

WHIMSY WITHIN VIRTUOSITY: EXAMINING THE LIFE AND STYLE BEHIND HIROMI
UEHARA AND HER SOLO PIANO WORKS

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CHAPTER I: INTRODUCTION

Crossing boundaries is a difficult thing to achieve, but for jazz, it feels like an extension of the indomitable human spirit.¹ From a genealogical point of view, jazz stems from classical music, but to call it a direct offspring would be a misnomer to both its roots and continuation for growth. Jazz is one of America's most significant cultural exports, and the globalization of jazz throughout the twentieth and twenty-first century has been a practice that blends both a country's musical history, and the American spirit of creativity as a response to Western European classical music. For a country like Japan, jazz feels like a far cry to the cultural and musical landscapes they would resonate with. But jazz has made a permanent home in Japan, and many musicians and composers have made worthy contributions to the genre.

The history of jazz in Japan has no canonical story or figurehead that spearheaded its own movement. Its first mention came by way of a sheet music periodical in 1920, with a photo of men posing with instruments and the caption "Tokyo Jazz Band."² By the end of the decade, Japan indigenized the term into their own language (*jazu*), and jazz became a mainstream sphere of interest in popular culture. At its core, jazz in Japan represented the American spirit of carefree freedom, as it grew from a niche interest into a commercial endeavor that helped develop consumerism.³

Japanese attitudes towards American cultural products (music, literature, and so on) have historically been approached with caution. But as generational barriers shifted, jazz became a new language in which to communicate ideals of indulgence and the celebration of virtuosic

¹ Jazz, in this document refers primarily to the African-American musical practice that began in the United States in the late nineteenth to twentieth century.

² E. Taylor Atkins, *Blue Nippon: Authenticating Jazz in Japan* (Duke University Press, 2001), page 46.

³ Japanese jazz in this context, refers to the music that transferred from American boats to Japanese soil beginning in the twentieth century.

excellence. Atkins opposes the sentiment of jazz being a language of freedom in a 2014 article, saying “Well, I think the line that's out there, that jazz represents freedom for everyone, is baloney. I think [that statement] is very much tied to its American origin, to American power in the world. I think that, however much I love jazz, I think that if Portugal had as much influence in the world, fado would probably be "the jazz" of the world. There's a certain sense in which a lot of Americans believe that the rest of the world really wants what we have — they're all Americans deep down — and I don't subscribe to that way of thinking.”⁴

In *Japan: An Illustrated Encyclopedia*, author Alan Campbell summarizes the following on stereotypes associated with Japanese jazz: “Japan is home to an important and highly profitable market for jazz, boasting numerous clubs, some of the best jazz magazines in the world, and a steady core of avid fans. [...] Yet while many of Japan’s jazz artists display marvelous technical ability, few display any real originality.”⁵

If Japanese musicians are being accused of imitation and lacking the skills to improvise in the way American musicians do when performing, their music is perceived as being of a lower quality. But these critiques around authenticity do not address the sincere Japanese desire to add jazz to their musical landscape. In reality: jazz itself came to be from the expansion and indigenization of classical music structures. The semantics behind the term jazz vary widely from region to region, but for the Japanese, it is a rebirth of American-based values with the expansion of Japanese harmonic language and technical excellence.

To take an anthropomorphized approach in illustrating this abstract connection in music: when a genre is “birthed,” its country of origin determines the basic structure that the musical

⁴ Patrick Jarenwattananon, “How Japan Came To Love Jazz,” A Blog Supreme, *NPR*, April 30, 2014, <https://www.npr.org/sections/ablogsupreme/2014/04/30/308275726/how-japan-came-to-love-jazz>.

⁵ Alan Campbell, *Japan: An Illustrated Encyclopedia*, First Edition (Kōdansha USA, 1993).

language sits in. In the case of Western classical music, it is a multigenerational monolithic idea that most certainly does not constitute a single genre anymore. It is at its core an amalgamation of *style*, and the journeys these styles took to evolve and diversify. When a genre leaves its metaphorical birthplace and immigrates, other countries may integrate their own native preferences, which produces a large pool with near endless subtleties applied or subtracted from the original source material.

In this sense, jazz is a remediation of classical music.⁶ When African Americans took European music and African rhythms and multiplied their own ideas on top of it, weaving in their own narratives of community, it became their own medium in which to celebrate merit of the highest talents. After it spread through international waters, it became inextricably linked to American culture. But for the Japanese, jazz is an export that has maintained a strong presence in modern culture. Japan is one of the most prominent countries with a large-standing network of jazz listening lounges. Even though jazz is still considered an alternative subculture, it is a powerful one that crosses generational boundaries to indicate a level of sophistication in personal taste. Japan also produces some of the world's most renowned musicians and composers, and despite academic discourse harboring mixed feelings towards authenticity in its current shape, one of those highly original musicians is jazz pianist and composer Hiromi Uehara.

Hiromi Uehara (known mononymously as Hiromi) was born March 26, 1979, in Hamamatsu, Shizuoka, Japan. Her musical journey began at the age of six, when she began taking piano lessons with Noriko Hikida.⁷ She learned classical music first before Hikida

⁶ Adam Hammond, "Remediation," in *Oxford Research Encyclopedia of Literature*, by Adam Hammond (Oxford University Press, 2020), <https://doi.org/10.1093/acrefore/9780190201098.013.1087>.

⁷ Many sources corroborate Hikida as Hiromi's first piano teacher; however no biographical details exist about her. Sources also point towards the Yamaha School of Music as a likely environment for Hiromi's early music studies.

introduced her to jazz and improvisations, using popular foundational technical exercises like Hanon's *The Virtuoso Pianist: 60 Exercises for the Piano*.

Not much is known about Hiromi's classical piano life in adolescence. She had a short career as a jingle artist writing music for Japanese car companies. However, two events are consistently cited in biographical sources: her concert appearance with the Czech Philharmonic Orchestra at age 14, and her first time meeting and performing with Chick Corea at age 17. This coincidental meeting would become a turning point in her life, as later on, they would go on to perform together at the Tokyo Jazz Festival and later record the album *Duet* released in 2009.

In 1999, Hiromi moved to the United States to pursue an education at the Berklee College of Music. Her primary major was jazz arrangement and composition, and her primary teacher was Ahmad Jamal (1930-2023). Upon her graduation in 2003, she signed with jazz label Telarc Records and released her debut album *Another Mind* (recorded in 2002). The album earned "Best Jazz Album of the Year" by the Recording Industry Association of Japan, and sold over 100,000 units within its first year of release.

Since her graduation from the Berklee College of Music, and the release of *Another Mind*, Hiromi has gone on to release an album nearly every year, with a total of fourteen studio albums, seven live albums, and a single film score. Hiromi's annual work consists of a combination of composing, recording, and touring internationally with a small ensemble. In the 2010s, she released four albums under her Trio Project, which consisted of bassist Anthony Jackson and drummer Simon Phillips. And in the 2020s, her new band Sonicwonder debuted with trumpeter Adam O'Farrill, bassist Hadrien Feraud, and percussionist Gene Coyne, and they have been touring together since the release of their album *Sonicwonder* in 2023. Hiromi has cited many artists as being inspiration for developing her style. A few of the names that

repeatedly circulate these sources are Chick Corea (1941-2021), Erroll Garner (1921-1977), Ahmad Jamal (1930-2023), and Oscar Peterson (1925-2007).

Chick Corea's career is not to be understated. He is a crowning pioneer of jazz fusion music and spent the latter half of the twentieth century as an avid performer, composer, and bandleader. In the 1960s, Corea began his professional performance and recording career, manifesting in the debut album *Tones for Joan's Bones*. But the epicenter of his career occurred in the 1980s and 1990s, right when Hiromi would've been growing up in Japan. Corea is often credited with infusing jazz with Latin rhythm and blues, but he also dabbled in classical music traditions. His first legitimate piano teacher was Italian concert artist Salvatore Sullo — but Sullo did not teach him jazz. In a 1998 interview with Ted Rosenthal, Corea said the following on Sullo: “[Sullo] was a great player. He got me interested, and he introduced me to classical piano literature. He showed me some basics of fingering and piano technique, and I'm really indebted to him for getting me facile at the piano, passing along some of what I feel is basic advice about piano fingering.” Sullo's teaching would later inspire him to compose a piano concerto adapting his most famous jazz standard “Spain,” as well as “Adventures of Hippocrates” for string quartet.

In 1996, Corea met “a little girl who played amazing, amazing piano” while he was in Japan.⁸ Ten years later, they reunited at the 2006 Tokyo Jazz Festival and Corea recounts the story to a very youthful Hiromi. Hiromi stands somewhat shyly to Corea's left, laughing only when he admits he had forgotten about her, only to rediscover her talents when a friend of his lent a CD of hers to him. He goes on to connect that the “crazy lady” playing the piano was in fact, the young girl he met all those years ago, and calls her “one of his favorites.”⁹

⁸ *Chick Corea Meets Hiromi Uehara at Tokyo Jazz 2006*, directed by muzline, 2014. YouTube video, 19:43. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3OjHCjzIUSw>.

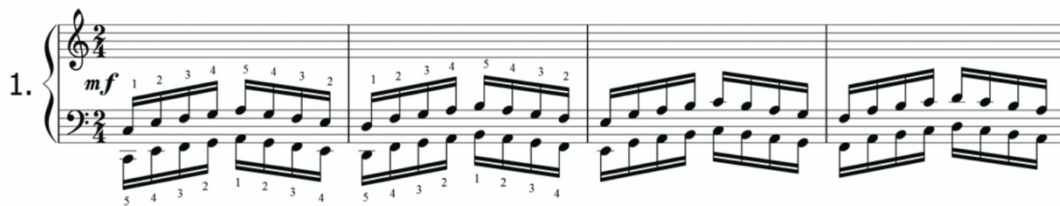
⁹ Ibid.

The culmination of Hiromi and Corea's collaboration comes in the 2009 live album *Duet*. The dual CD feature is a meeting of two different generations of jazz, crossing both language and cultural boundaries. In the second CD of the set, two originals are revealed from each artist: Corea's "Windows" and "Do Mo: Children's Song #12," and Hiromi's "Place to Be" and "Old Castle." The album was originally recorded and released in Japan in 2007, but the 2009 American release of this recording put significant exposure on Hiromi's solo piano writing and her virtuosic ability onstage. Its popularity led to Corea and Hiromi meeting again at the Budokan stadium in a concert that saw 5,500 attendees. Corea wrote about the reception of the concert as follows: "I wasn't sure how an audience that large in a venue that sprawling would receive our duet, which was conceived as an intimacy, largely improvised and for a jazz-wise public. Well, what a surprise when the audience calmly and appreciatively took in the almost two-hour concert with great interest and standing-ovation approval. I was so happy to see that this could happen in this day and age, and then thought, 'Well, the Japanese have such an artistic culture.'"¹⁰

Continuing forward, the third figure of interest is Erroll Garner, a notable jazz pianist of the mid-twentieth century. His distinctive style contributions were his vocalizations while playing and acting as a bridge for jazz musicians between small venues (nightclubs) and large venues (the concert hall). His early recordings feature stride piano rhythm patterns in the left hand that remained steady, while the right-hand melodic material played slightly behind the beat. He also made use of polyrhythms and swing rhythms that resembled Latin rhumba textures. Garner famously never learned to read sheet music, so publications of his compositions are simply transcriptions by other parties. But all of these can be found in Hiromi's compositions and

¹⁰ "Another Mind," Concord, Concord Albums, December 16, 2014, <https://concord.com/concord-albums/another-mind/>.

performance style. An example of this can be found in her Rick Beato interview, where she talks about her teacher Noriko Hikida. Hikida encouraged her to play Hanon exercise no. 1 “In the style of Erroll [Garner],” to make the exercises more palatable, which opened a world of creativity for Hiromi to explore other fusions of classical and jazz music.¹¹ Here is the original Hanon exercise in C Major:



And here is Hiromi’s present-day improvisation of the Hanon, based on her childhood improvisations on Garner’s style:¹²



Hiromi has maintained the right hand mostly intact, save for a few additions of intervals on the third beat. However, the left hand is completely reharmonized and transformed into that Garner style she referenced earlier on in the interview. For further context, the example below is

¹¹ Rick Beato, dir. *Hiromi: The Most Electrifying Pianist Alive*. 2025. YouTube video, 1:05:36. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xcKd9OkMPcc>.

¹² Transcription credit: Cornelius Tsen

a transcription of Garner's "I Only Have Eyes for You," where the textural distinction between the hands corresponds with Hiromi's rendition:¹³



Garner's left-hand textures are more vertically oriented than what Hiromi provided in the Hanon example, but the general harmonic scheme, leaps in the hands, and the rapid rhythm switching all make their ways into Hiromi's solo piano music. Garner passed away in 1977, so there would have been no personal encounters between Hiromi and him. But the spirit of his energetic playing is certainly an influence on her music.

The jazz artist that Hiromi formally studied with at the Berklee College of Music is Ahmad Jamal. Jamal received training in European classical music from Mary Cardwell Dawson, a voice teacher and director of the National Negro Opera Company. Jamal's playing style is considered more restrained than his colleagues, which is a distinct change in taste considering how many jazz artists thrive on controlled chaos. In a print interview for *The Great Jazz Pianists: Speaking of Their Lives and Music*, he said the following on his early musical training: "I was playing Liszt etudes in competition when I was eleven years old. So if I was doing that at eleven – and they were finger breakers – then I started very, very young: at three.

¹³ Transcription credit: An employee from the website/service "My Jazz Sheet Music Transcriptions"

[...] I also studied with fledgling and aspiring musicians around Pittsburgh, and we never had that separation of classical and so-called jazz music. It was music, either good or bad. [...] We considered Art Tatum a study, just like Bach or Beethoven.”¹⁴

The rest of that interview provides incredible insight on Jamal’s technique and influences, many of which were passed to Hiromi. Jamal also mentioned the standardization of Hanon and Czerny technical exercises but considered them only a small part of the larger picture in pedagogical and performance practice. From a philosophical perspective, Jamal considers the “openness” and “lightness” of his sound, and the use of space in his compositions as forms of discipline. The level of dedication Jamal puts forth in his work, and the polite refusal of genre labels in favor of making music “for music’s sake” has made its way over to Hiromi’s personal and sonic landscape.

That makes the final artist in Hiromi’s direct circle of influence, Canadian pianist-composer Oscar Peterson. Peterson is considered “the King of Inside Swing,” and his multi-decade career blended elements of classical, jazz, and twentieth century popular music in his work. Oscar had siblings who played the piano as he did, most notably his sister Daisy whom he credits as being his first piano teacher. Daisy centered her career in Montreal and taught both classical and jazz students.¹⁵ Because of this, Oscar’s career followed a balanced approach between performance and pedagogy. He taught piano and improvisation in the Toronto area, with a five-year tenure at the Advanced School of Contemporary Music in the 1960s. His teaching philosophy centered around assigning the works of Johann Sebastian Bach as a means for

¹⁴ Len Lyons, “Ahmad Jamal,” in *The Great Jazz Pianists: Speaking of Their Lives and Music* (Da Capo Press, 1983).

¹⁵ “Oscar Peterson: A Jazz Sensation,” Library and Archives Canada, last modified March 31, 2000, accessed January 2026, https://epe.lac-bac.gc.ca/100/206/301/lac-bac/oscar_peterson-ef/www.lac-bac.gc.ca/4/2/m3-2002-e.html?nodisclaimer=1.

building technique and artistry, and he frequently quoted classical composers in his performances. Pianism for Oscar, much like Corea, Garner, and Jamal, was a combination of the training he received, with the additional element of eclectic spirit woven between their musical textures.

In 2004, Hiromi met and toured with Oscar Peterson in Japan. After his passing in 2007, Hiromi wrote the solo pieces “Oscar’s New Camera” and “Take Me Home” in 2008 as part of a larger tribute concert, later recorded for the 2015 album *Oscar, With Love: The Songs of Oscar Peterson*. The Estate of Oscar Peterson, Kelly Peterson (his wife), and Felt Film published a series of interviews, in which Hiromi talks fondly about her time performing with him in Tokyo, and the inspiration behind the title “Oscar’s New Camera.” “Whenever he had cameras in his hand, he was like a little kid, you know? [...] Every day he was showing me new cameras, and he would go *ding!* And I wanted to capture that very precious moment with him. [...] [The tour] was too unrealistic; it was too dreamy...I still don’t know if it really happened.”¹⁶

What matters between these four pianists, is that they are all connected to each other and Hiromi, whether directly or indirectly. In Figure 1.2, the diagram shows Hiromi as the centerpiece, with her largest influences named in an “ancestry” tree. Figure 1.1 breaks down the circular and arrow distribution by color to describe an individual’s relationship to another, or where their music is typically categorized.

