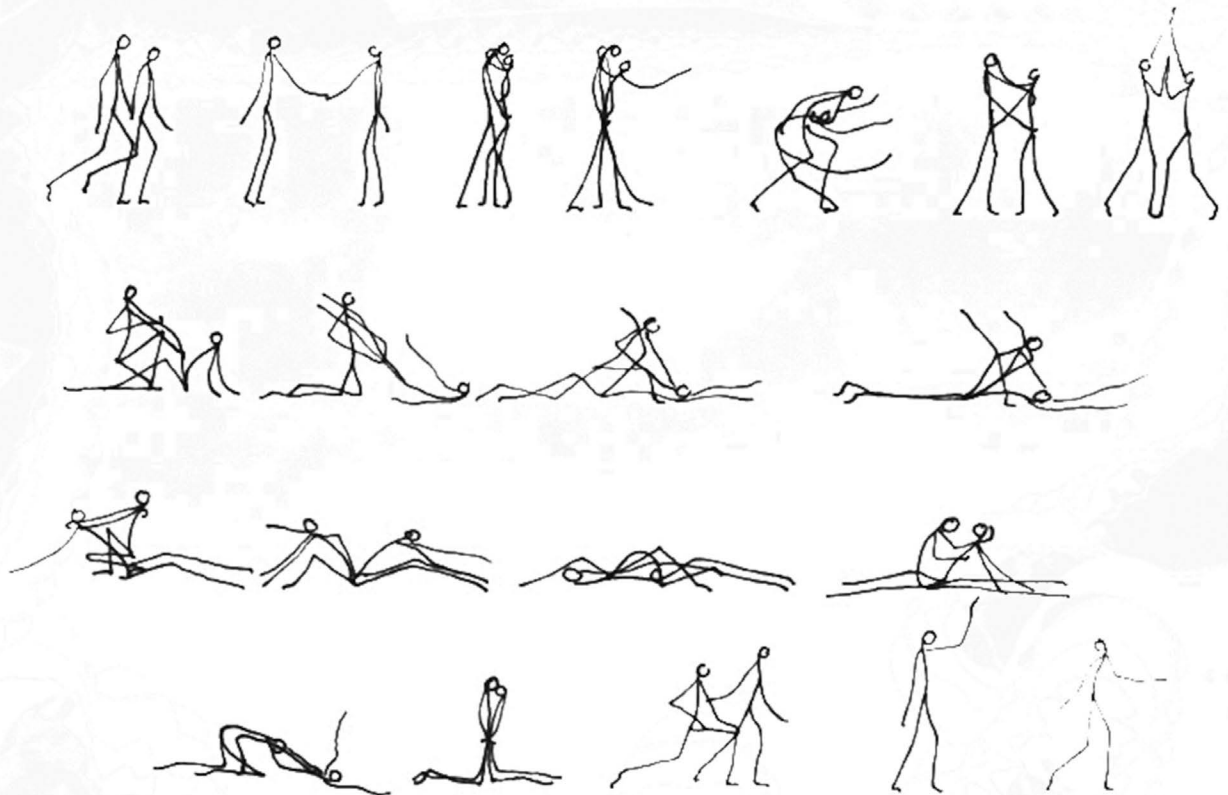


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# Experimental Encounters in Music and Beyond

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Kathleen Coessens (ed.)



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# EXPERIMENTAL ENCOUNTERS IN MUSIC AND BEYOND

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# Roll Over Czerny

Frederik Croene

pianist, composer

## BACKGROUND

*Roll Over Czerny* is an attempt to blend composed music, theoretical text, and improvisation into the artistic outfit of a live performance and consequently an LP (Croene 2010a).<sup>1</sup> These three components are basic elements for the classical pianist. He needs scores to play, background information with which to understand these scores, and a way of playing that makes an audience believe that the pianist is communicating expressions that transcend this score and the background information. One of the underlying ideas of this project is the belief that the instrument itself constrains the communication between pianist and audience. In a previous article on the concept of “Le Piano Démécanisé” (Croene 2010b), the gesture of removing all the mechanical components of a piano was discussed. “Le Piano Démécanisé” told the story of the dismantled piano, discovered as an *objet trouvé*. It demonstrated the hidden goldmine of sound possibilities waiting inside the piano. Only courage was necessary to disengage the piano carcass from the dictatorship of sophisticated mechanics. This article itself became an important aspect of that project as it was used as the liner notes of an album for which the sleeve design made the text literally wrap the music with meaning.

