Music of Its Own Accord

Aura Satz

Hands played a spectacular role in shaping the manifestations of spiritualism. There were the many knuckles rapping out messages on tables in telegraphic code; the hand of the medium scribbling out automatic writing; the touching fingers of participants placed upon the planchette of the Ouija Board; the interlocked sweaty palms in the circle of the séance sitting; the tied, manacled or chained wrists of the medium. Then there were the spirit hands materialized by mediums, the disembodied hands that manifested themselves by levitating things, stroking heads and knees, strumming guitars, striking drums, ringing bells. These floating hands were often luminous or invisible but palpable.

THE SENSES OF THE SÉANCE

Hands, whether those disembodied, disassociated from the visible living bodies in the room, or those that served as passive transmission entities, could be said to be the true agents of spiritualism. Séances took place in the dark or in the semi-light of flickering oil lanterns or gas lamps, and the threshold of the visible tended to manifest itself through manual gesticulation.

In the darkened séance room it was not the sense of sight that was privileged but the tactile, dactylographic evidence provided by hands, called upon time and again to demonstrate the truth of events. People insisted they could recognize the soft touch of a deceased family member or loved one or see the gentle gestures of their outstretched hands, that their faces were patted or their beards and hair pulled. Male and female bodies, material and immaterial, brushed up and touched one another, subverting the polite conventions of gendered contact of the time. Human agency was embodied by the haptic choreography of nimble fingers, so that while the hands of the séance sitters were gripped tightly in a chain of handclasps laid plainly above the table, these invisible fingers moved about making themselves known as presence and substantiating the claim of a possible afterlife.

The other sense organ that spiritualist manifestations most addressed, at the expense of the over-privileged witness of the eye, was the ear. The birth of spiritualism is alleged to have commenced with the mysterious rappings of the Fox sisters in
family of Athens County, Ohio, became known for their elaborate musical séances [3]. They were ordered by the spirits to build a “Spirit Room” and to furnish it with a number of musical instruments: a tenor drum, a bass drum, two fiddles, a guitar, an accordion, a trumpet, a tin horn, a tea bell, a triangle and a tambourine. During the séances the spirits would give concerts using the musical instruments. A circle of 20–30 people would be formed, the lights would be extinguished, and the performance would open with frightfully dramatic drum-rolls, followed by various musical performances, and ending with human voices singing until the room appeared to be inhabited by a full choir. All the while spirit hands and arms would form by the aid of a solution of phosphorous. The effect of such concerts in the dark must have been powerful, the eyes straining to latch sound onto source, gratified at the sight of hands and arms forming and materializing, providing a sense of embodiment to what they had just witnessed. The Koons’ exhibitions of musical “spiritual pyrotechnics” were enlivened by the “luminous bodies flying about with the swiftness of insects” resembling “different-sized human hands” [4].

Musical Instruments and Performance
Musical instruments provided an extension of these vocal manifestations, where again the spirits were challenged to produce mere sound as presence, and the faintest hint of melody was a bonus. Combining both hand and sound, musical performances became a prominent mode of communication with the dead. Daniel Dunglas Home, a famous Scottish medium known for, among other things, his levitating skills, describes a séance in 1854 during one of his tours in New York, during which a guitar was first heard to move in its case. Then the case was unlocked and the guitar placed under the table, from which it was played repeatedly, “not, to be sure, in the highest grade of the art, but with very fair average skill” [2]. Finally the guitar was passed from hand to hand of the people present, until it was removed by “invisible agency.” Such amateur handless music was common practice in spiritualist circles, as was the conjoined, indistinct group authorship implicit in the passing of the instrument from hand to hand, at once charging it with handfuls of added energy while proving its handless autonomy.

Also around the mid-1850s, the Koons family of Athens County, Ohio, became known for their elaborate musical séances [3]. They were ordered by the spirits to build a “Spirit Room” and to furnish it with a number of musical instruments: a tenor drum, a bass drum, two fiddles, a guitar, an accordion, a trumpet, a tin horn, a tea bell, a triangle and a tambourine. During the séances the spirits would give concerts using the musical instruments. A circle of 20–30 people would be formed, the lights would be extinguished, and the performance would open with frightfully dramatic drum-rolls, followed by various musical performances, and ending with human voices singing until the room appeared to be inhabited by a full choir. All the while spirit hands and arms would form by the aid of a solution of phosphorous. The effect of such concerts in the dark must have been powerful, the eyes straining to latch sound onto source, gratified at the sight of hands and arms forming and materializing, providing a sense of embodiment to what they had just witnessed. The Koons’ exhibitions of musical “spiritual pyrotechnics” were enlivened by the “luminous bodies flying about with the swiftness of insects” resembling “different-sized human hands” [4].

