

The piano as we know it today was created between the 18th & 19th centuries. It was used as much for scientific enquiry as it was for musical creation. Its size masked its wide dynamic & frequency range, which was unparalleled by any other instrument.

But, for some, the piano was a source for even further experimentation. Rather than use the technology as intended, composers of the 20th century began to dream up new musical resources to augment its spectra.

The name perhaps most associated with the prepared piano is John Cage. Drafting the music for choreography by Sylvia Fort at Seattle's Cornish School, Cage wished for a percussion ensemble. However, the space was far too small. As a substitute, a few objects were placed on top of the strings of a grand piano to produce muted timbres that resembled the desired drum textures. Cage continued developing his preparation techniques during the late 1930s & 1940s.

## **the deep listening club lovers & lollypops**

As interest in these varied timbres grew, so did the range of approaches that could coax new sounds from the instrument. Some performers began to catalogue the effects of different materials, noting that metal objects created brittle, metallic attacks while softer materials yielded a rounded, drum-like pulse. Others experimented with combinations of objects that might change & move about with each strike of the key. Rubber erasers, clothespins, bolts, felt, screws & other objects are used to make percussive effects on the piano. At times only select strings are altered, creating a unique sonic palette of hybrid colours.

It is worth mentioning that John Cage was quite specific in his instructions on how one was to prepare the piano. His Sonatas & Interludes details the material to use, the exact distances from the damper, tone & which strings are to be effected. While this may seem restrictive, it is meant as a suggestion: the pianist should feel out & explore what seems right for the piece,

#9: prepared piano  
2026

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& also for the model of piano they use as each instrument will have idiosyncracies.

The late 20th & early 21st centuries, saw the prepared piano move beyond its origin in experimentalism, as it entered a wider musical vocabulary. Both electronic & pop contexts began incorporating its textures into their work & a repertoire of prepared piano grew. Even Aphex Twin has made some miniatures on his *Selected Ambient Works, Vol. 2*. Programmed into a midi-controlled disklavier—an acoustic piano fitted with a mechanism that can play automatically—Richard D. James created percussive songs that relied on the aged Cagean operation.

Among the piano players who explored this terrain, Jessica Williams is singular. As she crafted her virtuosity under the jazz tradition, she also quietly cultivated an obsession with the prepared piano. Hidden resonances cajoled her away from standard forms, as she melded blues & jazz figures with the metallic shimmers, buzzing growl & muted overtones of transformed strings. Williams approached preparation not as an academic exercise, but as an extension of her pianism—a tool for a unique voicing.

Nowadays one can buy sample packs of pre-recorded prepared piano. The tonal shifts & variations of acoustic movement morphes into homogeneous shapes meant to evoke an absent experimentation. Although this can be read as a 'democratizing' gesture—the piano is no longer as 'common' as it was, nor is the possibility of having spacetime to prepare it—what begins as a spatial & choreographic necessity becomes a library of normalized sounds available to splice.

Featured txt scores:

jessica williams.....BLUE ABSTRACTION

&

ferrante & teicher.....john cage

aphex twin.....dave brubeck

the velvet underground.....cor fuhler

brian eno.....kelly moran

melissa st. pierre.....fennesz

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why have you done today?

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