

Visuals, Structure and Emotion: The Toy Piano in the Dramaturgy of Piano Recitals

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Resumo: este artigo examina a contribuição do piano de brinquedo para a dramaturgia de recitais de piano solo. Como ponto de partida para o estudo, o conceito de *artform recital* é apresentado, onde todos os elementos contribuem juntamente com o programa musical para a construção da experiência de escuta. É então proposta a aplicação de ideias da dramaturgia como ferramenta para a combinação coerente desses múltiplos elementos na estrutura do recital. Tomando como estudo de caso três recitais de piano desenvolvidos e apresentados por essa autora, é observado como a inclusão de performance de piano de brinquedo pode contribuir para o enriquecimento da dramaturgia de recitais ao se oferecer como um elemento de interesse visual, também ao trazer outras possibilidades de exploração do espaço e de movimento corporal da/do pianista, estimular percepções afetivas na experiência de escuta, e funcionar como elemento chave na estrutura do programa.

Palavras-chave: Piano de brinquedo, Performance pianística, Recital, Artform Recital, Dramaturgia.

Abstract: this paper examines the contribution of the toy piano to the dramaturgy of piano recitals. As a starting point for the study, the concept of *artform recital* is introduced, as the understanding that all elements come together with the music programme to build the listening experience. In order to weave all these elements together coherently, it is then proposed the application of ideas from dramaturgy. Three piano recitals are observed as case studies, demonstrating how the addition of toy piano performances can contribute to the dramaturgy of recitals by offering a distinct visual interest, allowing other possibilities of exploration of the space of performance and of the pianist's body movement, suggesting emotional connotations to the listening experience, and by working as a key element in the structure of the programme.

Keywords: Toy piano, Piano performance, Piano recital, Artform recital, Dramaturgy.

This article will discuss the toy piano as a relevant addition to the dramaturgy of solo piano recitals. As a pianist, usually the main concerns faced when preparing a recital is the programming of repertoire. This includes choice of work, or works, to be performed and, in the case of a programme with multiple pieces, the order in which they will be presented. In fact, the very question: “What to play on a piano recital?” opens Rosy Ge’s study titled “The art of Recital programming” which examines the transformations of the tendencies in the piano recital programming from the turn of the twentieth century to the present days. Ge observes, from experiences of concerts in what we consider are traditional contexts¹, the frequent feature of a chronological approach to a piano recital programme: “a conventional recital starts with a piece from the baroque era, followed by a German/Austrian composer from the classical era. A collection of works from the romantic era would be next, with something contemporary concluding the program” (GE, 2017, p. 1-2). The crucial importance of the programming in a piano recital was also highlighted by scholar Edward Said: “One looks for programs that appear to *say* something - that highlight aspects of the piano literature or of performance in unexpected ways - that highlight aspects of the piano literature or of performance in unexpected ways” (SAID, 2008, p. 15). Said suggests the sense of narrative as an interesting approach to frame the programme of a piano recital, explaining that “this narrative maybe conventional, moving historically (...) Or a program may have an inner narrative based on evolving forms, tonalities, or styles” (idem, p. 16).

In the research developed in my doctorate studies, I proposed the concept of the piano recital as an artform in itself. In such a proposal, the process of preparing a piano recital would go beyond the programming and practice of the music repertoire alone. The piano recital as an artform in itself calls the attention to the fact that all elements involved in the performance also convey meaning and make altogether the artistic experience - from the means of advertising to the space of performance, and the interaction with the audience.

This approach is also inspired by the concept *musicking* as created by Christopher Small, which proposes that music in itself is an activity, “something that people do” (SMALL 1998, p. 1). According to Small, the act of make music - i.e. of *musicking* - includes any activity which contributes

¹ The cited study was carried on at the University of Kansas, and examined the programmes of solo recitals presented at the Carnegie Hall in New York, USA.

to a music performance happening, from composing and performing to listening, also selling tickets, and ushering the audience in. In this concept, the very meaning of music involves much more than the aural aspect - it is generated through relationships which take place in the act of musicking (idem, p. 13).

