

On Piano Destruction

Wajid Yaseen

When it comes to musical instruments being destroyed in the name of creative expression, the piano seems to hold a special place. Annea Lockwood, Nam June Paik, Raphael Ortiz, Karl-Erik Welin, Francois-Rene Duchable, Joseph Beuys, to name but a few have all proceeded to burn, drown, suspend, hammer or degrade pianos. What is it about this particular instrument that attracts such violence towards it? In this essay, I aim to look at some of the varied reasons behind piano destruction, some of the key names and figures involved, and to investigate opinions from contemporary artists whose working practises include piano destruction pieces comparing them to those who hold the belief that no piano should be destroyed under any circumstance. Research has been gathered from personal experience, discussions with classical pianists, and with performance artists who choose to use the piano as the primary symbol of their destructive expression.

1 – Iconography of the Piano: Symbolism of the Piano and its Stature

The piano was one of the major status symbols amongst the growing middle classes in the 19th century throughout Europe where it served a prominent role in homes. Its success as the most popular instrument in these homes was due to a its simple versatility. It could be played solo or duet, as an accompaniment to the voice or other instruments and it became a fashionable object within a short space of time. Another reason for its popularity according to Arthur Loesser in his extensive writing on the social history of the piano in his book titled *Men, Women and Pianos* (1954) was due to the role of women within middle class aspirational society. To quote from the chapter titled 'The Claviers are Feminine', Loesser states:

Who played these middle-class keyboards? Women mostly [...] They were the ones who had the most time and the most opportunity. The instrument was a house furnishing [...] Their leisure also allowed the most imaginative among them plenty of encouragement for the tender introspection for the emotional auto-intoxication of which home singing and clavier playing were convenient expressions'

[Loesser 1990:64]

An expected knowledge of reading, writing and religion, now included music, drawing and dancing. As material and cultural ambitions grew, the piano came to embody the positive ideals of personal productivity, family solidarity, feminine domesticity and moral progress. Its popularity grew and unsurprisingly so did the

backlash to this new musical democracy. As the historian Jacques Barzun put it in the preface of Loesser's book 'the piano has become an institution even more characteristic than the bath-tub'. Walter Benjamin referred to the piano as 'a piece of furniture that functions in the petit-bourgeois interior as the true dynamic of all the dominant miseries and catastrophes of the household' [Benjamin 1986:28]

At the turn of the 20th century, the piano faced threats from other sources of entertainment such as the movies and the phonograph by which time its domestic role had altered. Many owners could now not play them and as a result, a mechanical device called a Piano-Player was invented which sat in front of normal pianos and played them by means of a series of felt-covered fingers. Within a few years, the mechanism of these 'push-ups', as they became known, was directly built in to normal pianos. These modified pianos were generically known as Player-Pianos [Grew: 1925] although shrewd marketing tactics by one particular manufacturer, the Aeolian Company, gave them the title of the Pianola by which they came to be known by the general public. Player-Pianos were foot-operated and controlled by means of suction power with a perforated music roll controlling the pitch. There were no changes of tempo or phrasing and only volume could be controlled by a small lever hence the development of Reproducing Pianos a few years later which were able to reproduce pedalling and dynamics. In effect, complete pieces of music could be reproduced and as a result nearly every major pianist of the early 20th century made rolls for these pianos. Each of these aspects of cultural transformation represented, over time, both a threat and a stimulus to the regular piano-making industry [1]. Due to these cultural and economical shifts in society, the piano's stature as an eminent symbol of aspiration had shifted.

