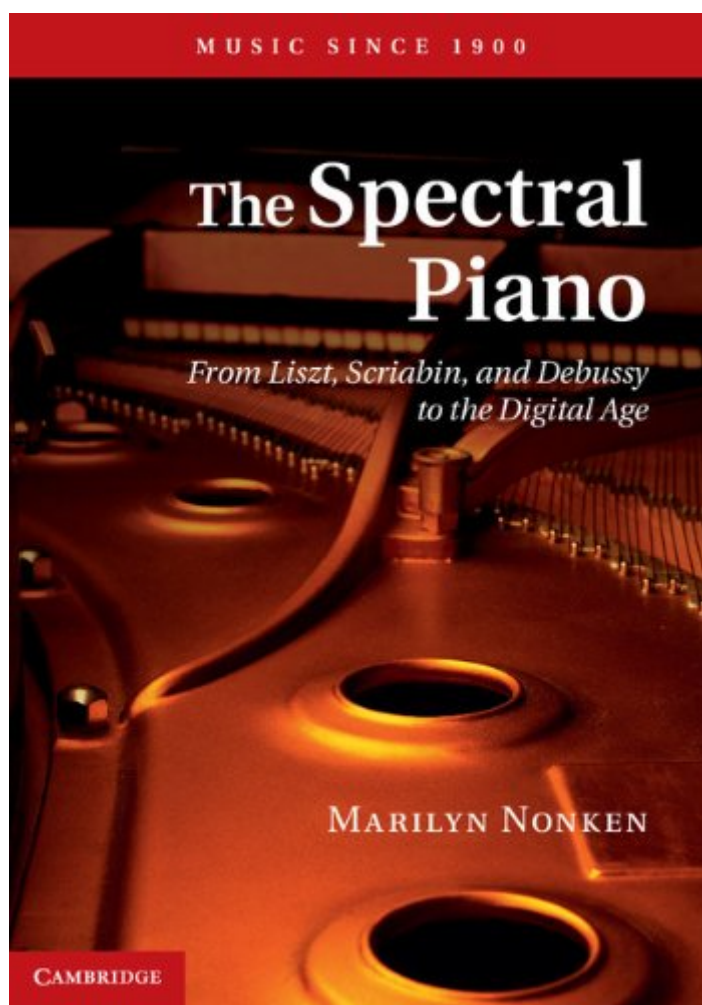


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# The Spectral Piano: From Liszt, Scriabin, And Debussy To The Digital Age (Music Since 1900)



## Synopsis

The most influential compositional movement of the past fifty years, spectralism was informed by digital technology but also extended the aesthetics of pianist-composers such as Franz Liszt, Alexander Scriabin and Claude Debussy. Students of Olivier Messiaen such as Tristan Murail and Gérard Grisey sought to create a cooperative committed to exploring the evolution of timbre in time as a basis for the musical experience. In *The Spectral Piano*, Marilyn Nonken shows how the spectral attitude was influenced by developments in technology but also continued a tradition of performative and compositional virtuosity. Nonken explores shared fascinations with the musical experience, which united spectralists with their Romantic and early Modern predecessors. Examining Murail's *Territoires de l'oubli*, Jonathan Harvey's *Tombeau de Messiaen*, Joshua Fineberg's *Veils*, and Edmund Campion's *A Complete Wealth of Time*, she reveals how spectral concerns relate not only to the past but also to contemporary developments in philosophical aesthetics.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

This book is an excellent overview of the development of a spectral attitude in music composition. The spectral attitude begins with the Romantic fascination with sound quality, especially the coloristic tendencies in the piano writing of Franz Liszt. The next composer discussed in the spectral lineage is Alexander Scriabin, who apparently intuited the overtone series (it was later explained to him) and exploited it carefully at the piano. Then come Debussy and Messiaen, furthering fascinations that come to define spectral music: time, timbre, process, perception. Nonken then takes us through three generations of spectral composers including Grisey and Murail, Hugues Dufourt, Joshua Fineberg, and Jonathan Harvey. In matters relating to these composers, Nonken is of course an authority: many of these composers she has known personally, and worked with on their own music. Many of her quotations also come from personal correspondence with the composers in question. An additional significant concern of this book is its emphasis on an ecological understanding of music. (This was the subject of Dr. Nonken's dissertation.) Performer, listener, and composer in interaction with musical environment - as well as questions of center vs periphery and activity vs passivity in musical listening. You will want listening to go along with this book: Nonken's own masterful recording of Murail's complete piano works is a good place to start. See also her recording *Voix Voiles*, which includes a number of the works discussed in the book (especially Dufourt's massive, agonistic *Erlkönig*). Also be sure to look up Grisey's *Partiels* and chamber/orchestral works of Murail.

Marilyn Nonken is an American pianist who has performed a great deal of modernist repertoire. While initially attracted by New Complexity composers such as Michael Finnissy, at the turn of the millennium she became fascinated by the "spectralist" school originating from France and subsequently taken up by some Americans as well. (Contemporary music fans might know her from her *Metier* recording of Tristan Murail's complete piano works). *THE SPECTRAL PIANO* is Nonken's presentation of the spectral aesthetic as it relates to her instrument. *THE SPECTRAL PIANO* opens with an historical prologue, where Nonken notes how Liszt, Debussy and Messiaen were writing for the piano in a way that considered its mechanics and natural resonance, with the pianist having to "look behind the score" and make his or her own decisions for attack and pedaling depending on the particular piano used and the hall's acoustic. Following a discussion of these forebears, she then presents five spectralist composers and particular solo piano works that typify their approach: Tristan Murail ("*Territoires de l'oubli*", "*Les Travaux et les Jours*"), Hugues Dufourt ("*Erlkönig*"), Joshua Finberg ("*Veils*", "*Tremors*"), Edmund Campion ("*A Complete Wealth of Time*"

and others) and Jonathan Harvey ("Tombeau de Messiaen"). The discussion of these pieces abounds with reproductions of the scores. The book ends with a contribution from Hugues Dufourt entitled "Spectral music and its pianistic expression". This essay, originally conceived of as the preface to the book, offers a view of someone long involved in the spectralist scene (even if, as Nonken herself notes, he is arguably not a spectral composer himself). For readers who already know a great deal about the spectralist approach in general, especially those who have read the 2000 Contemporary Music Review double issue on spectralism, at least half this book consists of things that one will already know. That is, Nonken repeats general issues of spectralism that aren't specifically about the piano. Furthermore, she repeats herself at times, and the book really does read like she was trying to dot every i and cross every t to please a team of reviewers, instead of like a smoothly flowing monograph. Still, as a fan of this kind of music, I found enough new material here to make this worthwhile, and THE SPECTRAL PIANO will introduce the still little-known Fineberg and Campion to listeners.

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