Figure 1.1 – Table of Color Codes for Figure 1.2

Color	Description
Violet circle	Central figure of the diagram (Hiromi)
Blue and teal circles	People associated with jazz music

¹⁶ Hiromi Uehara (@hiromimusic). Instagram post. December 12, 2025, <https://www.instagram.com/p/DSKuQ8fDkOR/>.

Lavender circles	People associated with classical music
Green circles/red arrows	References a direct teacher/student relationship
Black arrows	Marks a direct mention of influence AND professional working relationship (they have crossed paths)
Orange dotted arrows	Marks a direct mention of influence WITHOUT ever working together (they have not crossed paths)

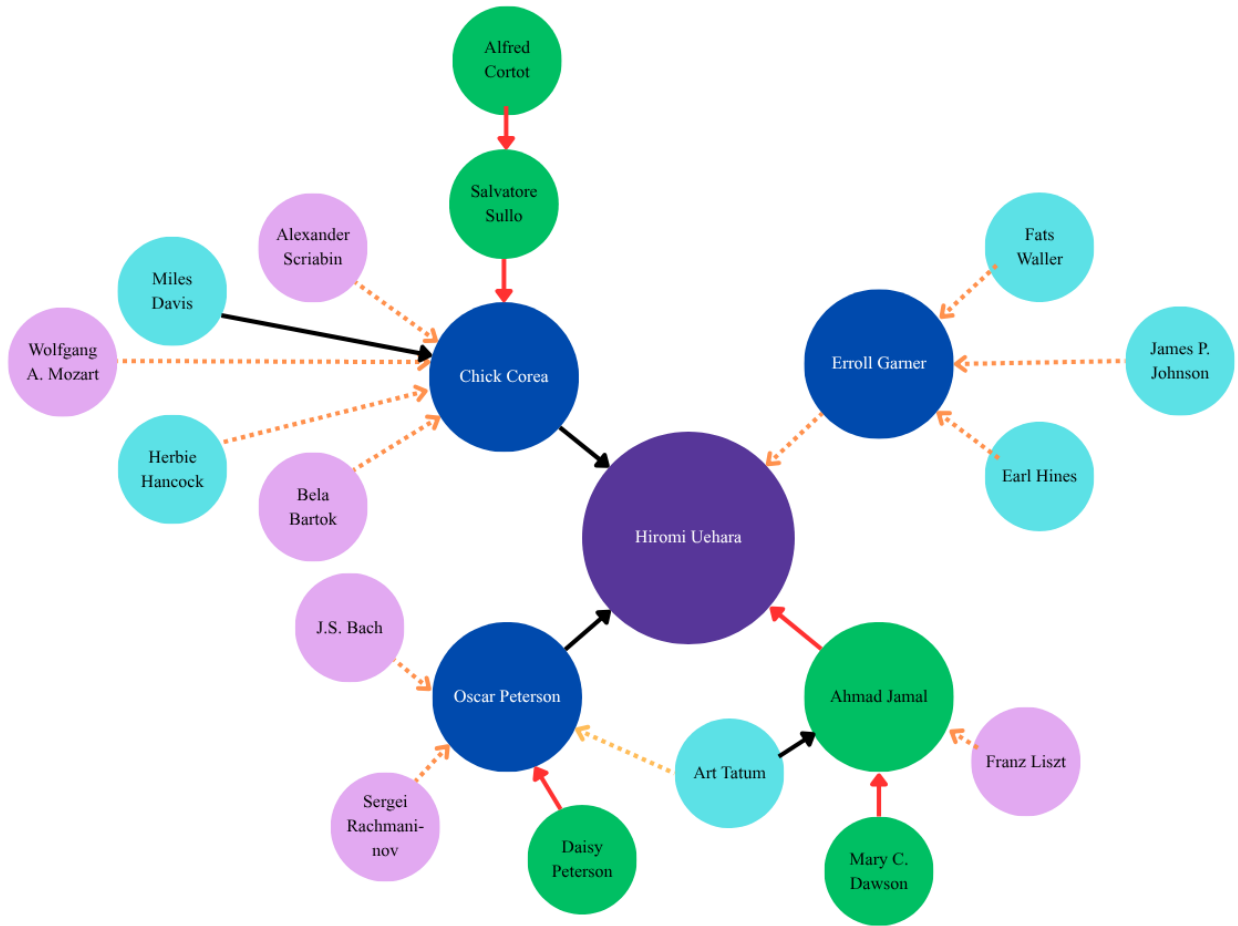


Figure 1.2: Pedagogical and Primary Musical Influences of Hiromi

This retracing of Hiromi's pedagogical and performance genealogy is an important factor in her biographical details, especially when tying back her history into the context of broader historical connections. Hiromi's pedagogical background indicates a genre-less understanding of music, which is an uncommon teaching method for most piano teachers. Historically, the markers of genre have kept pianists (and their teachers) within a tight line of where they fit, with specific social conventions and expectations in how to escalate in a performance-based career. In Hiromi's case, her artistic sincerity links with expressions of whimsy and virtuosic excellence to produce a career unlike no other. Her works contain extremely difficult demonstrations of overt virtuosity, with her solo repertoire shaped by nineteenth-century classical idioms, twentieth and twenty-first-century jazz improvisational technique, and additional touches of rock and pop.

The virtuosity being presented here is a multimodal approach shaped by Hiromi's personality and career choices, and it is framed by a deliberately constructed stage persona that influences a wide-reaching audience. This document studies the compositional and performance motivations behind Hiromi's artistry, across multiple visual and aural domains. Chapter II examines the compositional mechanics Hiromi takes that turn a solo instrument into an "orchestra;" Chapter III considers the study of genre markers and Hiromi's shifting relationship towards labels, and Chapter IV covers the visual style, showing how stage presence and concert fashion frame authority and audience perception under the lens of female pianism.

Chapters V and VI then translate those stylistic domains into an explicit framework: Chapter V identifies how virtuosity becomes measurable in notation and repertoire design using nineteenth-century scores as examples ("virtuosity on the page"), while Chapter VI examines how that virtuosity is read in live performance ("virtuoso on the stage"), culminating in Hiromi's own approach to virtuosity in the twenty-first century.

CHAPTER II: COMPOSITIONAL STYLE

To understand what is happening within the scope of Hiromi's virtuosity, the first location of explorations is in the notation. Scores provide a large wealth of information for performers to interpret all manner of physical and emotional expression on the stage. However, in classical music study, the standard practice is to study scores written by the composer. Hiromi's score publications are not written by Hiromi herself. Under each official collection lists a name of a transcriber who has gone to painstaking lengths to recreate the music recorded in the studio album. While Hiromi has been seen in some interview clips with manuscripts, this document is operating under the assumption that Hiromi does not edit her own music personally when it is published for purchase. This presents a slight issue when understanding what editorial markings belong to a transcriber or Hiromi, but with the combination of studying recordings, a fuller picture of Hiromi's solo piano style is revealed. This chapter will analyze two scores, with a tracing of her earliest developments and complications with composing for solo piano.

Hiromi's career as a professional composer began in 2000, while she was an undergraduate student. She developed a palette of clear rhythm and harmony-based patterns and her development of primary melodic material is primarily made through improvisation (which is later interpreted and written out by transcribers). Today, she composes primarily for small jazz ensemble, but solo piano is her secondary focus based on the number of compositions available. The current album release schedule averages to about one per year, and solo compositions have been scattered throughout her discography, with two albums featuring exclusively solo piano. Table 2.1 is a complete list of all her solo piano works publicly released, arranged in chronological order of composition.

Table 2.1: Complete Solo Works of Hiromi Uehara

Composition Name:	Date:	Album Appearance:
The Tom and Jerry Show	2000	<i>Another Mind</i> (2003)
Green Tea Farm	2003	<i>Brain</i> (2004)
Place to Be	2007	<i>Place to Be</i> (2009)
Pachelbel's Canon	2007	<i>Place to Be</i>
Oscar's New Camera	2008	<i>Oscar, With Love: The Songs of Oscar Peterson</i> (2017)
Take Me Home	2008	<i>Oscar, With Love: The Songs of Oscar Peterson</i>
I've Got Rhythm	2008	<i>Hiromi's Sonicbloom: Beyond Standard</i> (2008)
BQE	2009	<i>Place to Be</i>
Choux a la Crème		
Sicilian Blue		
Bern Baby Bern		
Somewhere		
Capecod Chips		
Islands Azores		
Viva! Vegas: Show City, Show Girl		
Viva! Vegas: Daytime in Las Vegas		
Viva! Vegas: The Gambler		
Firefly	2014	<i>Alive (feat. Anthony Jackson & Simon Phillips)</i> (2014)
Kaleidoscope	2019	<i>Spectrum</i> (2019)
Whiteout		
Yellow Wurlitzer Blues		
Spectrum		
Blackbird		

Mr. C.C.		
Once in a Blue Moon		
Rhapsody in Various Shades of Blue (Medley)		
Pendulum	2025	<i>OUT THERE (feat. Sonicwonder) (2025)</i>

While this repertoire list is comprehensive to the date of publication, what made compiling this list difficult is estimating the timeline between the writing stage of a piece, its recording, editing, and release. It is difficult to ascertain whether the entire track list for both solo albums was composed and recorded in one year, because there aren't any written records of Hiromi talking about her average compositional process and length. But Hiromi talks often about composing as a daily activity so it can be assumed that these solo works are collected over years of consistent writing.

The only piece that has some publishing discrepancies between officially published editions is Hiromi's first solo composition: *The Tom and Jerry Show*. A 2000 spiral-bound publication of *The Tom and Jerry Show* exists, known only by digital scan, and it claims to be published under the Yamaha Music Foundation, but its authenticity is dubious at best. Some independent musicians have transcribed some of Hiromi's early works unofficially, and those editions are useful in increasing the accessibility of her music, but after the release of *Place to Be* (2009), the Yamaha Music Foundation collaborated with Alfred Music Publishing to release Hiromi's first collection of solo piano music transcribed by professionals. *Place to Be* remains the only internationally available physical and digital collection of Hiromi's solo works, as *Spectrum* (2019) is only commercially available to Japanese customers, with international buyers having to seek Japanese proxy retailers or secondhand platforms for purchasing.

Before *Place to Be* (2009), solo piano works were just a small feature in her yearly album releases. *Place to Be* marks a special part of Hiromi's life, where she turns away from the jazz ensemble and towards herself. In a shortened interview with CNN, Hiromi said about the inspiration of her album: "I started touring when I was 23 years old. I went to as many places that I've never been before...I went to Africa, Europe, Asia, and of course the States and Canada."¹⁷ As a result, the piano transforms into a passport for her of all the places she's been. Each piece in *Place to Be* is named after a different location of the world that Hiromi either visited on her tour travels, or a place she wanted to visit. Some pieces are not real locations at all, but fictional or abstract. Either way, titles play a huge importance in tying the theme together for this debut piano solo album.

In a separate interview under the Telarc label, Hiromi indicates that *Place to Be* serves as a personal archive of her twenties as a pianist.¹⁸ "When I am in [my] twenties, it's just like life that you have very energetic youth, and immaturity. I think every essence like this is very precious in music. And I would never be playing like I am now, in ten years." Another point of challenge associated with the album is Hiromi's own handling of the piano as a self-contained ensemble. In multiple video interviews, she talks about this expectation to be a bass player, to be a drum player...to be a whole orchestra within one body. *Place to Be* was her experiment in pulling out the potential of the piano, and in some ways, the real "place to be" is onstage, no matter where she was in the world. Whether it be passport or journal, the twelve pieces in *Place to Be* contains many rhythmic and textural patterns. Some general patterns in the album include:

¹⁷ CNN, *Pianist Talks to Her Piano*, 2010, 2:33, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=X8AF1EzBGgo>.

¹⁸ telarc, *Hiromi "Place To Be" EPK*, 2009, 5:02, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fGQDWsNTwYE>.

The use of extended keyboard techniques – in the pieces *Capecod Chips* and *Pachelbel's Canon*, the scores call for string muting, rulers inserted on top of the strings, or other methods of piano preparation developed from the generation of twentieth century composers that aligned with academic institutions such as John Cage or George Crumb. In *Islands Azores*, the score calls for use of knocking and clapping, similar to instructions that can be found in the piano rags of William Bolcom.

Chromatic and/or scalar motion in odd numbered groups, repeated rapidly – nearly every piece in this album contains this exact signature. If there were a Bach-style equivalent of signing one's name in notes, this may very well be Hiromi's personal cipher. The first version is a group of notes played in multiples of three or six. Another version of this is groups of five, seven, or other odd numbers that have a lower or upper neighbor group of three notes, followed by a two-note “tail” that connects the groups. These post-minimalist textures link improvisatory sections and are often placed at the end of a long phrase to indicate a breathless quality and lack of “measured time.”



Left measure: *Place to Be*
Right measure: *Viva! Vegas: Show City, Show Girl*

Indefinite repetition of three note embellishments – this creates a “crushed” sounding effect in many of Hiromi's pieces and is usually present after transitional sections between improvised material.



Sicilian Blue

Brisk switching from triplets to duplets, or vice versa – similar to the previous two patterns, this back-and-forth between different rhythmic pulses is found in most improvised sections of Hiromi’s music and executed at a very fast speed.



Choux à La Crème

A lack of artistic markings – since these scores are transcriptions of Hiromi’s performances and not written out by the composer herself, the transcribers leave out most indications of artistic interpretation. Many of the pieces have standard dynamic markings, indications of volume, or whether a section is to be played with swung rhythm (using the phrases “Bounce” or “No Bounce”). But little is stated on whether to play a section with a specific mood or energy in mind within the score. Recorded performances provide a more holistic view of how to interpret phrase structures and articulations beyond what the transcribed score offers.

Intervallic repetition in the left hand – in Hiromi’s own words, she treats the piano as an orchestra.¹⁹ As such, the right hand takes on much of the melodic material, and functions as either a soloist (trumpet, guitar, vocalist, etc.), or as a rhythmic extension of the left hand. These techniques are both a callback to stride piano playing (first developed in the 1920s) and an extension of left-hand patterns popularized by Oscar Peterson and Erroll Garner.

Structurally speaking, many of Hiromi’s solo pieces in *Place to Be* follow a formula that combines classical-style thematic trajectory with a jazz-derived performance logic. Figure 2.1 shows a basic formal analysis on these works from a classical solo perspective. The descriptors

¹⁹ Author cmweb, “Hiromi – The BIRN Interview,” The BIRN, October 16, 2019, <https://thebirn.com/hiromi-the-birn-interview/>.

“Primary Melodic Material” and “Secondary Melodic Material” are being used as a way to communicate differences in harmonic function than traditional A and B section markers.

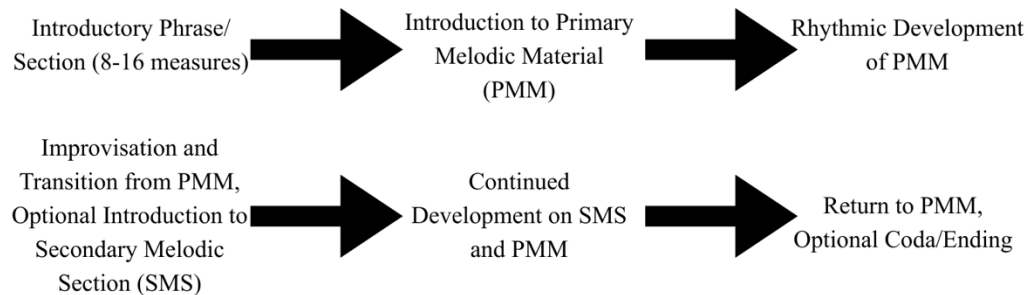


Figure 2.1: Linear structural diagram of Hiromi’s solo piano music.

Transcribers, in an effort to keep a consistent notational system, are using letters as a marker to define differences in rhythmic texture, not to formally connect past or present sections by recurring melodic or harmonic material. Figure 2.2 takes the same diagram, illustrated with slightly different labels and cyclical arrows to show how a jazz ensemble returns and deviates from the material.

