

2003

Thirteen Ways of looking at a Black Piano

Kurt Ellenberger
Grand Valley State University

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholarworks.gvsu.edu/gvr>

Recommended Citation

Ellenberger, Kurt (2003) "Thirteen Ways of looking at a Black Piano," *Grand Valley Review*. Vol. 26: Iss. 1, Article 14.

Available at: <https://scholarworks.gvsu.edu/gvr/vol26/iss1/14>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by ScholarWorks@GVSU. It has been accepted for inclusion in Grand Valley Review by an authorized editor of ScholarWorks@GVSU. For more information, please contact scholarworks@gvsu.edu.

My favorite GVSU piano (in fact, it is my favorite piano in all of West Michigan) is the wonderful concert Steinway in L.A.T. She owns the nickname "Martha" and is really one of the finest pianos I've ever touched. From my very first meeting several years ago, she has never failed to thrill me with her gorgeous, singing tone and beautifully easy playing action. I truly adore her in every way possible. When I imagine how I want a piece of music to sound, it is Martha's voice that comes rushing into my head. Since I am primarily a collaborative pianist (and a former singer), I always attempt to sing at the piano. This was, after all, Chopin's greatest desire in playing the instrument. I believe that he set the greatest example and it is one I strive for whenever I sit at the instrument! Martha's "voice" is one of great beauty and I hope that she enjoys my fingers as much as I enjoy her keys. I can't think of another piano in the area that even comes close to her magical powers! I hope that ours is a long and fulfilling relationship—I know that I will value it for the rest of my life. I also know that she will probably never be surpassed. I will borrow Shakespeare's line and amend it thus: "If music be the food of love, PLAY on . . ."

—Robert Byrens
Head of Accompanying/GVSU

Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Black Piano

One of the most difficult aspects of playing piano professionally is that we never actually perform on the instrument we practice on. We are faced with an enormous variety of sizes, styles, and brands from almost every corner of the world. Earlier in my career, I found this to be particularly daunting. Some instruments are very good, others are not; some instruments are easy to play on, some are difficult; nonetheless, we must perform on them all and somehow make it work. This is accomplished by developing the skill to rapidly "read" an instrument in terms of its strengths and weaknesses, and then (just as rapidly) altering our approach accordingly. This requires a great deal of technical facility and flexibility. One needs a large and varied set of approaches to playing in order to make music on every instrument. I became acutely aware of the extremes in this regard about 15 years ago in Boulder, Colorado, when I heard the great jazz pianist, Art Lande, perform with Sheila Jordan on an upright piano that I had played on a few times. I found it to be an impossible instrument in almost every regard. Yet, here was Art, play-

*My Martha, my beloved.
I touch you, and the heavens
open, and I am embraced by
your beauty, torrents of sound.*

—John Schuster Craig

ing the same piano (without amplification or sound reinforcement of any kind) and it sounded absolutely wonderful—he managed to overcome the extreme weaknesses of the instrument and produced a sound that was warm, even, and inhumanly large considering the size of the instrument. I was dumbfounded. How was this possible? I had studied with Art so I asked him how he did it, and his response was typical Art Lande: "You have to wait for the piano to let you in." This was

far too vague for me, so I kept probing, and he eventually began to talk about altering various aspects of his posture, the curvature of his fingers, the height of the bench and other things in order to (as he put it): “be the player the piano needed me to be.”

Fortunately, we have many fine pianos here at GVSU—three Steinways, two Schimmels, and many Yamaha grands, baby grands, and uprights. The CD in this issue of the *Review* was recorded on our Steinway ‘B’ (formerly in the Sherman Van Solkema Recital Hall) and on the brand new Schimmel 8’ grand that is currently in SVS. Strangely enough, only two pieces (Etude, and Quadrants) from the Schimmel recording session were chosen for the CD; everything else was recorded on the Steinway ‘B.’ This mix of the two pianos was not done consciously; we simply chose the tracks we liked best, and the majority happened to have been recorded on the small Steinway. I was surprised by this because the Schimmel is a very friendly piano, while the Steinway is a bit cantankerous and certainly not as inviting as the Schimmel. The Schimmel is also larger than the Steinway (by two feet), which also makes the Steinway preference surprising. Nonetheless, there is a depth, richness, and diversity in even the smallest Steinway that no other maker can duplicate. It is the gold standard in the world of pianos.

Notes to Accompany the Enclosed CD

Many of the pieces are taken from standard jazz repertoire (In Your Own Sweet Way, What Kind Of Fool Am I?, Body and Soul, You Don’t Know What Love Is, and It Could Happen To You). One is a variant of a standard 12-bar blues form (Tabulah Bluesah) while others are completely improvised (Gibraltar and Quadrants), or largely improvised (Etude).

Etude

This piece is based on a set of chord changes written by Kenny Wheeler one night last September as an exercise for a lesson he gave to two of our trumpet students. It focuses on a particular scale and coinciding harmony that he wanted the students to learn in various different keys. I improvised the melody and accompaniment, and

My friends know that I am a born shopper – shoes, clothes, cars – it doesn't matter. But the shopping trip of a lifetime was mine a few years ago when GVSU sent me to Steinway Hall in New York City to select a concert grand piano for the Louis Armstrong Theatre. What a treat! First off, the hallowed halls of Steinway Place hold their own secrets and memories and it was exciting just to be there. When I first saw the “selection,” it was overwhelming. There were five beautiful “D”s in a semi-circle waiting to be tested. I scarcely knew where to begin but begin I did and roughly five hours later I had made my choice. The difficulty was not in reducing the initial number but in making the choice from the final two! A friend told me that when I felt the sound of the instrument in the pit of my stomach I would know that I had the right one. Somewhere around 3 PM it happened and I knew that I had found our “Martha.” She has proven herself time and time again—under many different fingers, and she is always a lady—refined, well-mannered and gracious. If you have not yet experienced an evening with “Martha,” be encouraged to take advantage of the very next opportunity to enjoy this most beautiful Steinway grand piano.

—Julianne
Vanden Wyngaard

gave it this title because of its pedagogical origins and singular harmonic and melodic focus.

Quadrants

It was getting rather late in the recording session, and I had been thinking about improvising a set of short pieces named after the four points on the compass. I had little or no preconception of what they should represent, but I thought it might be an interesting basis for a series of short pieces.

Tabulah Bluesah

The blues form has never been one of my favorite vehicles. Of course, I have studied the blues and certainly played the blues hundreds of times as a sideman, but I have generally avoided it in my own playing. I decided to play a blues form without any pre-existing melody, just to see what would come out, and I surprised myself with this quirky mixture of styles in this very visceral old form (hence the name).

Gibraltar

This piece was entirely improvised, and was given its name by the producer (Dan Royer). He said that it possessed an amalgam of musical elements looking in all directions—Spain, Morocco and the deep Mediterranean—much as he imagines the birthplace of his friend and our colleague in English, David Alvarez.

Special thanks to Dan Royer for the enormous amount of time and energy he gave to this project. Without his encouragement and leadership (and keen ears), I am sure I would still be merely “thinking about” doing a solo recording. . . .

—Kurt Ellenberger,
Director of Jazz Studies
and Associate Professor of Music