The Art of Creating a Piano Fantasy: Montage, Notation, Performance

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Art is a very subjective matter, hence a lot of material discussed in this paper will focus on my personal experience and thoughts.

Abstract

I have created a ten-minute piano fantasy that is a suite of original compositions, and transcriptions and rearrangements of extant piano pieces. My piano fantasy contains media music—pieces from video games, anime, movies, and other types of entertainment and media—as well as elements and segments from the traditional classical repertoire. My goal was to create a piece that shows that media music can be as complex and beautiful as traditional repertoire, and that, because of that, media and traditional music can go hand in hand—making a new whole. I hope to convey what I love so much about pieces that easily go unnoticed in the background of media through my piece. To serve this purpose, I have performed my piece in public at the end of the semester, recorded myself, and uploaded it on the internet.

Keywords: piano fantasy, original composition, transcription, rearrangement, media music, classical repertoire, performance, recording, internet upload

1.0 Introduction

In this part of my paper I elaborate on my purpose, inspiration, and the techniques that I have used for various aspects in my project.

1.1 Purpose—Background

My purpose was to create a piece that combines media music with the classical repertoire to show how alike these two genres are in complexity and harmony, and, because of that, can become a new whole. To demonstrate these qualities, I tried to compose a piece that pushes the limits of the performer’s abilities in technique and genre. I hope that my values—virtuosity, technique, and imagination—made my piece interesting to my audience and effectively conveyed what I love about the music I play.

Media music was my gateway to enjoying classical music to its fullest. Originally, I wasn’t interested in classical music; I found it boring. But I always liked the catchy music from video games. While listening to video game music for several years, I learned more about classical music and eventually realized: “Wait a second, this IS classical music!”
Video game music is classical music. I mean to say that both genres follow the same principles in harmony and melody. Classical music embraces many styles—Baroque, Classical, and Romantic—and established the principles of music theory. Music theory is the basis for composers to write music that (to put it into simple words) sounds nice. It’s only logical that both, the classical repertoire and video game music, are fundamentally the same.

At first glance, video game music can sound very different because it used to be very limited in richness of harmony and in quality of sound, due to technology’s capacities in the past. The technology allowed only a limited amount of voices, making polyphony difficult to achieve. The sound was also produced by a sound chip within the computers that produced the familiar and funky video game sound of the 80s. This kind of music is called 8-bit music.

Since then, the capability of technology within video game consoles has massively improved—and so has the level of the consoles’ music reproduction. Today, video games can be accompanied by orchestral background music. This shows how similar compositions for video games are to the classical repertoire if played on classical instruments. The freedom of having no limitations in regards of the consoles’ output of their compositions also allows composers to show the true beauty and complexity of their pieces.

Video game composers may still decide to change the timbre (quality of sound), add a unique rhythm, or change their music in other various ways. I believe that this aspect of experimentally changing the qualities of music makes the pieces interesting. The pieces can sound like something that has never been heard before, even though they follow the same principles of music theory. The same is true for music composed for other media. I wish to honor the complexity of compositions devoted to media.

Media pieces easily go unnoticed, due to many other stimulants present—stimulants such as visuals or other complex information that have to processed. To show what I love so much about media music, I performed my piece at school publicly and opened up a YouTube channel for this project to upload my performance with its sheet music—and future arrangements, transcriptions, and compositions.

1.2 Inspiration
I have played the piano for over a decade, and still feel as enthusiastic about it as when I started. The piano has always fascinated me because it can be so much more than a piano. An experienced performer can play a melody, an accompaniment, and even several secondary melodies all at the same time. The pianist’s ability to change the quality of the sound (the timbre), which is determined by the touch of the keys being pressed, allows the piano to imitate different instruments—transforming the piano into an entire orchestra.
I was inspired to do this project by watching youtubers perform their own piano arrangements of pieces from video games, anime, and other media. A selected few youtubers—namely pianoYN, ru00ka/gao, and animenz—use also elements of the classical repertoire in their arrangements; they use entire excerpts as an introduction, ending, or anything in between, and sometimes, combine the classical repertoire with media music. For example, the youtubers may combine the two genres by playing with the right hand an accompaniment borrowed from a classical piece and with the left hand a melody of a media piece. These youtubers do not only try capturing the harmony and melody of an original piece but also make the music truly their own by rearranging it in a unique style; they do crossovers of the two genres.

This use of the classical repertoire intrigues me. Listening to these arrangements makes me realize how similar media music is to the traditional repertoire. It also shows me how complex the pieces in media can be and how they fit perfectly well together with recognized masterpieces. These youtubers make me want to play pieces from the classical repertoire in addition to the media music I already played. Looking at their arrangements widens my horizon and inspires me to also combine media music with the classical repertoire—through montage.

