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Editors

Blanka Bogunović, Sanela Nikolić, and Dejana Mutavdžin



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## Crossing the Threshold: A Performer's Experience of *Re:Mains for Multi-Pianist*

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### Abstract

Added to technical and other difficulties, undertaking the first performance of a work is a great responsibility for a performer, especially in the presence of the composer. Having faced the demands of deep involvement with Christina Athinodorou's highly challenging *Re:Mains for Multi-Pianist* (2013–2015; Christina Athinodorou Music, 2018), the pianist Annini Tsioutis engages in a post-performance re-exploration of the piece and its two presentations through an exchange of questions with the composer. The paper seeks to represent significant parameters of the experience of preparation, performance, and re-visiting *Re:Mains*, an innovative work. This is achieved through the exploration of the role of the composer in helping the performer assume the 'task' of bringing a piece to life and, equally, through the examination of the elements that contributed to the reinstatement of the performer's creative and music-evaluating approach to discover new artistic meanings and to reconsider her function as a performer more generally. The composer and the pianist retraced the wider processes involved in conceiving, learning, and delivering *Re:Mains* through post-performance interviewing techniques. The dynamic of the relationship between composer and performer was then discussed, aiming to address the benefits of the joint experience in dealing with *Re:Mains*. Also, the performer evaluates how the work, which initially exceeded her horizon of experience, has now expanded her horizon of expectation. The outcomes of this exchange have led to the definition of various useful tools for a further understanding of contemporary music and creation. The process retraced by the pianist and the composer broadly involved: 1) the conception of the work by the composer; 2) the writing of the score; 3) the preparation of the work in a collaborative endeavor of the pianist and the composer; 4) the 2 performances of the piece by the pianist; and 5) the exchange of evaluation feedback.

Stages 2) and 3) touch upon the role of notation. In Stages 3), 4), and 5), psychological aspects of the processes involved were considered. By extending and expanding various musical (aural, gestural), and performative (gestural, scenic) parameters, initially through the score and subsequently through their embodiment by the pianist, the work is seen as a threshold through which the pianistic experience is irrevocably transformed, and enhanced.

### Introduction

*Re:Mains for Multi-Pianist* was composed by Christina Athinodorou (b. 1981) between 2013 and 2015 (Christina Athinodorou Music, 2018). It was first performed in a concert dedicated exclusively to works by Athinodorou, as part of the official program of events for the Pafos European Capital of Culture in 2017. A second performance took place in Athens in 2020, in a concert featuring works for three pianos (grand piano, upright, and toy piano) from the 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> centuries, with *Re:Mains* being the center-piece.<sup>1</sup>

### Aims

Following the second performance, the composer and the performer engaged in a written exchange of questions and answers, retracing the process of composing on Athinodorou's part and the learning and appropriation period on the pianist's part, as well as sharing post-performance comments and observations. The most recent outcome of a series of collaborative studies undertaken by Tsioutis and Athinodorou, with *Re:Mains* as a starting point, this paper

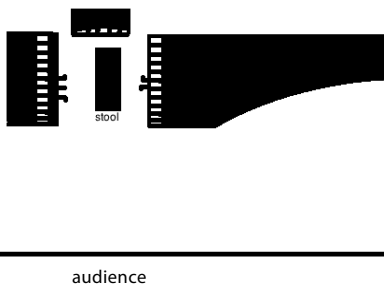
<sup>1</sup> Official website of the concert series: <https://www.onassis.org/whats-on/music-connects-onassis-stegi-and-panteion-university-vol-5>

is presented from the point of view of the performer while considering the composer's input. The focus will be on comparing the 2 live performances and evaluating the performer's overall experience, considering certain psychological parameters that affected on-stage behavior and post-performance perception. The conclusion will evaluate the importance that *Re:Mains* holds for the pianist's general performative outlook, and its status as a landmark work.

## Main Contribution

### The Particularities of *Re:Mains for Multi-Pianist*

*Re:Mains for Multi-Pianist* requires the pianist to be seated in the center of three pianos of different sizes, an upright piano, a toy piano, and a grand piano (Figure 1).



