

# **At the Intersection of Traditions: The Piano Collection in the Context of 21st-Century Piano Writing**

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## **I. Framing the Question**

The Piano Collection sits at the intersection of several major currents in contemporary piano writing without fully belonging to any of them. It engages with the notational intensity and rhythmic complexity of the New Complexity tradition without adopting that tradition's theoretical premises. It pursues microtonality with the systematic rigor that characterizes the work of spectral and post-spectral composers, but through a theoretical apparatus of its own invention. It achieves the cyclic scope of the most ambitious solo piano projects of recent decades, but organizes that scope around a developmental arc rather than a cultural-historical panorama. And it does something that none of these traditions does: it treats the simultaneous coexistence of independent tempi not as an extreme notational technique but as the primary generative principle of an entire compositional system.

To place the Piano Collection accurately in the contemporary piano landscape, it is necessary to examine these adjacencies carefully. The most instructive comparisons are not with works that sound similar — in surface texture the collection might be mistaken for New Complexity — but with works that share similar ambitions: to theorize a compositional language from first principles, to sustain that language across a major cyclic work, and to make solo piano writing carry the full weight of a composer's mature system.

## **II. Brian Ferneyhough: The Notation Is Not the System**

Any discussion of extreme piano notation in the 21st century begins with Ferneyhough. His solo piano output — from *Lemma-Icon-Epigram* (1981) through *Opus Contra Naturam* (2000) and *Quirl* (2011–13) — represents the most sustained and influential attempt to push notational complexity in the service of a compositional philosophy. The surface features are immediately recognizable: dense tuplet ratios nested within fractional meters, simultaneous extremes of dynamic and articulation, notation dense enough that the ink-to-paper ratio becomes part of the aesthetic experience. These features create the most obvious point of comparison with the Piano Collection.

The comparison is instructive precisely because it reveals a fundamental difference in premises. Ferneyhough's temporal complexity, however extreme, remains within a single tempo stream. The nested tuplets of *Lemma-Icon-Epigram* — a group of eleven in the time of seven at quarter-note equals 50 — are complex, demanding, and productive of unusual acoustic effects. But they

return to a shared pulse. The tuplet is a rational subdivision of the main beat, however remote that subdivision may be. What Ferneyhough is doing with this notation is described in his own theoretical writing as bending the "time arrow" — creating events of such internal complexity that the music's sense of forward motion is disrupted, diverted, made strange. The time vector is bent by contact with the event-object.

What the Piano Collection does is different in kind, not just degree. The polytempic system does not bend a single time arrow; it fires multiple arrows simultaneously from different bows. Tuplet ratios of 13:8 or 15:8 in the Piano Collection are not nested within a single governing pulse and returning to it. They are coexisting with other ratios at other speeds in what the theoretical system calls genuinely independent simultaneous tempi. The notation may look similar to a reader unfamiliar with either score, but the compositional logic is entirely different. Ferneyhough's complexity is the complexity of a single thing made maximally dense. The Piano Collection's complexity is the complexity of multiple things coexisting at incommensurable rates.

A second difference concerns the relationship between notation and composition. For Ferneyhough, the notational density is not a system — it is a philosophical position about the productive relationship between the score's demands and the performer's response. The notation exceeds what can be precisely realized; the gap between the written instruction and the actual performance is where the music lives. Ferneyhough has said explicitly that he would be an electronic composer if he wanted his scores to be a straitjacket, and that the notation is the beginning of a dialogue. The Piano Collection takes the opposite position in its fully specified pieces: the notation is the system. The tuplet ratios are not approximations or provocations; they are the precise articulation of what the compositional framework requires. This is why the aleatoric pieces in the collection — Pieces XX and XXIII — are so surprising, and why their surrender of control reads as a philosophical act rather than a retreat. The hyper-specified pieces have earned the surrender. They know precisely what they are giving away.

The 21st-century Ferneyhough piano works refine rather than transform his mature method. *Opus Contra Naturam* incorporates spoken text, adding a dimension of literary complexity to the notational. *Quirl*, based on fractal rhythms, introduces a generative mathematical principle not unlike Poppe's algorithmic approach. But neither work revises the fundamental premise: a single temporal stream subjected to maximum internal complexity. The Piano Collection and the Ferneyhough piano output are distinguished by the difference between one extremely complex thing and multiple simultaneously coexisting things.

### **III. Michael Finnissy: The Cyclic Ambition and Its Cultural Frame**

The comparison with Michael Finnissy is different in character and more intimate in its implications. *The History of Photography in Sound* (1995–2001) is the closest rival in contemporary piano writing to the Piano Collection's cyclic ambition. At eleven movements, over five and a half hours of continuous piano writing, structured as a gigantic palindrome around the central section "17 Homosexual Poets," the *History* is one of the most sustained acts of compositional courage in solo piano literature. Finnissy described the piece cinematically: rapid cuts from one sonic image or allusion to another, brief glimpses of autobiography and specific memory, a kaleidoscopic music history assembled from subliminally incorporated

quotations of folk music, ethnic sources, African-American spiritual tradition, and fragments of other composers.