It is interesting to consider that listening and the music experience may involve a more encompassing perceptual approach. Erik Clarke points out the ability of our perception to change the focus:

at one moment I can be aware of the people, clothing furniture, (...) and lighting of a performance venue, among which are the sounds of a performance of Beethoven's string quartet Op. 132 (...); and at another moment I am aware of nothing at all beyond a visceral engagement with musical events (...). Music does afford intensely absorbing and particular kinds of perceptual meanings (CLARKE, 2005, p. 188)

By accepting all those “extra-musical” elements as an integral part of the music experience and embracing the proposal of an *artform recital*, it becomes now crucial to engage in a creative process of integration of the various elements coherently. For this, it can be useful to consider concepts of dramaturgy, which is the “weaving of the performance’s different elements” (BARBA, 1985, p. 75).

The next section of this article will briefly introduce concepts of dramaturgy applied to piano recitals, drawing from results of my previous research. Subsequently, the growing incorporation of the toy piano in piano recitals nowadays will be discussed. Three case studies of recitals which I have developed and presented will then be examined to demonstrate the contribution of the toy piano to the dramaturgy of those specific concerts.

1. Dramaturgy of the piano recital: developing the *artform recital*

In my doctoral research I investigated strategies to develop a more comprehensive and immersive piano recital, which culminated in the development of the concept of the piano recital as an artform in itself.

As an art form, the recital should now be approached as an artistic compositional practice, being conceived as a whole artwork, yet thoroughly encompassing the craft of of all elements - from the interaction with the audience to the programming, and the design

of the interdisciplinary elements and their weaving by the dramaturgy. (Decoté Rodrigues, 2017, p. 72)

In this sense, the piano recital would not be seen singularly as a performance of a sequence of works (or of a single work, in the case of a programme made of one larger major piece). The piano recital would now be seen as a work of art in itself, where all the elements speak altogether - from the music programme to the space of performance, as well as the visual components and the aesthetic concept behind it all.

Among some elements which were observed to build, together with the music programme performance, what we call “live music experience”, it has been highlighted: (1) the space of performance, (2) social aspects involved between performer and audience, and audience and audience, and (3) the performative body of the pianist.

It has been found out that a deliberate preparation of the space of the performance can contribute to create a sense of anticipation for audience members, thereby helping to contextualise and frame their listening experience. Also, it has been found out that a space set up to bring a sense of intimacy is effective in heightening the affective aspect of live music performances.

Practical investigations during my doctoral research demonstrated that the social relationships resulting from interactions with other audience members and performers, even if temporary, have a powerful impact on an individual’s engagement in live music performances (BURLAND and PITTS, 2014, p. 176). Furthermore, the body of the pianist (with its performative gestures) carries in itself potential to generate meaning, communicate musical expressivity, also to shape the structure of the whole concert.

Once all these other elements are acknowledged as essentials in the structure of the *artform recital*, side by side with the music programme, the challenge that now emerges is to find strategies to weave them in a cohesive and meaningful way. For this, it became relevant to explore ideas from dramaturgy and their application in music performances.

Here, dramaturgy is understood as ‘the composition, structure or fabric of a play or performance (TURNER and BEHRNDT, 2008, p. 3). Key aspects have been identified in order to build the dramaturgy of the artform piano recital, i.e. to blend the elements together so the recital can be experienced as a cohesive whole, which include:

- The development of a sense of narrative as guideline to the unravelling of the performance;
- Craft of transitions between the pieces of music and the sections of the programme, so to allow the programme to flow;
- The intentional exploration of the physical gestures involved in the music performance, as essential elements in the communication of the artistic content and to hold together the whole of the music performance (DECOTÉ RODRIGUES, 2017, p. 67)

The approach of the piano recital as an artform in itself and the development of dramaturgies to structure them have been guidelines, explicitly or not, in my latest piano performances. In this process, I have found a relevant addition to the development of such projects, the toy piano. The toy piano has become a valuable element to enrich my solo piano concerts regarding: (1) the music content in terms of programme and timbre, (2) the visual aspect and possibilities of exploration of the space, and (3) alternatives to structure the programme and the development of an aesthetic concept within these performance projects.

