

# MirrorFugue III: Conjuring the Recorded Pianist

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## ABSTRACT

The body channels rich layers of information when playing music, from intricate manipulations of the instrument to vivid personifications of expression. But when music is captured and replayed across distance and time, the performer’s body is too often trapped behind a small screen or absent entirely.

This paper introduces MirrorFugue III, an interface to experience recorded piano performance that combines the moving keys of a player piano with life-sized projection of the pianist’s hands and upper body. Inspired by reflections on a lacquered grand piano, MirrorFugue III evokes the sense that the virtual pianist is playing the physically moving keys.

Through MirrorFugue III, we explore the question of how to viscerally simulate a performer’s presence to create immersive experiences. We discuss design choices, report reactions from users and outline a space of usage scenarios.

## Keywords

piano performance, musical expressivity, body language, recorded music, player piano, augmented reality, embodiment

## 1. INTRODUCTION

For much of human history, music could only be heard live; audiences gathered to watch performers of physical instruments at a specific location and time. The communication of musical ideas was intricately and inextricably tied to the body of the performer.

The development of audio recording in the late 19th century untethered music from the physical world of performer, instrument and concert hall [15]. Technology enables music to transcend the constraints of space and time—people can now listen to music anywhere at any time, even play with one another over distance [3].

But music loses its tight coupling with physically present performers when recorded and replayed across distance and time. Video may capture performers’ movements and expressions, but the images only exist behind screens, not present in the world. More often, the performer’s body is absent entirely, completely divorced from the resulting music.

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**Figure 1: Photo of our interface. The hands and body of a projected virtual pianist are synchronized with moving keys of a player piano.**

A musical performance does not need to be seen to be understood, and music extricated from the physical trappings of live performance affords a purer type of listening with its own advantages [14]. However, the presence of the live performer adds layers of richness to the musical experience [6].

This paper explores the relationship between music and the performer’s body in the experience of recorded piano performances. A central question of our work is how to simulate a *visceral* feeling of the pianist’s presence by piecing together information streams current technology can readily capture. Snibbe et al. describe a *visceral* mode of perception as an understanding of reality based in the body that precedes analytic, symbolic and linguistic thought [19]. During a live performance, the performer engages the audience physically and emotionally on a visceral level. Our work seeks not only to make available and legible streams of captured information but also to present them so as to engage the audience as in a live performance. In essence, we seek to conjure the recorded pianist.

We introduce MirrorFugue III, an interface for playback of captured performances on the piano that combines life-sized video projection of the pianist’s hands and body with the actuated keys of a Yamaha Disklavier grand piano [22], evoking the impression that the virtual pianist is playing the physically moving keys. This paper begins with a review of techniques for conveying human presence followed by the rationale and implementation of our system. We then report on qualitative findings from a preliminary study and present a set of scenarios illustrating the potential of MirrorFugue III as an expressive medium for experiencing music.

## 2. RELATED WORK

We first survey two approaches of depicting the presence of a human being, figurative and disembodied representations.

We then look at ways video has been combined with the player piano.

## 2.1 Figurative Representations

A common way to depict human presence is by rendering the figure through video. Interfaces for remote collaboration often feature a video stream of a remote user on a screen. Extensive research has revealed ways in which choice of framing, size and placement of the video affect empathy and the feeling of co-presence [12, 8, 9]. Studies have shown that including the upper-body in the video drastically improves collaborators' empathy over a head-only display [12] and that approximately life-sized video is more effective at simulating presence than smaller sizes [8].

Several researchers have explored how the arrangement of video screens can simulate real-life spatial relationships between distant users. Ishii's ClearBoard employs the metaphor of speaking through a glass pane [9], and Buxton's Hydra situated video surrogates of remote users around a table to simulate real-life meetings.

Artists have projected video of human figures directly into the physical world to create powerful statements engaging the viewer in contemplative experiences. Michael Naimark's displacements [11] and Kryztof Wodizcko's projections on public architecture [18] both play on the concept of human presence.



