

PIANO HERO. CURATORIAL EXPLORATION OF THE PIANO RECITAL

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Piano hero. Curatorial exploration of the piano recital is an experimental attempt to introduce curatorial narrative to the piano recital practice as well as to discuss the relevance of this concert genre and pianistic practices in the XXI century. The pieces chosen for the recital does give an opportunity to recontextualize piano, pianist and the very form of a piano recital.

In the context of contemporary art, the curatorial thought became an essential ingredient for a well-formed presentation. Curators and artists in their practices very consciously choose the elements of suggested narrative linked by specific social, historical or cultural links. In my artistic practice as a pianist and a director of contemporary music ensemble, I feel the growing need to create artistic performances that would be conceptually strong and unanimous. In my presentation, I am suggesting the performance based on the idea of a performer/curator as an extended professional competence for modern musicians.

When asked to define the work of curator, superstar curator of the Serpentine Gallery in London **Hans Ulrich Obrist** answered: “Today, curating as a profession means at least four things. It means to preserve, in the sense of safeguarding the heritage of art. It means to be the selector of new work. It means to connect to art history. And it means displaying or arranging the work.”

These four things are exactly what every performer does in his work, but the question is – how **consciously** musicians are thinking about the forms of the presentation and the repertoire choices in their practices.

For my first conscious attempt to use curatorial practices in my performance I chose to concentrate to the most popular genre – piano recital. The title PIANO HERO not only reflect one of the pieces that I will be performing today but also is a code that allows to question and rethink a very idea of one’s actions in front of the piano on stage.

One of the piece presented in the recital is Hungarian Rhapsody No. 2 by Ferenc Liszt. This piece is chosen as a representation of a most important invention for the piano performance tradition – piano recital itself. In the early 18th century music venues were the places of entertainment; the programing was dependent on

the wishes of general public, the performances were full of show elements, programs were formed around different musical genres and mixed instrumentation. Liszt was the person who suggested the format focused around the performer that is playing a solo program, performing the music from memory, on the stage where piano is turned 90 degrees from the audience (in order for audience to see the facial expressions of the soloist and at the same time to see virtuoso finger work). Musicologist Robert Greenberg says it best: “Franz Liszt was the template, the model for every performing concert pianist since the 1840s.”

From the time this format that was suggested in its purest form is still the dominant practice of pianists. Liszt in his own right was a curator by the definition of today – to quote Lina Navickaitė-Martinelli, “Liszt managed to manipulate all the tools to foresee the potential success in particular cities, track the change in the audience as well as consciously form his reputation in the press of the day.” Liszt idea that was the reflection of well noticed the cultural needs around 1840 surprisingly didn’t change much to this day.

In the article in the New Yorker Alex Ross is stating: “The problem isn’t that the modern way of giving concerts has grown hopelessly decrepit, as some say; it’s that music has for too long been restricted to a single, almost universally duplicated format.”

If we would look to the concert halls around the world we would see the exact reproduction of this format. Although successfully bringing music lovers to the venues this recital tradition rises few questions:

- Is the piano repertoire represented fairly by the pianists today? Why is there a constant repetition of the same names and titles, although piano repertoire is so waste and diverse?
- And why is there so rarely a concrete thought behind the connections between the performed works

I would like to outline the example behind the programming and the presentation of piano performance that I find original and refreshing in the context of usage of the piano recital format: Performance artist Marina Abramovič collaborated with pianist Igor Levit to present a project called „GOLDBERG“. In this performance the musical choice was legendary variations by J.S. Bach ‚Goldberg variations‘. This performance was Abramovič ‘way to continue her exploration of art as a tool of presence or in other word conscious. The first thing that every member of the audience had to do is to give away all of their modern devices. The performance started way before the first note was played – for a half hour the audience were sitting in a silence with the special headphones. For the collaborators it was important – to prepared overstimulated audience to the experience of the music listening. Abramovič says: „Today, in the 21st

century, we don't have the capacity to listen to classical music in a form that was done before". The artists created new set to the piano recital and gave an audience a contemporary art inspired experience.

It seems to be a radical idea to me, as a professional pianist working in the 21 centuries to be limiting myself to 88 keys of the keyboard. I found the pieces that does reflect variety of piano sound production possibilities are amongst most interesting to perform. Extended techniques, electroacoustic music, performative pieces – these are attractive to me both in artistic way and I feel the most excited to present it to the public.

One of the pieces that is included in my recital is dated in 1925 and it is Henry Cowell's Banshee. The importance of the piece lies both in its musical content as well as in the fact that it is the first recorded piece using only the extended techniques of the piano. Pianist does use only piano strings to produce the sound. This innovation inspired many composers to explore instruments beyond usual usage. Other piece that does not use piano in the conventional way is Toccata by Italian composer Francesco Filidei. The form is simple, and plays on the ambiguity of the title, in fact the pianist is limited to 'touching' the instrument, without lowering the keys. The interpreter evokes an intimate voice of the piano, considered as a species of large black animal with legs, teeth (white and black) sometimes covered by a large lid lip, giving rise, in its manifestation, to a sort of musical skeleton'. The author choses old and very well-known genre – toccata but suggest fresh compositional perspective. In the piece author personifies the instrument and outlines piano as a character in the history of the pianistic culture. The very idea of a pianist playing the piece using extended techniques is a reality of composition for almost 100 years but is rarely seen in mainstream piano recital programing.

Stefan Prins composition 'Piano hero #1' sums up the idea of the performance as well as allows to add audiovisual element to the program. Composer's interest in a pianist as a cultural hero reflects in the title, the author also rethinks pianist's connection with his instrument as well as the changes in modern performance. Composer modernize the instrument into today's context – piano mechanism consisting out of keyboard, metal strings, plucks and dampers is encoded into computer algorithms. Although during the performance on stage pianist is playing the keyboard as well as the sounds are made by piano, but the outcome is surprisingly different. In the piece the pianist becomes an operator of modernized musical material.