Fig. 2. Aura Satz, Automamusic, hand-printed cibachrome print, 2008. (© Aura Satz)
In one of the séances an old out-of-tune violin was tuned to concert pitch and played in various locations throughout the room (including against the wall, and strings downward against one of the sitter’s knees) [5]. The frail Lord sisters performed musical feats of the most astounding physical force, playing a double-bass violoncello, guitar, drums, accordion, tambourine, bells and more, at times singly, at others in unison, climaxing the performance with the lights turned back on to reveal one of the sisters seated silently in her invalid chair surrounded by a pile of musical instruments [6]. Similarly, the famous Davenport Brothers toured an act that consisted of entering a cabinet with their arms tied or manacled while instruments would float and play in the darkened room, and hands, seemingly human, would be felt and seen, before they would “dissolve, melt into air in the very grasp and tender of the spectator” [7]. The instrument was for the most part self-playing, or if there were luminous hands, they remained detached and bodiless, floating alongside the instrument. As one spirit communicated, as if to clarify a continuity between the tactile and the musical, “This is my hand that touches you and the guitar” [8]. The hands of the medium could likewise be termed self-playing, as they would frequently play automatically as if with a life of their own, while the medium was in trance, channeling an “invisible piano-forte player,” for instance. Musical instruments, especially pianos, often served similar roles to tables, floating, rocking and being rapped upon. Now and then the piano keys were used like a typewriter of sorts to answer questions. Much of the mystery centered around the proximity or distance of the musical instruments to the hands, and the tension generated by insulating one from another. Music would leak out despite all efforts to isolate contact between the instrument and the medium: Piano keys and strings would be played while the lid was locked and the keyhole sealed with wax. Mediums were frequently restrained in a variety of ways. Likewise the expert medium could channel a spirit and play music with minimal contact, effortlessly, by merely resting one hand on the piano while it was turned so that the keys faced the wall [9], or by laying her additional ethereal hands on the guitar (Fig. 1).

Home’s spiritual powers produced the famous case of a self-playing concertina accordion, which played hymns and tunes “without any visible agency” [10]. Again efforts were made to reduce contact between his hands and the accordion, and yet his hand was the powering force, the animating plug, as it were, for he could hold the accordion from the bottom with one hand, the keys being out of reach, while leaving the other on the table, and even so the instrument played many a tune [11]. To add energy to the accordion it was then passed into the hands of sitters while it continued to play of its own accord. The eminent scientist Sir William Crookes subjected Home to a series of scientific experiments in 1871, by placing a brand new accordion within a drum-shaped metal cage wrapped in copper wire. He ran an electrical current through the wire, but rather than block Home’s psychic force it seemed possibly to energize it—for it certainly produced no resistance. The medium was still able to make the accordion “expand and contract,” produce music, and even float, leading Crookes to believe that Home possessed a genuine psychic force [12]. Crookes also attested to actually seeing invisible fingers playing the keys of an accordion while both hands of the medium remained visible [13] (Fig. 2). The debunking theory is
that Home was performing ventriloquial misdirection of sorts, as he possessed a small one-octave mouth organ that he could hide within his mouth and play rather skillfully as though the sound were coming from the accordion [14].