## PIANO SPORTS

As the deconstruction of the instrument was the subject of the previous project, *Roll Over Czerny* had the ambition to uncover hidden aspects of virtuoso training. Uncountable hours are spent doing sports-like exercises to knead the body so it can perform with dazzling velocity. Without this preparatory work, it is probably impossible to perform virtuoso masterpieces. However, the numerous scales, broken chords, and finger dexterity exercises are never put into the spotlight.

Composer Carl Czerny became infamous for a remarkable artistic act: he introduced a mechanised form of composition that multiplied technical difficulties in order to train the fingers to master the compositions. These études stayed in a typical early nineteenth-century aesthetic because they were constructed with short fragments of difficult piano music of that time. More interesting were some entirely new compositional principles, such as *this is an etude for the left hand, the right hand is only an accompaniment here* or *this is an etude for parallel motion of both hands, nothing else will happen*. As composers such as Liszt

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<sup>1</sup> See also my YouTube channel, <https://www.youtube.com/user/frederikcroene>.

and Chopin immersed themselves in these études they unconsciously smuggled these proto-modernistic principles into their romantic pieces. When they came up with their own études, it was clear they wanted to transcend the formulaic forms of Czerny; it was almost as if they needed Czerny's expressionless structures to go further and set the standards for the iconic nineteenth-century virtuoso phenomenon.

The LP *Le Piano Démécanisé* (Croene 2010a) demonstrated the possibilities of playing on a piano frame; thus, the music sounds improvisatory, focused on resonance and the primitive sounds of scraping, hitting, knocking, and grinding on the strings and the wooden soundboard itself. It was an escape from academia, a rediscovery of the piano as a sound source, uninterested in preconceived ideas or traditions, which allowed the musician's identity as a sound explorer to be rediscovered. Very consciously, the pianist could sabotage his virtuosic skills and all knowledge he received at the conservatory.

#### CLOSING THE CIRCLE

This sabotage, however, only makes sense if the circle is closed again and the pianist confronts his traditionalist piano background with the newfound territory of *Le Piano Démécanisé*. Considering that playing on a piano frame with the piano keys in the hands is quite an extreme way of playing the piano, the antagonist in this story should be remote from the artistic centre of piano music standards. Thus, the unmusical structures of Czerny's études came to the fore to keep the balance. *Le Piano Démécanisé* can be considered as a metaphor for the passion a pianist builds up for the instrument and the love for sounds generated by hammer-struck strings, just as Czerny's études can symbolise all the hours one has to spend before mastering the classic instrument, before becoming an artisan who can truly perform the repertoire. The encounter between the love one has for working one's body towards technical mastery and the love for new sounds promised in theory to generate sublime music.

#### HOW TO

Six consecutive études from Czerny's *Schule der Geläufigkeit* were chosen and practised thoroughly. It became clear that the metronome markings were almost impossibly fast. The fun one gets in return for the effort is entirely sportive: the pleasure of being able to play the runs as fast as possible is rewarding but there is no story to tell with this music. Meanwhile the pianist needs to research six different playing techniques on the piano frame. As some of these techniques demand severe muscle tension in the forearms, the pianist needs to work hard on achieving an extremely relaxed dexterity. To switch between piano frame and piano is literally to be confronted with the struggle between form and content. The latter is provided by the frame and the limits of the pianist's imagination. Czerny's neutral forms and structures create a zone in which virtuosity grows without being distracted by having to express musical meaning. Two basic pleasures of being a musician—the sportive and the experi-

mental—are thus extracted and individually cultivated only to be put together again by means of new technologies.