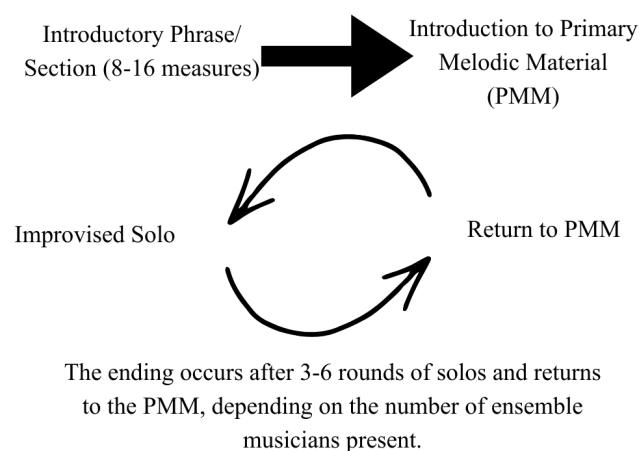


Figure 2.2: Concise visualization of Hiromi’s formal structure in composition.

In Hiromi's earliest composed works, her approach to pianism was to show what she was best at. Because of her mentor-led relationships with Ahmad Jamal and Chick Corea, Hiromi treated the piano as a percussive instrument and relied heavily on repetitive rhythmic patterns that would induce a "trance-like" state, depending on the length and durations of the pattern being looped. As far as chronology goes, *The Tom and Jerry Show* and *Green Tea Farm* are the only published works composed during Hiromi's time as a student at Berklee. But *The Tom and Jerry Show* also remains Hiromi's most popular solo piano work to date, with the number of performance and commercial recordings far surpassing that of her other works. There are several live versions of this piece, with the 2003 album recording getting transcribed and published for score distribution, however, when Hiromi was circulating this piece in performances in the early 2000s, she would improvise new material for different occasions.²⁰

When Hiromi was performing *The Tom and Jerry Show* in televised settings, much of the spectacle was in her technical prowess. At the time, she was setting herself apart not just by the unique music she was composing or performing, but by establishing herself as a pianist with uncannily clean technique, akin to Martha Argerich or Yuja Wang. It is very rare to see a musician who is able to perform live with notes as cleanly as they do in the studio, but Hiromi maintains a sharp, clean image from studio to stage. *The Tom and Jerry Show* in some ways, is a virtuosic litmus test for any musician who attempts to learn this piece, due to the slightly modified scales and stride bass patterns being a challenge to execute with clarity and strength.

One of the most difficult passages is in the second page, just past the B section. The left hand has octaves that ordinarily are not hard to play, but the close intervals and distance require

²⁰ holdsyfan, *Hiromi Uehara: Tom & Jerry Show*, 2020, 6:07, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=r58rGatZPy0>.

extreme precision to come out clearly and with no extra notes attached. The right hand is even harder, with combinations of intervals that are not idiomatic to the pianist's hands.



This is one of the few examples where Hiromi has written something that is largely uncomfortable for pianists. These rhythmic patterns are certainly intuitive to her, but it may be an indicator that these pieces were not necessarily written with the express purpose to be performed by others. Regrouping fingers and fingering patterns are techniques applied by pianists to make performances easier to memorize, or to clarify the phrase structure for listeners. Here is an annotated example of the same passage, but with lines drawn to regroup both the hands, and conquer the challenge of tempo in clearer sections:



What regrouping allows for is a rewiring of the performer's brain to focus on direction as the central playing facet, with tighter phrasing and repetition to help guide the hand into working in quicker, more efficient movements. *The Tom and Jerry Show* may be an undergraduate-composed piece, but it contains many of the seeds that would later evolve into more intense, but better fitting repertoire.

Another passage in *The Tom and Jerry Show* that shows difficult technical work at a magnified level is in section G. The alternating fourths and single note in the right hand are positioned in a way that poses the same clarity challenges as the previous passage, only on a more crunched-down scale. The same regrouping techniques can be applied from the excerpt in section B, but the rigidity in what the fingers are capable of is what gets in the way. It is at its core, an uncomfortable passage to play, and play well. In the studio recording, Hiromi's notes ring clean and clear, but in live performances, this is where the pedestal of great technical masters (including Hiromi herself) can get broken down.



Throughout this piece, the rhythm almost exclusively drives the phrasing, which is a defining trait of Hiromi as a performer. As an improviser, she builds simple motifs and manipulates them with speed. Speed in tempo, speeding up the pulse, rapid switching of rhythmic types, all create a breathless, swinging nature that is associated with Hiromi's

compositional style. But the function of these early works all seems to be interconnected: these are mostly encore-type materials, meant to dazzle an audience at a heightened part of the program. They were not necessarily deep explorations of Hiromi's style – they were more an amalgamation of the pianists that Hiromi collaborated or studied with. In the first quarter of 2026, Hiromi returned to *The Tom and Jerry Show* in her tours by performing an orchestrated version with the Liepāja Symphony Orchestra. No recordings exist of the concert, other than a clip shared to her public Instagram story the night after, but it shows a snippet of Hiromi's writing translating fantastically from solo to ensemble.

From *The Tom and Jerry Show* to the works on *Place to Be*, Hiromi's compositional priorities shift towards more lyricism in her rhythmic motifs. Her melodic ideas are native towards the piano topography, meaning they do not embody a vocal or non-pianist quality to their phrasing structure. They sound as if they are meant to be played on the piano only. Developments in these facets are present in *Sicilian Blue*, a character piece inspired by Hiromi's time in Sicily. From the liner notes of *Place to Be*, Hiromi wrote: "When I was walking down the street in Sicily, this melody came to me naturally, probably because of such a blue sky, blue ocean and beautiful streets."

That melody in question first appears in section C. Here is the melody, notated in its simplest form:



Hiromi transforms this section by inverting the function of the hands. Gone is the traditional binary of “right-hand melody,” “left-hand support.” The left hand has the primary melodic material, which repeats in a simple dotted quarter note to eighth note motion. The right hand also has a two-beat pattern, which consists of an eighth rest, eighth note, and quarter note. The first note is a single note followed by a four-voice chord, usually an extended seventh chord or minor chord with added note. Both hands are rhythmically driven but work in sync to create a lush harmonic background. Hiromi also deepens the register of the left hand and splits the main melody into two voices in the second half of the phrase, where the bass acts as a harmonic thickener so that the melody stays within a 1.5 octave range. The last detail that transcriber Takashi Hoshide leaves in a section marked “Rubato” and two measures of ritardando, placed as a transitory point to mark the halfway point of the melodic section. The final result is section C, excerpted in full.

The musical score for Section C is presented in four systems. The first system begins with a box containing the letter 'C' and the word 'Rubato', followed by a piano (*p*) dynamic marking. The right hand (treble clef) plays a melodic line with eighth and quarter notes, while the left hand (bass clef) plays a dotted quarter note followed by an eighth note. The second system continues this pattern, with a *mf* (mezzo-forte) dynamic marking in the left hand. The third system includes a *rit.* (ritardando) marking above the right hand and a *p* (piano) marking below the left hand. The fourth system concludes with a *rit.* marking above the right hand and a repeat sign. The score is written in a key signature of one flat (B-flat) and a 3/4 time signature.

The formal structure of *Sicilian Blue* builds upon the base diagram established in Table 2.2. There are several descriptor additions not included in the previous diagram, due to the emphasis on long-form improvisation. Free improvisation is defined in this piece by a section where the right hand takes on all the melodic and rhythmic variation, and the left hand advances the harmonic phrase structure.

Table 2.2: Formal Analysis of Hiromi's *Sicilian Blue*

Section Description	Section Letter in the Score
Introductory Section	Zero (unmarked)
Free Improvisation	A
Introduction of Primary Melodic Material (PMM)	B, C
Development of PMM via Harmonic and Rhythmic Variation	C, D, E, F
Introduction of Secondary Material	G, H
Free Improvisation	I, J
Melody-Free Transition	K
Free Improvisation	L, M
Melody-Free Transition	N
Free Improvisation	O
Transition into Right Hand-Exclusive Melodic Improvisation	P
Reintroduction of Left Hand, Continued Improvisation	Q
Recapitulation of Sections B and C + Ending	R, S, T

To get a better idea of what free improvisation looks like in *Sicilian Blue* we'll use the beginning of section M as an example. In the first four bars, there is a combination of repeated two and three note embellishments, one example of chromatic motion, and a left-hand rhythmic

texture that is repeated in every measure.



This is just one of the many ways Hiromi makes a palette of her most-used rhythmic colors and paints them in a countless number of combinations. By looking at the above excerpts, it would be possible to pick apart every phrase and break it down to its core rhythms, pitches, and references. But doing so would take away from Hiromi's core value as a composer. Under her website's discography, she is often quoted saying for her debut album: "I don't want to put a name on my music. Other people can put a name on what I do. It's just the union of what I've been listening to and what I've been learning. It has some elements of classical music, it has some rock, it has some jazz, but I don't want to give it a name."²¹

In a sense, it sounds as if Hiromi is discouraging academics from evaluating her works by eschewing the construct of labels. However, it is clear by her career trajectory that Hiromi is not an academic. She is a creator, first and foremost. Whether she creates notes on the score, or curates eclectic performances onstage, she continues to elude the stifling boxes put forth by fans or critics. Interviewers also come back to this quote year after year, and Hiromi's response has shifted over time. Whenever she spoke that sentence, it was likely in protest of not wanting to be looped in with other musicians when she set out a clear path for herself. As the years passed, her attitude shifted and matured, and her later albums represent a sharper clarity in self-image. This genre-less approach was established in her studies with Noriko Hikida, and strengthened through

²¹ "DISCOGRAPHY | Hiromi Uehara," Hiromi Uehara, accessed February 18, 2026, <http://www.hiromiuehara.com/>.

her time at Berklee. To listen and perform music outside the bounds of genre is a difficult feat, but it is accomplishable. For Hiromi, she breaks the bounds of genre by incorporating pieces from multiple styles simultaneously, through explicit and implicit score references. Explicit references would be like the piece *Pachelbel's Canon in Place to Be* (2009), which reimagines the popular D major canon with additional reharmonizations and improvised passages. Implicit references would be small melodies that are embedded within an improvisational section. Hiromi likes to incorporate multi-level callbacks to composers, where she may quote another melody from the same composer in another piece of theirs. This does not show up in her scores, but it occasionally pops up in her live performances. The most notable example of this is when she plays her reimagining of George Gershwin pieces: her performances of *I Got Rhythm* often includes a quote of *Rhapsody in Blue* while she transitions between her improvisation and Gershwin's material.

Ultimately, the scores provide only a partial view of the picture. The primary takeaway from studying the notes on the score, is that Hiromi is a rhythmically *and* harmonically driven composer, and she uses a large palette of rhythmic patterns to add variety to her melodies. But the number of patterns she was able to use in her first album were limited. That limitation caused there to be a number of rhythm-based repetitions in the score that make it difficult for a performer to read and interpret variety from. The following chapter will explore the second solo album, and what revelations Hiromi has after ten years of ensemble and solo performance.

CHAPTER III: INTERTEXTUAL STYLE, REFINEMENT AND EVOLUTION

Robert Campbell, a professor at Waseda University and professor emeritus at the University of Tokyo recently asked Hiromi in an interview: “Do you always lean towards jazz?” Her response? “Whether performing or composing, my aim is to find what feels good. I then look for like-minded people, in both musicians and audiences. I want to share that excitement with everyone.”²²

This interview was focused on her most recent album *OUT THERE (feat. Sonicwonder)* (2025) and her life as an active touring musician. Between the 2000s and 2010s, many things changed in Hiromi’s life. But her core tenets remained the same: her purpose for performance and music-making is to bring joy to the audiences who delight in her music. This approach to the intersections of jazz and classical music as a single journey that erases arbitrary boundaries is refreshing in comparison to past scholarly research concerning the crossing of the two styles. Older published materials often evaluate jazz as a symptomatic response to classical music but neglect to see the road towards inspiration and influence as a two-way street. By narrowing the scope and focusing on piano only, we can better understand the relationship of jazz piano and classical piano as a symbiotic one, rather than a true genetic continuation. When an individual creates, it becomes their style. When several people create and combine, that style becomes a trend. Trends then become influenced by industrialization and manufacturing, and what was once a special idea is now considered a standard and absorbed into the musical diaspora.

The first to adopt early ragtime and jazz practices into the Western European classical canon were French composers of the Early Modernism/Impressionist movements. While these

²² “Hiromi: Sailing the Sea of Music - Face To Face | NHK WORLD-JAPAN,” NHK WORLD, accessed February 21, 2026, <https://www3.nhk.or.jp/nhkworld/en/shows/2043103/>.

composers were not writing jazz music, they took the piano and applied French pedaling and phrasing with American extensions of harmonic prose. The result became pieces like Debussy's "Golliwog's Cakewalk" from *Children's Corner Suite* (1906-8) or Satie's *Jack-in-the-Box* (1899). These solo works expanded into an international movement that lasted until the mid-twentieth century, where Russian, American, and French musicians composed works for large-scale ensembles. Perhaps the most notable classical composer with jazz fluency was George Gershwin (1898-1937), whose body of work has been attributed to being the most successful fusion between classical, jazz, and popular music. The "*Rhapsody in Blue* was the first significant work by a popular musician to create a large-scale composition in which elements of classical music, popular song, jazz and the blues were combined into a stylistically unified whole."²³

In the *Oxford Companion for Jazz*, the stylistic fusion between classical and jazz is defined and explored by author Terry Teachout as the "Third Stream." Regarding Gershwin's music, Teachout asserts that Gershwin is neither classical nor jazz. He employs classical forms and notated scores with no room for improvisation, but the melodic patterns and instrumental effects are closer related to jazz. This ambiguity has continued well into the twenty-first century for scholars who try to draw comparisons to his contemporaries. Third stream music was defined first by Gunther Schuller in an article published in the *Saturday Review of Literature* on May 13, 1961.

"I first used the term 'Third Stream' in a lecture three or four years ago, in an attempt to describe a music that was beginning to evolve with growing consistency." (Schuller, 114). He called it a fusion of jazz and contemporary "classical" music techniques, that later expanded to

²³ Terry Teachout, "Jazz and Classical Music: To the Third Stream and Beyond," in *The Oxford Companion To Jazz*, ed. Bill Kirchner (Oxford University Press, 2000), page 348.

include folk, ethnic, vernacular, and non-Western music. This article grew in popularity from being featured in the *New York Times*, and sparked heavy discussion amongst scholars who were attempting to dissect this new genre of music as a necessary label or not.

Schuller's attitude towards the term changed decades later and became as flippant as Hiromi's early attitude towards genre categorization. In his essay collection *Musings: The Musical Worlds of Gunther Schuller*, he has two essays titled "Third Stream" and "Third Stream Revisited." In the "Third Stream" essay, Schuller writes: "Ultimately, I don't care whether the term 'Third Stream' survives. In the interim it is no more than a handy descriptive term. It should be obvious that a piece of Third Stream music is first of all *music*, and its quality cannot be determined solely by categorization. Basically, I don't care what category music belongs to; I only care whether it is good or bad" (115). In the "Revisited" essay: he humorously articulates that the label became more trouble than it was worth, because of its anti-pedigree and anti-establishment implications. But Schuller's writing asserts that the Third Stream, allows individuals to express themselves in personal ways and calls it the "quintessential American music" (120).

Perhaps this is what Ahmad Jamal meant when he called jazz "American classical music."²⁴ Teachout calls the direct influence of jazz on classical music "a passing phase of modernism," and both him and Schuller affirmed that "third stream" music was primarily for large-scale ensemble music, not music for solo instruments. An attitude of confinement exists between classical and jazz piano, and performers tend to suffer from exclusionary social rituals and cultural practices that keep them bound to their styles. But both music styles bring important technical and performance foundations to the table that neither can live without. Hiromi's

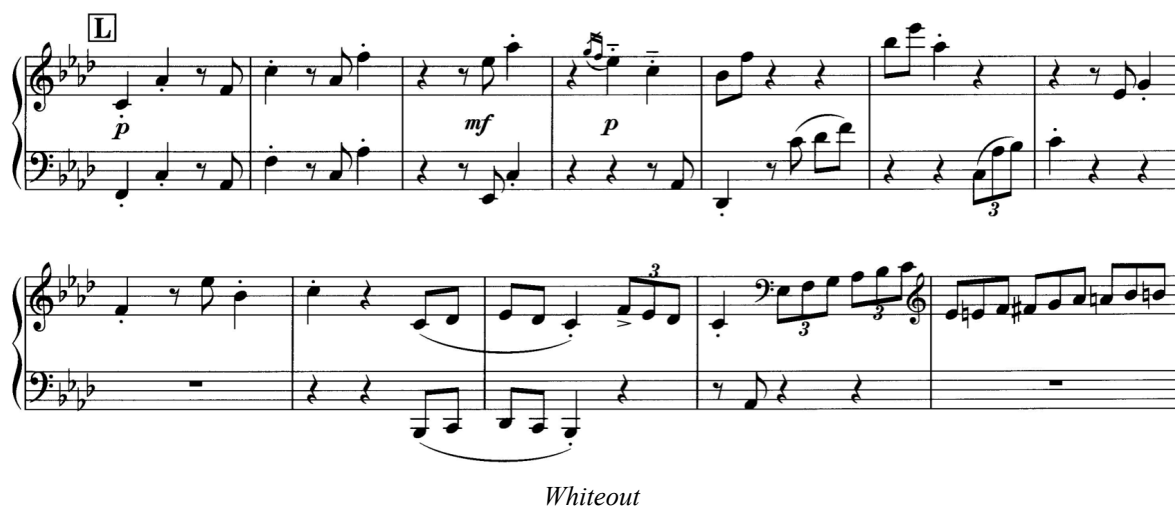
²⁴ Len Lyons, "Ahmad Jamal," in *The Great Jazz Pianists: Speaking of Their Lives and Music* (Da Capo Press, 1983).

responded to Professor Campbell mirroring the retrospective view Schuller provided, saying “I never thought about the genre, or what I wanted to be known for. [...] It’s probably thanks to my first teacher, a classical musician. She had me listen to the Jackson Five and Erroll Garner. [She] never said, “This isn’t classical.” She just played the Jackson Five LP after Horowitz. She loved all genres and impressed about me the wonders of music. I was about six, but her love of music has always stayed with me. My only focus has been to reach out and share that feeling with others. So, I’ve never given much thought to genres. But it’s as if I’m navigating a map of different musical continents. There’s jazz and classical. You learn something different from each.”

