

Learning, Performing, and Recording *Post-Partitions* and other Babbitt piano works

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This article discusses the process of learning, performing, and recording Babbitt's Post-Partitions (1966), as well as Overtime (1987) and other Babbitt works, in the U.S. and in Japan. Issues discussed include: learning away from the instrument, pedalling, voicing, and body movement.

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Internalising Babbitt's Music Away from the Instrument

My first encounter with Babbitt's *Post-Partitions* happened when I taught this piece to one of my students. It was during the year in which I took a leave of absence from performances due to injury; therefore, given the circumstances, I learned this piece physically away from the piano. Although I did not originally plan this, I think it turned out to be the best approach for tackling this piece. Helping my student to figure out complicated rhythms and suggesting productive ways of practising difficult passages made me want to play this piece myself, and it was with this piece that I went back to playing the piano after one year of a complete break from even touching the piano.

Soon, it became a part of my repertoire, and I first performed it at a recital together with the music of Bach, Schoenberg, and Carter. In my opinion, Schoenberg, Carter, and Babbitt are the twentieth-century composers whose styles clearly have taken root in the venerable tradition and have flourished, developing into their own personal manner of writing. After having studied most of Carter's piano works, which feature polyphonic composition of the highest quality, I naturally gravitated towards Babbitt's music, which also belongs to the category of twentieth-century contrapuntal work. After having performed Babbitt and Carter many times, I recently

recorded Babbitt's *Post-Partitions* (1966)¹ and *Overtime* (1987),² which represent two different periods of his compositional life, along with most of Carter's middle-to-late piano works. Also, in lecture recitals since the fall of 2020, I have presented Babbitt's *Minute Waltz* (1977) and *It Takes Twelve to Tango* (1984) together with *Post-Partitions*.

When I was studying the score of *Post-Partitions* away from the piano, and listening to my student struggling to play it, the piece sounded extremely systematic. It seemed to me that the complexity of the rhythm dominates this composition. Although it is written in strict 4/4 from the beginning to the end, its rhythmic intricacies are very intense and delicate. The 4/4 time signature stands as a firm foundation to hold together its complex structure based on the correlation of pitch class, time value, and dynamics.³

I saved a lot of time by figuring out the rhythm first away from the piano, because when I actually sat in front of the piano and started playing, I immediately started to see another side of this piece, and the original impression began to change. The more I learned the score, the more I found that its notational details evoke the kinds of musical expressivity familiar to me from other compositions of the past that I greatly admire.

At first, with the help of the three pedals in various combinations, the polyphony written on four staves became distinct. Then, the dynamic markings appearing on every note, which seemed an impossible challenge initially, soon started to act as a means of expression. What had seemed merely systematically written rhythms turned out to be a collection of very creative rhythms, with even a touch of swing.

Pedal Technique

Although the piece requires unusual technical skills to perform, it is quite possible to be very faithful to the score and to bring out the distinct voices in four staves.

As a pianist, I must first point out the infinite possibilities of the pedal technique used in this piece, which serves as the most important tool to realise the heavily dense polyphony that occupies the entire keyboard. Babbitt does not provide any pedal markings, so it is up to the pianist to develop their own pedal technique.

The most common use of the sostenuto pedal (middle pedal) is to have the long notes or chords sustained such as in bar 3, in [Figure 1](#), the D-flat that starts

The image shows a musical score for four staves, labeled P1, P3, P3, and P1 from top to bottom. The score is for bar 3 of *Post-Partitions*. The top two staves (P1) are in treble clef, and the bottom two staves (P3) are in bass clef. The music is highly complex, featuring many notes with dynamic markings such as *mf*, *ff*, *mp*, *pp*, *f*, and *fff*. There are also fingerings indicated by numbers 1-5 and 7-8. A prominent feature is a long note in the bottom staff (P3) that is sustained, with a flat accidental (D-flat) that affects only that note. The score is marked with '8--' at the beginning and end of the system.

Figure 1 *Post-Partitions*, b. 3. Accidentals affect only the notes they immediately precede.