1.3 Montage

Montage is a technique that was originally invented by Sergei Eisenstein and Dziga Vertov for filmmaking. Marcus Boon, an English professor at York University in Toronto and the author of “in praise of copying,” breaks montage down into five components: 1. Fragmentation; 2. Tactile Exploration of Material; 3. Juxtaposition; 4. Selection of Fragments or Fragment Combinations; and 5. Naming and Framing (Boon, 2010).

I used montage to write my piano fantasy. To do so, I translated its five components into the following: Fragmentation was the process of splitting up the pieces I wanted to use in my piano fantasy into smaller fragments. The second step, Tactile Exploration of Material, was randomly moving around the fragments I’ve created. Tactile Exploration of Material quickly led to the third step, Juxtaposition. Juxtaposition was figuring out which fragments contrast and fit well. The fourth step was the Selection of Fragment and Fragment Combinations, the process of sorting out the fragments that didn’t fit the big picture. Not all the fragments were used for the project—only the most relevant and interesting ones to me. The fifth, and last, step, Naming and Framing, was making the collage of selected fragments a new whole by putting the fragments into a specific order, composing transitions between fragments, rearranging the fragments, adding original compositions, and naming the newly created piece. The last step was making the new piece my own.
1.4 Validation

To create my piano fantasy, I used the same technique as many recognized composers did in the past—notably Bach, Liszt, and Vivaldi. They used and reused pieces from themselves and each other. For example, Bach has transcribed Vivaldi’s Concerto in E for four pianos to create his four piano concerto and Liszt transcribed a set of variations on the passacaglia theme from Bach’s Cantata no.12 (Grove, 2001).

Some people may argue that my piano fantasy is still some kind of copy and can’t be called truly my own because the concept of intellectual property wasn’t invented at the time when Bach and Liszt composed music—but it has been now. To find a response to this argument, I reference some philosophies of creating art.

Plato, one of the greatest philosophers of all time, conveyed that art is an imitation of an imitation of a form (Plato, 380 B.C.). Plato believed that art is always a copy from reality or the past. A creation will always be some kind of copy because a person gets inspired by the environment and surrounding; so, art will always be some kind of copy, regardless of how similar or different it is to the original (Plato, 380 B.C.). Interestingly, Plato also conveyed that a copy can surpass the original, which contradicts his first statement (Plato, 360 BC); if everything already exists, the purest form of everything already exists as well, making a copy surpass the original impossible.

Boon (the author of “in praise of copying” who broke down montage into its five components) expresses that Chinese art history textbooks mention Tao, a philosophy used in painting that states that copying is one of the six fundamental principles to create new art (Boon, 2010). Boon supports Tao because he believes that even though students are always told not to copy, it is essential for progression.

In conclusion, there are different philosophical ideas about copying. Having the right to call my piano fantasy truly my own or not is a matter of one’s belief system. I believe, after considering the different philosophical approaches to creating art, that I can call my piano fantasy truly my own because I combine extant pieces in a way that has not been done before.

2.0 Philosophy

In this part of my paper, I discuss the importance of music in my life and why I chose the values that I have used for my piano fantasy.

2.1 Balance and flow

Music allows me to balance my life. While pursuing a science degree, it is easy to pull aside feelings that don’t relate to school or work. But music is an essential part of my being human; it allows me to experience a sense of harmony and peace during stressful times, and it allows me to experience flow.
Flow is an ecstatic state in which one separates from the routines of everyday life (Csikszentmihalyi, 1975). This state is achieved by being involved in an activity so demanding that there is no attention left for any other stimuli irrelevant to the task, but easy enough to not get frustrated. Skill and technique have to be acquired in order to experience an effortless performance that becomes technically natural, and allows one to be emotionally fully engaged. “The idea is to be so, so saturated with it that there’s no future or past, it’s just an extended present in which you are...making meaning. And dismantling meaning, and remaking it” (Csikszentmihalyi, 1996).

### 2.2 Technique, Virtuosity, Imagination

One way for me to get into flow is through virtuosity. I usually associate virtuosity with athleticism (the quality strength and agility), although there are many ways to be virtuosic. For me, virtuosity is a tool to express energy via techniques such as arpeggi, big jumps, and secondary melodies. Virtuosity is a big component in my playing because it allows me to have the clear focus I need to get into flow. By combining this focus with the emotional feedback that I experience from listening to the sound of my playing, I can get completely lost in mastering a physical technique—a glorious feeling!

Imagination is also essential in my playing. Imagination is a tool for me to introduce variety. Variety keeps music interesting for me, by letting me continuously explore something new. Since there are only so many options in tones and chord progressions available, a chord progression is likely to be repeated and can become boring. By introducing different ideas—such as adding secondary melodies, changing the rhythm, or reharmonizing the melody—a repetition can sound like something entirely new!