After the release of *Place to Be* (2009), Hiromi stayed true to her promise and released her sophomore solo album a decade later, titled *Spectrum* (2019). Following the previous two self-imposed rules, the album is an archive of her piano playing in her thirties, and it has a singular theme: the exploration of color. This is represented in the album cover – a simulated rainbow with Hiromi in the center, surrounded by parts of the piano dissected and circling around her. But it is also present in the titles of pieces – each piece makes use of a different color, some referencing colors more than once (like the color blue), with an exploration in different jazz and classical styles emerging as a secondary narrative arch. In addition to the patterns established in *Place to Be*, *Spectrum* now adds the following new compositional thumbprints:

Hands in rhythmic unison, placed intervallically as a way to transition between

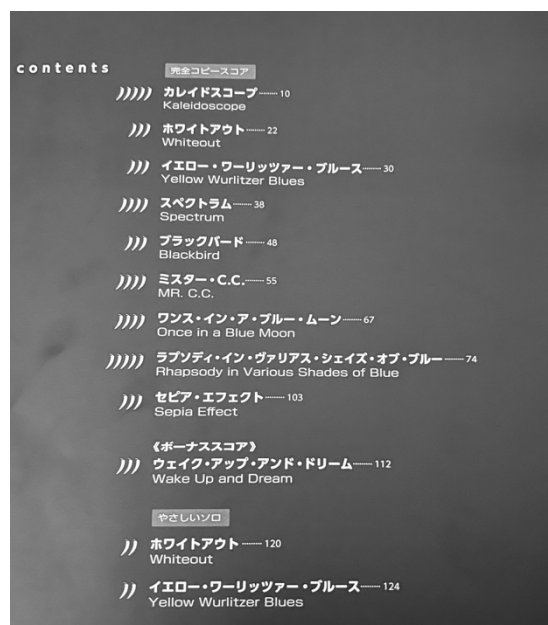
improvisational sections: this is explored in *Whiteout* and *Rhapsody in Various Shades of Blue – Medley* where the hands are not playing the same notes, but have the same rhythms. Notes are spread apart in a variety of intervals, most commonly thirds, fifths and sixths.



The same passage shows another evolution of Hiromi's melodic evolution, which is the **inclusion of rests as a tool for temporal displacement**. Silence plays a large part in performance, and Hiromi makes use of the rest in such a way where the meter becomes aurally ambiguous. In this piece, the time signature is 3/4, but the reversal of strong beat/weak beat tension and release creates a sense of anticipation that is equally as effective as inserting harmonic tension. This intentional displacement makes the phrase seem short to the listener's ear, but on the page, the phrases are much longer because the rests leave the notes searching for any kind of ending.

A marked shift towards playable pieces: in the earliest years of Hiromi's compositions, these piano solos were mainly played by her. As professional and amateur transcribers began copying her works for written access, and with a better understanding of how to write for solo piano, Hiromi's works became more accessible for experienced pianists to learn. The virtuosity and sheer technical demand did not go away, in fact, one could argue these pieces are even more technically difficult than most of the pieces on *Place to Be*. But in the score collection for Spectrum, Yamaha Publishing included a difficulty chart of where all the pieces rank for other

pianists to get an idea of.²⁵ The liner notes that were written by Hiromi herself also include valuable tips for understanding the narrative structure and influences behind each piece. It is ranked on a “spice level” scale with peppers, similar to what one could find in restaurant menus.



contents		完全コピースコア
))))	カレイドスコープ	10 Kaleidoscope
)))	ホワイトアウト	22 Whiteout
)))	イエロー・ワールリッツァー・ブルース	30 Yellow Wurlitzer Blues
))))	スペクトラム	38 Spectrum
)))	ブラックバード	48 Blackbird
))))	ミスター・C.C.	55 MR. C.C.
))))	ワンス・イン・ア・ブルー・ムーン	67 Once in a Blue Moon
))))	ラプソディ・イン・ヴァリアス・シェイズ・オブ・ブルー	74 Rhapsody in Various Shades of Blue
)))	セピア・エフェクト	103 Sepia Effect
《ボーナススコア》		
)))	ウェイク・アップ・アンド・ドリーム	112 Wake Up and Dream
やさしいソロ		
))	ホワイトアウト	120 Whiteout
))	イエロー・ワールリッツァー・ブルース	124 Yellow Wurlitzer Blues

Photo credit: Hsin-Yi Nebeker, taken from the author’s physical copy of *Spectrum*.

More pieces based on popular source material: there are two pieces that are not complete original compositions. With *Spectrum*, there is *Blackbird*: a solo piano rendition of the Beatles song, released in 1968. The other piece is *Rhapsody in Various Shades of Blue – Medley*, a reimagining of George Gershwin’s *Rhapsody in Blue*.

Hiromi describes the choice to add the *Rhapsody in Blue* on her album as a way to honor the piano as a solo orchestra. “When I first heard it, I think I was in elementary school, probably like 11 or 12. I was fascinated by all of the orchestra instruments. I found the condensed score for the solo piano version and started to play *Rhapsody in Blue* solo. I realized, wow, piano can

²⁵ No credits are given towards who exactly designed the difficulty scale, so it’s unknown as to whether it was done by Hiromi herself or one of the transcribers on the publishing team.

be clarinet, piano can be trumpet. [...] That's why I always thought that if I ever have the opportunity to record *Rhapsody in Blue*, the first time has to be solo, not with an orchestra, just to prove that piano is an orchestra itself. That's how I felt when I first heard that song.”²⁶

For Hiromi, *Rhapsody in Blue* is a piece she's studied for over thirty years, and *Rhapsody in Various Shades of Blue – Medley* is a combination of the Gershwin material, intertwined with other songs that have the word “blue” in them. The primary samples come from John Coltrane's *Blue Train* and The Who's *Behind Blue Eyes*. What results is a nearly twenty-three-minute-long recording that injects pop and rock into an icon of classical jazz innovation. Below is a table that breaks down the harmonic and melodic material of Hiromi's reinvention of Gershwin's work. Table 3.1 shows notes comparing the original piano and orchestra score with Hiromi's score made available from Yamaha Music Foundation in 2019.

Table 3.1 – Formal Analysis of Hiromi's *Rhapsody in Various Shades of Blue – Medley*

Section Letter	Section Description	Notes on Changes/Materials:
Opening	Introduction of <i>Rhapsody in Blue</i>	Additional octave glissando on mm. 1 and improvisational run at mm. 15
A	Continuation of Gershwin	Improvisation on rhythm from mm. 25, 27, melodic improvisation from mm. 28-32
B	Continuation of Gershwin	Textural additions at mm. 37-39 that vary from the piano solo, full departure from the original solo starting at mm. 50
C	Rearrangement of material	Material that is found after the original piano's cadenza is inserted earlier than anticipated, new improvisation at mm. 78-79
D	Restatement, brief return back into original solo	Melodic improvisation added at mm. 97-102
E	New material	Hiromi's brand-new melodic improvisation emerges
F, G	New material	Long scale solo improvisation with funk and smooth jazz elements
H	Rhythmic transition	

²⁶ “Hiromi – The BIRN Interview.” The BIRN, October 16, 2019. <https://thebirn.com/hiromi-the-birn-interview/>

I	Return to new material, transition to Gershwin	Measure 228 marks the transition back into Gershwin's piano solo
J, K	Gershwin's return	Slight rhythmic variations but overall unchanged
L, M, N	Introduction of <i>Behind Blue Eyes</i> – The Whos, <i>Blue Train</i> – John Coltrane, plus new Hiromi material	The musical quote is in mm. 273-276 before being added upon by solo improvisations
O	Abrupt return to Gershwin	Measure 384 marks the return of the piano solo part
P, Q, R, S, T	Continuation of Gershwin	Rhythmic embellishments are abundant, and the hands are switched (no hand crossing in Hiromi's version). The piano solo is reduced in texture to account for integrating all the major orchestral harmonies. Improvisations added in mm. 481, 489-490.
U, V	New material	Hiromi changes the left hand to be a samba rhythm, and reinvents the right hand melody entirely.
W, X, Y (up to measure 728)	Rearrangement and return to Gershwin	Integration of the solo and orchestra leads to a thicker sounding piano.
Y (measure 729), Z	Gershwin but with swung rhythm (marked "Bounce"), coda	New melodic features and extended seventh chords layer on top of Gershwin's ending.

Between the release of the two solo albums, Hiromi's ability to compose longer melodies and create new rhythmic improvisation patterns matured significantly. One example within her *Rhapsody in Blue* is in the first full page of original material. There is no left hand on this page, it's a single voice texture that combines many of the rhythmic traits seen in previous pieces, but with added variety in articulation and phrasing.



It's hard to believe that this passage is incorporated within the larger structure of the *Rhapsody in Blue* timeline, but it acts as an interruptive section, not a smooth transition. This

piece is also rated by Hiromi and her team as the most difficult solo composition to play. Not only is Gershwin's *Rhapsody in Blue* already considered a complex work to master, adding nearly ten minutes of original and borrowed melodies on top of incorporating solo and ensemble textures makes this a feat for any pianist to accomplish. It is not a transcription, nor an homage. It is a complete reinvention of one of the most famous piano pieces of the twentieth century, revitalized with the spirit of the twenty-first century.

A continuation of Hiromi's pianism is also explored in the piece *Mr. C.C.* The liner notes provided at the beginning of the score collection say that it is dedicated to the King of Comedy, Charlie Chaplin. In Hiromi's own words, translated it reads: "Although his films are in black and white, I feel that the comical expressions and movements make them look very colorful. [...] The most important thing about this song is to play it with a lot of humor. The tempo is fast, especially in the parts where the left hand uses a stride style, so it can be difficult to play, but rather than trying to play every single note without making any mistakes, try to play in a comical way, even if you slow down the tempo a little." This line shows self-awareness that the marked tempi in the scores are often unrealistic for the average pianist trying to learn these works, but Hiromi's acknowledgement and suggested performance note is really helpful and indicative of a broader attitude shift towards writing music more accessible for pianists to perform. She continues further: "This song has many tempo changes, but as you play, imagine it as a scene change in a movie, and enjoy the transitions between scenes. For the last image, imagine the final scene of a movie, like dancing with Chaplin."

Shortly after the release of this piece, Concord Jazz released a stop-motion-style animation of *Mr. C.C.* on their YouTube channel, directed by Takaumi Furuhashi (a colleague of Hiromi's). In it, string and felt puppets of Hiromi and Charlie Chaplin are seen dancing and

moving together. The transitions fade in and out, or circle in which are reminiscent of Chaplin's films. It's also silent, save for Hiromi's recording playing in the background. There are moments where the two seem to be enjoying each other, in full color. And those moments are contrasted with black and white scenes of falling down, getting lost, and animated strings that control the puppet's movements. There is no view of the supposed puppet master, but it can be interpreted that the strings represent loss of autonomy and feeling stuck. After puppet Mr. Chaplin finds a pair of scissors, they assist each other in cutting off their strings and the short film switches between color and black and white as the music rises in tempo. And as the ending approaches, they are happily dancing, playing the piano, and getting tea as the energy culminates in a fiery ending.

Mr. C.C. is the only piece that has its own companion music video to supplement the story it's telling. It also feels like a natural evolution of *The Tom and Jerry Show* with its similar mood shifts and stride piano style. What separates *Mr. C.C.* from *The Tom and Jerry Show* besides the obvious character reference changes, is that evolution in playability that hadn't been developed yet. In Hiromi's twenties, her whimsical yet superhumanly fast fingers were what carried her to notoriety. In her thirties, that notoriety continued to climb, so there was less of a need to compose pieces that were relying solely on technical prowess. There is a subtle attitude shift, and a more refined nature that settles within the *Spectrum* album, and even though its pieces are generally more bombastic and energetic, the lyrical pieces are much more harmonically and melodically developed. The ideas matured, the playing style settled, and a sense of authority was established in Hiromi's writing.

If Hiromi were to continue composing for solo piano, her next album release would be in 2029, as a closer to her forties. So far, the 2020s has brought exactly one solo work: *Pendulum*

from the 2025 album *OUT THERE (feat. Hiromi's Sonicwonder)*. The piece contains very thin textures and a one-octave interval arpeggiating back and forth mimicking the sound of a pendulum in an analog clock. If *Pendulum* is any indicator of what's to come, we can guess that a gentler, more introspective album about the concept of time is in the works. But there is no accurate predication method to determine what ideas will be explored. The following chapters will pause on analyzing specific works, and start focusing on specific patterns observed in Hiromi's overall music making.

CHAPTER IV: VISUAL STYLE: CONCERT FASHION AND VIRTUOSIC EXPRESSION

A musician is not only an engager of aural arts, but an engager of visual spectacle as well. Hiromi utilizes both visual and aural in her performances, with a specific mode of dress that has become a mainstay in her career. That style performs both the function of a costume and a uniform, which places concert fashion in a unique position balancing these two concepts.

For musicians, the boundary between aesthetic and function begin to intertwine when it comes to clothing made to be seen onstage (a costume), and clothing made to be performed in (a uniform). When we think of a uniform for musicians, we often think of “concert black” – a tradition that harkens back to 17th-century Europe. But when we think of a soloist’s outfit, what is considered “standard” is to dress in clothing that resembles more of a costume. Uniforms, gender, and costumery are confusingly blurred (perhaps intentionally so), but they all function as a way to show self-expression on the stage. In Hiromi’s case, the function has morphed over time: the costume (her style of dress that is larger-than-life) *became* a uniform (something she puts on consistently for the stage).

To better understand that context, let’s travel back to the inception of theater. Theater is the closest field of performance art that has a highly documented visual and oral history, from Ancient Greek plays to now modern-day Broadway and the West End. Women’s clothing in theater was created by men, for the use of men because of the practice of obligatory crossdressing. In Edo-era Japan, the art was known as *onnagata* (female role), emerging in early 17th-century kabuki theater.²⁷ In Renaissance-era England, women were largely excluded from working professional theater roles until the 1660s, so men became adept at pretending to be women to circumvent rules often implemented by religious or hierarchal authorities.

²⁷ Timon Screech, “Fashion and Moral Concern in Early Modern Japan,” in *The Cambridge Global History of Fashion*, 1st ed., ed. Christopher Breward et al. (Cambridge University Press, 2023).

What we see as a result of these morality-induced fears, is that clothing for women has been performatively functional since the very beginning. And in the realm of theatrical performance, costumery was a means of coy illusion – tricking the audience into believing women were on the stage, even though they weren't allowed to be. Even after social norms relaxed, and actresses began to join actors onstage for mixed gender casting, the male gaze still governed what was allowed to be functional and what was allowed to be a spectacle.

In relation to musicians, the publicity of an individual's role determines what clothing was considered appropriate. For example, if the role of a court musician is to publicly entertain, then colorful, over-the-top clothing is a must. If a musician is performing in an ensemble, then clothing must not draw attention away from the music. Blending in becomes the priority, patterns become simpler, and garment construction standardizes the gaze into looking at the group as one whole.

