to any compositional school or movement, but she often seems to be the natural successor of the 60's movement “Fluxus”, a strong current of anti-commercialism and an anti-art sensibility with the aim of disparaging the conventional market-driven art world in favor of an artist-centered creative practice. Like the event performances of Fluxus, sought to elevate the banal, to be mindful of the mundane, and to frustrate the high culture of academic and market-driven music and art, confusing the limits between art and existence ⁵³.

⁵¹ Dame, Joke: “In love with sounds” in “Mens en Melodie”, September 2008 <http://www.maykenas.nl/text6.html>

⁵² Ibid.

⁵³ Robert Filliou on Fluxus and art, 5 September 2010

Her pieces can be considered a clearly ironical reflection about the role of the musician today and a lucid portrait of the general crisis of nowadays' art, where **the goal is the reflection itself and not the search of a solution, that seems impossible to find.**

She often talks about the compositional process as a pure “search from troubles” and she often quoted Fluxus artist George Maciunas, who spoke of art's great paradox: it “must be unlimited, obtainable by all and eventually produced by all, but the artist doing art has to justify his income, demonstrate that only he can do art, and art therefore must appear to be complex, intellectual, exclusive”. It's a tough one, and rather than solving the problem, Nas punks us with it, living it unsolved: In a time where art, news and life all travel without context – in which the funniest stuff we see online makes absolutely zero sense – Nas perfectly captures weirdness, and how we've become so very familiar with it ⁵⁴.

Mayke Nas found in the four-hands **the perfect medium to convey all the shades of her compositional style and message**: the piece “Digit #2”, written in the years 2002-2003 is not the result of a commission, but the pure outcome of her compositional inventiveness (she declared that this happens with her only in rare occasions).

In the composition the piano is used just as a “cluster producer”: the pianists, not without a good sense of coordination use their full arm to produce the cluster.

In the score notes the beginning of the piece it is explained in this way:

“All notes for the piano are to be played very firmly with flat hands, producing loud clusters. Don't use any pedal. Keep your hands on your thighs during rests. Start off playing in the middle of the keyboard together, carefully listening to the cluster you produce. Decide where you play the next cluster instantaneous up until the repeated bar on the second line. From there on, play only extremely high and low clusters. Synchronize all your movements” ⁵⁵.

Then the clusters start to make room for some body-percussion, a rhythmic fantasy growing out of children's hand-patting and clapping games. The **fig. 6** reports the score notes in order to give the reader an idea about how the composer put on score such movements and **fig. 7** represents

⁵⁴ “Mayke Nas is looking for troubles”: <https://hcmf.co.uk/looking-for-trouble-with-mayke-nas/> (last access 23-01-21)

⁵⁵ Performance notes on Digit #2

the first page of the piece. For a good performance of the piece listen to the YouTube recording of the duo “Eighth blackbird” (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bmM0-TRIQJA>).

The reason of the choice of the medium is clear: the physical proximity between the two performers sitting on one piano makes the rhythmic interaction between the two bodies possible and intensify the theatrical effect of the piece, which it would have been impossible to obtain otherwise. Perfect coordination is the main issue: the cluster on the piano need to be performed exactly in the same way.

It is impossible not to notice that the piece has an evident **“musical” limitation**, which appears a bit surprising considering the usual attention the composer always gives to the sonic result: she never makes use of the piano in a melodic way, denying the instrument’s most peculiar potentiality. The piece can be performed by someone who doesn’t have any knowledge about the instrument (an other instrumentalist, even a non-musician with a good sense of rhythm), but this is exactly the symbolic message Mayke wants to convey: does the piece mean that anyone should be able to make art, outside of commodity chains and professional skill? Or does it mean the opposite ⁵⁶?

We are not able to answer the questions, but in the meantime we enjoy this extremely unique piece of music with a very important question point in mind, which, as often, could be the solution itself.

“Night” (2016), by Fazil Say

The Turkish composer Fazil Say (born 1970) doesn’t need any introduction: he is world-wide famous above all as pianist for his very personal and sometimes curious interpretations of the great classics and for his jazz improvisations, but also his compositions enjoy more and more an extraordinary success of public and critic. The contrast between his extremely Western classical music-centered education and his deep Anatolian “emotional” roots make his music immediately recognizable at a first listening. In his compositions as well as in his improvisations, Say is extremely busy in what he calls “the new cultural synthesis”, meaning the attempt of **merging west and east cultures** in order to bend the limiting and restrictive boundaries of music, to break

⁵⁶ “Mayke Nas is looking for troubles”



Play a low cluster with your right hand.



Play a high cluster with your left hand.