**Figure 1.** The setup for the piece *Re:Mains for Multi-Pianist* by Christina Athinodorou, as found in the music score.

The work comprises 5 movements, and the pianist must turn around, on the stool between movements and between pianos, without getting up and without moving the stool. A powerful element concerning the spatial dimension becomes apparent, and generates two important points for consideration:

- 1) There is essentially a disruption of the customary position of the pianist on stage, a disruption which inevitably has cognitive and psychological effects.
- 2) This disruption or inversion of the customary position of the pianist on stage is initially communicated visually, for the

audience. However, because during the learning period, the performer did not have the possibility to practice in the actual setup required by the work, this realization also took place post-performance, through the visualization of the videos. In both performances, access to the stage and to the actual setup of the three pianos was possible only a few hours before the concert.

### The Spatial Dimension

As a custom in classical music concerts, pianists expose their right side to the audience when seated on stage facing the grand piano. When performing *Re:Mains for Multi-Pianist*, and when turning to play on the upright piano, as required in movements III and IV of the work, the pianist has rotated 180 degrees, thus inverting their position and exposing their left-hand side to the audience. The effects on the performer's aural perception of the sound produced by the instrument, and the spatial awareness of the hall, by this inversion of the position, will not be commented on here. The focus will be on the psychological aspects.

Through many years of long practice of an instrument, musicians develop and acquire specific skills through training, repetition, and habit (Drost et al., 2005). Just as these skills pertain to technical parameters, such as reading notes and instantly translating them into movement, they also relate to spatial parameters, such as the position and posture of the pianist concerning the instrument, sound perception, as well as their physical gestures. These embodied skills and perceptions include the performer's body image itself (Schilder, 1950).

The piano itself can be considered an integral part of the pianist's peripersonal space, whether on stage, while performing, or while practicing (Holmes & Spence, 2004). In the familiar stage setting, this peripersonal space includes the pianist's body, the instrument, and the positioning of the audience on the right-hand side of the pianist. In this familiar setting, the pianist's body image (i.e., the "system of perceptions, attitudes and beliefs pertaining to one's own body") is aligned with their body schema (i.e., the "sys-

tem of sensori-motor capacities that function without awareness or the necessity of perceptual monitoring”, Gallagher, 2005, p. 24).

In movements III and IV of *Re:Mains*, when the pianist turns to face the upright piano, their Body Schema (BS) is reversed and is no longer aligned with their Body Image (BI). Furthermore, while playing through the entire piece, the pianist must find a balance between the movements of the work where the two notions, the BS and the BI, are aligned, and where they are not (Table 1). This may affect the interpretative process and/or its perception by the performer.

**Table 1. *Re:Mains for Multi-Pianist*: Titles of movements and position of Body Schema and Body Image.**

Title of Movement and Instrumentation	BS and BI position
I. <i>mains</i> for grand and toy piano	Aligned
II. <i>reins</i> for grand piano	Aligned
IIb. Or bridge <i>snare</i> for toy piano	-
III. <i>esi</i> for the upright piano	Not aligned
IV. <i>emis</i> for toy and upright piano	Not aligned
V. <i>remains</i> for grand and toy piano	Aligned



**Figure 2. Annini Tsioutis practices *Re:Mains for Multi-Pianist* (movement V, *remains*) by Christina Athinodorou. October 2017, Nicosia, Cyprus. Photo from the private collection of the composer.**

### A Slightly Disrupted Perception of the Performance

During the second performance in Athens, when the piece was over, the performer had the sensation of having left out a large part of the work, something akin to a blank. This was not the case, but apparently, this experience resembles what can be described

As spacing out, which in contrast [to spacing in], is inarticulate, passive, and opaque: attention is simply blurred and scattered. Spacing out is often related to changes undergone in moving away from one feeling space to another. (Welwood, 1977, p. 111)

The ‘feeling space’ is defined as a centered space, “structured around a central point, a sense of *me-here-ness*, around which the whole affective landscape is constructed” (Welwood, 1977, p. 102) In the case of the performer in *Re:Mains*, this affective landscape would be the familiar position in front of the piano, with the right-hand side facing the audience, and would, of course, include the piano. The loss of attention and center is attributed to a resistance to change; the change in question is induced when the performer’s BS and BI are not aligned. This feeling of change is accentuated by the fact that the performer did not have the chance to practice in the required setup of the piece for sufficient time (Figure 2), prior to the two performances in order to become accustomed to the space and its special characteristics.