Figure 2 *Post-Partitions*, bb. 19–20.

halfway through beat two in the second staff,⁴ and as shown in Figure 2, the last chord in the second staff of bar 19.⁵ There are numerous other occasions of this kind throughout the piece. Sometimes the sustained chords do not seem long enough to insert the sostenuto pedal, as in bar 12 (Figure 3). But even there, it is possible to quickly depress the sostenuto pedal in between the first *ffff* chord struck in the third and fourth staves and the eighth note on G3 marked *p*. In this way, while the loud chords stay *ffff*, the middle voice in the third staff clearly stands out.⁶

Secondly, the importance of the releasing technique of the sustain pedal is often neglected or overlooked. The releasing of the sustained pedal frequently occurs on the tied notes, such as in the very first measure of the piece (Figure 4) the first Ab in the second staff from the top. By completely releasing the sustain pedal on the tied Ab, the dampers are placed back on the strings of the notes that are not held, which stops their vibration so that the tied Ab (left untouched by the dampers because its key is held down) comes into clearer focus while being able to resonate through the exact duration indicated.⁷ Furthermore, such pedalling gives a sense of where the beats are, which helps define the complicated rhythms clearly. Figure 2 illustrates this releasing technique used in conjunction with the sostenuto pedal. Right after the last *ffff* chord is struck in bar 19, the sostenuto pedal should be depressed and held through to the last beat of bar 20. Although the sostenuto pedal technically retains the pitches D, E, and F as long as it is depressed, the register is high enough that they die away and only the G5 is left to resonate. Meanwhile, the sustain pedal is quickly inserted right on the last note of the septuplet in bar 20 (the

Figure 3 *Post-Partitions*, b. 12.

Figure 4 *Post-Partitions*, b. 1.

A4 in the second staff) and immediately released on the tied G5 (the same releasing technique is used as above). Re-depressing the sustain pedal allows the higher octave strings of the manually depressed pitch to resonate and thereby give that pitch a slight boost retroactively. The A4 must be played with a very quick sharp touch accompanied by a quick insert of the sustain pedal that gives a striking presence, and by very quickly lifting the sustain pedal, the A is immediately cut off, and therefore it does not interfere with the G that is resonant throughout. In this way, the tied G is highlighted, while other voices in short fragments marked *pppp*, *pp*, *p*, and *mp* are also heard clearly and independently.⁸

Lastly, besides its strategic use, it is worth mentioning the intentional *avoidance* of the sostenuto pedal for musical reasons in other passages. In bars 69–70 (Figure 5), where Eb and E in the bass are repeated in long sustained syncopated rhythms with various dynamic indications, the pianist's instinct would normally be to use the sostenuto pedal. However, the use of the sostenuto pedal here would eliminate the possibility of differentiating the written dynamics on the dyads in syncopated rhythms; it would jeopardise the expressiveness and freedom of Babbitt's writing. In places where it is impossible to hold the dyads, such as in bar 69 in Figure 5 the second held Eb-E dyad, after G# is caught with the left hand, the pianist must quickly and quietly reposition the left hand on the dyads caught in the sustain pedal without re-hitting the notes and then release the sustain pedal. In this way, the dyad is able to sustain through the indicated duration, which creates the distinct outline of an expressive bass line in suspended rhythm.⁹

Figure 5 *Post-Partitions*, bb. 69–70.

Using these types of techniques, which require a pianist's quick reflexes and judgment continuously throughout the piece, can help reveal the expressiveness of Babbitt's intricate and dense polyphonic writing.

Voicing Skill

The twentieth-century modern piano has an extraordinarily intricate and sensitive action. This magnificent instrument is capable of producing wide varieties of dynamics and articulations beyond what one might imagine. It is the human ear that is sometimes not sensitive enough to recognise the subtlety of sound making.

It is not good enough to be faithful to Babbitt's dynamic indications; the pianist must find ways to help listeners hear what he or she is intending to play. Because of the highly dense texture that occupies the entire keyboard, the harmonic overtones can create confusions to the human ear, and we are often lost in a muddle of so many notes and complicated rhythms. The most realistic and effective solution to help listeners and pianists distinguish the four distinct voices and twelve levels of dynamic indications in this piece from *ppppp* to *fffff* is voicing skill. It is important that the pianists look for ways to reduce the overtones of the higher register, therefore leaving more space for the middle range to resonate. Babbitt often indicates the same dynamics simultaneously in high and middle registers, as in bar 2 (Figure 6) on the last thirty-second notes of the first beat in staves 1 and 3 marked *ppp*,¹⁰ and bar 15 (Figure 7) on the dotted eighth notes in the second and third staves marked

Figure 6 *Post-Partitions*, b. 2.