Liszt is a prime example of a pianist who honed technique, virtuosity, and imagination. In his arrangements, he used two signature techniques: freedom of formal structure and monothematicism (Grove, 2001). Freedom of formal structure is the deviation of conventional forms, like the sonata form. Monothematicism is the art of having only one theme present in a piece but varying it (through technique, virtuosity, and imagination) to such a degree that the repetition of the theme becomes unique. Most of Liszt’s works in the Transcendental Studies are monothematic. Liszt subjected his themes to changes in rhythm, meter, tempo, accompaniment, and many more aspects. He exploited all the resources of the piano and made the piano sound like an orchestra. For example, Liszt used a three handed effect in his solo piano etude *Mazeppa*.

Technique, virtuosity, and imagination are the main components in my piano fantasy. Like Liszt, I wanted to achieve an orchestral sound that can convey the beauty and complexity of media music in an impressive way. I took freedom of formal structure to have the opportunity to be experimental with my piece. I wanted to create something that is unique and contains surprises. I believe that surprises grab one’s attention and allows the person to better connect to a piece, which also results in a memorable experience. Overall, I wanted to create...
a piece that conveys as many different emotions as possible within the ten minutes. I wanted to perform music that moves and resonates with my audience—to share what I love so much about media music.

3.0 Piano Fantasy

In the following part of the paper I write about the program of my piano fantasy and elaborate on my process to get to the finished product. I’d like to note at this point that the descriptions in the program and sheet music show how I feel about my piano fantasy, but the interpretation of the piece is free to the performer.

3.1 Program

I called my piano fantasy *Time Travel* because it features 24 pieces from 15 different sources that were composed centuries apart. Also, the name doesn’t indicate a set tone for the piece, which is convenient since many different emotions are conveyed throughout.

My piano fantasy can be subdivided into five parts: *Prologue: An Unexpected Journey; 1st Movement: The Adventure Begins; 2nd Movement: Approaching Danger; 3rd Movement: Overcoming Despair and Frustration; and Epilogue: Celebration into a Quiet Night*. It is an attacca piece, meaning that the five parts of my piano fantasy feel complete by themselves but are fluidly connected to make big whole.

My piano fantasy starts with *Prologue: An Unexpected Journey*. The name previews the themes that are emphasized: surprise, unfamiliarity, and motivation. The first chords of the piece start forte, interchange between dissonance and consonance, and go from high notes to low notes and back up to high notes to establish a sense of surprise. It is, after all, an *unexpected* journey. The chords are followed by fast arpeggi that neither indicate major, nor minor key. The arpeggi establish a mysterious, magical, and unfamiliar feeling because no base tone is sensed; one does not know what to expect next. The arpeggi intensify, foreshadow the piano fantasy’s main theme, and finally meet a base tone. The piano fantasy’s main theme is played. It is a quiet theme that serves as a quick rest from the turbulence before—and that sets the mood for the journey. The theme is subjected to a motivating chord progression. Fast arpeggi return, and, since there is a sense of tonality this time, an exciting feeling is established. Towards the end, unpredictability is reintroduced to finish the prologue with its core themes: surprise, unfamiliarity, and motivation. The left hand starts playing the accompaniment for beginning of *1st movement: The Adventure Begins* but is interrupted by three playful chromatic arpeggi that mark the end of *Prologue: An Unexpected Journey*.

1st Movement

The Adventure Begins continues the motivational arpeggi from the prologue in a more dramatic flair. The epic main theme of this movement is introduced: a simple grand melody. The Adventure begins. A playful back and forth between brilliant melodies, jazzy and rhythmic chords, fast arpeggi, and quiet, as well as dissonant, moments show the different themes of the adventure: epic, fun, hectic, and mystery. None of the themes

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seems dangerous, and a sense of superiority is established. This sense stays until a quick melodic reference
to the prologue is played towards the end—which is followed by a short silence. This symbolizes a flashback to
when the adventure began, before the first serious obstacle has to be overcome. An outburst in chromatism
and dissonance signifies stress, and eventually ends in a variation of the piano fantasy’s main theme. The
main theme floats in insecure chords. The sense of superiority is completely vanished. A high-pitched trill
foreshadows the dramatic events coming in the second movement. The main theme ends in major. For now,
rest is assured.

