Majority of timbre studies focus on the sound difference made by a range of instruments; Less studies focus on within-instrument timbre. “Whether piano timbre can be influenced by touching qualities or not”: a long debated question.

• Previous studies on piano timbre production/perception adopted a disembodied approach, e.g. timbre descriptor verbalisation (Bellemare & Traube, 2006), actions of keyboard movements (Bernays & Traube, 2013).

How do pianists conceptualise piano timbre? How do they (prepare to) produce different timbres? What is the role of pianists’ body and bodily movements?

New insights: the perception of piano timbre is a weak cross-modal synaesthesia—a combination of visual/kinaesthetic/auditory/tactile feedback (Parnutt & Troup 2002)

Research Aims

• To explore the role of pianists’ gestural control and the interaction with the instrument in the conceptualisation of piano timbre;

• To what extent piano timbre perception may be influenced by perceptions from other sensory modalities and other musical components?

Interview Study

Semi-structure interview; 9 advanced pianists took part

Two parts:

• several open-ended questions around their understanding of timbre concept

• Demonstrations (self-selected music) + Explanations via live performances

Question design:

(1) Subjective definitions and understanding

(2) Motivations of the employment of timbral nuances

(3) Physical production of piano timbre (techniques/methods)

Data analysis: Thematic Coding

Results and Discussion

1. Prominent themes in pianists’ explanations of timbre

Touching qualities
- Attack speed/depth
- Flat or curved fingers
- Finger percussiveness

the Body-Sound Relationship
- Body Scope (finger, arm or entire body)
- Relaxation/Tension
- Weights
- Moving direction

Musical elements
- Performed articulation
- Dynamics
- Musical structure (tempo/pitch/harmonic)

2. Timbre production and musical interpretation; it relates to:

• Composers’ intention

• Musical title/style

• Pianists expressive intention

3. Timbre has functional relevance to the performer:

• Timbre as essence of the art of piano playing

• Focused concentration in practice

• Important than playing techniques

• Emotional communication to audience

Summary:

(1) Pianists’ descriptions of piano timbre indicate the multimodality of their timbre concepts and embodied representations of timbre production

(2) Timbre seems an important artistic and aesthetic dimension of piano playing

Contact details: Shen Li (sli37@sheffield.ac.uk); Renee Timmers (rtimers@sheffield.ac.uk)