Figure 2: Examples of using video to convey presence: Clearboard (left) and Displacements (right)

## 2.2 Disembodied Representations

Another approach abandons the image in favor of animating objects in the world to suggest the presence of an invisible being. Objects may move as if under the direct touch of an invisible person [4], or they may appear to be infused with an invisible spirit [10]. While the movement of animated physical objects carry significant meaning [7], it is difficult to imagine identity of the ghostly presence from seeing the objects alone without additional cues or explanation.

A classic example of disembodied presence is the player piano. Its modern incarnation, the Yamaha Disklavier, captures and re-renders a pianist's touch and tone in near perfect detail. A recent concert featured the late Marvin Hamlisch on a Disklavier posthumously performing a duet with the violinist Joshua Bell [2].

## 2.3 Video and the Player Piano

The Disklavier has been used in conjunction with video for both practical and artistic applications. The Sync-a-Vision by PianoDisc features a built-in screen at the music stand which plays video of performances synchronized with the moving keys [16]. Both remote lessons and concerts have employed the Disklavier to transmit playing over distance along with a video feed shown on a separate screen [23].

Theatrical concerts have projected video of the live pianist onto the Disklavier's surroundings such as Sakamoto and Iwai's Parabola [17].



Figure 3: Death and the Powers (left). The disembodied main character is represented by movement of the chandelier and visuals on the walls. Parabola (right). A copy of the live pianist is projected on the wall next to the Disklavier.

## 3. DESIGN

Our work aims to combine the immediacy of the moving keys with the visual identity of the pianist such that the interface is perceived not as streams of synchronized information but as a coherent, engaging experience. Our design is inspired by the reflections of the player on the surface of a lacquered grand piano. Guided by this metaphor, we discuss choices in framing, size and placement of video in relation to the piano.

We project life-sized video streams of the pianist's hands, face and upper torso onto surfaces of the piano. Video of the hands include the full keyboard recorded from above, which is projection-mapped exactly onto the physical keyboard. The piano's glossy surface naturally mirrors the physical keyboard as well as the projection. Video of the face and upper torso with a black background is projected on the piano's music stand where a live pianist would be reflected. Though most of the virtual pianist is not explicitly shown, the synchronized hands, body and keys suggest the form and movement of the invisible.

We also designed an alternate variation where the virtual hands and keyboard are aligned but not coincident with the physical keys, building on a prior interface for remote lessons [21]. Although this interface departs from the reflection metaphor, it may offer advantages when used for pedagogy. We consider differences between the interface configurations in our evaluation.



Figure 4: Alternate Interface

## 4. PROTOTYPE

We built a prototype of MirrorFugue III on a Yamaha Disklavier baby grand piano, which communicates with the computer through a MIDI to USB cable. We installed a short-throw projector 7 feet above the ground overhead the piano bench, which covers both the keyboard and vertical surfaces without blockage from a person seated normally on the bench. For the upper body video, we constructed a custom display surface from plywood treated with projection screen paint,

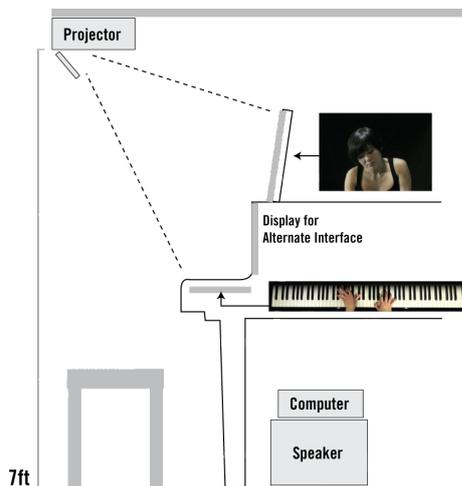


Figure 5: System Diagram

which fits over the existing music stand of the piano. For the alternative interface configuration, we constructed a similar display for the hands which replaced the vertical surface of the original keyboard cover.