Figure 7 *Post-Partitions*, b. 15.

Figure 8 *Post-Partitions*, b. 5.

ppppp and on the dotted eighth notes in the first and third staves marked *p*.¹¹ In cases like this, the middle register notes should be played slightly more than the high register notes. In this way, it gives the middle register more presence, while the high register will still be heard effortlessly, and the dynamics will stay in the range indicated without a risk of jeopardising proper balance with the resonant overtone of the high register. This type of voicing issue can be found continuously throughout the piece.

Bar 5 (Figure 8) demonstrates sudden drastic changes of dynamics that are also found very often throughout the piece. The repeated D3 and D4 with the much higher pitch B5 is one of the many examples where voicing skill can help differentiate the contrasting dynamics effectively, by playing the middle register notes more strongly than the higher register notes when marked soft (their initial attack), and by playing the higher register notes more strongly than the middle register notes when marked loud (their repetition).¹² Bar 7 (Figure 9) demonstrates a similar kind of voicing situation. The higher of the two downbeat pitches marked *fffff* must be played as loud as possible, and the next sixteenth notes G7 and G8 at *pppp* in the first staff must be played as soft as possible; the lower Eb in the second staff must receive slightly more resonance. On both occasions, adding a touch of sustain pedal on loud notes and lifting it completely on soft notes can also help the contrast to be more evident and effective. The difference is subtle but well-known by pianists: even though the sustain pedal does not directly increase the loudness of the key being struck it nevertheless increases the overall resonance of the piano, including especially the other strings one or more octaves away from the key being

Figure 9 *Post-Partitions*, b. 7.

The image shows a musical score for four staves, labeled P1, P2, P3, and P4. The score is for a piece titled 'Post-Partitions, b. 33'. The notation includes various dynamic markings such as *pp*, *pppp*, *ppp*, *mf*, *fff*, *mp*, and *f*. There are also musical notations like slurs, accents, and fingerings (e.g., 7, 3, 5). The staves are arranged in a grand staff format, with P1 and P2 on the top two staves, and P3 and P4 on the bottom two staves.

Figure 10 *Post-Partitions*, b. 33.

struck, which resonate in sympathetic vibration with the string (or strings) of that key, thereby further increasing the loudness of that pitch.

The same type of voicing may also be effective in bar 33, shown in [Figure 10](#). Here, the first and third staves each have pairs of dyads (B2 with Bb3 and F#6 with Eb7) occurring three times, starting from the second beat in the first and third staves, each time with contrasting dynamics. Again, by weighting (voicing) the registers differently each time as in bar 5 ([Figure 8](#)), the contrast will be more distinct to the listener's ears.

Voicing skill can also be very effective in his later piano works. *Minute Waltz*, *It Takes Twelve to Tango* and *Overtime* all have much more lyrical textures than *Post-Partitions*. Although these shorter works may seem less technical than *Post-Partitions*, they require even more sensitive voicing skill to clarify the densely layered lyrical lines that occupy wide registral spans.

In addition to the technical aspect of voicing, understanding the fundamental principle of dynamic indications can also be an important factor for expanding the possibility of sound making. If these dynamic indications are perceived only as loudness, the sound quality remains one-dimensional. However if they are perceived also as nuance, the possibility of sound making becomes multidimensional. For instance, *f* can be played with or without the sustain pedal, or with or without the soft pedal, or with any combinations of pedals. In the same manner, *p* can be played with or without the soft pedal, or with or without the sustain pedal, or in any combination. Furthermore, the sustain pedal being extremely sensitive, a slight change of pressure on the pedal can change the quality of the sound to a great extent. When all of these possibilities are imbued with the touch of the pianist, the possibilities of sound making become almost limitless.¹³

Body Movement

While pedal technique and voicing skill undoubtedly play the most significant roles in the art of sound making in a dense polyphonic piece such as *Post-Partitions*, there are other issues worth considering. I am almost hesitant to talk about this piece from a physical point of view, because every pianist has his or her own style of playing, and my ideas and experimentation with body movement do not necessarily suit

every pianist who will tackle this piece. However a consideration of this issue, even from a personal perspective, might be a useful resource to pianists who are attempting to perform it.

