**A short history of key noise at the piano: its technical and aesthetic implications**

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One of the oldest and most fiercely contested questions in the history of piano playing has been that of whether it is possible to produce variation in timbre on the instrument independently of dynamics. Much familiar rhetoric about 'depth of tone' or 'singing tone' rests implicitly upon the assumption that this is indeed possible, though some of the formulations could also be argued to employ a vague metaphor of 'tone' for a conglomeration of aspects of voicing, legato, pedalling and various else, rather than something specific to individual, isolated tones. Even Chopin's contrast of a supposedly ready-made tone on an Érard piano with the possibilities of establishing a more individual one on the Pleyel relies upon various assumptions of this type. A simple consideration of the nature of the piano's mechanism however demonstrates clearly that it is impossible to affect any aspect of how a hammer hits a string other than its velocity, as was concluded after an experiment detailed in Eugene Tetzel's Das Problem der modernen Klaviertechnik of 1909. However, two years later Ludwig Riemann, in his Das Wesen des Klavierklanges und seine Beziehungen zum Anschlag argued that this is to neglect another fundamental aspect of perceived piano tone, specifically the sound of the finger hitting the key, which is a parameter I call 'key noise'. In this paper, I give a brief overview of how this parameter might have become manifest in line with a cross-section of principal schools of piano playing in the nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries, in both technical and aesthetic senses, then consider the way it has received limited critical and pedagogical attention during the course of the twentieth century, culminating in a survey of some contemporary works – classic works by Sylvano Bussotti, Nicolaus A. Huber, Salvatore Sciarrino and more recent ones composed for myself by Richard Barrett, Aaron Cassidy, Richard Emsley, Wieland Hoban, Ross Lorraine and others – which foreground such a parameter. I argue that a comprehensive understanding and judicious exploitation of this parameter is not only a deeply fruitful activity for both composers and performers, but also that it helps to penetrate some of the mystifying discourse which surrounds pianism.

Ian Pace is a pianist of long-established reputation, specialising in the farthest reaches of musical modernism and transcendental virtuosity, as well as a writer and musicologist focusing on issues of performance, music and society and the avant-garde. He was born in Hartlepool, England in 1968, and studied at Chetham’s School of Music, The Queen’s College, Oxford and, as a Fulbright Scholar, at the Juilliard School in New York. His main teacher, and a major influence upon his work, was the Hungarian pianist György Sándor, a student of Bartók.