2 – Extending the Instrument: the Distinction Between Piano Modification and Destruction

There is a distinction to be made between piano modifications, as developed by John Cage (1912-1992) with his well-known prepared pianos and outright piano destruction. Work on prepared or extended pianos was and is concerned with exploring the piano's functionality and to broaden its sonic potential using unorthodox methods. Although Cage popularised the prepared piano and inspired many composers to modify the instrument, its forerunner, the harpsichord, was altered with reed stops; these lowered strips of paper onto the strings as early as the 17th century. By the mid 18th century, muting mechanisms and stop registers had become standard devices on pianos. Around the turn of the 19th century, pianos were altered to include a pedal that would cause a bell to ring or a hammer to strike the soundboard in imitation of a bass drum, sometimes known

as a “Turkish stop” (also known as the “military” or “Janissary” stop). Erik Satie’s performance of *Piège de Meduse* in 1913 included placing sheets of paper on the piano strings to imitate the sound of the puppets that featured in the play. Satie, who was dismissed as a “negligible eccentric” [Tommasini 1997:81] was to have an influence on Cage, who was probably introduced to Satie’s music by the composer Virgil Thomson. We can see signs of Cage’s interest with his arrangement of Satie’s *Socrate* for Merce Cunningham’s ballet *Idyllic Song* in 1945 followed by Cage’s performance of *Piège de Meduse* in 1948 where he organised a concert festival of Satie’s music [Revill 1992:94].

In the 1920’s an instrument called the *Luthéal* [2] was invented where objects were lowered just above certain strings to produce dulcimer-like sounds although the instrument itself became obsolete within a few years due to the fragile nature of the mechanics. Another example of performances that included piano modifications was a piece by the French composer Maurice Delage (1879–1961) titled *Ragamalika* (1912–22) that incorporated a section of cardboard placed on strings to emulate the sound of an Indian drum. Henry Cowell’s ‘*Aeolian Harp*’ written in 1923, which he dubbed ‘string piano’ instructed the pianist to reach inside the instrument and manipulate the strings directly with the hands. This ‘interior work’ incorporated techniques such as plucking the strings with fingernails, scraping objects along strings, strumming or brushing the strings and incorporated utilising the body of the instrument itself. Piano modifications were intended to expand the possibility and the tonal range of the instrument and Cage claimed it was possible to “place in the hands of a single pianist the equivalent of an entire percussion orchestra ... With just one musician, you can really do an unlimited number of things on the inside of the piano if you have at your disposal an ‘exploded’ keyboard.” [Cage & Charles 1981:38]. [3]

The intention of modifying a piano, although still viewed as a method of brutalisation by some traditionalists, is markedly different from the intention of destroying a piano completely and it will be helpful to mark the point of differing intent. Before we can explore reasons for destroying the instrument outright, it is important to mention the intermediary standpoint of “ruined pianos”. W.A.R.P.S (World Association for Ruined Piano Studies) [4] is a group formed in 1991 by Ross Bolleter and Stephen Scott (professor of music at Colorado University, Australia) and according to them, has been created with the intention of “giving old pianos a good home, which can certainly mean adequate sunshine and rain” [5]. Their interest lies in pianos that have been abandoned to face natural weather conditions with their gradual deterioration resulting in few of the notes resembling a conventional piano. The piano’s frame and bodywork is for the most part kept intact but the soundboard is prised open subjecting it to “the blue sky”

so that it can be played in the ordinary way. In answer to my questions made directly to Bolleter regarding reasons for ruined piano research, he replied:

Amazing sonorities, expressive power, permeability to the sound environments in which the ruined pianos find themselves – indeed intimacy with birdsong, wind, trucks starting up, sheep station owners complaining about the drought – constitute good reasons for me improvising on ruined pianos, and recording them. [6]

There is also an underlying political dimension to their work, to quote Bolleter again:

The piano, that arch symbol of European musical culture (and cultural imperialism) in its present location and condition as the Ruined Piano functions is a dead end sign for the Northern Hemisphere traditions and styles that we have so gratefully and eagerly adopted in Australia [...] all this is reduced to a debris of rotten wood and rusted wire. Re-entering the soil it is absorbed into the voices of the crickets and birds. [7]

There seems to be a sensitivity to their work similar to that of Annea Lockwood (b.1939) who also incorporated an ‘acoustic ecological’ approach integrating gradual deterioration as part of her work. Her Piano Transplant performances (1969-1972), in homage to Christian Barnard’s pioneering heart transplants, incorporated old, defunct pianos that were variously burned, drowned and partially buried. At a conference titled ‘Historicism? Sound, Music and Ruined Pianos’ in Australia in 2005, Lockwood stated: “It was not destruction which fascinated me. I am interested in something less predictable, arising from the gradual action of natural forces [...] on an instrument designed for maximum control.” [8]