To be ready to execute any and all types of leaps in various positions and in various rhythms, in principle the pianist must be absolutely at ease with his or her body. The movements must be as effortless as possible. It helps to divide the piece into small segments and take one segment at a time. These segments can be of any length, from just one beat to a bar or more, depending on one's liking. First, let the body memorise the leaps in relation to the rhythms. Then apply dynamic indications to them, insert necessary pedals, and work out the voicing. All of these aspects then have to be combined in one sweeping motion. Everything happens so very quickly that there is no time to be listening to the process of what is happening, as in for instance a segment in Chopin, where the pianist listens to his or herself making a crescendo, diminuendo, ritardando, accelerando and etc. In contrast, performing *Post-Partitions* is almost like visualising a fast playback of a vase falling off a table and smashing into pieces of different sizes and shapes. For example, the very first bar (Figure 4) can be considered one segment played in one motion. The pianist must visualise all the elements mentioned above and throw them out in one stroke of motion with absolute ease, so that everything will fall into place perfectly. This relaxed movement makes the body swing, and contagiously makes the music swing.

Conclusion

Without a question, *Post-Partitions* is one of the most outstanding contrapuntal works of the twentieth century. The polyphony in *Post-Partitions* is much denser, occupies a much wider range of the keyboard, and requires a much wider range of dynamics than the polyphonic works of Babbitt's predecessors. However, the fundamental ideas of pedal technique and voicing skill used to project the polyphony in this piece rest on the same principles as those used to play Bach's fugues. For a skilled pianist, rendering a Bach fugue in a fashion that projects its perfection to listeners is feasibly within reach, whereas with *Post-Partitions* the sense of having reached that state is much more elusive. The difference between *Post-Partitions* and its predecessors is that, with this piece, the player must always hunt on, within, and through the physical instrument for further ways to project the score as effectively and faithfully as possible for listeners to be able to hear the composer's intentions.

Happily, we are blessed with the numerous possibilities of the instrument; the problem usually lies with the pianist, who is at their wits' end trying to handle the fully equipped modern piano. The only way to realise Babbitt's score faithfully and effectively enough is by working to make the most of the instrument's capacity.

Notes

- [1] Performance of *Post-Partitions*: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sMIad0VPni0>.

- [2] Performance of *Overtime*: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=eGLzrDgIur4>.
- [3] Mead (1994, 175–77) discusses dynamics in Babbitt's *Post-Partitions* and his music in general. He describes perceptual issues and conceiving dynamics in terms of contours and their transformations.
- [4] <https://youtu.be/sMIad0VPni0?t=12>.
- [5] <https://youtu.be/sMIad0VPni0?t=76>.
- [6] <https://youtu.be/sMIad0VPni0?t=44>.
- [7] <https://youtu.be/sMIad0VPni0?t=1>.
- [8] <https://youtu.be/sMIad0VPni0?t=78>.
- [9] <https://youtu.be/sMIad0VPni0?t=256>.
- [10] <https://youtu.be/sMIad0VPni0?t=7>.
- [11] <https://youtu.be/sMIad0VPni0?t=58>.
- [12] <https://youtu.be/sMIad0VPni0?t=17>.
- [13] See Mead (1994, 175–77).

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Notes on Contributor

Mari Asakawa has established herself internationally in many notable performances, with a concentration on contemporary music. Her recent activities comprise lectures, workshops and recitals focusing on the music of the great American composers Elliott Carter and Milton Babbitt. In 2012, she gave all-Carter Piano Recitals at Carnegie Hall in the presence of the composer. Her recording *The Flow of Music: Piano Works of Carter & Babbitt* was released on the Centaur Label in 2018, and was chosen as 'specially selected CD' by the *Record Geijutsu Journal*. She teaches piano performance at the Aichi Prefectural University of Fine Arts and Music, and lectures on contemporary piano music at the Open University, in Tokyo. She holds a Bachelor's degree from the Juilliard School and a Master's degree from Yale University. Her teachers have included Gyorgy Sandor, Daniel Pollack, and Bruno Mezzena.

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Discography

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