### An Effort to Fill the Scenic Space

Although it was primarily a musical event, the first performance in Cyprus (Figures 3.1 and 3.2) had an important visual element at its core: the works succeeded one another without interruption and applause, performers were dressed in black and made minimum movements, and a projection of live animation accompanied the concert throughout.



Figure 3.1. Photograph from the first performance of *Re:Mains for Multi-Pianist* (movement III, *esi*) by Christina Athinodorou, with live animation by Charalambos Margaritis. Pafos, Cyprus, November 11, 2017. Photo extracted from the video recording of the concert, HOOK Recording Art Studio (Christina Athinodorou Music, 2018).

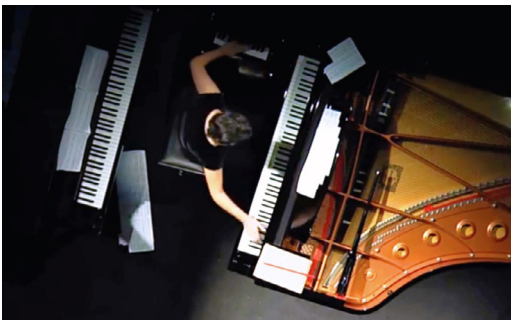


Figure 3.2. Floorplan photograph from the first performance of *Re:Mains for Multi-Pianist* (movement V, *Re:Mains*) by Christina Athinodorou, Pafos, Cyprus, November 11, 2017. Photo extracted from the video recording of the concert, HOOK Recording Art Studio (Christina Athinodorou Music, 2018).

The stage setting for the second performance in Athens, Greece (Figure 4) was completely different: The lights remained on throughout the performance, the piece was not accompanied by animation, and the audience was seated much closer to the stage. These conditions allowed for no intimacy between the performer and the instruments.

A comparison of the two performances by Tsioutis leads to the following observations:

1) The absence of animations and the illuminated stage in Athens was counteracted by a sort of exaggerated focus on the pianist's gestures, which felt like being in slow motion; more time was taken between the movements of the piece



Figure 4. Photograph from the second performance of *Re:Mains for Multi-Pianist* by Christina Athinodorou (Christina Athinodorou Music, 2018). Athens, Greece, Panteio University, Concert series *Mia Gefyra Mousikis pano apo ti Syggrou*, [Music Bridge over Syggrou] Onassis Foundation, February 6, 2020. Photo from the private collection of the composer.

while trying to maintain and to convey the continuity of the work through its 5 episodes, by keeping the performing posture throughout, even while moving and turning on the stool.

2) The performer felt an exaggerated focus on herself, an exterior focus emanating from the audience's attention, but an equally important inwardly generated focus stemming from the fact that they were not situated in a familiar space. In an effort to inhabit the space and make it her own, the performer cluttered the stage with various objects (scores, music stands, water bottles, pencils), as if she was at home practicing (Figure 5), thus appropriating a space which she had been unable to assimilate, to spend time in, since – once again – the setup was only put in place a few hours before the concert. The absence of animation and the exaggerated exposure because of the lights staying on throughout, created a feeling of emptiness. In this light, the cluttering can also be interpreted as an effort to fill the space in some way. The spacing out during the second performance, mentioned earlier, is also due to the significant differences between the scenic spaces of the two performances of the work.





**Figure 5. Floorplan photograph from the second performance of *Re:Mains for Multi-Pianist* (movement IV, *emis*) by Christina Athinodorou. Athens, Greece, Panteio University, Concert series *Mia Gefyra Mousikis pano apo ti Syggrou* [Music Bridge over Syggrou], Onassis Foundation, February 6, 2020. Photo by Yannis Soulis.**

Modifications in spatial parameters appear to influence behavior during the performance, as well as post-performance perception, even in cases of repeated performances of work and following long preparation periods. In addition to the embodied spatial awareness of the ‘feeling space’ and the alignment of BS and BI discussed above, recent studies point to new ways of listening, which also pass through the whole body (Gritten, 2020). The dynamics of these relationships could constitute new paths of exploration in future performances of *Re:Mains for Multi-Pianist*.