One could propose a ruined piano is a piano ‘prepared by nature’ and parallels to the Vanitas art movements in Holland of the 16th and 17th century can be made here where notions of decay were integral to the work. Symbols such as smoke, watches, hourglasses and rotting fruit represented the brevity of death and musical instruments symbolised the ephemeral nature of life. [9]

3 – the Poetry of Destruction: Curiosity and Emotional Resonance

There are wide and varied methods of piano destruction and equally wide and varied reasons for doing so and these piano destruction pieces are by no means restricted solely to those in the field of music or sound. Fine artists have made

extensive use of the piano as part of their work including Raphael Ortiz, Nam June Paik and Joseph Beuys, all with varying intent and purpose. In the 1950's Raphael Ortiz (b.1934) emerged as one of the key figures in the 'Destructivist' movement which attempted to redress the social detachment of post-war avant-garde performance art happenings working in a number of genres including painting, sculpture and installations. He started performing theatrical rituals where he destroyed furniture, musical instruments and various other objects with the concept that through the symbolic destruction of objects, one could shift destruction from society to art – one could transform the object, the artist and society as a whole. At the core of his thinking was the idea that destruction itself did not become art but that it transformed into a process that released both the man-made object and the human subject from the constraints of societal norms. Ortiz frequently incorporated pianos as part of his performances and is rumoured to have destroyed around 80 in performances throughout Europe and the US. The psychologist and psychotherapist Dr Arthur Janov, the creator of a method of therapy called Primal Therapy, was inspired by Ortiz's performances at DIAS and dedicated his first book titled Primal Scream [1970, Putnam, NY] to him. [\[10\]](#)

In 1988 Ortiz was honored with a retrospective exhibition at the El Museo del Barrio museum in New York, titled "Years of the Warrior, Years of the Psyche, 1960-1988". During the exhibition, he performed a dual piano destruction piece titled Homage: Duet to Huelsenbeck in reference to Richard Huelsenbeck, one of the main protagonists of the Dadaist movement in Berlin. The performance called for active audience participation in the destruction of the second piano and the homage performance underscored the mutual admiration that Huelsenbeck and Ortiz had for one another's work.

Acknowledging a debt to both Ortiz and Huelsenbeck, contemporary artists Gary Nickard and Reinhard Reitzenstein recently performed a destructivist performance piece in April 2007 titled Monsters in New York, billed as "a duet of ritualized violence and stifled catharsis emerging from the dying shrieks of two sacrificial pianos, set against a starkly jagged swirl of throbbing guitar feedback and pulsing percussion" [\[11\]](#)

Ortiz's various activities and manifesto's coalesced in the 'Destruction in Art Symposium' in London in 1966. The group, led by Gustav Metzger (b.1926), included a diverse group of artists, poets and scientists such as Hermann Nitsch, Wolf Vostell, Yoko Ono, Gunter Brus, John Latham, Al Hanson, and Barbara Steveni and explored elements of destruction in Happenings. Metzger was the leading component of the Auto-Destructive Art movement and his first manifesto written in 1959 stated:

- [] Auto-destructive art is primarily a form of public art for industrial societies.
- [] Self-destructive painting, sculpture and construction is a total unity of idea, site, form, colour, method, and timing of the disintegrative process.
- [] Auto-destructive art can be created with natural forces, traditional art techniques and technological techniques.
- [] The amplified sound of the auto-destructive process can be an element of the total conception.
- [] The artist may collaborate with scientists, engineers.
- [] Self-destructive art can be machine produced and factory assembled.
- [] Auto-destructive paintings, sculptures and constructions have a lifetime varying from a few moments to twenty years. When the disintegrative process is complete the work is to be removed from the site and scrapped. [\[12\]](#)

