

PIANO -  
GRAPHS

NEW MUSIC FOR THE PLAYER PIANO  
INSPIRED BY *PAPER PROMISES:*  
*EARLY AMERICAN PHOTOGRAPHY*

J. PAUL GETTY MUSEUM  
LOS ANGELES

MAY 25 - 27, 2018

**PERFORMANCE & CELEBRATION**  
**Saturday, May 26**  
**6 to 9 p.m.**

**SELECT ROLLS PLAYED HOURLY**  
**Friday, May 25 – Sunday, May 27**  
**between 12 and 5 p.m**

PIANO—GRAPHS brings together seven artists to share new music for the player piano inspired by photography—a pairing of two 19th-century technologies that inscribe time onto paper in processes that surpass the abilities of the human hand.

Translating music into a visual poetry of dot-and-dash perforations on paper rolls, this experimental program reflects on the cultural impact of 19th-century shifts in automation, reproduction, the commodification of the arts and entertainment, and the representation of time—elaborating on the themes explored in the exhibition *Paper Promises: Early American Photography*.

In the exhibition, rare photographs and negatives, as well as iconic images from the Gold Rush and Civil War, trace early experimentation with photography on paper in 19th-century America. The show reveals how photographic reproduction helped shape perceptions of the United States during a critical period of political tension and territorial expansion. At a time when counterfeit paper money was rampant, the U.S. was slow to adopt and learn to value paper prints over weightier metal or glass.

Ultimately, the versatility of paper enabled photography to circulate in new ways as enlisted soldiers sent their portraits to loved ones, newsworthy images were dispersed, and photo albums entered the family home as an affordable

souvenir. It was a rapidly changing era riddled with anxieties over the advent of new technologies—one that is remarkably like our own.

Photography—the mechanical box that is the camera, and the intricate printed image it renders—bares unexpected and fascinating relationships to another machine-and-paper-based technology that emerged in the 19th-century: the player piano. While one object concerns vision and the other sound, they both use machinery for uncanny results. Just as few artist's brushes rival a photographic presentation of reality, even the most virtuosic fingers lag behind the automated capacity of a player piano.

Functioning like an early computer, the player piano reads code via a pneumatic device: air passing through the holes on the paper sheet inflates a bellows that triggers a key strike, prefiguring the expressive sonic freedom musicians would encounter decades later with electric synthesizers. Beyond their mutual dexterity, photographs and the player piano share a ghostly quality. The 19th century witnessed a craze for so-called "spirit photography," or the belief that you could capture fleeting images of what appeared to be the supernatural likeness of the dearly departed by your side. In the same sense, the sight of the player piano keys rising and falling under invisible hands leaves chills.

In his influential essay *Understanding a Photograph*, John Berger wrote that a photograph is a "memento of the absent," noting that, "the true content of a photograph is invisible, for it derives from a play, not with form, but with time." In fact, he argues that photography is as close to music as it is to painting or other arts. Both the photograph and the player piano make ephemeral time physical, recording it onto paper. Where the photograph freezes a moment, the player piano makes a duration—of sound or silence—incrementally visible.

PIANO—GRAPHS has its own spiritual guide: the extraordinary composer Conlon Nancarrow, who created over fifty groundbreaking studies for the player piano. Born in 1912, the son of the mayor of Texarkana, Arkansas, Nancarrow traveled to Spain as a young man to join the fight against Franco. He returned to U.S. in 1939 to join the experimental music community in New York as a passionate jazz trumpeter. When his radical politics caused trouble, he fled to Mexico City where he made his home in exile until his death in 1997. Frustrated that no player could perform the joyous and energetic whirlwind compositions he envisioned, Nancarrow began building custom player pianos in his home studio. For decades he worked in isolation, until avant-garde icon John Cage chose one of his jangly and disjointed works as the score for Merce Cunningham's dance *Crises*, which debuted at the Thirteenth American

Dance Festival in the summer of 1960. In the decades following, Nancarrow slowly gained recognition, and as music scholar Kyle Gann observed, he is “increasingly recognized as having one of the most innovative musical minds of this century.”