Before examining three case studies of piano performances which benefited from the feature of toy piano pieces, this article will discuss relevant aspects of the toy piano in the literature, as a contextualisation.

2. The toy piano as a concert instrument

John Cage's *Suite for Toy Piano* written in 1948 is considered the first proposal to take the toy piano as a concert instrument. Since then, the toy piano has been getting more attention by composers and performers and has secured its place in the concert music scene. Pianist Margaret Leng Tan has been a pioneer and pivotal figure in the development of the toy piano in the context of art music (GOH, 2015, p. 36). From performances of John Cage's *Suite for Toy Piano*, Margaret Leng Tan has contributed to building up the repertoire for toy piano through transcriptions and commissions.

As potential reasons for playing on and writing for toy piano, Baker points out emotional connotations, technical challenge, and distinctive musical characteristics:

the toy piano causes one to think about music in a different manner. For some it evokes a child-like sense of whimsy, for other it is about the challenge of writing for an instrument with a limited pitch range, others just like the way it sounds in all it's non-standard tuning glory (BAKER, 2016, p. 3).

Reinforcing the emotional aspect which may be associated with the toy piano, composer David Smooke observes that “the general sound of the toy piano is an instant nostalgia for childhood” (interviewed by McCABE, 2014).

The unique sound characteristics of the toy piano have also been an element of fascination for both composers and performers. Toy pianist Isabel Etternauer calls the attention to the fact that “each [toy piano] has a different sound” (interviewed by POOLE, 2002). Composer Geoff Hanna points out the interesting aspect of the irregularities and inconsistencies of the toy piano: “it's slightly out of tune. The top half and the bottom half of the range are two different harmonic regions. In the bottom half you can hardly hear the fundamental - you tend to hear a fifth up” (interviewed by POOLE, 2002).

Among the factors of the toy piano attractiveness for performers, in particular, the portability of the toy piano is highlighted by pianist and researcher Xenia Pestova Bennett. Pestova mentions the feeling of liberation:

The pianist (...) is able to bypass practical considerations and perform in milieus that include (for example) a tropical rainforest, a natural cave system, a desert landscape, a mountain top, experimental music lofts and other potential public performance environments where there simply isn't a piano, and no practical way to bring one in' (PESTOVA, 2017, p. 2).

Pestova also suggests the incorporation of the toy piano into one's practice as a welcome contribution to a versatile career, as well as an opportunity to bring freshness from the tradition inherited from the nineteenth century piano culture. In that respect, composer David Smooke has said about one of the reasons he enjoys writing for the toy piano:

I also like that there really isn't a traditional performance practice for the toy piano. If I get onstage with a piano, there's hundreds of years of comparison that people just automatically will draw upon. (...) With the toy piano the associations are much more personal and music less attached to a cultural tradition (interview to McCabe, 2014).

As another stimulus for the development of toy piano performance, Margaret Leng Tan has pointed out the challenge to mastering of the toy piano technique and the eventual benefit it will bring to one's piano technique itself:

When I go back to the real piano [I find that] it's refined my technique no end [...] I can play [...] so reliably now after working with the toy piano. I tell my students: "Take any chance you get to work with a toy piano - it will do so much for your technique" (Tan interviewed by WILLIAMS, 2007).

Bringing attention to another aspect of music performance, Pestova mentions the unconventional theatrical visual feature of the toy piano and the eccentric and humorous flavour it can bring to a concert:

The act of crouching on the floor in front of the audience is in stark contrast to the majestic silhouette we associate with the open wing of the concert grand, and acts as an invitation to participate in the event, drawing audiences closer. Traditional barriers between performer and audience are removed, the performer is reduced in stature and can't help contributing to an unusual situation (PESTOVA, 2017, p. 2).

In this respect, Margaret Leng Tan also has highlighted the visual appeal of the toy piano and its role in expanding her concerts towards a more theatrical experience: "They're theatre events rather than just concerts. It's very vivid and colourful - there are all these toy instruments involved, and all this choreography" (Tan interviewed by WILLIAMS, 2007).