Ardengo Soffici (1879-1964), one of the principle theoreticians of the Italian Futurist movement, suggested the arts were breaking with conventional forms in order to draw closer to the fluidity of life and proclaimed “Art’s final masterpiece will be its own destruction” [\[13\]](#). It can be suggested that the auto-destructive art of Gustav Metzger was one step closer to realising this concept. The Surrealist dictum about “all beauty being convulsive” is a heritage from the Futurists’ conviction that art can be born out of violence and destruction [\[14\]](#). Kristine Stiles, Professor of Art History at Duke University, US, described the destruction art movement as follows:

Destruction art bears witness to the tenuous conditionality of survival; it is the visual discourse of the survivor. It is the only attempt in the visual arts to grapple seriously with the technology and psychodynamics of actual and virtual extinction, one of the few cultural practices to redress the general absence of discussion about destruction in society. [\[15\]](#) In exploring pieces that specifically included pianos, we can refer to a number of fine-artists as well as musicians and composers. Nam June Paik (1932-2006), known for his work with video installations also incorporated a piano in his piece Klavier Integral (1958-1963) where an upright piano was prepared with various everyday objects [\[16\]](#) and altered to the point where it’s sounds were distorted beyond any point of recognition of belonging. His involvement with Fluxus, the group loosely organised by George Maciunas, brought him into contact with experimental composers and musicians such as John Cage, La Monte Young and the cellist Charlotte Moorman. The charismatic and controversial Joseph Beuys, renowned for his ritualistic approach to live happenings, also incorporated a piano in his piece from 1969 titled Revolutionsklavier. During the 1960’s he formulated concepts concerning the social, cultural and political function of art. He was motivated by the conviction in the power of universal human creativity and was

confident in the potential for art to bring about revolutionary changes within society as a whole. His most famous phrase, 'Everyone is an artist' was written in 1973 where he stated:

Only on condition of a radical widening of definitions will it be possible for art and activities related to art [to] provide evidence that art is now the only evolutionary-revolutionary power. Only art is capable of dismantling the repressive effects of a senile social system that continues to totter along the deathline: to dismantle in order to build 'a social organism as a work of art'...every human being is an artist who – from his state of freedom – the position of freedom that he experiences at first-hand – learns to determine the other positions of the total art work of the future social order.[\[17\]](#)

As for musicians involved in piano destruction pieces, Karl-Erik Welin (1934 – 1992) was a Swedish composer, pianist and organist who seemed to have a love-hate relationship with the piano and appeared to be drawn to music that allowed for his flair for drama. His chamber piece titled *Esservecchia* written in 1963 required a pianist to deliver several strong fist blows to the piano's keys and strings. In 1964 whilst performing a piece by Theodore Liber titled *Rendez-vous* 1963, he threw himself into destroying the piano using a chainsaw with such fervour, he injured himself and had to be taken to hospital. Rumours were abound that he almost cut off his legs although eye witnesses have described how his inexperience at handling a chainsaw caused the tool to bounce haphazardly across the keys. He actually did cut his leg but it was fixed with three stitches. In 1965 he presented his own piece *Essai du Pianiste* in which a grand piano was given an elaborate funeral. The French classical pianist Francois-Rene Duchable (b.1952) notably quit the music industry after winning France's soloist of the year three times in a row in protest at its elitism. In July 2003 he planned to launch his piano into Lake Mercantour in the French Alps as part of his first farewell concert. The second farewell concert was to include burning his recital suit and the third to include blowing up his piano mid-air to demonstrate "the concert is dead. Long live music"[\[18\]](#). To quote Duchable : 'I have had enough of participating in a musical system, which in France at least, functions badly and limits classical music to an elite. The piano is a symbol of a certain domineering bourgeois and industrial society that has to be destroyed. Used as this society uses it, the piano is an arrogant instrument which excludes all those that don't know about music," [\[19\]](#)