Each recording for *MirrorFugue III* is captured on two cameras, a MIDI sequencer and a high quality audio recorder. We mounted one camera on a truss above the keyboard and another at the end of the piano to capture the pianist's face and upper torso. MIDI signal from the Disklavier is captured by Reaper on a computer. Both cameras and Reaper also capture audio, which is used to synchronize the streams when editing. The final product for each recording consists of the MIDI file and two video files rendered at 720p.

A custom Java program controls the entire interface. It composites the video streams, computes projection mappings in real time and synchronizes playback.

While a recording is playing on the piano, keys that are not moving function normally, and a user can layer live playing with the recording.

## 5. EVALUATION

The goal of our evaluation is twofold. First, we wanted to determine if spectators perceived our interface as an immersive whole and can viscerally feel the presence of the virtual pianist. Second, we wanted to uncover more generalizable design principles. For the latter, we asked the following research questions:

- What does the audience gain from each visual channel (moving keys, projections of hands and body)?
- What difference does interface arrangement make?

Based on these questions, we compared five interface configurations (see Table 1) based on the following three parameters:

- Music generated from player piano's **moving keys** or as **sound only**
- **Projection** of pianist or **no projection**
- Projection of keys in the **original** or **alternate** configuration

### 5.1 Method

A convenience sample of 15 subjects (8 male, 7 female; Aged 23-49(28)) with varying piano experience watched recordings of 5 different performances by the same pianist on the

5 interfaces. Each recording was approximately one minute long, and the order of interfaces and recordings was randomized. After watching all recordings, subjects ranked the interfaces from 1-5 with one being most preferred and completed a questionnaire on their preferences.

#### 5.1.1 Statistical Analysis

Differences in ratings between interface configurations were evaluated using Friedman's matched group analysis of variance test with the Nemenyi multiple comparison test.

## 5.2 Results

The average ranking of each interface configuration is summarized in Table 1. Our original interface (I) had the most preferred average ranking and was significantly more preferred than the configurations that lacked either the projection or moving keys (III, IV, V). The alternate interface (II) had the second most preferred average ranking and was significantly more preferred than the two configurations without the moving keys. The alternate interface without moving keys (IV) had the worst preference ranking.

#### 5.2.1 Immersion and Presence

Eleven of the 15 participants felt that the original interface enhanced the presence of the recorded pianist. They spoke of the interface's immersive experience, and their language indicated their perception of the projection and moving keys as an integrated whole. Some participants described the player as "virtually in the piano", and others felt "as if the player were sitting besides me playing for me". A few even said that the interface "tricked my brain completely into thinking that I was playing."

#### 5.2.2 Alternate Interface Arrangement

The alternate configuration was four people's top preference, and they tended to speak of the interface in terms of its separate information streams. Each had a different reason for preferring the hands projection not on the keyboard. One was an experienced pianist and liked how the vertical projection gave a clear view of the hands, explaining that "watching and learning are blurred for me as a former player." Another experienced pianist had difficulty reconciling the 2D projection "playing" the 3D keys in the original interface but said that he could imagine preferring it once he "gets used to the dimensionality." Others felt that the hands on the keys was distracting and preferred seeing them more peripherally.

When asked which interface they would use if they were to learn to play, 12 out of 15 chose some variant of the alternate configuration (II: 9, IV: 3). These participants felt that it was easier to follow the vertically projected hands because "it is not blocked by your hands." Some described direct projection on keys as "too cluttered" and "distracting" for learning to play.

#### 5.2.3 Role of Moving Keys and Projection

When asked about the effect of the player piano's moving keys, 12 of the 15 participants mentioned that it made the performance seem more real, live and present. For example one participant said that it "gives real energy to the music and made the performance seem more immediate and in the moment."