VENTRILLOQUISM AND TECHNOLOGY

Indeed ventriloquism can be viewed as the prime metaphor for the shifts in technology that took place in this period, many of which were engaged in the prying apart of sound and source. For as the sonic manifestations of spiritualist sittings became more sophisticated, music itself was on the cusp of losing its body—its resonating instrument body as well as the anatomical body that played it—to transform into the incisive indentations on the tinfoil of the gramophone, as patented by Edison in 1878. Around this time sound technology shifted from attempting to create sound-production machines modeled on the mouth to sound-transduction machines modeled on the ear, one of the phonograph’s most evocative precursors being the 1874 Ear Phonograph, which used a real ear from a cadaver to record (but not yet reproduce) sound [15]. This change in anatomical focus also coincided with a move from efforts in the imitation of sound to efforts in the preservation of sound that could then be reproduced. Preservation implies an entombment of the acoustic event, which becomes relegated to its past-ness, clearly corresponding to the idea of spiritualist voice-channeling, bringing the voices of the dead back into the present. And yet, both prior to and concurrent with these shifting sonic paradigms, there were a series of curious anatomical in-betweens of music reproduction that were not quite disembodied, nor were they exactly ears or mouths. These accomplished self-playing musical machines were still somewhat anatomical, inasmuch as they simulated the hands of the musician skimming lightly over a piano or a violin, ringing a bell or striking a drum, or the air breathed into a wind instrument. And indeed a view of the musical automaton’s inner workings revealed the viscera, lungs and mechanical fingers of pneumatic tubes, heaving bellows, cranking arms and mechanically articulated joints. For a moment—before Edison’s thin iron diaphragm that he himself termed a “tongueless, toothless instrument, without larynx or pharynx” [16] was to visualize sound-frequencies as an indecipherable script—for a moment sound still had a body of sorts and looked like itself, in the form of music automata. Before (and even while) the higher fidelity of the gramophone rendered them obsolete, these short-lived technological marvels seemed inhabited and animated by invisible hands, much like the musical manifestations of spiritualism. As The Illustrated London News reported on 5 July 1851 on the exhibition of Kauffmann’s Orchestrion at Buckingham Palace, “flutes, flageolets, clarionets, cornets, bugles, trumpets, bassoons, horns, oboes, trombones, drums it is almost miraculous to hear this invisible instrumentation” [17]. Such lavish Orchestrions descended from the barrel organ and similarly used pinned barrels to store musical data, until perforated paper rolls were introduced in 1887 (Fig. 3). The self-playing organs from 1882 onward enabled the understanding of pneumatic action and paved the way for the most famous exponent of mechanical music, the pianola (or player-piano), the wonderful self-playing piano that experienced a golden age between 1890 and 1930, until it was displaced, like the rest, by the gramophone. Piano-playing, the distinctive trait that made the middle-class woman all the more marriageable, joined the general technological impulse
toward automated domesticity, enabling a degree of liberation of the servitude of female hands but nonetheless retaining the pedaling agency of the feet. It played of its own accord, the keyboard graced with invisible fingers, although rhythm, tempo and emphasis were provided by the feet. The pianola did wonders in democratizing the performance of music, allowing the musically ignorant to enmesh their performance of listening with a performance of playing, before the more passive mode of listening was established by the phonograph. Pedaling away, the pianolist had to find the tune, incorporate it into the pace of the lower half of the body and channel it. In 1891 wary notation lines were introduced, printed alongside the perforations of the pianola roll, to provide a more precise indication of how to lever tempo and lend the pianolist a role some claim almost akin to that of music conductor. Music was still to be felt and interiorized in order to be heard. The imaginary fingers lost their anatomical map, the left thumb playing perhaps the place of the right, or extra invisible fingers playing melodies “more capable than the ten human fingers” [18]; what did it matter when all that one saw were the keys pressed down in a sequence of digits removed from anatomical constraints? (Fig. 4) Later the technology advanced to enable the removal of all human agency, so that the mere switch of a finger could trigger an entire musical composition with the first electric piano in 1898 (1 year later, coin-operated pianos such as the Tonophone would play at the drop of penny). Electrical pianos led to reproducing pianos, which removed the legwork and preserved the works of composers “exactly as played by them,” as the ad for the Apollo Reproducing Piano states, showing an illustration of a semi-translucent Beethoven playing the piano with nebulous fingers [19]. Similarly translucent hands graced the piano in the advertisements for the Welte-Mignon reproducing piano, headed by the slogan “The Master’s fingers on your piano.” But there were other lesser-known examples, such as the Automatic Harp (1899); the Banjorchestra (1907); the Mills Violano Virtuoso (1909) and the Hupfeld Phono-liszt Violina (1908), a piano crowned with three violins played pneumatically and by being pressed against a circular spinning bow. Throughout the 1930s the art-deco jazz-inspired Decap Organ introduced accordions and a full drum kit, as well as other exotic instruments such as maracas and temple blocks, and in 1936 it even incorporated a saxophone. Then of course there were also the cheaper and more portable mechanical musical instruments such as the Autophone (1881), the Triola Zither (1926), the Rollmonica or self-playing harmonica (1925), the Playasax (1930).