This culminates in the toil of attempting to track down a visual history of women's performance clothing, specifically women on the keyboard. If the earliest examples of women onstage were just male performances of women, and women were excluded from pursuing musicianship as much as they were theater, what is left is a very limited scope of research possibility. In this journey to track down what performance clothing looked like before the inception of photography, we started with finding paintings that featured siblings of notable composers on the piano. Beginning with the famous 1780-1781 "Portrait of the Mozart Family," this painting depicts Marianne (sister), Wolfgang (brother), Anna Maria (mother), and Leopold Mozart (father) crowded around a fortepiano. Marianne and Wolfgang are playing together at on the keyboard, hands crossed, while Leopold is holding a violin to the right.



Artist: Johann Nepomuk della Croce

According to letters exchanged by Wolfgang and Leopold, we know that Marianne was unable to attend initial painting sessions due to illness in the summer of 1780. Wolfgang writes: “What about the family portrait? Is it a good likeness of you? Has the painter started on my sister yet?” And Leopold responded days later with: “You ask how the family portrait is turning out? So far nothing more has been done to it. Either I have had no time to sit, or the painter could not arrange a sitting; and now your sister is laid up with a cold and cannot leave the house.”²⁸

What is worth noting in this portrait from Marianne’s perspective, is the stiff back posture likely caused by the restrictiveness of the garment as she overlaps her hands with Wolfgang’s. The maroon color, shininess of the dress fabric, and translucent ruffles are indicators of access to a high-quality tailor. The ribbon color on her wig matches the bows on her bodice and rear, making this the pinnacle of deliberate, and delicate femininity. But it is a family portrait, not an action shot of playing at the fortepiano. It is then a safe conjecture that Marianne’s clothing is not indicative of what she would wear when performing with her family members on tours throughout Austria. Corsets, custom-tailored garments, and stitching make this a sorely inaccurate portrait of expectations for female keyboard players in 18th-century Europe. Even the

²⁸ Stanley Sadie, *Mozart: The Early Years 1756-1781* (OUP Oxford, 2006), page 493.

existence of this portrait is a subtle indicator of the wealth the Mozart family possessed to commission an artist. But it is an accurate portrait in the sense that it provides one of the clearest images of Marianne's short career as a musician before her brother took over the business.

Similar to the Mozart family, a late nineteenth-century painting of the Mendelssohn siblings shows them playing the piano together in a home.²⁹ The black and white color scheme makes it difficult to distinguish details on the garments, but Fanny Hensel's dress features a more relaxed silhouette and natural hair, with the puffy short sleeves and lack of corset feeling more realistic to what a woman could wear while playing the fortepiano comfortably.



Artist: Byr Poetzelberger, rescreened for Getty Images

One of the clearest visual examples of what a female pianist would've been wearing in the nineteenth century is found in the art collections of Clara Schumann. Pictured below is an 1854 drawing of Clara playing the piano in concert alongside violinist Joseph Joachim. It is a

²⁹ The Getty Image collection cites this painting as being completed in 1888, but Fanny Hensel's dates of birth and death are 1805-1847. This makes the artist's work a posthumous imagining of the Mendelssohn siblings, not a posed portrait in which they were sitting in front of the artist.

stark contrast to the Marianne Mozart portrait and the Fanny Hensel portrait, because it is as close as we can get to a candid performance shot. Here we have Clara's dress, fabric choice unknown, hair pulled back to avoid encroaching on the eyes, and sleeves either rolled up or purposefully tailored to only come down to the elbow.³⁰ Freedom of movement is essential in order to play the scope of repertoire Clara was touring with at the time. But this is perhaps the clearest intersection of form and function in a woman's garment, and one of the first preserved instances of female "concert fashion."



Artist: Adolph von Menzel, redistributed by Deutsche Fotothek and the Robert Schumann House

Concert fashion in this case, can be defined as garments that were meant to be worn on the stage by one or more musicians. For the ensemble musician, it is a uniform, but for the soloist, it is a uniform that can become their signature costume. Even the contrast between Clara's bright gown and Joachim's black-tie outfit in the sketch is worth noting, because while they are playing as partners, Clara's dress is more striking on the drawing. She is deliberately not matching with Joachim; she is creating a visual spectacle of music performance. Her access to

³⁰ This photo has been recolored by an unknown colorist, as most images of this sketch are in black and white. It is an approximation of what colors might have been worn, but there are no further sources to support this assumption.

colorful clothing, matching hair decorations and jewelry signals her wealth and social class as she is performing for the audience. But she is still pushed towards the right of the sketch, as the positioning of the piano logistically calls for it. With our modern eyes, it also feels like a subtle point being made that the outfits performers are wearing, are not meant to be the focus of the conversation. And that may be true to an extent, but the colors of the outfits certainly pull the eye towards the body before noticing what the activity of the portrait is.



Artist: Jules-Alexandre Grün

Another example of nineteenth-century performance fashion is the 1885 painting “Concert de musique de chambre.” This does not feature any famous figures; it appears to be a posed portrait of a chamber music reading session. Between the anonymous woman pictured above and Clara, both are portrayed as wearing their hair in low buns, with their sleeves rolled up and the layers of fabric concealing the shape of the chairs they’re sitting on. But this painting is almost thirty years older, with the most revealing detail being the angle of the painting. In Clara’s sketch, she was drawn to the side, with Joachim featured front and center. In this painting, the woman is closest to the center of the canvas, and her white dress stands out

considerably from the concert black and grey the other male musicians are wearing. Grün is highlighting a comparatively more equal distribution between performers, as the woman is not being hidden by the violinist. Her expression reads that she is deep into concentration, and her fellow musicians are working alongside her, showing a mutual respect in collaboration.

With those examples, an assertion can be made that nineteenth-century trends for women pianists were: long hair tucked into a low bun, colorful dresses with sleeves often no longer than elbow length, and a combination of corsets and petticoats to shape the body into a tight Victorian-era silhouette. And as the demand for portraiture died down in paintings, the birth of photography portraiture was on the rise. What is available in the realm of early photography are a few photos of Clara Schumann towards the end of her life, with one notable photo of her posing on an upright piano.



Credit: The Bettman collection, courtesy of Getty Images and the New York Times

The photograph's details are clearer than the 1854 sketch: there are observable tassels, dots, and strong stitching patterns visible within the folds of fabric. This is also evidence of the

growing industrialization of clothing manufacturing, as the “ready-to-wear” era of clothing would’ve begun to take off during this period. Clara’s sleeves are longer but still rolled up to accommodate for the freedom of wrist movement. It is unknown whether this was a dress Clara actually performed in, but judging by the angle of the seating position and the sleeves, it seems she’s comfortable enough to show that she can play in this dress without much restriction to her figure.

In the twentieth-century, we start to see more women pianists gaining an international reputation, as globalization begins to soften the cultural borders of countries. For the concert pianist, the uniform expectations onstage became synonymous with Western European “formal dresswear.” The regional distinction is important, because formal clothing can hold a wide variety of meanings in different countries. Since the piano is associated with European classical tradition, pianists from other countries are not seen wearing traditional dresswear from their countries. They’re wearing what European and American manufacturing factories determined was comfortable and demure. As an example, pictured below is a press release photograph of Dame Myra Hess performing circa 1920-1940.



Credit: UW Madison Mills Music Library Collection

What's seen here is a continuation of the matronly low bun hairstyle, but the neckline is more exposed and features a pearl necklace. It is a relaxation of previous modesty standards, but still closer related to the nineteenth century rather than the twenty-first century. The sleeves are no longer rolled up to the elbow, instead they cover her arms all the way to the wrist – and bodywear such as corsets were out of fashion due to wartime restrictions on metal and fabric use. Hess' performance dress is also present in this photograph, taken in the peak of her lunchtime concerts at the National Gallery in the second World War.



Credit: Imperial War Museum gallery

On a different stage, the dress code for jazz musicians differs dramatically than what classical musicians were wearing in the twentieth century. They were comparatively more casual, focusing on function rather than aesthetics even when performing in formal concert spaces. One reason for this could be that since jazz is often found in small, more intimate venues, fashion was not a primary spectacle to focus on because the audience was physically closer to the performers. Another conjecture is that since jazz musicians tend to operate within ensembles rather than as soloists, visual uniformity demanded that jazz musicians look more cohesive, instead of standing

out in dress. The exceptions for this would be conductors or band leaders, due to their center placement onstage. They had the option of dressing differently to communicate their position of musical power to the audience.



Toshiko Akiyoshi conducting in Carnegie Hall, 1980. Credit: AP Photos

As the twentieth-century progressed, women gained increasing access to civil rights and job equality, and with that, the agency to choose looser and more comfortable clothing. Women are, however, not immune to criticism from male concertgoers, and attitudes of misogyny that pervade concert spaces. This continues to be an issue today, with many women pianists having to consider what the perception of their dresses will harbor on the stage. Will a shorter dress garner unwarranted attention? Will a clothing malfunction occur when the arms are moving too quickly, and something slips? In a competition setting, will a panel of judges take off points for inappropriate stage presence? These are all questions women face when choosing what to wear, and while those conservative critiques shrink into a vocal minority, they are not gone forever.

Combining this with the continual technological advancements of photography, clothing manufacturing, we begin to see young girls, teenagers, and women populate the stage in their own outfits. Below are some examples of beloved twentieth-century pianists: a very young Alicia

de Larrocha posing at her family's piano in the 1930s, nineteen-year-old Mitsuko Uchida competing in the 1968 Queen Elisabeth competition, and Martha Argerich in her early twenties concertizing in London, circa 1971.



Credit: aliciadelarrocha.com, queenelisabeth.com, and Jeremy Fletcher/Redferns distributed by Redferns Collection and Getty Images

Eventually, with the rise of the twenty-first-century, women's concert fashion has reached both a peak and a plateau. The peak is not necessarily describing the height of visual and aural beauty on the stage, but an observation that places the concert stage parallel to a Fashion Week runway. Young girls strut in their best shoes, gowns, and makeup that ages them intentionally, to appear grown up and proper. As they age, flashiness and glamour are traded for demure, comfortable garments that still allow for a show of one's personal taste. But in the case of a few musicians, they develop such a strong taste for fashion that their clothes become an identifiable silhouette and uniform that transcends trends and style rules altogether.

Enter Hiromi, a woman living in Japan and America at the turn of the twenty-first century. From February 2006 to June 2018, Hiromi kept a public blog on her official website that

features candid photos of her life touring as a musician. This collection, along with her official Instagram account, are a side-by-side comparison of a life well-documented, perceived from both a pre- and post-social media lens. When Hiromi is on the street, she does not look like the Hiromi seen onstage. And this is perfectly normal for most artists: if they develop a persona that is dependent on specific clothing or hairstyles, then their uniform becomes a “costume.” The costume serves a few purposes: one is primarily to make the person wearing it as identifiable as possible, but also, to preserve and protect the privacy of said person after they are allowed to take it off.

A central figure to Hiromi’s style influence would be her husband, Japanese fashion designer Mihara Yasuhiro. Hiromi met Yasuhiro at a Milan fashion show that she played for in 2006, getting married the following year. Hiromi has said “I always loved fashion like any girl, but now I get to go backstage and see it more. I wear [his designs] almost every day.”³¹ Yasuhiro is best known for his shoe collaborations with Puma, and maintains a house brand where he releases clothing, shoes, and designer accessories that show the intersections of Japanese streetwear, Japanese traditional clothing and Western European high couture.

The defining central characteristics of Hiromi’s stage appearance are her hair, her sleeveless/short-sleeve tops or dresses, and dress sneakers. When she takes professional photos for press release, her hair is in blunt-cut bangs and a teased-up bun that appears wild and larger-than-life. Sometimes she features a bob with blunt bangs and a triangular backcombed shape, but her hair is usually long and carefully styled to look “messy.” Her makeup is clean and youthful, with her features enhanced by neutral lipstick and eyeshadow colors. Her blouses or dresses are usually sleeveless, and feature a single color, or a colorful pattern. If she is wearing pants or a

³¹ Priya Rao, “Hiromi Uehara Pushes the Limit,” *WWD*, February 1, 2010, <https://wwd.com/eye/people/feature/hiromi-uehara-pushes-the-limit-2442720-1383647/>.

skirt instead of a dress, she wears either solid color leggings, or a midi-length skirt. And she plays in sneakers or flats, an unconventional shoe choice given the usual concert preference of dress shoes or heels.



Left photo: Hiromi for the cover of her 2014 album *Alive*. Center photo: Hiromi in Toronto from a blog entry published June 26, 2007. Right photo: Hiromi at a Mihara Yasuhiro fashion show in Milan, published September 4, 2006.

Onstage, Hiromi maintains the same style as in her photos, but with a toned-down version of her hair. Professional stylists add volume and dimension to her photoshoots by the addition of wigs or hair extensions, but in performance, extra hair is not practical. Hiromi has stated in interviews that she does her own hair and makeup and has gotten very good at it over the years. In a 2023 interview for *Emisiune Realizată Cu Sprijinul*, interviewer Cătălin Ștefănescu asks Hiromi how she fights for visibility onstage. She remarked: “Nobody really recognized me when I’m walking on the street, without my stage hair. I started doing that when I was in school in Berklee, in Boston in 1999. Because I would play a show, and so many Japanese [pianist’s] friends of mine were getting compliments from people that “You sounded great yesterday!” [...] I realized, wow, Asian people really look the same to [people who live abroad]. [...] So I have to

find a way that everybody can easily recognize “That’s Hiromi.” And so, I came up with this stage hair.”³²

While the interview is the only known source of Hiromi’s stage hair story, the consistency of her stage hair appearances slightly contradicts with the photography timeline provided on her website’s blog. In photos dated from 2006-2007, there are some photos of Hiromi wearing her natural hair onstage, and some with her stage hair. A likely conclusion that can be drawn is that Hiromi had not committed fully to the untamed bun hairstyle until late 2007 onwards. This is not to discredit the story she told on that interview but rather clarify that an individual’s style is a choice that takes time to solidify and become a tool in that artist’s arsenal.

Another important factor in the case of Hiromi’s stage hair is the social perception of hair buns in Japanese culture, and East Asian culture as a whole. Hiromi appears to take elements from couture fashion, and the dress code seen in Western jazz spaces, rather than the formal dresswear of classical musicians. For example, the “spiky hair bun” she uses onstage was a style perpetuated by both American and Asian American public figures. But these styles derive from Japanese hair practices and have since recirculated the 2020s landscape as a revival of Y2K aesthetics.³³ Many countries have strong cultural ties woven in hair, and hair can tell stories. But it can also be a source of appropriation, most commonly seen in communities from the African diaspora. For the spiky hair bun, it is a Japanese hairstyle co-opted by American popstars. But Japanese fashion movements were already infused with American influences so at that point, it is less an argument of who began the hairstyle, and more a mutual understanding that trends are cyclical. They come and go just as quickly as the seasons change.

³² Blue Glimpser, dir. *Hiromi Uehara Interview*. 2023. YouTube video, 39:26.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HrXO5LkRRtc>.

³³ “10 Gorgeous Ancient Hairstyles Worn by Japanese Women,” ThoughtCo, accessed February 11, 2026, <https://www.thoughtco.com/japanese-womens-hairstyles-through-the-ages-195583>.

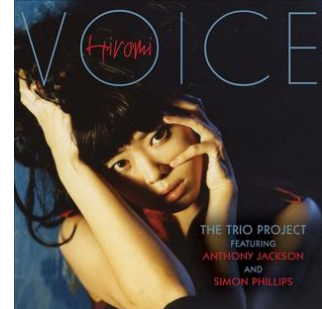
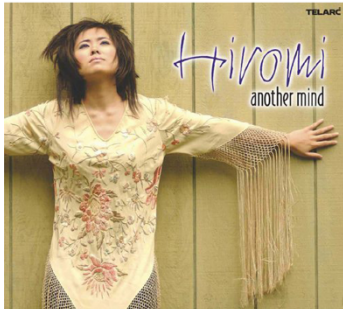


Left photo: a Harajuku streetwear model taken from Japanese fashion magazine FRUiTS (exact issue number unknown). Center photo: Lucy Liu at the 2002 VH1 Awards. Right photo: Doja Cat at the 2022 Grammy Awards.

Hair, and hairstyling have long since been symbols of social class, gender, and occupation. The bun, as a formulaic base, is a genderless twist of hair, secured by pins, clips, and the occasional styling product. Practically speaking, it keeps the hair away from the face. But the intricacies of how to design hair into a specific shape, with or without accessories are where meaning can be pulled from. A clean bun, free of frizzy hair is often a signal of someone well put together. By contrast, a spiky or messy bun denotes an untamed nature. In the case of Hiromi, her hair holds symbolic weight to the music she is making. She is taking a nonverbal stance of saying “My music is wild and crazy, but exciting. And hopefully this excites you as well.”