When asked if he creates his compositions on the piano and then translates the notes into dots and perforations on the roll, Nancarrow exclaimed, “I don’t play at all!” His music was an entirely visual concept transcribed directly onto paper, skipping the piano altogether.

In Nancarrow’s footsteps, PIANO—GRAPHS brings together an instrumentally eclectic group of contemporary experimental musicians both connected and disconnected to the piano. Some are keyboard players, but others are composing on the instrument for the very first time. Some of the commissioned musicians typically work with electronics, or translate analog instruments through them. Several of these musicians approached their compositions visually, generating sounds from specific shapes, symbols, or even words punched into the paper rolls.

Their compositions were turned into custom paper piano rolls, manufactured by Atlanta-based player-piano collector and enthusiast Timothy Baxter, who is among the very small number of people in the world still manufacturing new player

piano rolls. His "perforator" makes rapid punches in paper rolls via a computer interface and circuit board. This weekend, the commissioned pieces are performed on a 1922 double-valve standard pneumatic Hammond cabinet upright grand piano.

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# ABOUT THE ARTISTS

## **Celia Hollander** *9 Handed*

Celia Hollander is an artist and composer performing under the name \$3.33. A regular collaborator with Dublab and KCHUNG radio, past performances include programs at the Skirball Cultural Center, Human Resources LA, and 2016's *AIR OUT* (presented in partnership with Clockshop as a part of Dogstar Festival 13) which featured three performers in three parked cars, using car stereos, and a mobile audience.

Hollander's piano roll, designed on a computer, begins with a single repeated note and evolves into an escalating pattern. Through the dense sequenced dynamics, rhythmic shifting, and repetition, it produces music that could only be played mechanically. Hollander, who started off playing classical piano, later found her artistic voice through composing and recording music electronically with software that exceeds the capabilities of standard instruments. In an ironic twist, the computer-created roll brings those digital skills full circle, back to the piano.

**Corey Fogel**

***About to Reach a Kind of Maw***

Fogel is a drummer and artist. In addition to touring and recording with many rock, jazz, noise, folk, and chamber music ensembles, he is currently working on his PhD in UC Irvine's Integrated Composition, Improvisation, and Technology (ICIT) program. His practice is based in the intersection of sounds, objects, textiles, and foods, with frequent interdisciplinary collaboration with other musicians and artists. His works have been presented at Machine Project, Los Angeles County Museum of Art, Human Resources, Redling Fine Art, Hammer Museum, Museo de Arte Contemporaneo de Oaxaca, REDCAT, and as part of the Getty's Pacific Standard Time performance festival.

Fogel says his approach to composing for the player piano was to "mine for musical characters from a collection of time-warped recordings, chance operations, traditional harmonic patterns, and assemble a sequence of transmogrified events that challenges the capabilities of the piano, as well as our sense of the rhapsodic."

**Dean Spunt**  
*Expanded Expression*

Dean Spunt is an artist, musician, and one half of noise rock duo NO AGE, formed in Los Angeles in 2005 with guitarist Randy Randall. Outside of the band, his experimental performances have seen recording technology and playback units, such as CD players and tape decks, slowly drowned in vibrantly colored paint, exploring the eroding sound decay of failing machines. NO AGE's fifth album *Snares Like a Haircut*, was released this year on storied indie label Drag City.

Spunt's piano roll loops and manipulates found code—such as the ready-made drum patterns, sound effects, or backing tracks you would find pre-programmed into any 1980s-era Casio or Yamaha electric keyboard. By taking this digital data and translating it back into piano notes on the paper roll, the imitation sounds become analog again, playing out on the piano in rhythmic, free-form clusters. Spunt's roll points to the player piano's automation, an early form of canned music, which, like its 1980's counterpart, was destined to be replaced by wave after wave of new technology.

**Jeremiah Chiu**

***A Piano Cannot Play a Sine Wave***

Chiu is the founder of Some All None, a hybrid creative studio working at the intersection of graphic design, art, music, and technology. Projects merge disciplines into applications such as exhibitions, identity systems and strategy, publications, performances, scores, type design, websites and workshops. He has presented work at the Museum of Contemporary Art Chicago, Getty Museum, Human Resources, Cincinnati Contemporary Art Center, CalArts, and High Desert Test Sites. Chiu is currently in Italy as part of the design team representing the United States in the U.S. Pavilion at the 2018 Venice Architecture Biennale.