Fourteen of the participants mentioned that the projection makes the performance more human and emotionally engaging. For example, one participant said that seeing the movement and expression of the performer was "very much like a traditional performance but directly in front of you." Some people reported paying more attention to the "nu-

Configurations	Original (I)	Alternate (II)	III	IV	V	
						
Moving keys	yes	yes	yes	no	no	
Hand projection	on keys	vertical	none	vertical	on keys	
Average rankings	1.4 <sup>a, b, c</sup>	2.3 <sup>d, e</sup>	3.3 <sup>a</sup>	4.3 <sup>b, d</sup>	3.7 <sup>c, e</sup>	<b>p-value<sup>1</sup></b>
Std. deviations	0.7	1.2	1.2	0.9	1.0	$p < 0.01$

<sup>1</sup>Friedman’s test and Nemenyi follow up

**Table 1: Participants were asked which interface configuration they preferred from 1 (most favorite) to 5 (least favorite). Values with similar superscripts are significantly different.**

ance of facial expressions that enhanced the character of the piece”. Others paid more attention to the hand movements to better understand the “flow of rhythm and phrasing.”

Though almost all participants enjoyed seeing the moving keys and the projection, the interfaces with only projection or moving keys had the lowest preference averages. This suggests that the positive effects of the player piano and projection are enhanced when the two appear in combination. Some users explicitly clarified that they found the moving keys “ghostly and unnerving” on their own but really enjoyed it with projection. Others noted that “projection on the keys without the player piano was awkward.”

### 5.3 Study Summary

After one minute of watching a piano performance on our interface, more than two-thirds of the study participants described feeling the impression of a present pianist. Participants articulated the role of the moving keys and projection and exhibited strong preference for interfaces that combined the two. While only four participants preferred the alternate configuration for watching performances, most ranked it as their top choice as a reference in a learning scenario.

## 6. SCENARIOS

We discuss how MirrorFugue III can be used over distance and time as well as how it can be used to visualize musical structure.

### 6.1 Over Distance

MirrorFugue III can be used to capture and transmit playing over distance.

#### 6.1.1 Concert

People can experience live concerts right in their living room with a view closer than a seat in the concert hall. Audiences gain an intimate view of the performer’s facial expressions, and they can see how the hands are playing. Audiences can sit on the piano bench to experience the concert from the performer’s point of view and even shadow the performer’s hands on the keyboard.

#### 6.1.2 Lesson

Remote lessons and master classes can also be conducted through MirrorFugue III. The Disklavier accompanied by a video feed has been used for remote lessons [1], but the video has always been shown on a display away from the piano. MirrorFugue III gives the student and teacher the illusion of a shared keyboard, as if they were sitting next to each other at a typical lesson. This makes it easier for the student to observe the teacher’s demonstrations and for the

teacher to watch the student’s technique. Being able to view each other’s faces also allows better communication. The alternate interface with vertical projection may be used to better see the hands, and another video feed can be added to view the wrists and arms.

#### 6.1.3 Duet

MirrorFugue III can also be used for 2-way playing over distance. During ensemble playing, musicians are peripherally aware of each other’s presence and use physical cues for synchronization. Distant pianists can feel each other’s presence when like they are playing together on MirrorFugue III.

## 6.2 Across Time

MirrorFugue III is a new medium through which to interact with recordings from the past.

#### 6.2.1 Archival References

People can watch recorded performances of great pianists on MirrorFugue III and compare how different people play the same piece. In addition to listening to the sound, people can observe how different pianists channel different styles of playing.

#### 6.2.2 Tutorial

How-to videos such as those on Youtube are popular among aspiring musicians. Tutorials on MirrorFugue III can demonstrate playing on the physical piano. They could also include exercises allowing the student to play along with the recorded teacher.