The freshness of the toy piano in relation to tradition, the opening of possibilities for mobility and suggestion of sense of scale, its theatrical potential, timbre distinctiveness and connotations of nostalgia, are elements which have been particularly interesting in some of my latest piano recitals. The next section of this article will discuss the role of the toy piano in three of those performances.

3. Case studies - the toy piano in the dramaturgy of three piano performances

In this section, three piano performances which I have developed and presented will be observed as case studies. The contribution of the toy piano to the dramaturgy of those recitals will

be examined by offering possibilities for exploration of the space, other visual and aural perspectives, and as a structural element within the music program.

3.1. Case study 1. *House-Dream* - a short piano performance

*House-Dream*² was a short piano performance presented as part of a showcase event promoted by CARU - Contemporary Arts ReSearch Unit, at Modern Art Oxford art gallery in Oxford, UK. My act was a 20 minutes solo music performance to be presented at the foyer of the gallery, following a programme of artistic numbers ranging from world music to live art performance. I had then the challenge to develop a dramaturgy of this short piano performance, which should contain both a variety of elements and unity among them, presenting distinctiveness in such a limited timeframe.

The theme of “dream” was the chosen thread for the programme, and the space was set with objects that would remind of a house setting - cushions and a wind-chime around a digital piano and a toy piano. The music programme performed was:

Késia Decoté - *Bagatelle 1*, for piano
John Cage - *Dream*, for piano
Késia Decoté - *Bagatelle 2*, for piano
Silvia Berg - *El sueño... el vuelo*, for piano
Késia Decoté - *Bagatelle 3*, for piano
Stephen Montague - *Almost a lullaby*, for toy piano, wind chimes and musical box.

The toy piano piece, *Almost a lullaby* by Stephen Montague, plays with the idea of a deconstructed lullaby. It requires that a wind chime (or a recording of it) is played, chiming throughout the piece. It also asks the toy pianist to wind up a musical box and allow it to play simultaneously with the toy piano during the last sections of the piece.

The feature of a piece for toy piano at the end of the performance created a spacial dynamic, since I had to walk from the digital piano to the toy piano. This could be seen as a subtle but effectively distinct element for visual and kinaesthetic engagement of the audience, since a piano performance is usually still in terms of movement in space due to the characteristic of the instrument itself.

² <https://vimeo.com/162903232>

The performance of this toy piano work also played with perceptions of a sense of scale, as an audience member mentioned having an impression of “a sonic Russian doll” (audience member feedback). This scale aspect was further highlighted because the music box used in this occasion, as a happy coincidence, had the shape of a grand piano. There was then the dynamic of the pianist coming from the “real size” piano from the previous piece to the toy piano and ending up handling the 20 centimetres musical-box piano.

FIGURE 1 – Késia Decoté performs *Almost a lullaby* by Stephen Montague, Modern Art Oxford, 27/09/2015.
Photo: Stu Allsopp



The toy piano itself brought some intended and not-intended connotations, shaping the emotional impact of the performance in different ways. Whilst some audience members related an impression of sweetness, another spectator felt uncomfortable because the toy piano brought unpleasant memories from their childhood. Other people said they had a sense of creepiness, by

linking the toy object with terror movies, corroborating Pestova's remark that "many of us naturally appear to associate the bell-like sound of the toy piano with the slightly unnatural world of childhood, creepy lullabies and horror films"³.

Here in a practical situation is how the toy piano has the potential to affect the listening experience due to its link to each person's emotional past and nostalgia.

In this case study, we could see the toy piano creating a distinctive interest and engagement even in such a short piano performance. It contributed to building a physical and emotional ambience that allowed the unravelling of the theme of the performance - dream. It also contributed to shaping the performance as an interdisciplinary work. On this occasion, there was a perception that the act was more than a presentation of music – there was a concept framing the music programme and performance, also combining visual interest and exploration of space.

House-Dream was a work-in-progress for the development of a full-length concert titled *casa*, discussed in the next section.

3.2. Case study 2. *casa - reflections on house and home*

casa - reflections on house and home was an interdisciplinary piano recital which combined the performance of contemporary Brazilian piano music with theatrical actions. The project was inspired by Bachelard's *The Poetics of Space*, and had an autobiographical character.

