

# On Piano Performing in Short Videos from a Semiotic Perspective

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## ABSTRACT

Inseparably connected, hands and musical instruments, piano as a well-known traditional one in particular, have been prevalent in short videos nowadays. Piano itself has descended from aristocratic culture to a part of popular culture, in which creative works are produced and shared. The short video authors, however, tend to hide their identities in the camouflage of nick names or by covering their face. Hands at this time become a sign focused to generate expressive form in this art semiosis with piano, and interact with the short video text and receivers. Semiotologists including Charles Peirce and Susanne Langer try to build a system made up of three or four branches, from the object to signs, from the interpretant to the expositor, separately or interactively studied as a continuum. Short videos as a frame, in which hand-associated works abode, and a sign at the same time give a window into fandom and youth subculture ecology as a macro-semiosis from a micro-semiosis perspective.

**Keywords:** piano performing; hand sign; short video text; symbolic interaction

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Hand is the most prominent index sign physically. The hand stencils found in El Castillo Cave (Puente Viesgo, Cantabria, Spain) dated back in 37,300 BCE are the oldest known visual symbol of hand,<sup>[7]</sup> an evident proof of an act for the satisfaction of curiosity, understanding of the world, and recognition of risk and living conditions of ancient human by solely handprints. Perception, acceptance and use of hand signs can be considered as one of the most productive and creative traits of human activities, in which a simple gesture gives forth signification of direction, number, good or bad meanings (e.g. by turning thumbs up or down, or a victory sign), agreement or disagreement, and religious implications. On top of that, ornamental accessories amplify signifying a hand sign by, for example, different finger positions of a ring to symbolize different relations between a couple. God touches Adam by his index finger to cast in his divine power in *Creation of Adam* by Michelangelo, and Uncle Sam pointing at a frontal direction in the *I Want You* posters prevalent during the US conscription time spurred the aspiring youth. All mark the credit of how hands or fingers signify explicitly and become an important token that distinguishes homo erectus from quadrupeds. Hand signs are also where

meanings of humanity, thoughts, emotions, power and rites abode, to the point that *Venus de Milo* and midrange portraits present a sensation of divinity.

Hand signs have been under the spotlight of art texts since the entry of the inseparable link between hands and musical instrument, which relates much to the discussion of spatial arrangement, strength and emotion generation. Known as the musical instrument of all, piano has been a household name from the nobility to the public since the prototype harpsichord was invented by Bartolomeo Christofori in 1709. Its wide range brings challenge to and puts focus on the hands of a performer, be he Bach who gave his solo debut in London in 1768, or Robert Arthur Moog who initiated the electronic synthesizer in 1960s. Hands are naturally uploaded, shared and commented with the digitalization of piano music in multimedia platforms, particularly via short videos. Taking short video as an evolving context in the sign-consuming age, it is expected to give a glimpse into the formation and symbolic links of the hands-piano duality in a cultural and interactive way.

## 2. BACKGROUND OF THE STUDY

Filled with signs, short videos, as a way of advertising, frame an opportune but addictive space for

the generation and analysis of any semiosis. Complex like the hands-piano duality draws attention to the bouncing fingers and each note. Relevant studies are few over this co-relation. In *Système de la mode* (1967), Roland Barthes elaborates the generation of acceptance of fashion advertisement as a semiotic language and the symbolic value of fashion products to conceive a myth in a particular culture. The exposition of gestures and hand signs connects to modern design, visual communication, digital forensics<sup>[6]</sup> and a retrospect of the contribution made by gestures as a crucial semiotic focus. With the emergence and carnivalization of multitudes of signs in short videos, the semiotic formality of piano incorporated with hands is dissected from how it is transmitted and perceived as a semiosis, giving shape to the discourse of this paper, which digs into the relation and symbolic interaction of the two specific signs.