2nd Movement
Approaching Danger starts with a peaceful melody: a break from the epic adventure in the first movement. The
peaceful music transitions into an upbeat melody, which establishes as sense of developing happiness. This
feeling, however, doesn’t last long. Subtle dissonance disturbs the cheerful mood and quickly intensifies,
turning the cheerful melody into a complete mess of sounds. The trill at the end of the first movement
reappears. The piano fantasy’s main theme is played as if it quickly passes by the memories—before the
complete turnover of events is fully perceived. A strong gloomy base note is played and repeated in an
unpredictable rhythm; danger approaches slowly but surely. A dissonant note progression, emphasizing a
stinging high note, proceeds; danger is expected, but the kind of danger is unknown. Tension rises and
eventually leads into the dramatic main theme in the base that is accompanied by hectic arpeggio—a sinister
storm. The theme dramatizes until it reaches a bipolar point—a back and forth, a conversation, between playful
and serious melodies—that leads into an absolutely romantic variation of the movement’s main theme. The
pinnacle of pain and sadness is reached. More dissonance builds up until a devastating end statement
embodies the climax of this movement. An echo of the theme follows; the danger is leaving. Silence arrives.
Sadness and frustration develop. The second movement ends.

3rd Movement
Overcoming Despair and Frustration starts with a quiet, sad theme. What has been lost in the second
movement is mourned after. The sadness transforms into an outburst of anger. Two-hand arpeggio are
aggressively played until a majestic melody enters. A sense of helplessness is felt. Such a fate cannot be
accepted and is anxiously fought with determination. Big, fast jumps, with quick arpeggi in between, are played
until a quick silence is reached; a short moment of realization that the fight was in vain. The climax is reached.
A heart-breaking melody is accompanied by dramatic jumps; A feeling of despair and frustration is felt until a
stinging pain gives the rest. An agonizing melody follows. And just when all hope seems to be lost, a light is
seen at the end.
Epilogue

Celebration into a Quiet Night is the last part of my piano fantasy. The jazzy and bluesy music celebrates the obstacles that eventually have been overcome in this unexpected journey. It celebrates deep into the night until finally, some rest is found. The main theme of the piano fantasy is played one last time. It is played continuously without finding an end. It is an open-ended journey that may continue at a later time.

3.2 Process

I started my piano fantasy by listening to countless pieces, picking the ones I really liked, and splitting them up into fragments that I eventually wanted to use for my piano fantasy. Because I didn't know at the beginning how my entire piano fantasy should sound like, I could only finalize the selection of the fragment once the majority of my piano fantasy was written. The selection was an ongoing process—a process in which I also had to replace and discard fragments that I at first thought would fit but didn’t in the end. This was a surprisingly time-consuming process that I've spent approximately 30 hours on.

After the selection of the fragments, I had to write the music down onto sheet music. Sometimes, I could copy extant sheet music—such as when I used the classical repertoire. At other times, I did transpositions of extant sheet music, and rearrangements of my fragments. In some cases, I did transcriptions and arrangements of pieces myself. Doing transcriptions means that I had no sheet music to rely on. I listened to the music that I wanted to use and figured out the key, rhythm, harmony, and melody myself—a very time-consuming process. Since I also rearranged a lot in my piano fantasy, I wasn’t done after writing the sheet music once; it was an ongoing process in which I had to rewrite the sheet music over and over again. I also had to discard some sheet music that I’ve written because I realized at a later point that some fragments didn’t fit the bigger picture (which is analogous to what happened during the selection process). To describe my music, I used German expressions when I couldn't precisely articulate my emotions in Italian or English—this, I believe, made my piece more personal and allowed me to better connect to it. In total, I spent approximately 70 hours on the notation.

The last part of my project was practicing the piano fantasy. Like with the selection of the fragments and the writing of the sheet music, practicing was an ongoing process that I started once I selected my first fragment. I’ve learned in my project to highlight the most important components of the music I play—may it be through emphasizing the highest note of a chord, balancing the volumes between my left and right hand, or taking back the volume of arpeggi or any accompaniment in general. My piano fantasy is an incredibly difficult piece to play that I still have to master. I dare to even say that not any pianist is able to play my piano fantasy; so many different techniques and genres are featured. In total, I spent approximately 150 hours practicing my piano fantasy.
Even though I've spent 250 hours my piano fantasy in total, I call my piano fantasy an open-ended piece. What I call finished today, I may call the foundation for a new project tomorrow.

4.0 Conclusion

I'm happy with how my piano fantasy turned out. My performance went very well. Of course, my playing could have been better, but it always can. Considering the difficulty of my piece, the limited time I had to prepare my performance, and the absence of a warm up right before performing my piece, my playing was more than good enough for me. For my piano fantasy itself, I believe, I did impressive work and could achieve exactly what I wanted—a piece that moves my audience. The length of my piece is the only component that didn't work out as planned; my piano fantasy is 13.5 minutes long instead of the ten minutes I was aiming for. My goals were high; it was difficult to include all the different emotions within ten minutes. Sometimes, I was also a bit stubborn and couldn't let go of fragments that weren't necessary for the overall piece per se, but I truly loved—which also contributed to the elongated duration of my piece. Overall, I would not want to change my piano fantasy, even if it means to go over the time limit that I set for myself. I put my heart and soul into my piano fantasy, and I love what I have created.

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