Hiromi’s album covers provide yet another focal point to reference visual growth. In *Another Mind*, there are two versions of the album cover. The leftmost album cover seems to be only found in Japanese releases, whereas the middle album cover is the international release. In a side-by-side comparison, they both feature Hiromi with her arms outstretched, and her hair only

mildly untamed. But the version on the left appears to be not as widely circulated as the version on the right – a difference in international distribution rights, most likely.



This develops further with her albums featuring “The Trio Project.” Hiromi puts her face and body front and center, and relies on an editorial style of photography, with eye-catching poses and an autograph that is scribbled on every cover from 2003-2023. In both of her solo piano albums, an interesting feature that is not present in the other albums is the addition of a keyboard, edited so abstractly as to not resemble its original shape. Hiromi also replaces her signature bun for a bob and sports a black-and-white outfit in both albums. Today, Hiromi is no longer front and center. With the introduction of her band Sonicwonder in 2023, she traded photography for surrealist artworks by Lou Beach,³⁴ signaling the end of an era reliant on portrait and editorial style.



³⁴ ““Out There”, Jazz Pianist Hiromi’s Second Disc with Sonicwonder, out April 4 | Chicago Symphony Orchestra,” Experience the Chicago Symphony Orchestra, accessed February 11, 2026, <https://cso.org/experience/article/22736/out-there-jazz-pianist-hiromis-second-disc-wi>.

In the 2020s, Hiromi's style has not quieted down as she ages. Hiromi is still performing and getting photographed with her iconic silhouette, with the addition of other collaborators and performers. Her career connections to fashion are quieter, but still present: on May 13, 2026, she performed at the opening of the Miu Miu Jazz Club (a pop-up event) in Tokyo to celebrate the reopening of their Ginza flagship store.³⁵ Hiromi's appearance ties back to the jazz listening clubs referenced in Chapter I, alongside the mixture of a strong brand persona and cultural significance. From the Miu Miu website, they write that this one-night-only event is "A highlight of the brand's enduring relationship with Japan and the world of music – the event is inspired by Japanese jazz and *kissaten* sensibilities with a curated program of performances."³⁶ This partnership with Hiromi signifies her presence in fashionable spaces is welcomed, and while her performance outfits reflect a need for form and function, she does not hesitate to incorporate a strong aesthetic value in her appearance.



Credit: Miu Miu's Instagram (@miumiu)

³⁵ "Miu Miu (@miumiu) • Instagram Photos and Videos," May 14, 2026, https://www.instagram.com/p/DYUXJbSjDQG/?utm_source=ig_web_copy_link&igsh=NTc4MTIwNjQ2YQ==.

³⁶ "Miu Miu Jazz Club Tokyo," Miu Miu, accessed May 14, 2026, <https://www.miumiu.com/pt/en/miumiu-club/special-projects/miu-miu-jazz-club-tokyo.html>.

Overall, photography and art provide excellent context to understanding a musician's motives. For Hiromi, her chosen costume represents an intersection between cultural tradition, observed fashion trends, and the freedom to move around comfortably onstage. Colors, fabrics, hairstyles, and texture all play an important part to the perception of music. What can be gleaned from these examples is that women's concert fashion is a rich source of understanding cultural identity, and a generations-old desire to be seen. Hiromi developed her concert fashion as a means to become highly visible, and the meticulous curation of that style created a starkly identifiable silhouette that distinguished her from her peers. For classical solo pianists, there is a rich tradition of formalwear that has developed over the past century. For jazz pianists, their aesthetics provide a different level of visibility, but they put forth a more effortless energy, than the highly curated dress code of their classical counterparts. A more conservative and critical lens would focus more on body parts shown, or the perceived social tact of a woman based on what she chooses to show onstage. But with each new generation, rises a group of women who put artistry at the forefront of their performance and clothing. Music has always been a medium that engages the ear and the eyes simultaneously, so when both senses coordinate, taste is developed as the awareness of artistic cultivation. This fashion is a part of expressing virtuosity, because the clothes a performer wears communicates personality, with fabric colors and shapes supporting the variety of moods captured in performance.

CHAPTER V: VIRTUOSITY ON THE PAGE

“Virtu means in Italian, not only that propensity of the soul which makes us agreeable to God and makes us act according to the rules of right reason, but also that superiority of talent, skill or ability which makes us excel be it in the theory or be it in the practice of the Fine Arts. [...] It is from this word that the Italians have formed the adjectives virtuoso or virtudioso to name or praise those to whom Providence has granted this excellence or superiority. [...] they more commonly and more especially give this name to those who apply themselves to the theory or to the composition of music. [...] So that to say simply that a man is a virtuoso is almost always to say that he is an excellent musician.”

-Sébastien de Brossard, *Dictionnaire de Musique* (1703)³⁷

Brossard’s quote is considered to be one of the first recorded definition of the word *virtu*.

Building on the preceding chapters’ discussion of compositional, genre, and visual style, Chapter V shifts from description to evaluation by measuring how virtuosity is recognized in score notation. This chapter focuses on the performer’s perspective of evaluating repertoire on a virtuosic scale, using observation and experience-based metrics to identify common patterns within the confines of solo piano scores. Hiromi is not the focus of this chapter, due to the sheer number of compositional patterns that exist outside of her music that must be defined in order to understand where her virtuosic ideas originated. While many of these patterns come from earlier composers, the examples provided will focus on primarily nineteenth-century classical figures and twentieth-century jazz tradition to frame how virtuosity is executed from a solo pianist’s point of view.

If there were a trifecta of persons that determine how to identify virtuosity, the keystone role would be the performer. The performer is responsible for executing actions on stage, with or without instructions in the score. The composer is next, because without the ideas of the composer, the performer would be able to act on the thoughts of one person alone. And finally, the audience member is what determines the success of the performance. For an audience

³⁷ Sébastien de Brossard, "Dictionnaire de Musique." Cited in Pincherle, *The World of the Virtuoso*, page 16.

member with no previous knowledge of music studies, they would likely focus on the visual component of performance. If it “looks” difficult, then it can be perceived as a great achievement for the performer, which listeners reward in applause. For an audience member with some knowledge of music and performance, they may focus less on the visual, and more on the aural. But the answer ranges widely, depending on the knowledge level of the individual and what is happening within the music.

The performer cannot perform without the composer’s ideas, whether those ideas appear as fully notated works, lead sheets, or other compositional frameworks. Composers typically depend on performers to realize, circulate, and advocate for those ideas in public. Audience response, along with teachers, critics, and institutions often shapes what repertoire is circulated, recorded, and taught, and it can influence how performers and composers refine their craft over time. Although exceptional cases exist (e.g. works whose reception is delayed, limited to specific circles, or shaped by a composer’s restricted attitude toward performance), the performer-composer-audience relationship remains a useful model for understanding how virtuosity is received. The composer cannot gain notoriety without the help of the performer, and what the audience member likes or dislikes is what fuels the performer and composer to continue honing their craft. It is a tightly linked relationship that favors no one, because without the existence of one role, the other two are left missing something important.

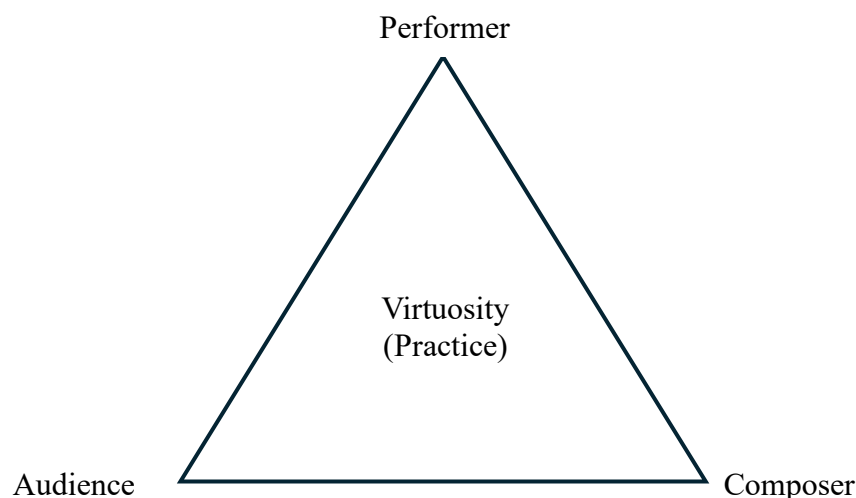


Diagram 5.1 – The Key Roles for Identifying Virtuosity in Practice

In reality, this model is a simplification of the relationships between these three, because any person can embody any of these roles at any time. For example, composers can become audience members when viewing the premiere of their piece. Audience members can be inspired by performers and take on performing or composing as a hobby or profession. But if there were two secondary roles to consider in the journey towards discovering virtuosic events, it would be the critic and the teacher. The teacher bridges the gap between the composer and performer, by using knowledge of previous experiences to help facilitate a practical guide towards a success performance. The critic uses theory and their development of personal taste to influence audience members by giving or writing reviews. But both roles function under the larger umbrella of “scholar,” which is less of a specific career role in this context, and more of a sliding scale that utilizes knowledge of theory and practice in tandem.

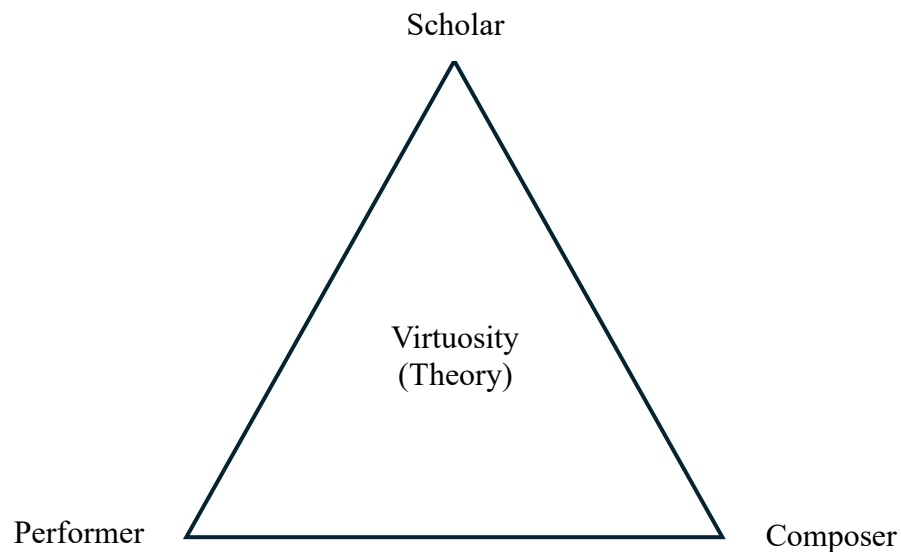


Diagram 5.2 – The Key Roles for Identifying Virtuosity in Theory

For the pianists of today, there are three major facets to consider when evaluating repertoire as virtuosic or not. The first is physical prerequisites, or an individual’s ability to

command their body to execute the tasks written on the musical page. It's a fairly even playing field, as all humans go through approximately the same development stages of life. If a child starts learning the piano at a young age, their dexterity is guaranteed to not be as developed as an adult. Fingers need time to grow, heights change, and with that comes a finer understanding of motor skills. Where physical skills begin to decline is when subjectivity of endurance comes into play.

Physical endurance is a valuable metric for performers, but the athletics required are not necessarily as “flashy” as those used by regular athletes. From an outsider's perspective, to be in a room and sit at a bench for hours seems less involved than any outdoors physical activity. But there are other physical factors that affect an individual's ability to play difficult music. The easiest to cite for pianists, is hand size. Almost every human will experience the growth of their limbs as they age. But there comes a point in which the body stops growing, and they have to work with what they have. This is where some inherent biological advantages and disadvantages come to light. Since the first piano was invented by Bartolomeo Cristofori in 1700, the major developments of the instrument have been by men, and the overwhelming majority of notable composers and performing pianists are male. Despite that, the overwhelming majority of independent piano educators in the twenty-first century are women,³⁸ and the piano has been regarded as a feminine activity since the nineteenth century.³⁹ As long as the modern piano has existed, it has been socially aligned with women's values for an activity that is not as taxing as modern sports, but a subtle signal towards the presumption of wealth and intelligence.

³⁸ “Piano Teacher Demographics and Statistics [2026]: Number Of Piano Teachers In The US,” January 29, 2021, <https://www.zippia.com/piano-teacher-jobs/demographics/>.

³⁹ Joe Davies and Alexander Stefaniak, “Women, Pianos, and Virtuosity in the Nineteenth Century,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Women Composers*, 1st ed., ed. Matthew Head and Susan Wollenberg (Cambridge University Press, 2024).

There is an inherent disadvantage for learning solo piano repertoire that requires a larger hand. This most often affects the visibility of people with smaller hands onstage, and the representation of women composers. Since the piano was developed with a man's hands and height in mind, it should come as no surprise that the people who were not genetically predisposed to have larger hands are now systemically gatekept from a major group of standard piano repertoire. To advance in the piano canon means to learn pieces with more patterns, textures, and larger intervals. Clever solutions of fingering redistribution and cutting out some of the thicker textures in piano writing can be applied, but it comes with a social cost of being perceived as not playing the piece "as it was written." The width of the keys, and the intervals notated on the page are both factors that can cause physical discomfort and thus for the sake of preservation, many people end up having to cut notes to avoid potential injury.

Smaller players may have a more difficult time learning repertoire that is outside the bounds of their size, but taller players experience issues on the piano as well. For example, the height of a piano bench affects the ability of all pianists to play effectively, as mismatched heights can cause pain or discomfort. Pianists with less body mass may find it a difficulty to use their weight to create larger sounds, and end up compensating by overusing other muscle groups, such as the fingers and wrists. There is no one height or body type that is best suited for the piano – all players adapt to the environment as best as their bodies can allow. But these biases are important to remember as virtuosity is not measured on a spectrum of what one can't do, but rather, what one *can do* in comparison of their peers, despite whatever obstacles they encounter.

Beyond the physical aspects of piano playing, the emotional depth is another layer to be developed for the promising virtuoso. To control the body to produce emotional responses on command is something that *can* be found on the score but is most often found through

experiencing life. To be able to play the mature works of classical composers for example, comes with an expectation that one has lived a number of years, and understands complex emotional experiences such as tragedy and loss to really comprehend the subtext in the score. That being said, child virtuosos exist under the term “prodigy” or “genius.” But in the developmental stages of life, most children cannot experience emotions on the scale that adults do. If they do, then there is likely some anecdotal evidence behind why that child is able to conjure that at an earlier stage – the phenomenon is rare and considers the life of that child on a case-by-case basis.

Many scholars cite the nineteenth century as being the “beginning” of virtuosity for the solo pianist. But from the historical perspective of keyboard instruments, the development of virtuosic playing on the piano has existed since its inception. Before the invention of the piano, organs and harpsichords were where one went to witness grand spectacles on keyboards (then called manuals). But limitations in design meant the demands of performers and composers pushed for innovations in manufacturing, changes in the range, register, and types of materials used to produce a different sound – one that could be heard in larger spaces. The nineteenth century was the beginning of industrialization for the piano, and the increase in accessibility allowed for virtuosos to be discovered in the home, or on the stage.

The first existence of virtuosity in scores can be found in cadenzas. These are not a piano-exclusive phenomenon; they can be found in almost any instrument or voice type. The earliest definitions of cadenzas were just simple embellishments on the score – adding ornaments to the ends of cadences, or decorative notes within a phrase. As the cadenza became more fleshed out, it took on several forms in the piano canon. Its most common appearance pre-nineteenth-century was within the concerto, when an orchestra would stop playing and the soloist would either play sections of the material in an unheard variation, or improvise new material. Successful

improvisations would include some level of recall, while providing insight on the performer's ability to execute lots of tricks in a sequence. But cadenzas are not exclusive towards concerti, or any repertoire that requires an ensemble. Solo repertoire, such as sonatas, arias, and character pieces can all contain cadenza passages at any point in the music, most commonly towards the end (as an etymological callback to the word cadence). A cadenza's function has always been to dazzle the audience, so it's one of the first and most common performance examples for audience members to get acquainted with what virtuosity looks like in music.