#### FIRST PERFORMANCE

The scenario of the first performance (for which an assistant<sup>2</sup> at the computer was necessary) could be sketched out as follows:

1. Play the first étude on the piano; the computer records.
2. The pianist switches to the piano frame and improvises a long intro (bouncing on the frame and using muted-string technique).
3. On a cue, the assistant plays the recording through the speakers; the pianist cues in and plays his prepared soundtrack on top of the Czerny étude, ending perfectly together.
4. The pianist switches to the piano again, playing the second étude; the computer records.
5. Switch to the piano frame again with a very short improvisation (hard glissando technique); the assistant plays the recording of the second étude.
6. When the étude (the shortest of the pack) is finished, a long improvisation on the piano frame follows.
7. Third étude on the piano; the computer records.
8. Switch to piano frame; now software is put in-between the piano frame and the recording of this third étude. The Czerny is only heard when a certain volume level is reached on the piano frame. In this way the piano notes are in almost direct control at the piano frame. When played at high volume the recording will sound distorted and resemble the sound of the piano frame. The pianist can play freely, whether going along with the étude or interrupting it *ad libitum*. Technique: bouncing on the strings, *sur place*.
9. Switch to the piano again to play the fourth étude; the computer records.
10. To the frame again, starting as precisely as possible with the recording, playing a prepared soundtrack on top of the recording; when the recording is finished, a long, intensive improvisation (five-keys technique) follows.
11. Back to the piano, the fifth étude is played; the computer records.
12. On a sign, the assistant plays the recording, but slowed down, thus sounding three octaves lower.<sup>3</sup> The pianist plays a prepared

<sup>2</sup> Kristof Lauwers of Logos Foundation developed a Pure Data patch.

<sup>3</sup> This way, all the small irregularities, little mistakes, etc., become immensely magnified and poetic, holding a dark mirror in front of the pianist in his attempt to play as fast as possible. It is ironic that a deep beauty pops up precisely in the slowing down of an étude built for speeding up finger dexterity.

soundtrack (soft glissando technique, combined with soft-headed strokes on the bass strings and the squeaking of a broken key in between the high strings), which merely is an accompaniment to the étude. Software makes the étude fade out when deep bass notes are played. The piano frame and the étude end together in a classical mode.

13. On the piano the final, sixth étude is played; the computer records.
14. Switch to the piano frame; again, software connects the frame and the recording, this time the volume of the frame controls the recording's on/off switch; playing louder will also generate reverb towards the end. Technique: one key hammering, the other damping.

#### EVALUATION

Although this first performance was met with enthusiasm, some issues clearly needed to be fixed: (1) During the switches between frame and piano, a part of the audience felt the need to applaud; this obstructed the natural flow of the performance. (2) An assistant at the computer and mixing table was necessary, making rehearsals and transport more complex. (3) Reactions afterwards made it clear that not everybody understood what was going on.

#### TEXT AS COMPOSITIONAL MEANS

A solution to these problems was the idea to write a text about the project and use it in the performance. In the album *Le Piano Démécanisé* (Croene 2010a), the text on the inner sleeve (which was actually used as the outer sleeve, referring to the inside-out piano used on the recording) was an essential part of that project, along with the music and the overall sleeve design. As plans were being made to transform *Roll Over Czerny* into a concept album, once again the idea of having a text as an important component of the project came up.

A seasoned tenor<sup>4</sup> was found who was willing to record the text in French, because of the outspoken references to the academy and conservatory in the language. During the recording, the singer was asked to speak the text aloud in a dull, pedagogical fashion. The text contained a small paraphrase on the importance of Carl Czerny as a pedagogue/composer and why one would want to put experimental music played on a piano frame on top of his études.

#### SECOND PERFORMANCE

For the second performance opportunity, a tape was made to avoid the need for an assistant and the transportation of excessive gear. The laptop was put on the piano so the Pure Data patch could easily be switched on or off when

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4 Zeger Vandersteene.

needed, while a tape would run on the same laptop throughout the whole performance. The recorded text was cut into snippets of one sentence or shorter. The tape was prepared so that the text fragments were heard during specific places in the études, filling the transitions necessary for going from piano to frame and back. The scenario of the whole performance remained the same, the only difference being the addition of the ranting voice covering the transitions between the pieces and accentuating the structure of the Czerny études.

This way, the performance was a demonstration of blending mechanical, empty virtuosity with experimental musicianship and theoretical reflection. Although the theoretical reflection was forced actively to participate in the project and so could not be neutral or analytical, the writing of the text itself proved to be fruitful and provoked new ideas and insights. For example, this chapter would have taken a different direction if the text had not have been written.