4 – Repercussions and the Backlash: Classical Aversion

From evidence gathered in contact with classical pianists in person and via internet based communities, it is clear that most classical musicians are repulsed or at least disturbed by the idea of destroying a piano especially one in a playable

condition. One of the key issues is how the piano ties in with notions of high culture and how it is still regarded as a symbol of western musical culture. One could suggest by destroying a piano, one is opposing aesthetic dictates of elitist European bourgeois music culture with its celebration of some musics and its deprecation of others. Destroying one therefore instills a very powerful resonance and has a multitude of meaning not just with musicians but with the public at large. It is not uncommon for musicians to consider their instruments as being an extension of their bodies and to view their instruments 'prosthethically'. Through constant practice and playing, the union between player and instrument becomes physical as well as emotional and the instrument becomes a partner in an intimate act of expression. Even the piano, as large as it is, is seen or experienced in this way by musicians and therefore can be seen as a body in its own right. With this in mind, one can imply destroying a piano is akin to a personal self-mutilation. Would somebody who is classically trained to play the piano feel more revulsion and distaste in either viewing or being involved in a piano destruction piece compared with somebody who is not? Personal conversations with pianists who have destroyed instruments suggest that it seems highly likely. The level of skill in playing the piano is generally equated to the amount of time spent trying to master it which in turn can be equated to the level of physical connectivity with the instrument – the deeper the bond, the deeper the feelings of self-mutilation. For those pianists that have been involved with destruction pieces, there are varying levels of guilt in the knowledge that they have been responsible for the fall of a body from a grandiose stature to one of complete and irrevocable debasement. It is the actuality of its death made physical. A common response from pianists when questioned on the willful destruction of pianos is that it is a wholly unacceptable act – something sacrilegious. Aside from the loss of enjoyment in playing or hearing one, there are other reasons to oppose the idea of destroying one including the issue of economical value; both in the cost of manufacturing the instrument and the effort involved in making such an intricate and delicate machine, and to the potential in loss of income and revenue for the pianist. There is also the issue of waste. In the current climate of environmental concerns about recycling and wood conservation, it cannot be considered ideal to visibly waste such materials that make up a piano – materials that are unlikely to be redeemed from the wreckage of destroying one. A counter-stance to the idea that the piano represents an elitist musical culture is that actually destroying a piano could be considered a reserve of elitism itself.

A point worth exploring is whether electronic instruments, including computers, generate the same degree of physical connectivity for a player and whether destroying them in the same vein would generate the same level of aversion. In personal discussions with classical musicians, it seems the general consensus is that there would be less distaste in destroying a computer even if it was designed

specifically to make music. Computers are viewed as mass-manufactured, disposable and ultimately 'soulless' machines whereas classical instruments are seen as individual and unique. Even two instruments of the same make and model have noticeable differences to the ears of musicians which may seem trivial to non-instrumentalists. From the perspective of an electronic musician who does indeed have a comparable relationship with a computer or any other electronic hardware, one can start to see similar associations of connectivity or 'prosthesis' and research into human-computer interfaces (HCI) [20] may bring about an even deeper sense of the union between player and instrument never before made possible.

5 – Personal Experience : Anthropomorphic Sentimentality and the Moral Low Ground.

The primal desire to destroy is an unpalatable yet undeniable facet of humanity – something Sigmund Freud defined as the 'death instinct' [21]. In bringing to mind my own personal experience of destroying a piano, I recall distinctly different emotional phases. The piano was an upright and 5 contact mics were placed inside its body with 4 boom mics pointed towards it. A sledgehammer was used to reduce the instrument to tiny pieces over a period of two hours – longer than was expected. The initial sense of ferocity and blind thrill was expected. What was unforeseen though was the deep sense of sadness and remorse that slowly and unexpectedly crept up on me. Images of the hands of all those who had played this particular piano appeared before my eyes and an anthropomorphic sentimentality started to take form in my mind. The piano started to symbolise human physiology – the keys became teeth, the cast iron frame became a spine, the casing a body, and by the end of the exhausting experiment, I literally felt as though I had blood on my hands – as though I had taken life. In conversations with other artists who have also chosen to destroy a piano in such a violent method, I've noticed a similar sense of guilt and profound sense of sadness and even strong regret. During the writing of this essay, I have recently been witness to a destructivist event where a piano was one of a number of objects destroyed and used as a cathartic channel to vent fury. Having previously been involved in destroying pianos first-hand I thought I would be somehow impervious to the act yet I still found it deeply unsettling even though my relationship with the piano isn't profound. As a counter-emotion, it helps to take a concept from Antonin Artaud's book 'Theatre and its Double', a collection of essays written as an attack on theatrical convention written in 1938. The book's most famous piece is 'The Theatre of Cruelty' where he writes:

“Without an element of cruelty at the root of every spectacle, the theater is not

possible. In our present state of degeneration it is through the skin that metaphysics must be made to re-enter our minds” . [\[22\]](#)

Notes

[1] To paraphrase William Hettrick, one of the most notorious incidents of wholesale destruction of musical instruments was the burning of a large number of old square pianos at Atlantic City, New Jersey, on the evening of May 24, 1904. The event was entirely the creation of Harry Edward Freund, the editor of *The Musical Age*, a New York trade journal aimed chiefly at piano dealers and among the many concerns that Freund raised in his weekly periodical, was the claim that dealers were suffering losses by having to give trade-in allowances on their old, outmoded square pianos. His solution to the problem was to stage a public demonstration of the worthlessness of the squares in a way that would generate maximum publicity and his campaign began in *The Musical Age* on November 7, 1903, with his editorial “Burn the Old Squares at the Atlantic City Convention”. Freund made sure that the bonfire ceremony was described in detail, especially the point at which he set his torch to the pile of kerosene-soaked pianos, reported to number one thousand.

[2] Oxford University Press, accessed April 2007, <http://www.groveart.com/>

[3] One could suggest Cage could never quite get away from the intrinsic nature of the piano and its core expression regardless of these modifications With the advent of modern technology including samplers and software that give the ability to transpose virtually any sound across a keyboard however, we have the capacity to

expand on Cage’s description of controlling an entire orchestra and beyond.

[4] WARPS, Stephen Scott and Ross Bolleter <http://www.warpsmusic.com>

[5] WARPS, Stephen Scott and Ross Bolleter <http://www.warpsmusic.com>

[6] from a personal email communication with Ross Bolleter, April, 2007.

[7] from the website <http://www.warpsmusic.com>

[8] Sound Scripts: Proceedings of the Inaugural Totally Huge New Music Festival Conference 2005, vol. 1 (2006) p3

[9] Oxford University Press, accessed May 2007, <http://www.groveart.com/>

[10] Writings in the book were the inspiration for the name of the pop bands ‘Tears for Fears’ and ‘Primal Scream’. An actual therapy session with Janov also inspired John Lennon and Yoko Ono on their Plastic Ono Band albums.

[11] Gary Nickard and Reinhard Reitzenstein performance in April 2007, Hallwalls Arts Centre, New York – http://www.hallwalls.org/perflit_04.html

[12] Metzger manifesto’s – www.luftgangster.de/gmetzger.html

[13] Introduction to Gustav Metzger by Ross Birrell – <http://www.autogena.org/Breathing/Gustav/birrell.html>

[14] John Golding – Reviewed Work(s) : *The Burlington Magazine* > Vol. 111, No.

795 (Jun., 1969), pp. 386-388

[15] Kristine Stiles – “Selected Comments on Destruction Art,” – 1992

[16] Nam June Paik – “Klavier Integral”, 1958-1963 – image :

<http://www.paikstudios.com/gallery/35.html>

[17] Beuys statement (1973) published by Caroline Tisdall: *Art into Society, Society into Art* (ICA, London, 1974)

[18] Francois-Rene Duchable :

[http://www.contactmusic.com/new/xmlfeed.nsf/mndwebpages/french classical pianist quits in style](http://www.contactmusic.com/new/xmlfeed.nsf/mndwebpages/french%20classical%20pianist%20quits%20in%20style)

[19] Duchable – Times online –

www.timesonline.co.uk/tol/news/world/article1147966.ece

[20] Human computer interfacing – <http://sigchi.org/cdg/cdg2.html>

[21] Sigmund Freud – *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* – 1920

[22] Antonin Artaud – “*Le Theatre et son Double*” – 1938

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