The connection to Piece XIX of the Piano Collection, the Quod Libet, is immediate and specific. Both works assemble disparate materials — folk idioms, existing musical traditions, quotations — into a compositional texture that uses these references structurally rather than ornamentally. The quodlibet form has always required exactly this: the coexistence of incompatible materials in a frame that makes the incompatibility itself compositionally productive. Both the History and the Quod Libet use their borrowed materials this way. Bulgarian folk rhythm, waltz, bird song, and polytempic counterpoint in the Piano Collection's Piece XIX produce something similar to what Finnissey achieves with his range of cultural reference: a sense of the musical world as a place of extraordinary density, where traditions that have no reason to coexist suddenly find themselves sharing the same notational moment.

The differences are equally significant. Finnissey's frame for the History is cultural and historical: the title refers to photography as a metaphor for how music records and transforms cultural experience. The work is an autobiography of a composer's cultural consciousness — the music he has absorbed, the people and traditions that have formed him, assembled into a formal structure that is also a kind of memorial. The Piano Collection's frame is theoretical and systemic: it is an autobiography of a compositional system discovering what it is and what it can do. The cultural references in the Quod Libet are deployed within a polytempic polymicrotonal framework that transforms them; in the History, Finnissey's language responds to its references, is changed by them, incorporates them at the cost of its own stability.

Both composers also face the same problem of microtonality and the piano. Finnissey, like the Piano Collection, uses microtonality as part of his compositional vocabulary, and like the collection's Triptych II, he must negotiate the piano's equal-tempered nature. But where the Piano Collection addresses this problem theoretically — through Scala tuning files, synthesizers, and the explicit instruction to use any available instrument — Finnissey uses microtonality more intuitively, as one color among many in his complex harmonic palette rather than as a systematized framework. The Piano Collection's microtonality is theorized first, then applied. Finnissey's arrives through the compositional act.

There is also a structural difference in how the two cycles organize their scope. The History of Photography in Sound is designed to be performed in whole or in part, as a concert or as an installation. Its sections are self-contained. The Piano Collection has a developmental arc — Origins, Triptychs, Capstone, Resolution, Terminus — in which the later pieces cannot be fully understood without the earlier ones. The collection is a cycle in the developmental sense: each piece changes what comes after it. The History is a cycle in the encyclopedic sense: each movement adds to the accumulation without the accumulation itself being the point.

#### **IV. Georg Friedrich Haas: Microtonality Without the Polytempic Axis**

Georg Friedrich Haas is the composer of the 21st century whose commitment to microtonality comes closest to the Piano Collection's in intensity and systematicity. His ensemble work in vain (2000), which a 2017 Classic Voice poll named the greatest work of art music since the millennium, represents the most widely recognized demonstration of what microtonality can do

as a primary compositional language rather than as a color or technique. His piano concerto (2007) and various chamber works extend this language to the keyboard. The Piano Collection and Haas's output share the conviction that the equal-tempered system is a historical convention rather than a natural law, and that composing outside it requires developing an alternative theoretical apparatus.

But Haas has notably resisted the systematization of his microtonal approach. He has said that he is "not really comfortable with being pigeonholed as a 'microtonal composer'" and that he draws freely on different theoretical approaches — harmonic spectra, non-octaving scales derived from Wyschnegradsky, equal temperament in collision with just intonation — without formalizing them into a unified system. His microtonality is guided by what sounds right to him in a given compositional context, not by a theoretical framework that precedes the music and generates it. The Piano Collection's relationship to microtonality is exactly opposite: the polytempic polymicrotonal system is theorized first, described in two treatises before it is fully instantiated in the music, and the collection is in part a demonstration that the theoretical apparatus produces real compositional results.

The other crucial difference is temporal. Haas's music is characterized by gradual microtonal transformation within a single flowing tempo — what one critic described as "spiral forms: sound loops which seem tentatively to seek, touch and feel their way forward but never lead towards any particular goal." His approach to time is phenomenological rather than polytempic: the listener is placed inside a temporal experience that seems to have no fixed coordinates, to be moving simultaneously forward and back. This is a profound conception of musical time, but it is not the polytempic system. Where Haas makes a single temporal stream maximally ambiguous — floating, spiral, without clear direction — the Piano Collection maintains multiple simultaneous temporal streams, each internally coherent, together producing a texture that is dense precisely because it is the product of several coexisting certainties rather than one productive uncertainty.