#### EVALUATION

Looking back now (four years later) to the Roll Over Czerny project, it becomes clear that the blending of text, experimentation, and classical repertoire was a necessary step in turning a repertoire pianist into a composer. Since then, pianist Frederik Croene has profiled himself more confidently as a composer. Characteristic of his practice now is approaching different conceptual set-ups as instruments through which a musician can discover the underlying principles that constitute the existential being of a musician.

#### APPENDIX: SIX DIFFERENT TECHNIQUES ON LE PIANO DÉMÉCANISÉ

Over the years, a handful of characteristic playing techniques have been developed while trying to master Le Piano Démécanisé. There is one rule: only use material from the piano itself. The keys of some models of piano proved to be remarkably polyvalent in making contact with the strings or the soundboard.

##### *Étude 1: bouncing keys*

As they have a small wooden cylinder on a metal pin at their end, these keys have a particular ability to bounce. When held loosely in the hand, the key becomes a bouncing mallet, if the right kind of pressure keeps it from falling still. It can bounce on nearly every zone of the frame: strings (very quickly, very loud), the muted zone at the end of the string (a fascinating sound because of the small microtonal intervals between the strings), the metal frame (like a very fast series of knocks), or the soundboard (generating a huge and warm resonance).



*Étude 2: hard glissandi*

When the felt wears out, the key makes a tremendous hard and edgy glissando when it is pushed with a lot of tension grindingly across the strings. Overtones occur when playing diminuendo; a repetitive rhythm is necessary to keep the glissandi going.

*Étude 3: bouncing on the strings, sur place*

This technique requires some exercise to enable the key to bounce without breaks on only one string. Therefore, the key needs to be steered up and down the string at a certain angle so the key doesn't start to glide, and a very supple wrist is required that can switch angles almost unnoticeably, although it does depend how much rust the string has accumulated. The other hand can damp and undamp the string, changing the colour immediately. In this étude, the computer reacts to the volume of the piano frame so it is important to have direct control of the volume.

*Étude 4: five-keys technique*

The five-keys technique was invented especially for the fourth étude. This étude for the left hand is quite famous and contains some *Sturm und Drang* reminiscent of Beethoven. The technique requires the pianist to hold five black keys next to one another in the right hand. The left hand and forearm take care of damping the strings after the five keys have struck the entire bass-stringed zone of the frame. The volume is loud and bombastic, but being able very quickly to mute all the resounding strings with the forearm makes it a fascinating gesture, both visually and aurally. Experience taught that only black keys were slim enough to be held by one hand. When held vertically above the strings, they bounce irregularly and fast on the high strings, which is a nice thing to see and hear when tightly controlled.

*Étude 5: soft glissandi*

Little pieces of felt on the wooden cylinders attached to metal pins at the end of the keys make the sound soft and mute, the glissandi breathy and whining. A little moisture is necessary sometimes to get more resistance to make the string vibrate. Doing the same glissando on the wooden soundboard generates a massive animalistic yet pathetic sound. In this piece, the piano frame merely accompanies the slowed-down étude, sometimes bursting out in a large bass sound that makes the computer fade out the Czerny étude. Meanwhile a tiny squeaking sound is heard: a small piece of wood coming from a broken key is grating in-between two upper strings creating a big range towards the dark basses.

*Étude 6: one key hammering, the other damping*

As this is the last piece of the project, it has some pretension to being an apotheosis. It is a kind of toccata idea in which the whole spectrum of the stringed part of the frame is scrutinised step by step. One key with a soft, felted head knocks on the string, the other key damps the string as a bass player would do

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with his or her left hand. When the damping key grates over the strings, a surprising spectrum of harmonics appears.

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## Appendix

### ONLINE MATERIALS



As further illustration to chapters six, seven, eight, eleven, fifteen, and sixteen in this publication, an online repository of audio and video examples has been created and hosted within the website of the Orpheus Institute, Ghent. These examples, which should be viewed in connection with a reading of the relevant chapters, may all be accessed under the URL: <http://www.orpheusinstituut.be/en/experimental-encounters-media-repository>