### A Vain Search for Repetition

The points discussed above resonate well with Soren Kierkegaard’s concept of repetition (Kierkegaard et al., 1983); the existence of a first performance with strong elements of staging as well as novel parameters in terms of spatial, aural, and gestural configurations, make it a memorable event for the performer, one which takes on the importance of a sort of landmark (Pickering, 2004). This observation, combined with Kierkegaard’s philosophical distinction between re-experiencing something rather than experiencing it again, allows us to consider repetition as a catalyst for change, as well as granting the status of *ur-experience* to the first performance, which can thus never be exactly reproduced (Kierkegaard et al., 1983). This is because, even if the material and technical con-

ditions were identical, the performer is not the same person anymore. Kierkegaard (Kierkegaard et al., 1983) clearly distinguishes repetition as a forward-looking impulse, and recollection as a backward-looking one. The performer has now undergone a process of recollection through the written exchange of questions and answers, and comments with the composer. Their experience of the events has been consolidated by the study and analysis of this enriching and revealing exchange, not to mention by the very process involved in any collaboration, with its necessary adaptations and compromises, as well as illuminations and differences of focus and attention.

Thus, there can be no repetition of the first performance or any first performance of any work. Let’s consider the act of repetition as moving forward on the temporal axis, and that of recollection as moving backward. The whole process described in this paper may be seen as an effort to reconcile the 2 opposite movements by examining the psychological effects and changes with a focus on the performer.

One last concept will be drawn upon to describe these effects and how they are perceived by the performer today, after having undergone this process: the concept of the horizon of experience (*Erfahrungshorizont*). Horizons are useful conceptual tools for denoting the limits of our perception or awareness and have been applied to various disciplines with promising results. The philosopher Hans-Georg Gadamer (2008) has made use of various conceptions of the horizon, but perhaps the most famous application is the one by his student, Hans Robert Jauss: that of the horizon of expectation (*Erwartungshorizont*) of the public, which he conceptualized in the framework of literary reception theory (*Rezeptionsästhetik*; Jauss, 1978). The concept of the horizon of expectation is versatile and can also be applied to audiences other than literary ones, for example, music or theatre audiences, providing useful insights into the reception of certain works and the reasons for their success or failure.

Finally, the concept of the horizon of experience (*Erfahrungshorizont*), again drawing on Gadamer (2008), has been used by the historian Reinhart Koselleck (2004) in his analysis of historical time and has been successfully applied to cultural and museum studies through research focusing on the spectator experience of works of art, and on the interaction between the public, curators, and museum educators (Pickering, 2004).

If we now reconsider the events in chronological order, we may say that *Re:Mains for Multi-Pianist*, as a work, initially exceeded the performer's horizon of expectations. Through her involvement with the work, the learning, and the first performance, Tsioutis expanded her horizon of experience and established the first performance as a landmark event. Subsequent performances of the same work were compared to and measured in relation to the landmark event, and a new involvement with contemporary repertoire for piano requires that it lies within this newly expanded horizon of expectation of performance.

### Conclusion

The performer considers Athinodorou's work *Re:Mains for Multi-Pianist* as a sort of threshold, or according to Reinhart Koselleck (2004), as a landmark, through which their performative practice has been transformed: the augmentation and modification of spatial, gestural, aural and psychological parameters have now expanded their horizon of experience, allowing for a broader consideration of the performative act. The embodied elements now include revisiting the first performance's experience as a primary foundational element that defines the very self (Gallagher, 2005), which may constitute a fertile subject matter for future research. Addressing these novel tools and notions provides the means to acquire an expanded vocabulary in writing for the piano and in solo piano playing, which can be potentially applied to the analysis of other contemporary works. Studies focusing on the performer's

point of view are scarce in the literature. Thus, they offer a precious starting point for considering and discussing the creative process. The composer's participation and validation of the post-performance feedback process fosters the notion that conclusions are authentic and encourages further exploration of the subject in future research-creation studies.

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