Haas has explored tempo layering in ensemble contexts — his Cello Concerto overlays tempo streams in the percussion — but not as a primary compositional system, and not in piano writing. The Piano Collection is, in the 21st century's piano literature, the most sustained realization of a microtonally conceived compositional language applied simultaneously to the pitch and temporal dimensions. Haas's work is the only other project that pursues microtonal pitch with comparable seriousness, but the temporal axis is where the two composers' systems diverge entirely.

## V. Enno Poppe: The Algorithmic Neighbor

Enno Poppe represents a third tradition that the Piano Collection intersects without joining. Poppe's compositional method begins from a single motivic cell — a building block — and subjects it to algorithmic processes derived from biological growth models: Lindenmayer systems, plant-growth algorithms, processes of branching and proliferation. His *Thema mit 840 Variationen* for piano (1993) applies one such algorithm to a single-bar motive across 840 variations. His ensemble works (*Stoff, Holz, Prozession*) extend this method to larger forces. The microtonal intervals in Poppe's music are produced through sum-and-difference-tone relationships, what he calls "twisted spectral chords or maybe bashed and dented nature" — intervals that shimmer rather than clash, arrived at through acoustic calculation rather than

historical tuning systems.

The affinity with the Piano Collection is real but limited. Both composers use microtonality and extreme rhythmic complexity as primary rather than supplementary material. Both work at the outer limits of notational specificity. And both are concerned with what might be called the inner logic of their systems — the way a set of generative principles, once established, produces consequences the composer follows rather than invents. But Poppe's generative principles are algorithmic in a technical sense: they are mathematical processes applied to musical parameters. The polytempic polymicrotonal system is theoretical in a different sense — it is a framework that describes how independent temporal and tuning systems can coexist, not an algorithm that generates specific material from a seed. Poppe's music grows from a cell by a rule. The Piano Collection deploys a framework that allows multiple kinds of material to coexist at multiple rates and pitches simultaneously.

There is also a tonal difference in what complexity is for. Poppe's complexity, like Ferneyhough's, is ultimately gestural in its expressive aim: the algorithmic proliferation produces textures of biological energy, of organic growth and decay. The Piano Collection's complexity is philosophical: the coexistence of independent tempi and tuning systems is not just a compositional technique but a claim about how musical time and pitch can be organized. The music argues for the legitimacy of its framework through the act of composition. This makes the two approaches to complexity feel different in motivation, even when they produce superficially similar notation.

## **VI. La Monte Young's Well-Tuned Piano: The Closest Tuning Relative**

The composer whose relationship to the Piano Collection's microtonal dimension is most directly comparable is not a 21st-century figure but La Monte Young, whose *Well-Tuned Piano* (1964, in continuous revision) represents the most rigorous sustained exploration of just intonation as a solo piano language. Young's piano is tuned to a specific 7-limit just intonation derived from the overtone series of an inferred low fundamental — a system that, like the Piano Collection's approach, was theorized before it was fully performed and has been described and explained in considerable theoretical detail. Young famously remarked that once he has worked out a tuning for a new composition, the compositional work is already substantially done: the tuning is the composition's basic material.

The Piano Collection's *Piece XXIII*, "Maximus Part Deux," was initially conceived in 7-limit Fokker tuning — the same harmonic territory as Young's *Well-Tuned Piano* — before being opened to any tuning the performer chooses. This is not coincidental: 7-limit just intonation is the most historically significant and acoustically rich alternative to equal temperament for keyboard instruments, and both Young and the Piano Collection arrive there through theoretical commitment to the harmonic series rather than through spectral analysis or arbitrary deviation from 12-tet. But where Young's approach is monumental and quasi-improvisatory — the *Well-Tuned Piano* performances last up to five hours and exist as extended meditations in a fixed tuning — the Piano Collection uses its tuning systems as structural parameters that change, multiply, and ultimately become the performer's choice. Young inhabits his tuning. The Piano Collection cycles through, combines, and finally releases tuning as a parameter.

## VII. Helmut Lachenmann: The Contrast

The most illuminating contrast to the Piano Collection's approach is offered by Helmut Lachenmann, whose concept of *musique concrète instrumentale* produces piano writing of comparable complexity through entirely different means. In works like *Serynade* (1997–98) and *Air* (1968–69), Lachenmann treats the piano as an acoustic object rather than a pitch-generating instrument: the physical sounds of the mechanism, the felt dampers, the string resonances, the percussive actions of the player become primary material. His extended technique is not in the service of a pitch or tempo system — it is the system itself, a rethinking of what the instrument is and what sounds it can honestly be said to produce.