This project also aimed to explore the space of the performance and to challenge conventions of spectatorship: the performance space was "arena" style, with no distinction between stage and audience. There were two pianos and two toy pianos in the space which I alternated playing throughout the programme. There were no seats for the audience, who were informed they were free to walk and explore the space during the performance.

³ <http://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/b06sgxjp>, cited by PESTOVA, 2017, p. 9.

FIGURE 2 – Music programme for *casa - reflections of house & home*

Programme

(please feel free to move around and explore the space as you wish)

1. Memories (*Life begins well, it begins enclosed, protected, all warm in the bosom of the house*)
Tátil [Tactile]* (2007), by Valéria Bonafé - for piano
2. Echoes (*...the old house, for those who know how to listen, is a sort of geometry of echoes*)
Ressonâncias [Resonances] (1983), by Marisa Rezende - for piano
3. Corners (*When we recall the hours we have spent in our corners, we remember above all silence, the silence of our thoughts*)
Nenhum, Nenhuma [None, None]* (2010), by Gustavo Penha - for piano
4. The attic (*... even when the attic room is lost and gone there remains the fact that we once loved a garret, once lived in an attic*)
Ludvan ven Beethowig* (2009), for two toy pianos and one player, by Daniel Moreira
5. The cellar (*... the dark entity of the house... When we dream there, we are in harmony with the irrationality of the depths*)
gosto de terra [it tastes like earth]* (2013), for piano and live electronics, by Daniel Puig
6. Love, Intimacy, and Dream (*[the house] bespeaks intimacy... The house shelters daydreaming, the house protects the dreamer, the house allows one to dream in peace*)
El sueño... el vuelo [The dream... the flight] (2010), by Silvia Berg - for piano

* First performance in the UK

Quotations in italics from Bachelard's *The Poetics of Space*, 1994 Edition by Beacon Press, Boston

Movement was an integral part of this project, which was highlighted by the fact that I had to walk across the space to play the different pianos. Adding to this dynamic, the toy pianos were on top of a scaffolding tower, so in a way there was also a shift of vertical levels, the spacial aspect (see Fig. 3).

The programme (see Figure 2) was structured in scenes which were related to specific spaces of the house - following Bachelard's reflections - and to phases of my life. Each musical piece corresponded to a scene and was followed by a theatrical gesture. The toy piano piece corresponded to the scene of the 'attic' and suggested the moment to bring out nostalgia and happy memories from childhood.

The toy piano scene was a humorous moment in the dramaturgy of this performance, following a dynamic of releasing tension before increasing again up to the climax in the storyline. The timbre of the toy piano and the fragments of Beethoven's *Pour Elise*, which were deconstructed in Daniel Moreira's piece, built up effectively the scene related to childhood memories.

Also, the act of going up the scaffolding brought a change of visual perspective (see Figure 3): the performance space, which had been explored horizontally through the movements from one piano to another, now also being explored vertically.

FIGURE 3 – *casa - reflections of house & home*: audience's perspective of Késia Decoté performing toy pianos at top of scaffolding tower. Photo: Stu Allsopp



We can see, in this project, here the toy piano is a key element in building up the visual, structural and emotional aspects of the performance. The toy piano brought variety of timbre and visuals, conveyed perceptions of childhood, added an element of humour, and allowed an additional exploration of the space of performance.

3.3. Case study 3. *light, leve, luz*

light, leve, luz was an intimate recital⁴ exploring the word “light” in its various aspects when related to music. In Portuguese, my mother tongue, there are two different words for light: *leve*

⁴ Recital presented at The Abbey Sutton Courtenay, UK, on 22 December 2019.

meaning weightlessness and *luz* meaning luminosity. The music programme presented works which explored these aspects in musical terms. The programme was structured in three sections, each exploring an aspect of the word “light” through the pieces included in those sections (see Figure 4).