The figures who are most associated with developing virtuosity through piano composition in the nineteenth century are Franz Liszt, Frederic Chopin, Robert Schumann, and Johannes Brahms. Despite having very different approaches to music, all of them shared techniques and pattern developments like the ones mentioned. Liszt's contributions are the most well-known, as he combined his compositional output with a very active performance and pedagogical tenure for the majority for his career. It was Liszt after all, that invented new methods of laying out passages of scales and chords, extended the range of tonal colors by use of the sustaining pedal, and his developments caused a literal shift in the piano manufacturing industry to create instruments that could withstand those demands.⁴⁰

On the other side of the spectrum, more introspective composers like Brahms and Chopin brought a sensibility to the instrument that both sounds and feels very different than the dazzling moments found in Liszt's music. Within the confines of the nineteenth-century score, experienced pianists can often identify notation-based clues that constitute being defined as virtuosic. These include tempo markings, speed, rhythm, large intervals, and pattern recognition and recall. Pitch is notably the one aspect of music that is absent from this equation, but from the

⁴⁰ Tilly Fleischmann. *Aspects of the Liszt Tradition*, 1986, Adare Press, page 53.

perspective of the pianist, it is the one thing that is assured across most keyboards. Pianists are not the primary responsible parties for tuning their instrument, so pitch is left out due to its unanimous presence.

Tempo markings come with an indication for speed, and speed is one of the easiest visible and aural indicators of virtuosic piano playing. Pieces that require a fast tempo are commonly seen as more demanding than pieces with a slower tempo. But this is where the ratio of physical and emotional labor becomes a test of a performer's abilities. Faster pieces require more physical demands, so one's level of technical advancement is directly correlated to their ability to play fast music. Pictured below is the opening of Liszt's Transcendental Etude no. 4 "Mazeppa" – considered to be one of the most difficult piano etudes to play in all of the solo piano canon.

Mazeppa



All of the classic characteristics are there: a fast tempo marking (Allegro), arpeggiation in the form of chords, large interval ranges in the chords averaging an octave to a tenth, and scale-based passages. With scalar passages, rhythms are not complex as the base expectations for performing scales is to perform with clean, accurate notes and fingering patterns that are suited

for speed. But another layer of complexity to add is to interpret the dynamic markings while performing the arpeggiated chords and the scales at what feels to be an inhumanly fast speed for audience members. This opens a delicately spoken truth that the substance behind virtuosity is not purely mechanical in nature, nor is it all glamour in the spectacle of showmanship. It is a balance universally acknowledged that technique and artistry go hand in hand when performing difficult works onstage for audience members.

In the article “Virtue or Virtuosity: Explorations in the Ethics of Musical Performance,” author Jane O’Dea writes: “Interpretation is characteristically linked to understanding. To “interpret” something is to characterize it in such a way as to make it intelligible.”⁴¹ So while audience have loved to be entertained for as long as they have existed, and watching fast-moving scenes generates excitement, there are many critics that find distaste in over-the-top displays. An example of this is Henri Herz, an Austrian virtuoso pianist and composer in his time. While his compositional output is impressive, much of it applies the same techniques that Liszt and his contemporaries were using, but it creates a divide between audiences and critics. The excerpt below is taken from *Airs Nationaux Américains*, a solo theme and variations based on popular American songs like “Yankee Doodle,” “Hail Columbia,” and the national anthem. The audience may find delight in the Maestoso tempo, and the constant shift in orchestral-inspired textures and song references. The critic, however, may find the excessive presence of cadenzas and density of to be whiplash-inducing. Ultimately, the seriousness taken by the performer would determine whether this piece functions as a salon piece (unserious), or concert piece (serious).

Interpretation begets the curation of taste, and both are subjective in their own spaces.

⁴¹ Jane O’Dea, “Virtue or Virtuosity? Explorations in the Ethics of Musical Performance,” *Contributions to the Study of Music and Dance*, no. 58 (Praeger, 2000), page 2.



So when critics are turned off by disproportionate flair, they inevitably turn towards the sublime. In an ideal world, the audience, the performer, and the composer's intentions are all read perfectly and meld with each other to create a living piece of art. There is virtuosity to be found in slower music, just as there is in faster music because tempo is not the defining feature in producing a musician at the top of their craft. Slower pieces require a partially visible weight and depth that is not present at certain speeds. It is through slower pieces that a musician learns how to feel the silence between the phrases, and connect with the audience without producing a “wall” of sound. To illustrate this, the opening of Chopin's Nocturne op. 48 no. 1 will be the archetypal example for “slow virtuosity.”



The ‘lento’ tempo marking is somewhat deceptive to the entire speed of the piece, as the energy picks up in later sections. But the presence of chords, large intervals, and complex rhythms are all there, with the added challenge of additional emotional labor. The leaps in register between each beat of the measure carries an invisible weight that must be communicated visually by the pianist. The space between each beat is much more exposed, which leaves the pianist vulnerable to missed signals in understanding the true weight of this piece.

To be considered a virtuoso requires mastery of both slow and fast pieces – versatility inherently, is the universal sign of appeal in a musician. The ability to endure a fast piece for many minutes on hand, is on par with the ability to endure static harmonies or textures that move at a slower pace. This connects with prior knowledge of technical patterns, such as scales, arpeggios, chords, and ornamentation. The first few years of piano study heavily emphasis building upon patterns and recalling them at a rapid rate. As the student begins to identify and recall those patterns faster, they are assigned more challenging pieces that build and layer those patterns, while introducing new ones. With enough dedication, the student begins to build self-reliability and independence when studying new ideas and incorporates them without the assistance of a mentor.

As composers and performers began to integrate the solo recital as part of their careers, the priorities of repertoire shifted into a formula. That recital formula has remained the standard in formal music institutions across the world – a balanced program that includes 3-4 contrasting styles, periods, and tempo schemes. While demonstrations of virtuosity are determined by the repertoire choice and the player’s execution of the program, the optional inclusion of an encore is one choice that can seal the entire program into a package for the audience’s consumption. Historically speaking, the encore used to be defined as a spontaneous repeat of the last piece

played. However, its functions have shifted as different concert pianists of the twentieth century added their approach and changed it into an unwritten but secretly expected part of the program. If the cadenza is the short-form demonstration of virtuosity in music, then the encore expands upon those demonstrations and crams them into one concise work. For the pianist, an encore is a piece under five minutes that shows off nearly every trick on the book: scales, glissandi, fast passages, difficult rhythms, and more. The choice in encore varies widely but generally, the pianist chooses a piece that either the audience will recognize, or a piece that pianist is best known for. Slow or fast pieces are allowed, but it's typically the length and popularity that determines whether a piece can be used as an encore or not.

This leads into the split path between classical piano and jazz piano virtuosity. The single most defining characteristic that both separates and connect these two genres, is improvisation. In the earlier days of seventeenth through nineteenth-century keyboard performance, improvisation was an essential skill for classical performers. But it faded as newer schools of composition prioritized writing out the spectacle, eliminating the need to provide improvised content from the performer. The average classically trained pianist does not train extensively in improvisation the way jazz pianists do, because of the cultural relationships between spontaneity and innovation. Improvisation was revitalized through jazz, and with the previous mentions of harmonic expansion and technique, it became the primary vehicle for jazz artists to showcase their skills.

In the chapter “Jazz Improvisation and Concepts of Virtuosity” from *The Oxford Companion to Jazz*, David Dempsey explores some common misconceptions when it comes to improvisation, as it relates to virtuosity.⁴² The first misconception is that improvisation is truly

⁴² David Dempsey, “Jazz Improvisation and Concepts of Virtuosity,” in *The Oxford Companion To Jazz*, ed. Bill Kirchner (Oxford University Press, 2000).

spontaneous. According to Dempsey: “A jazz improviser must have a working knowledge of harmony, an innate feel for form and melodic line, a strong technique, a quick, relaxed mind, and a deep sense of history.” (789) This is very similar to the requirements for pattern recognition in the classical sphere, albeit with more technical knowledge that comes from studying music theory and musicology. The second misconception is that jazz improvisation is created “by divine intervention.” Dempsey remarks that the reality is that an improvised solo “are no more spontaneously created than are the words of a spoken language.”

However, that changes slightly for pure solo music. Solo jazz piano primarily exists due to the work of transcribers diligently marking down every note and rhythm taken in a specific performance or recording. So, in this sense, the classical training is more useful for interpreting basic foundations for pitch and rhythm, but to play jazz in a “classical” style would invoke accusations of lack of context from critics. From the perspective of written music, the existence of notation is where the largest difference occurs between classical and jazz music. As seen in the previous score excerpts, concert music is written out, with the expectation to be played as written. But jazz relies on a completely different notation system, with the choice left up to the performer on how to interpolate new material on top of the pre-existing one. What a jazz pianist can expect to read from are lead sheets: a series of instructions for specific harmonies and progressions to take. A melody is often notated on top, but the expectation is to foster creativity

Bb *Autumn Leaves* Joseph Kosma

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B-7 E7 AΔ7

DΔ7 G#-7b5 C#7 F#-

C#7 F#-

on top of the skeleton of the harmonic structure. Take the song “Autumn Leaves,” a jazz standard originally composed by Joseph Kosma in 1945.

It looks considerably barer and easier to play than most classical solo piano repertoire. But the interpretation is left to the performer in the form of chordal instructions, not fully notated embellishment. “Autumn Leaves” has been performed and recorded a countless number of times, so the thought of an “absolute” or “authoritative” edition is unreasonable to expect. What happens with this score, is watching how well a performer is able to weave their knowledge of harmony and melody together instinctively. If that version is successful, it gets repeated, and added to the overall canon of that song as a highly lauded interpretation. Some dedicated musicians take the time to notate and transcribe some of the most popular improvised solos taken in specific recordings, and that creates a symbiotic relationship between improvisation and reinterpretation. But jazz virtuosity exists primarily outside the notated sphere, and in the form of live performance.

What Dempsey and O’Dea share in their respective writings is an attitude that modern virtuosity does not stem from natural-born talent. From the clues left in piano scores, many patterns can be identified in what makes a solo piece virtuosic. Essentially, what a composer leaves to the performer to interpret a gift and a curse. The gift is in the notation of music, and the composer’s ability to weave sound onto paper. The “curse” is really the Sisyphean task of pouring over intention, interpretation, while trying to innovate on the same base materials. Either way, there is freedom to be explored even within the constraints of the score, as the final chapter will cover the motives behind modern-day virtuosity on the stage, and Hiromi’s theatric approach to performance.

CHAPTER VI: VIRTUOSITY ON THE STAGE

This brings the final puzzle piece of building a complete framework of Hiromi's virtuosity from the pages and her fashion to the final environment: the stage. Before completing the picture of her approach to virtuosic piano playing, some factors require acknowledgment before bringing a complete picture of solo piano virtuosity into frame. The first is the inception of televised competition in the twentieth century, and the second is the internet-based optimization of appearance to increase visibility, both through photography and video. The twentieth-century practice of televised competition is a prevailing method of evaluation that many professional level pianists are subject to in their careers. Competition provides a platform for many pianists to exercise their virtuosity, and it is a unique environment in which the theory and practice of virtuosity come together in one event.

If the nineteenth century was the “era of the virtuoso composer,”⁴³ the twentieth century took this career, and morphed it into the “era of the concert pianist.” In the height of Romanticism, musicians made their living off of a combination of teaching, composing, and performing. Some were lucky enough to sustain their career off of performing alone, but it was exceedingly rare. The twentieth century began to democratize the discovery of virtuosos across the world with the birth of professional level competitions.

Professional piano competitions have historically presented the opportunity for pianists to demonstrate their level of virtuosity on a public stage, with the addition of a jury panel. This environment flips the triangular model where virtuosity is determined by performer, composer, and audience member. This fundamentally changes the success metrics that were previously set

⁴³ In this document, “virtuoso” and “virtuosity” refers to pianistic virtuosity in the performance context beginning in the nineteenth century, where technical control, physical endurance, interpretive freedom, and audience recognition interact. “Difficulty” refers to the demands in the score, be it any combination of those factors listed above.

up by these three roles, and instead, the search for virtuosity changes into the search for “perfection.”

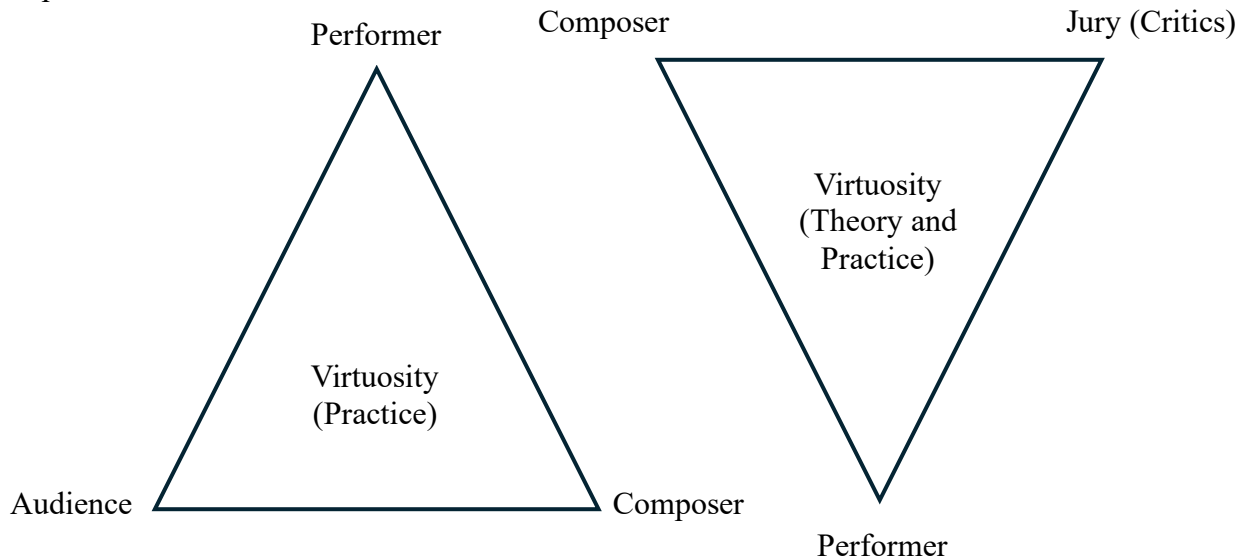


Diagram 6.1 – Identifying Virtuosity Within a Practice-Only and Theory-Practice Hybrid Environment Model

Perfection in the world of solo piano is often defined by a performance free from technical flaw. The expectation for performers is to produce an interpretation of the score where every note, rhythm, and score instruction is executed from memory. This is a supremely difficult ideal to achieve, and yet, it is considered the “bare minimum” when it comes to professional level competitions. If technical perfection is achieved, the jury panel begins to look for emotional involvement as a metric for rewarding success. This has led to a drastic side effect in our current landscape, where pianism is defined by both objective and subjective measures, and the lingering effects of breeding generations of flawless pianists has ultimately shifted the priorities of career performance from personal fulfillment to the external validation of experts.

This systemically installed model is antithetical of what Hiromi has done with her performance career. In all of her biographic materials, there is no mention of a specific

competition, or any competition for that matter that catapulted her notoriety. It is likely that Hiromi participated in competitions in her youth (as it is a common activity for solo pianists of all ages), however, there is no verbal confirmation or archived material that proves that she ever competed consistently. In Hiromi's world, virtuosity and theatricality are inextricably linked to standards settled in place by the nineteenth century. The scores provided by transcribers show that she makes use of common virtuosic patterns established by nineteenth and twentieth-century composers, but really, the best way to experience her version of excellence is to see her work in person. In a live performance, Hiromi's way of performing fits the very ideals of overt spectacle, as she invites dazzlement and excitement on the stage. Moments of this have primarily been captured by concert photographers, but a still image only does so much to illustrate what is happening in a long-form performance.

Something Hiromi does in many of her performances that is worth acknowledging, is to play two keyboards at the same time. This virtuosic novelty was popularized by Trinidad-American pianist and singer Hazel Scott in the 1940s, a classically-trained jazz pianist who studied at The Juilliard School. Pictured below is Hazel in the movie *The Heat's On* (1943), with two grand pianos positioned so that she can play both classical music and ragtime at a blinding speed with a jazz orchestra accompanying her.⁴⁴



Credit: "The Disappearance of Miss Scott" documentary on PBS Masters

⁴⁴ Joe Skinner, *The Disappearance of Miss Scott - Watch the Hazel Scott Documentary Now* | *American Masters* | PBS, 2025, <https://www.pbs.org/wnet/americanmasters/hazel-scott-documentary/35137/>.

The two-piano setup showcased by Hazel Scott functions as a virtuosic stage spectacle, turning pianism into an explicitly visual event. Hiromi's two-keyboard moments are not a recreation of Scott's two-piano spectacle, but rather a timbral and visual effect that appears mainly in ensemble settings. In solo performances, Hiromi plays a single acoustic Yamaha grand piano (as part of her partnership with Yamaha), so the "two-keyboard" device is best understood as a stage-spectacle aside, rather than a defining feature of her solo virtuosity.