The Piano Collection takes the opposite approach. It treats the piano as a pitch-generating instrument, however imperfectly, and uses its standard mechanical resources — keys, dampers, pedal — in the service of a theoretical framework about pitch and tempo that originates entirely outside the instrument's physical characteristics. Where Lachenmann's piano writing is generated by the instrument's material reality, the Piano Collection's writing is generated by a theoretical system that the instrument must be made to serve, sometimes inadequately. *Triptych II* of the collection engages directly with this tension: the equal-tempered piano is the philosophical adversary of a microtonal system, and the collection's awareness of this adversarial relationship is part of its compositional content. Lachenmann resolves this by changing what the piano is for. The Piano Collection resolves it by accepting the instrument's limitations as structurally meaningful and inviting the performer to use any instrument that can realize what the score specifies.

## VIII. What the Piano Collection Does That No One Else Does

The comparisons above establish the Piano Collection's neighborhood without pinning down its specific address. The collection uses notational complexity comparable to the New Complexity tradition but with a different theoretical premise. It pursues microtonality with a systematicity that Haas alone rivals, but combines it with a temporal dimension Haas does not pursue. It achieves cyclic scope comparable to Finnissy but organizes it developmentally rather than culturally. It uses algorithmic-like generative principles in its simpler pieces without reducing the entire project to algorithm. And it treats the piano's equal-tempered nature as a philosophical problem — as Lachenmann does — but through extension and invitation rather than radical redefinition.

What the collection does that none of these comparisons does is treat two independent compositional dimensions — pitch and tempo — as equally primary axes of a single theoretical system applied simultaneously. This is not Ferneyhough's nested tuplets within a single stream. It is not Haas's floating microtonal harmony within a single temporal process. It is not Finnissy's cultural quotation or Poppe's algorithmic growth. It is a compositional system in which every moment of the music simultaneously occupies a specific position on a pitch axis that may involve multiple incompatible tuning systems and a temporal axis that may involve multiple independent tempi, and in which the relationship between these axes is theoretically determined rather than intuitively negotiated.

The closest historical precedent is not a 21st-century piano composer but Harry Partch: another

American who built his own theoretical system before writing music, developed his own instrumental resources to realize it, documented the system in treatises that preceded the music's full realization, and spent a career demonstrating that the system was compositionally generative rather than merely interesting as an idea. Partch's system was based entirely on extended just intonation; it had no polytempic dimension. But the relationship between composer and system — the sense that the theory is primary, that the music is the proof of the theory, and that building your own framework outside institutional sanction is both a compositional and an ethical necessity — connects the Piano Collection to Partch more directly than to any of its 21st-century contemporaries.

There is also one structural feature of the Piano Collection that has no clear parallel in any of the works discussed here: the oscillation within a single cycle between maximum compositional control and maximum compositional openness, resolved in the final two pieces as the same gesture. Ferneyhough does not give away control. Finnissy does not surrender the score to the performer. Haas's aleatoric elements are incidental to his main project. Poppe's algorithms are generative constraints, not an invitation to the performer's freedom. The Piano Collection's final pair — Maximus (196 measures of fully specified, maximally complex writing) and Maximus Part Deux (any tempo, any dynamic, any tuning) — present maximum specification and maximum surrender as the same maximum. This is a philosophical position about the composer-performer relationship that none of the contemporary works discussed here articulates with anything like this clarity or symmetry.

## IX. Placement

In the landscape of 21st-century piano writing, the Piano Collection occupies a position that can be described as follows: it is the only major piano cycle of its era that attempts to unify a theorized system of simultaneous independent tempi with a theorized system of polymicrotonal pitch organization, sustain both axes of this system across a 23-piece developmental arc, and conclude by demonstrating that the maximum of the system and the surrender of the system are the same gesture.

The most technically comparable works — Ferneyhough's Lemma and its successors, Finnissy's History, Haas's piano output — are each comparable on one axis. Ferneyhough matches the temporal complexity without the polytempic system. Finnissy matches the cyclic ambition without the theoretical framework. Haas matches the microtonal commitment without the temporal dimension. No work in the 21st-century piano literature combines all three at the scale and with the theoretical rigor that the Piano Collection deploys.

This placement is not merely a claim about rarity or difficulty. It is a description of the compositional problem the collection solves: how to sustain a complex theoretical system across a major work without the system becoming mechanical, without the developmental arc becoming predictable, and without the theoretical ambition crowding out the human occasions that give the music its occasions — time, instrument, self, freedom, everything, surrender, return, maximum. The collection's answer is that a system becomes interesting when it is brought into contact with things larger than itself. Time is larger than tempo. The self is larger than a tuning system. Freedom is larger than any compositional framework. The Piano Collection uses the polytempic polymicrotonal system to discover this, piece by piece, across twenty-three works. That is what

distinguishes it not just technically but philosophically from the contemporary piano literature it inhabits without quite belonging to.