FIGURE 4 – Music programme of *light, leve, luz*

- Part 1: lightness of touch
Ben Gaunt - *Light Spellsphere*, for toy piano (2019)
Arnold Schoenberg *Leicht, zart* (Light, delicate) - from Six Little Piano Pieces Op. 19 (1911)
Ruth Crawford-Seeger - *Preludes 8* (Leggiero), for piano (1924)
.....
Part 2: lightness of being
Yfat Soul Zisso - *Para a frente*, for toy piano (2018)
Silvia Berg - *El sueño... el vuelo*, for piano (2010)
John Palmer - *Shambhala*, for piano (1990)
.....
[transition]
Michael Taplin - *Wax Candles*, for piano (2018)
.....
Part 3: light - luz
Yfat Soul Zisso - *Full Moon*, for toy piano (2019)
Max Gibson - *Night over Berstane*, for toy piano & piano (2017)
Thomas Adès - *Darkness Visible*, for piano (1992)
Marisa Rezende - *Miragem*, for piano (2009)

Differently from the other projects discussed in this paper, this recital presented a fairly traditional format, being performed to an audience placed in a standard classical music seating arrangement, at a traditional venue. This project was developed with a focus on the performance of the music works, with no interdisciplinary processes being deliberately explored in the sense of visual or theatrical elements.

In this recital, the toy piano pieces acted as signposts in the structure of the programme, marking clearly the beginning of a new section. On one hand, these toy piano moments brought a freshness to the listening process through the intervention of a different timbre. On the other hand, they linked the different sections of the programme. In this respect, if they brought in novelty in terms of timbre and visual perception, with the recurrence at the beginning of each section they started to become recognisable features. Like effective signposts, the toy piano pieces could be understood as the sign for a new section to start immediately once heard. In this way, the toy piano

pieces worked simultaneously as an element of variety and of unity within the programme of a fairly traditional piano recital.

Thus, by working as an element of transition between sections, the toy piano assumed a crucial role in the dramaturgy of this recital, allowing the programme to flow organically while developing the concept of the recital. The transitions are in fact the key to the dramaturgy of a performance work, as pointed out by Turner and Behrndt: “It is the ‘links’ or the ‘bridges between events that are, in fact, key to understand the ‘inner logic’ of the piece. Transitions are not just a question of moving from one moment to another; it is in these transitions that the dramaturgy of the performance is discovered.” (Turner and Behrndt, 2008, p. 33)

Additionally, although the visual element was not an element deliberately explored in this performance, the presence of the toy piano in itself added a visual variety to the performance. It also offered a new element of perspective in relation to a traditional solo piano recital: usually only the audience members seated on the left side of the auditorium can see the keyboard and the hands action of the pianist. In this recital, because I placed the keyboard of the toy piano on the opposite direction to the piano keyboard, the audience seated on the right side could also see the action of the keyboard during the toy piano pieces. Finally, the toy piano brought in a spacial dynamic similar to the first case studied in this paper, for the simple fact that I needed to move from the toy piano to the grand piano, and vice versa.

Conclusion

In this paper I examined how the feature of toy piano pieces contributed to the dramaturgy of three piano performances which I have developed and performed. Drawing from my previous research was the concept of the artform recital where all elements of the performance are understood as essential for carrying expressivity and meaning in the live music experience - from the space of the performance including visual elements, to interactions with the audience, plus the music programme and performance. It also showed the concept of dramaturgy as an relevant tool to weave all these elements together in order to make this artform recital a cohesive whole.

It was observed that the toy piano contributed to the dramaturgy of the piano performances

examined in this paper by: adding visual interest and theatricality, liberating from traditions of classical music concerts, bringing freshness of timbre, offering more possibilities of movement and exploration of the space of the performance (which has allowed variety of perspectives and eventually played with a sense of scale), suggesting emotional connotations such as nostalgia, and working as a key element in the structure of a programme.

Although the outcomes draw from practical experiments involving varied contexts, it is recognisable that the limitations of this study are in terms of scope of repertoire and focused parameters of evaluation. It is our expectation that more studies in the field of toy piano performance will build on and complement the understandings generated by this discussion.

On one hand the tradition of piano recital dates back from the 1800s, on the other hand the toy piano has been gaining its place in the world of concert music only since the late 1940s. These reflections aim to demonstrate how this recent tradition of toy piano performance can contribute to refresh and enrich solo piano recitals, and to enchant audiences sonically, visually, and emotionally in a unique way.

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