**AUTOMATA**

In all of these self-playing mechanisms sound still looked like itself, and the visual presentation of the automatic musical instruments was as important as, if not more important than, the sounds produced. On the verge of dematerialization, the physical marker of sound was stubbornly reiterated. That said, often they were slightly deceptive in their elaborate rhetoric of display, showing some parts in order to hide others. Cabinets would have glass doors or could open up to show the workings of the machine to the curious eye, but without revealing all—the mandolin mode of playing the piano strings of the Mandolin PianoOrchestra was clearly not enough of a visual treat, and would have demystified the implicit tight fit of a mandolin inside a piano. The piano accordion of the Decap Organ was in fact played deceitfully by the organ, while its saxophone, despite a mock mechanism that appeared to operate the keys, was merely a dummy, a shell of an instrument providing embodied resistance to acoustic disembodiment. All the same, the invisible agents of spiritualism must have felt somewhat stunted by these feats of technology, where virtuoso invisible instruments seemed to be at work, not as spirits with a message of presence, but as musician-less listening experiences with a trace of visibility. As the phonograph and radio took over, rendering these machines obsolete, an even purer listening mode came to the fore. No longer the visual entertainment of luminous hands operating the instrument, no more subtle mysterious interplay of hand and instrument, and not even the spectacle of the instrument playing of its own accord, by mechanical fingers of sorts. In both the cases of the musical spiritualist séance and the musical automata, the acoustic experience had been diverted to the fact that the instrument was playing “hands-free,” thereby highlighting the visible absence of manual performance, marking this anatomical anomaly. What was actually played was to a degree less important, as the marvel of a self-playing musical instrument gave it an extra aural shine. The ear was more forgiving if the eyes were sufficiently entertained.

The experience of listening was to be purged of this visual distraction. The closer technology came to reproducing the peculiarities of timbre and nuance of the human voice or of human musical performance, the more abstract and indecipherable it became: the less musical it looked like itself. The “sound-writing” of phonography remains a script unreadable to all but the machine. The higher the fidelity, the more distant and absent was the body that had produced those very sounds [20]. Hands were no longer laid upon the instrument thus providing a conduit for its performance; they no longer hovered around it, levitating, strumming, striking it or playing its keys. Hands no longer needed restraining, tying up and managing, to prove their handless agency. Even invisible hands were fast evaporating into nothingness. And in the gradual detachment of hand and body from musical instrument, pedaling, winding up and switching on were subsumed into the cautious placing of a needle upon a groove, providing a very different image of sound.

**References and Notes**

2. From Daniel Dunglas Home’s supposed autobiography, Incidents in My Life (New York: Carlton, 1863) pp. 85, in which he described his own mediumship through a report in the New York Conference, 26 December 1854.
3. J. Everett, who investigated the Koons phenomena, published the messages of the spirits under the title Communications from Angels (1853).
4. Britten Hardinge, Modern American Spiritualism (New York: 1870) p. 314. This is one of the most significant literary efforts to collate spiritualist manifestations and, like many other books of the time features extensive citations of newspaper accounts. In this case it is a letter to the editor by Stephen Dudley in the Age of Progress, 1854.
7. Thomas Low Nichols, A Biography of the Brothers Davenport, with some account of the physical and psychical phenomena which have occurred in their presence in America and Europe (London: 1864) p. 47. See also Arthur Conan Doyle’s 1926 History of Spiritualism (Echo Library, Middlesex, 2006), chapter 10, where he described the “label of sounds” produced by the instruments, and how the instruments were dropped on the floor as soon as a light was turned on; p. 111.
8. Richard Cope Morgan, An Inquiry into Table-Miracles, their cause, character, and consequence, illustrated by recent manifestations of spirit-writing and spirit-music (Bath: 1853) p. 15.
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and screened her work nationally and internationally, including at FACT (Liverpool), Site Gallery (Sheffield), Galleria Civica di Arte Contemporanea di Trento (Italy), De La Warr Pavilion (Bexhill-on-Sea), the Zentrum Paul Klee (Switzerland), Whitechapel Gallery, the Victoria & Albert Museum, Beaconsfield Gallery, Artprojx Space, ICA, Jerwood Space, Barbican (London). Her film on gramophone grooves, Sound Seam, was funded by the Wellcome Trust and produced during an artist’s residency at the Ear Institute, UCL. It premiered as an installation in collaboration with musician Aleks Kolkowski at the AV festival in Newcastle, and will be exhibited at the Wellcome Collection in December 2010. Her previous projects can be seen on-line at <www.iamanagram.com>.

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20. In his 1928 essay “The Curves of the Needle” Adorno problematizes phonographic sound reproduction, in that sound is separated from the body, and, in his contentious opinion, the female voice suffers in particular as it requires the physical body that carries (and so in reproduction sounds “needy and incomplete”). Theodor W. Adorno, “The Curves of the Needle,” in Essays on Music: Theodor W. Adorno; selected, with introduction, commentary and notes by Richard Leppert; Susan H. Gillespie, trans. (Univ. of California Press, 2002) pp. 271–275.

Manuscript received 1 January 2010.