### 3. THEORY AND ANALYSIS

#### 3.1 Music as a time-borne consciousness

A gift for ears, music entitles the receivers listeners who, at this time, concentrate not on the performer but the ultimate product (enjoyment), regardless of his/her face, body contour or hand shape. Comments after the performance care about rhyme, tonality and the “vision” transmitted to and then interpreted by our brain. The listeners would compare the work to the original version if it is not performer-generated before it goes into critiques of its remaking and adaptations. Music arrangers and performers will hardly be examined in their hands.

The language of music can be regarded as a sound-image signified as Saussure proposed. It is an invisible and continuous time-borne order that is in harmony with the behavior of receivers. That coincides with Susanne Langer’s idea of expressive form or iconic symbols of emotions that resorts to audio-visual or imagination device, in which music signs, different from what is traditionally termed, hook closely onto forms, emotions, associations and life. A fusion of subject, sign, conception and object, expressive form is an art sign in unity that outstrips the binary or ternary semiotic system.<sup>[5]</sup> Langer further explains conception by an example<sup>[8]</sup> where a “house” can be represented in either (1) a photo, (2) a painting, (3) a sketch, (4) a front view of an architectural blueprint, or (5) a construction plan because they include relations of the same parts in an entirety, which is also equivalent to a form. Music frames and fills one’s consciousness in a period of time, and moves in time with internal elements through force, pause and cadence to attract receivers to contact with and integrate themselves into the life emotion of this symbolic process. She believes that music obtains and produces artistry via metaphors and symbols rather than straightforward realism, and that it is an organic illusion

of time in which perception, sentiment and imagination are in one piece.

#### 3.2 The presence of hands-piano semiosis in short videos

The new media context gives rise to photography and video recording that escape the limit of traditional transcribing and note-taking. Anything that goes into the video frame can be generated, transmitted, consumed and reproduced. At this time, the person being recorded and uploaded is the narrator and also originator. The way he/she provides the work has been transformed, from the interest in the final results to the process. The information is constantly modified to the point that a video text as a way of transmission has no end when readers and audiences are allowed to censor or add what they want to ceaselessly expect and present a better text. Micro-film, a secondary creation derived from long films, is gradually coming to the stage thanks to the advance and support of social media platforms and appreciation from diverse audiences. That catalyzes the popularization of short videos, with its emergence in China and the US at almost the same time. The first YouTube short video *Me at the Zoo* was published by the co-founder of the platform Jawed Karim in April, 2005, while the end of the same year saw a 20-minute exceptional work *A Murder Case Caused by Steamed Bread*, uploaded by freelancer Hu Ge. It was an adaptation from a fantasy film *The Promise (Wu Ji)* by Chen Kaige (director of *Farewell My Concubine* in 1993), mixed with the *China Rule of Law Report* and video clips of the performance in Shanghai Circus City. Recognized as the embryonic form of China’s micro film, it marked a stunning number of views and downloads more than the original work. This medium opens a door for internet users to video text and cultivates their ability to perceive, translate and create fragmented contents.

Taking a creed to be short, adaptable and rapid, short videos observe human body as the most essential and natural sign exposed to the public. It is the author’s active uploading, presentation, and editing that cover the naturalness and continuity of a work, and it is the receivers’ passive entry into the video frame, sporadic attention and endless information consumption that give birth to the development of such existence. This form, if under close scrutiny, is also productive, facilitating viewing, learning, interaction, reproduction and re-transmission through limited symbolic representations in a given time and space.

Short videos of piano performance add image to music, and the entitlement of a spectator is transformed to a listener. Every detail of a performer can be examined, criticized, compared, studied, and reproduced by slowing down, pausing, playing back and repeating. This could be a self-projection which perfectly conveys its image as an “implied author” in the presence of himself/herself