#### 6.2.3 Self-Reflection

Pianists can also record their own playing on MirrorFugue III. These recordings can be a record of progress. The pianist can record part of a piece and play the rest of it as a duet with their virtual self. A recording on MirrorFugue III captures a moment in time. Replaying a recording momentarily offers a glimpse of that moment, creating the illusion of time-travel where one confronts selves from the past. A pianist can play a duet with a much younger version of the self. Grandchildren can play with versions of their grandparents at their age. MirrorFugue III can create intimate, reflective experiences on the passing of time.

## 6.3 Musical Structure

Much of music consists of multiple layers or lines [20]. Canons and fugues typical of baroque music are classic examples of multi-layered pieces for the keyboard. Music of other styles also feature multiple layers with different roles such as melody and bass line. In an ensemble, the timbre of dif-



**Figure 6: Some scenarios: A student learns to play from a master pianist (left). A child plays a duet with herself (center). Chopin’s Opus 25, No. 7 Etude [5] expanded into tenor, harmony and melody lines (right).**

ferent instruments help clarify the different lines, and in live performance each line is personified by a different musician. In solo piano music, every line is played on the same instrument by the same performer, and it can be difficult to fully appreciate the intricacies of the sound.

MirrorFugue III could be used to clarify the layers of a piano composition by personifying each voice with a virtual pianist. The same pianist could be duplicated multiple times, or a different person could represent each voice. Each virtual pianist can project a different character, adding depth to the performance, especially when voices exhibit different characters (e.g. a stately bass line with a soaring melody).

Expanding a performance into multiple layers can also serve as a useful practice tool, allowing the student to take over over and play along one layer at a time. Practicing this way enables the student to experience the whole piece while working on it portions at a time. This may allow the student to gain a deeper understanding of how the piece fits together.

## 7. FUTURE WORK

This paper suggested potential pedagogical uses for MirrorFugue III. We plan to continue this line of research by conducting studies to verify our hypotheses. Of particular interest is how the interface can help students learn certain advanced techniques, embody a range of characters and promote engagement during practice.

### 7.1 Weight Touch Technique

Two professional pianists who saw MirrorFugue III commented that the original configuration can be useful for seeing the weight-touch technique of the recorded pianist. Weight touch is an advanced technique highly prized in classical playing where the pianist uses the weight of the arms to control tone [13]. We would like to study how the combination of projected hands and moving keys can help students understand and acquire this technique.

### 7.2 Embodying Characters

Musicians display vastly different body language when playing different styles of music. For example, they may sway slowly when playing a lyrical, expressive piece or dance to the beat when playing strong rhythms. We are interested in how students can learn to embody different characters in a variety of musical styles by mirroring the body language of the virtual pianist.

### 7.3 Longterm Engagement

An oft-lamented fact of music practice is that the musician is always alone. This is especially true for the pianist who has fewer opportunities for ensemble rehearsals than other

instrumentalists. Consistent, convincing presence of a virtual pianist could engage students on a personal level and keep practice from being a dull, mechanical exercise. We would like to explore if and how MirrorFugue III could promote this sort of longterm engagement and how frequency of use influences students to play more expressively in performances.

## 8. CONCLUSION

This paper explores how visual cues of the performer’s physical presence enhances the experience of a musical performance. Surveying a range of work in both research and the arts, we articulated strategies for representing human presence, either figuratively through video or through the disembodied movements of physical objects. We then introduced an interface for experiencing piano performances that combines video with the movement of a player piano’s keys. In an evaluation, we articulated the role of the player piano and projection in the interface, and we showed that most spectators can feel the presence of the virtual pianist, perceiving the multiple information streams as an integrated experience. We then described seven categories of scenarios of how the interface can be used to bridge distance and time as well as how the interface can depict musical structure through personification.

MirrorFugue III reconsiders the musical performance not just as abstract ideas from the composer rendered accurately in time but also as the expressive gesture of a performer who lives, breathes and embodies the music. Whether the performer is live or conjured on our interface, the music becomes a visceral communicative experience between the performer and the audience, an experience that is deeply and fundamentally human.

## 9. ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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