Hands and thighs

L-thigh

Slap your left thigh with your left hand.

R-thigh

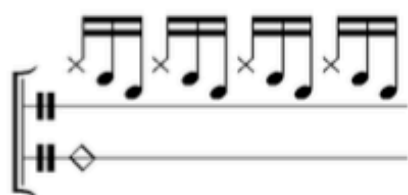
Slap your right thigh with your right hand.

Clap

Clap your hands.

L+R straight

Turn towards each other and clap each others hands, keeping the palms up vertically. The left hand claps the right hand of the other player and vice versa.



Turn towards each other. One player holds his/her hands in the air (palms vertically and facing out), the other one plays on them - alternately clapping his/her own hands, then slapping the right hand on the left hand of the other player and the left hand on the right hand of the other player etc (in other words: slapping goes straight ahead, not crossed).

RHs cross

Turn towards each other and clap each others right hands.

LHs cross

Turn towards each other and clap each others left hands.

L+ R horiz.

Turn towards each other with your hands in front of you, keeping your palms horizontally, and clap each others hands in countermovement: one hand goes up (palm up), and the other one goes down (palm down) and vice versa. Change direction from one clap to the next. Start with your right hand up (going down).



N.B. From R on, the unisono is interrupted 3 times by individual repeat signs for the left and the right player, resulting in three canonic fragments.

Fig. 6 Performance notes by Mayke Nas on Digid #2

DiGiT #2

Mayke Nas

A ♩ = 11 sec. ♩ = 10 sec. ♩ = 9 sec. ♩ = 8 sec. ♩ = 7 sec. ♩ = 6 sec. ♩ = 5 sec. ♩ = 4 sec.

Piano

B ♩ = 3 sec. ♩ = 2 sec. ♩ = 30 *accel.* ♩ = 72-80 10 x

R-thigh
L-thigh
Piano

C

R-thigh
L-thigh
Piano

D

R-thigh
L-thigh
Piano

E

Clap
R-thigh
L-thigh
Piano

F

Clap
R-thigh
L-thigh
Piano

G

Clap
R-thigh
L-thigh
Piano

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Fig. 7 First page of Digid #2

out of compartmentalization. Turkish tunes cannot be played with the piano as it is a tempered instrument consisting of twelve notes, while Turkish music is composed by a system of twenty-four notes. Say has found a solution for this dilemma and argued that although melodies of East and West are separated, they create a harmony when used properly. He weaves motifs from Turkish folk music with Western music, providing a new texture to music and sound. His Turkish identity and nostalgia about Anatolian culture add emotion into his improvisations that influence his compositional style ⁵⁷. If the melodic aspect of his compositions in itself is peculiar, so are the harmonies, the big contrasts, the syncopated rhythms, the percussion-heavy moments (clearly tributes to the earthy Modernism of Bartók and Stravinsky, but with a smell of almost-pop style), but above all the atmospheres that the combination between these features creates are Say's printmark.

As the composer declared, "Music in the Western tradition consists of a kind of holy trinity: melody, harmony and rhythm. For me as an oriental there is a fourth element. I add **color** to that. Composing, is in a sense a form of painting. Which painter is my work related to? I do not know. I've never thought about that question. **I paint an inner state of mind**. Sometimes I see cinematic images in my head" ⁵⁸.

His genius as performer gives him the distinct advantage in writing music with greater technical and emotional connection with the instrument, that allow him even to add new traits to the personality of the piano itself.

Every aspect of his compositions style is enhanced by the choice of the four-hands medium in his piece "Night", an effective encore piece written for the piano duo Lucas & Arthur Jussen (see their performance on YouTube: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_duUdEB7BBM), where virtuoso scales and percussive inside-piano effects put the gloomy and aggressive tonal world of the piano to the extreme for a romantic spooky scene in the night, creating an extremely dark and obsessive atmosphere.

"The Jussen work 'Night' became a work about trauma", says Say. "It's a dark piece, a struggle with feelings. It's about a dramatic night, a separation between two people. Not because of illness

⁵⁷ Say, Fazyl in encyclopedia.com: <https://www.encyclopedia.com/international/encyclopedias-almanacs-transcripts-and-maps/say-fazil-1970> (last access 25-02-21)

⁵⁸ Galema, "Joost: Fazil Say in de spotlight", <https://www.classicstogo.nl/features/in-de-spotlights-fazil-say/> (last access 25-02-21)

or death, but because of a relationship drama. The two pianists are talking or arguing with each other. I hope the Jussen brothers will never end up in such a situation.”⁵⁹

The four-hands medium realizes perfectly the atmosphere of this dramatic emotional fight going on between two people through an entanglement of physical movements very intriguing to watch, a dark melodic dialogue and a breathtaking rhythmical structure, reinforced by the massive use of extended techniques “Black Earth like”, as he himself labels them in the score.