and in full view of a large crowd. The performer is allowed to meditate, flail, wave or change his/her outfit or makeup when the spectators enjoy only the music, accompanied by the ambience and the lights in the video. However, if one's image is displayed with merely hands, the projection would be elevated to a symbolic abstraction unreachable but eager to be understood. Within the focus of a camera, the hands are godly signages composing unworldly, transcendent melodies on a mortal instrument, rather than a stilted, automatic mechanism. This signage residing in the video frame cannot be liberated and is destined to "live" with the piano, shaping an incomplete closed loop of "world (video text)-performer (with hands only)-expressive form-receivers". The spectators' view is fixed on a picture of perhaps fifty keys of a piano, and the performer does not have to play all of them. The spectators' eyes usually could not follow the hands and key pressed, and when they catch up, the fingers had crossed to another key, or the rebound was held down again. Restraining the performer's hands only by hitting a pause is no less than holding a painter's hand while he/she is painting, and examining how the stick between the fingers, the brush and the pigment form a linkage to complete a work. Such deconstruction loses the vitality of music and the isomorphism of expressive form. The moment of pause ceases permanently the force, space and emotion on the piano, and the nervous reflex from the hands.

The "strength" can be spotted from the pressings and the afterimage generated by the striding fingers over the span of the all keys. In fact, receivers can never sense the strength and speed in the planar works, but the image that occupies their sights. The wider the span is in control, the more amazed they are at the hands to the instrument. When the video text is signified and accepted, that means the codes of musical and visual signs will match the codes induced by a receiver's psychological expectation. One will naturally associate light melodies and bouncing hands with sunshine and fireworks, and excitement surges up accordingly. In contrast, the expressive "image" would be more likely to connect to a wisp of breeze, frozen rain, and loneliness upon slow and sad melodies, and gentle hand movement. The anonymous and intractable bullet screens will flicker with self-mockeries like "My hands are wasted" and "Now I have the piano, but where can I buy the hands", or some poetic, lyric-like contents to comprise a multimodal world of audio and visual signs. The bullet screens in the context define the piano-playing video as a visually auditory symbol and take the place of the verbal and body language to command either praises or criticisms based on receivers' intuitive understandings towards the music. This kind of ritualistic conglomeration is a behavioral result of creating a sense of identity and security with the help of short video framework, and becomes the "imaginary community" part of the artistic sign.<sup>[2]</sup> Receivers in the pursuit of the quantity or distribution of bullet screens are

indeed in a want of taking part in the text. The sparsely commented videos are considered to be "unwelcomed" that receivers stop by and glance only at the covers before hurrying to the next welcoming work.

### ***3.3 Face concealment of subject in creation***

In the frame where visual symbols are focused preferentially, auditory and acoustic signs are denoted after the visual ones: their quantities (the number of views, fans and bullet-screens) are seen before a click-in to hear the music. A huge barrage of bullet screens is visual itself and for visual work only. It is a performative act implemented by the receivers in a sea of words to secure virtual identity building and impression control. They would extend this act to the comment section after finishing watching the video, from a one-way admiration of the music, surroundings and the hands, to the interaction by getting his/her nickname(s) as a satisfying link with the author. The act can also be understood as a result from the flood of signs being unable to be captured inside the video and therefore jumps outside the frame for a quest of the performer's skills, social status, and details of life. The author gives feedbacks in such more indirect ways as checking on views, subscriptions, likes, dislikes and promotions. But as the background behavior is logically distant from the real-world action, interaction remains in the framework of the virtual world.

The similar signification of hands-piano duality can be seen in short videos on other topics: guitar playing, cuisine cooking, handicrafts and craftwork making, and calligraphy demonstrations. They all hide a distinct feature of a subject, a visual symbol that should be paid attention to by the receivers: face. Roland Barthes suggests that "A face constitutes the absolute state of the naked parts of a human body".<sup>[1]</sup> Johari Window model also points out that face is an open area of self-cognition, showing the facial vitality in meaning making and signifying. It is the flesh, nerves and bones that hold up facial features to tag human as an individual and a social member, while a hand is never faithfully investigated except for the shape and length of its fingers.