Chiu's graphic approach to the piano roll turns words, abstract shapes, and images into sound. As the perforations roll past, words become their own peculiar songs—the word “time” taking on an especially melancholy melody. Chiu's visual and musical poem taunts the piano. The harmonics of its vibrating strings make the pure tone of a sine wave impossible. Chiu's playful juxtaposition of both language and image, and its resulting sound, challenges us to consider the relationships between our eyes, our ears, and our ideas.

**John Wiese**

*Wind Changed Direction*

Artist and composer John Wiese works primarily in recorded and performed sound with a focus on installation and multi-channel diffusions, as well as scoring for large ensembles. After experimenting with recording as a teenager, he has gone on to work in the world of contemporary sound art as well as the international experimental music scene. He is a founding member of Sissy Spacek, and has collaborated with Sunn O))), Wolf Eyes, Merzbow, C. Spencer Yeh, and performed in the 52nd Venice Biennale with artist Nico Vascellari.

For his piano roll, Wiese revisited a project first composed at the Getty in 2014 for a series of quadraphonic audio installations made in collaboration with the band LIARS, staged in Robert Irwin's Central Garden as part of the Friday Flights series. Wiese reused the digital harmonic information from the Getty-site inspired composition as raw data for the piano. The result bears little resemblance to the original ambient and atmospheric track, despite sharing the same source code.

**Mary Lattimore**  
***Glamorous Mom***

Lattimore is a Los Angeles-based harpist. She experiments with her Lyon & Healy concert grand harp and various analog and digital effects. An avid touring performer, Lattimore has collaborated with a range of notable artists including Kurt Vile, Meg Baird, Thurston Moore, and The War on Drugs. She has performed original cinematic scores at the Museum of Modern Art in New York, London's Meltdown Festival, Marfa Myths festival, and the Getty Center. Her third solo album, *Hundreds of Days*, was released this month.

The harp mirrors the piano: a collection of strings stretched on an elegant curve. But the harp hoists the piano-form upright and strips it of its machinery to be embraced and played delicately by hand. Lattimore's piano roll was initially composed and recorded on the harp while imagining a memory of childhood wonder watching her mother playing on her harp with her retro glasses, big hair, shoulder-pads and all, inspiring cascades of arpeggios and glissandos. These passages were modified with digital looping effects creating shimmering waves of sound meant to challenge the abilities of player piano. The recording was translated into MIDI data and arranged using an algorithm to generate a corresponding set of notes. The resulting piano roll captures the spirit of the original harp composition while seeing it reimagined for the instrument's 88 keys.

**William Tyler**  
*Magic Kingdom*

Nashville-native Tyler is known for lush instrumental compositions that create dramatic sonic landscapes mining the complexities of the American experience. A one-time member of Lambchop and Silver Jews, Tyler has release four critically acclaimed albums since 2010 which have led to several U.S and international tours, and collaborations and performances with Hiss Golden Messenger and Wilco.

A virtuosic guitarist, Tyler's signature sound is the result of intricate fingerpicking enhanced with prismatic digital loops, a process that points to the inextricable relationship between American traditions and ever-evolving technologies. Tyler's roll is his first composition for the piano and extends his continued experimentation with the many facets of American vernacular music.

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**Timothy Baxter, Perforator**

Baxter has created interpretations of a wide variety of classical, ragtime, and popular music for the player piano in artistic settings. These include the realization of custom piano rolls of music composed by Ramin Djawadi for the first season of HBO's *Westworld*, Gershwin's centennial celebration at Carnegie Hall, and more. Baxter is an attorney 'by day' and received French horn instruction from Milan Yancich at the Eastman School of Music, and music theory training by John Pavao of Swansea, Massachusetts. The Getty is grateful to him for his unique expertise and invaluable advice.

# Getty Museum Public Programs Staff

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Special thanks to Mazie Harris, Timothy Baxter, Vince Wukmir, James Merle Thomas, and Rosali Middleman.



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