In his celebrated piano piece “Black Earth” Say indeed vividly **evokes the sound of hammered Turkish string instruments** by damping the piano strings with his hand and striking the keys sharply to plunk out the melody, and in this piece **he makes use of this technique in a much more efficient way**, having the possibility to use the second pianist in order to keep the harmonic part going. About that he declared in an interview:

“I let the brothers work with techniques that I devised years ago for the piece ‘Black Earth’. They also pluck the strings in the grand piano. As a composer it was fascinating to have two pairs of hands at my disposal. With that I could create ghostly atmospheres.”⁶⁰

Of course this aspect makes the piece very **theatrical** to interesting to watch: the pianists stand up, manipulate the inner part of the piano one by one or together, cross their hands, they visually “argue” one with the other in front of an astonished public. The piece is so **visually** effective in giving voice to a terrifying, obsessive night, that a short version has been made of it in order to realize a videoclip under the direction of Carli Hermès, with the participation of Floor Eimers and Nathan Brhane, dancers of the National Dutch Ballet.

Say anyway gave his very personal opinion about the piano four-hands medium: “Two people is so much more difficult than one, in my experience. I won't be playing it anytime soon, because I rarely do four-handed pieces. The piano and I are such a physical unit that I cannot share that body with anyone else. That will be a matter of ego, it is in my nature.”⁶¹

But this didn't prevent him from composing one of the most interesting pieces in the contemporary repertoire.

⁵⁹ Ibid.

⁶⁰ Ibid.

⁶¹ Ibid.

“Let’s play a duet!” (2006) by Tomohiro Moriyama

This piece is a proper gem in the repertoire, almost completely unknown by the public, but discovered by the great duo ZOFO and performed in many important concert halls (see one of the performances <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Gk9Lnzzh6jl>). It has been impossible to find informations about the life and the compositional style of the composer Tomohiro Moriyama (born 1977) and about the piece itself, but ZOFO gently shared the manuscript of the score, and this gave the possibility to clarify many distinctive aspects of the piece.

Plenty of reviews and informations can be found instead about **ZOFO**, one of only a handful of duos worldwide devoted exclusively to piano duets. They are paving the way for other four-hand duos by focusing on 20th and 21st century repertoire and commissioning new works from celebrated contemporary composers (including William Bolcom, Gabriela Lena Frank and Terry Riley) as well as exciting transcriptions of famous works that always contain an innovative sparkle and make use the piano in the most “experimental” way possible ⁶².

One of the distinctive features of ZOFO is the attention to the choreography and the theatricality of the pieces, in order to create a proper show that could fulfill the needs of a very broad public.

The piece is clearly inspired by Takemitsu’s style and is meant as a satire on the etudes of Ligeti. The first part, “Presto assai”, is a barbaric chase after each other of the pianists, with virtuoso hand and arm crossings, improvised figures on the basis of material already showed, very choreographic movements, highly theatrical moments of struggle. The piece brings the **improvisatory dimension** to the most extreme way possible, made possible by the proximity of the performer, the use of the same keyboard and the consequent possibility of visually imitate the movements, making always new choreographies.

In the second part, “Allegretto con Moto”, the pianists are busy in sharing a melody in an almost **hypnotic dance**, for which an incredible coordination is required. The two performers really need to share intentions about touch, colors, pedal, as if they really would have one mind controlling twenty fingers. The visual effect of the piece is absolutely astonishing and deserves to be enjoyed by the public.

⁶² <https://zofoduet.com/zofo> (last access 25-02-21)

A commission of Dirac Piano Duo: “Entanglement” by Ching-Fang Teng (2020)

Ching-Fang Teng, a bachelor student of composition of the Koninklijk Conservatorium Den Haag, took advantage of the outputs of this research to write down “Entanglement”. The title, proposed by the duo itself as starting inspirational point for the composer, is extremely significative and connected with the story of Dirac Piano Duo (they choose their name as homage to Dirac, the physician who theorized the Entanglement).

The entanglement is a quantum physic phenomenon that happens when two quantum systems interact in such a way that they become “entangled”, linked: they are no more two individual particles and they cannot be described as two constituents, but only as an inseparable whole.

This fascinating concept seems to explain perfectly what happens in the intimate relationship between two fellow pianists collaborating in a piano duet.

The piece results to be a catching homage to the piano duet and to its endless compositional potential, and dedicated it to the Dirac Piano Duo.

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