John Fiske believes that mass culture has both creativity and productivity, among which symbolic productivity characterizes the culture as a whole. It is substantively in-ward and limits its particular discourse, time and space within a local community, ranging from fan culture to every element of a sign.<sup>[4]</sup> Face backgrounding owes to the fact that hands in the context of piano playing is more "productive" by its intensity of strength and force when touching the keys. The face nonetheless is an emotion-bearing and identity-bearing space. The hand-focused videos "naturally" require dexterity from the particular body part. In other words, even a performer is fully included in the video frame, the receivers also filter out an ideal relationship between the hands and objects and ignore the face, which is trimmed

down to a shadow, silhouette, or nothing. Even if the sound is cancelled into a nil symbol and only a picture is left on the screen, the latter conveys a more powerful image in silence than the muted person presented by only moving his/her lips has to offer.

### **3.4 Symbolic interaction of hands-piano duality**

According to the symbolic interaction theory by G. H. Mead and Max Weber (1962), social interaction between individuals endows signs with symbolic meanings and matches them by their own meanings. Signs hereby cover languages, written characters, behaviors, objects and scenes.<sup>[3]</sup> At the lingual level, piano is a derivative of an Italian word *pianoforte*, with the former part of which referring to lightness or silence, and the latter part of which implying power and potent. The strong sense of the word is omitted to coin what it is called lexically. Interestingly, the Chinese translation of piano is 钢琴 (steel piano) because of the material used. That generates a contradictory meaning semantically. As a metaphorical sign, piano naturally brings receivers to a petit bourgeois property placed in the center of a hall. It is a machine integrating industrial technology and humanistic spirit, designed for precise coordination by strings, keys and pedals. In terms of behavioral level, that a piano is chosen for artistic expression via superimposing notes to achieve a full signification is actually a mathematical accuracy. Piano performers in short videos will simplify the original music to cater the public, and reduce it to a rudimental and popular procedure in a bit to bring the receivers (sign consumers) to a quick sensual experience of the signified with more distinct signifiers. Even the steps and purposes are elaborated. This aristocratic culture which should have been included in a wide paradigmatic space is now decentralized and transferred to the library of popular culture where a piano can be played in a living room of every household, behind a shop window, in a waiting hall of a railway station or airport terminal and even on the street.

At the scene level, such decentralization is still rigorous and must involve certain social situations as the subject of action, role relations, space-time relations, etc. Before approaching a piano, the individual expositor and the spectator as others share the same, almost identical role, but upon a hand-touch on the black and white keys, the gesture has already labelled him/her: a determination to smash the public realm of otherness and be seated before the piano, in a place that is both in store for flow experience and part of the public sphere. The social interpretation of the situation will directly affect the performer's behavior<sup>[9]</sup> that the "role" begins to demarcate and the demarcation is particularly salient when the touch becomes rendition. In this case, the hands are likely to be filmed and put back into the frame of a short video clip. The signification of the process, in its essence, is echoed and advertised in the same mold, and

should bring out equivalent effects even by different performers or instruments. Either by private use, sharing in reality or uploading for more promotions, a reproduction of short videos does not seem to anchor any discourse or configure any metaphors, since pure acoustic experience could be diminished by multiplied shooting angles and interpretations.

## **4. CONCLUSION**

The artistic sign theory by Langer embraces a quaternary system that includes subject (performer), signs (hands-piano duality), conception (internal and external relations), and object (receivers), composing a complete expressive form and advancing beyond the ternary structure of representamen-object-interpretant by C. S. Peirce. Short video text, as it proceeds, also becomes a sign and a space of perception for expression and identity building. It has to be noted that the author of short videos often hides his/her face as an iconic sign to express, leading to a deficiency of the integrity of artistic symbols and loss of comprehensive interpretations. The foregrounding of hands that casts music into a vehicle of time-borne consciousness connects to the receivers' understanding of the semiosis, and downplays, to some extent, the authority and aesthetics from a social perspective, thence making for a macro-sign for the expressive form of its kinds in the short-video ecology. It is expected to reach a part of the fandom culture—short video experience—via deconstructing this ecology and further grope the jumbled world of sub-culture.

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