

“It’s Just Too Much”: Hypervirtuosity and Genre in the Music of Conlon Nancarrow, Art Tatum, and Black MIDI

Art Tatum is frequently mentioned as an inspiration to the reclusive composer Conlon Nancarrow. Tatum’s combination of swinging, stride-style jazz with hypervirtuosity that traversed the piano with machine-like precision has distinct echoes in Nancarrow’s player piano studies. The intense concentration of material present in the music of both Nancarrow and Tatum complicates their relationship to conventional genres even while connecting them, with both labeled as *sui generis* renegades and sharing more with one another than with established categories. Nancarrow’s music was classified primarily as avant-garde modernism, but its generic associations changed over the course of his career, heavily influenced by his financial status and his reassimilation into bourgeois society in the latter part of his life. His music both early and late in his career referenced popular idioms like jazz, the blues, and boogie-woogie, combining these with a reliance on automatic performance that foreshadowed electroacoustic music, the synthesizer, and MIDI sequencing. In more recent times, the music of Black MIDI arrangers has picked up where Nancarrow left off, pushing the limits of processors while quaintly relying on MIDI piano sequencing that as a technology dates back nearly 40 years. As with Nancarrow, the use of technology in an almost frightening way by Black MIDI composers is combined with nostalgic elements that humanize the listener’s experience but complicate genre classifications.