Credit: Robert Drózd and Matthias Hangst

Facial expressions are considered an essential part of performance in any medium, but as an observer, it is considered a social taboo to comment openly on an individual's facial expressions. Showing emotions onstage is generally read as a sign of "true artistry," and a lack of visible human expressivity can translate to a lack of warmth to an audience or adjudication panel, in the case of competition or audition-based settings. But critics can cite certain facial contours as "distracting," "grotesque," as a way to express personal distaste with their performance. Perhaps the facial expressions critics were expecting did not occur, or line up with their expectations. But such comments often toe a very thin line between legitimate criticism and unnecessary bullying, and with it, there comes a point in which the loss in nuance takes over. A very famous example of this is Lang Lang, whose career has been highly remarked as one of the best twenty-first century solo pianists, but his highly theatrical playing has been a long-standing

topic of controversy since his career began in 1999. While there is no empirical research conducted on Lang Lang's face or any of his contemporaries, the prevailing attitude of audience and critic reception can be found in a few articles and search trends.⁴⁵ Google Trend results for "Lang Lang face" and "Lang Lang Bang Bang" (an impolite nickname from the early 2000s describing his early performance style) are recorded as peaking upwards of 100 individual mentions in 2015, with an average of thirteen searches daily.

In Hiromi's case, her facial expressions do not seem to garner the attention of critics. There are several possibilities for this: one being the current social faux pas of commenting on a woman's body or appearance publicly. A few critics have made their careers off of derogatory comments on women pianists, but their reputations are not highly regarded in the long run. Therefore, it is seen as unnecessary or too high risk to even mention anything in regards to a musician's visual stature. Another possible reason is the level of perceived integrity. Many pianists who are known for their emoting style may have their expressions called into question. Since emotions are highly subjective, some audience members may find a particular grimace or grin to be disingenuous to the music being played. It calls into speculation whether a musician has practiced these expressions, thereby choreographing their expressive state, or whether those emotions were truly spontaneous.

This expression choreography can be traced back to theatrical practices, and there is a common link between classical and non-classical artists. Outside the classical sphere, this modern phenomenon is documented online as the "stank face"⁴⁶ - an involuntary contortion of

⁴⁵"The Lang Lang Effect - Good, Bad or Ugly," accessed April 10, 2026, <https://interlude.hk/the-lang-lang-effect-good-bad-or-ugly/>.

⁴⁶ Weller, Phil. "'It's a Primal, Unconscious Reaction. An Honor Bestowed upon Only the Best Riffs': What's the Science behind a Stank Face Riff? We Asked Everyone from Mike Stringer to Periphery and Nik Nocturnal to Define Metal

the face that is registered as deep, visceral pleasure or repulsion as a reaction to what's happening in the music. Often times a large dissonant phrase, or a technically difficult passage is what causes a musician's face to contort into this iconic grimace. This is primarily observed in the metal and rock community, but live musicians of all genres are capable of conjuring their own versions.

In the jazz community, "stank face" is implied to appear because of the concentration required behind virtuosic improvisation; and in an ensemble setting, other members may nonverbally reply with stank faces of their own to show admiration for the soloist's hard work. But on a solo stage, that face is more at-risk for possible confusion of interpretation. Depending on the audience, and how their live performance culture responds to facial displays of virtuosity, mixed reactions are to be expected. This does *not* imply that Hiromi is deliberately engaging in these theatrical/social practices, but rather, these phenomena are described to give the audience a fuller picture that facial concentration is observed differently in specific music spaces.

Hiromi's face *does* contort when she plays, however, and her intentions are generally read by audiences as being an intense show of both focus and happiness. When Hiromi is playing in front of people, her energy is so emphatic that it feels like it cannot be contained within her physical body. The photo captured below shows her standing while playing, face scrunched in concentration, and the joy is palatable. It is difficult to articulate how Hiromi is in a live performance without first experiencing it oneself. When watching her perform, it is impossible to ignore the exuberance on her face when she is navigating through difficult phrases with ease.

Guitar's Ultimate Accolade." Guitar World, July 4, 2024. <https://www.guitarworld.com/features/how-to-create-stank-face-riff>.

Candid photographs show her often looking towards the audience with a joyful smile, as her hands move effortlessly to carry the music forward.



Credit: 2DF Olympic ceremony coverage of the 2020 Tokyo Olympics (July 23, 2021)

Another visual display of virtuosity is in a performer's hair, specifically in the physics of movement. Now the amount and density of hair vary greatly between individual to individual, but on stage, having a lot of hair can create a moment of audience dazzlement if the timing is right. Having loose hair can intentionally or unintentionally contribute to the level of seriousness taken with the performance.



Top photo: Lang Lang playing at Disney Hall, courtesy of Lawrence K. Ho and the Los Angeles Times. Right photo: Yuja Wang playing in Carnegie Hall, courtesy of Hiroyuki Ito and the NY Times.



Most pianists onstage choose to have their hair styled away from the face and neck, as a practical means of avoiding potential distraction. But many a concert photographer have frozen this moment in time, where the hair and face perfectly capture the split second of coordinated emotion. Hiromi's hair has the benefit of being both voluminous (achieved by her own meticulous hairstyling), and relatively stiff (set in place by modern hair products), so from a practical standpoint, the amount of hair she has does not negatively affect her ability to play. In fact, the volume of hair in its movement creates an image of total involvement – it is the unspoken vehicle of visualizing emotion outside of the face. Similar to acting, deeply seated emotions that constitute the rush of movements factor into the movement of hair, and a well-timed hair flip (whether accidental or on purpose) can send audiences into a flurry of emotions.

Standing while playing the piano is also a sight rarely seen, but in Hiromi's case, she begins to stand up while playing long, fast-moving passages of notes. It's an occasion that happens multiple times at her ensemble concerts, although not as frequently in her solo playing. The excitement of her hands moving at perceived superhuman speeds causes the audience to get more excited, and start shouting and cheering as a response, which then feeds into her playing as well. It's a cyclical energy transfer that cannot be described verbally, but it can be observed through videos and live performances. With regards to previous interviews Hiromi has done on her performance style, she has not indicated that what she does while playing the piano is intentional. It is simply an emotional reaction that is parallel to the emotions of her music. If the music calls for lower energy, her body language reflects this by sitting down closer to the piano, moving slower, and closing her eyes to really focus on the sounds being created. If the music is higher energy, her body language reciprocates, and she cannot contain the whimsicality that is poured out in her notes.

This level of extreme energy expelling does not come without its consequences, however. In her day-to-day life, Hiromi describes herself as introverted and reserved, and when the time calls for it, she conjures all of her energy and displays it on the stage with consistency and praise. In the interview with NHK World Japan, she describes her energy levels like a battery on “low power” mode or “economy-saving” mode, saying: “I call this my Eco Mode. I save my energy for when I need it. Until then, I’m in Eco Mode. [...] New people are often surprised by how lethargic I am. I’ve had to explain my Eco Mode several times a year.”⁴⁷

That is why her performance persona is so powerful, because it contrasts so heavily from her daily personality. Introverted pianists are not a minority, at least on the professional level. What’s expected of a concert pianist is someone who reserves their physical energy for the stage, and releases it in a highly controlled, yet accessible stream of mental and emotional energy. But many pianists get “stuck” from the beginner to professional level when it comes to proper maintenance and release of energy. To circle back to competitions, any setting where a jury of experts is present changes the context of performance significantly. When judgment is expected, the skills of musicians inevitably freeze due to nerves. Some lose their physical skills, and note mistakes begin to increase. Others lose their emotional involvement, as they focus on just executing the technique as they struggle to juggle the balance between physical and mental tasks. Perhaps this is what separates Hiromi from the rest: her lack of competitive nature leaves the path of least resistance for her artistry to flow. She is not reliant upon the validation of others to pursue her path. Comparisons will always be made internally or externally, but they only do so much in terms of changing the trajectory of her career or outlook on life. What this means for performers everywhere, is that environments of nonjudgment bring forward celebration and a

⁴⁷ “Hiromi: Sailing the Sea of Music - Face To Face | NHK WORLD-JAPAN,” NHK WORLD, accessed February 21, 2026, <https://www3.nhk.or.jp/nhkworld/en/shows/2043103/>.

safe place for emotion and physicality to be received. Evaluation-based environments bring forth a demand for excellence, with the added burden of pressure.

In some ways, this grounds Hiromi and brings a level of realism into her world as a musician. It is an unspoken truth that all performers, no matter what discipline, embody something different onstage. It takes time, practice, and a constant self-evaluation of a person's energy levels to understand how to best channel that energy and channel it in a way that honors the intentions of the composer, the performer, and the audience. Many pianists can relate to the feeling of "saving the energy for the stage" and not expelling it too early or too late. What a pianist chooses to do to achieve that balance of emotional control and release is ultimately a personal choice, and not one that can be quantified by measurements of data collection.

Virtuosity as a visual medium is inherently, a very different playing field than what's heard on the page. There are certain core personality traits that are developed when putting oneself on the stage. Jane O'Dea articulates them more elaborately in "Virtue or Virtuosity," but she lists the following traits as virtues essential to a virtuosic performance: patience, tenacity, humility, self-respect, a generosity of spirit, diligence, judgment, and truthfulness.⁴⁸ Ultimately, these boil down to two keywords: passion and commitment.

Without either of these traits, any one singular performance will be lacking in all depths. The passion to study music is one thing, but the commitment to self-betterment is what all pianists, and musicians strive for. Both ideas are found in the center of Hiromi's playing. As it stands, all of these performance quirks are not unique to Hiromi – other professional and non-professional pianists make use of these methods all the time. But intention carries a lot of weight

⁴⁸ Jane O'Dea, "Virtue or Virtuosity? Explorations in the Ethics of Musical Performance," *Contributions to the Study of Music and Dance*, no. 58 (Praeger, 2000), pages 28-32.

behind those decisions, and in today's age, that intention is greatly influenced by the external institutions, both physical and digital.

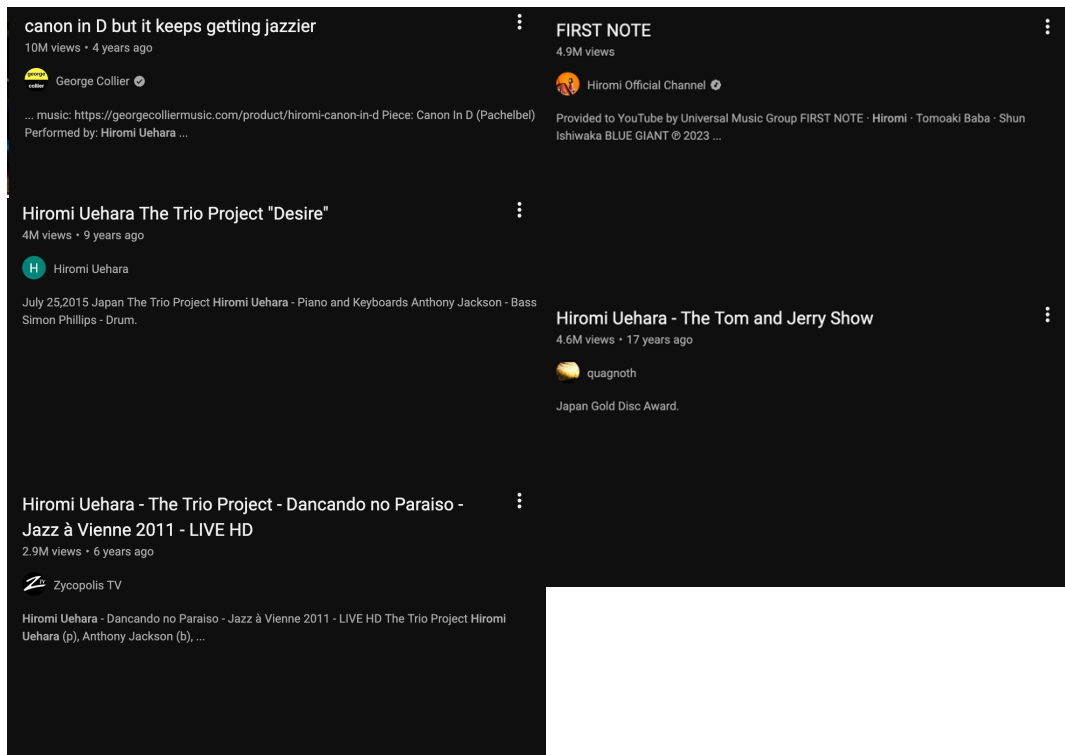
In the first quarter of the twenty-first century, the “era of the concert pianist” is now currently the “era of engagement bait.” With global Internet access, the prevalence of social media, and the ever-present attention economy, online engagement forces musicians to once again, change their priorities and focus more on content creation to gain eyes on their work. For pianists specifically, a side effect of continuous social media usage is the inception of musician accounts. Many musicians choose to form a social media account expressly for the purpose of sharing music, or music-related content. Short form content for the burgeoning musician can be found in examples of comedy sketches, behind-the-scenes videos, memes, and the infinite remediation of pop culture trends. Long form content may be found in the form of music-themed podcasts, professionally edited performance videos, or interview-style shows that showcase the lives behind musicians. It is an individual's choice on whether to separate the personal life and career online, with advantages and disadvantages to both, as it ultimately falls on preference.

Virtuosity in the digital age has pivoted to exclusively focus on appearances, not necessarily the quality of the music being made. The critical role in this case, is changed from scholar back to audience member, with the comment section being the democratic space for thoughts to exist. For pianists, this can show as a pressure to present either as highly polished all the time, or to make content surrounding the “normalization” of practice methods. For women pianists specifically, concert dress plays a higher stake in determining average engagement, which causes a reconsideration of appearance. An example of this may be a creator with several college degrees producing educational content under the lens of humor or relatability. They rely on what's being said or played, with appearances being a secondary priority. Others reverse those

ratios by pandering to the male gaze by intentionally dressing provocatively for the promise of content monetization. This spectrum creates many divides in the world of pianists, and forces viewers to take a position on what content they wish to consume (with algorithmic assistance, of course).

Hiromi has been developing her audience just before, and right around the inception of social media. From her personal blog on her website, to the transition of using Instagram and TikTok, when she isn't rehearsing, composing, or touring, she is posting content of her international travels online and sharing a general attitude of thankfulness for the life she is living. It's uncertain whether her accounts are run by social media managers or by herself, but by a visual analysis of the content being posted, the captions and lack of polish in specific posts promotes the general content as being sincere to her. The cross-posting between platforms may be managed by an external party, but this is a normal practice for touring musicians to rely upon assistance to maintain images online.

Hiromi's performance style also happens to align very well with algorithmic-based curation. Hiromi's performance videos on both short-form platforms (TikTok and Instagram), and long-form platforms (YouTube), have gone incredibly viral multiple times. She frequently garners millions of views with secondary YouTube channels transcribing her solos and adding scrolling scores while she plays. Online audiences are enamored with her playing, and with the added practice of musicians interpreting her works and posting them to their own accounts, her visibility is even more far-reaching with the contributions of those performers.



What this all encapsulates is that sincerity and intention determine the success behind appearances. Hiromi’s career has flourished not only due to her talent and workload, but in the current internet-based climate, her style of playing garners attention that is largely well-received by international audiences. In the NHK World interview with Professor Campbell, Hiromi said: “I always think of a live music venue as a ship. I’m the captain. [...] I’m inviting everyone to join us on a musical journey. It’s a miracle that we all happen to be on the same ship.”⁴⁹ Hiromi Uehara demonstrates that success on many levels as a composer and performer. But her virtuosity is centered around her work and effort, not by the comparison of others. The piano for her has so many connections. In her words: “Obviously, [the piano is] a truly reliable partner. It’s also a teacher and a companion in my search for what I love. It also allows me to connect with

⁴⁹ “Hiromi: Sailing the Sea of Music - Face To Face | NHK WORLD-JAPAN,” NHK WORLD, accessed February 21, 2026, <https://www3.nhk.or.jp/nhkworld/en/shows/2043103/>.

people. There's no better way to connect with people than through the piano."⁵⁰ She took what she learned from her teachers and applied it in a manner that suits her best. And while she shares in that music with ensembles, her solo playing is the best demonstration of what separates her from the rest. Her performance communicates the pure enjoyment of music in many forms: the joy to be able to compose music, the joy of being a performer, and the joy of having the privilege to share that music with the world. Beyond the genre or performance labels, micro or macro, her internal motivations and her onstage character are the unequivocal representations of that whimsical nature. And that output of personal joy is what puts her in a league of her own. Hiromi has presented a clear, authentic style of composition, performance, and appearance from decades of development and stage experience, and that has cemented her as one of the most notable musicians of the twenty-first century.

⁵⁰ Ibid.

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