Detail views of Peter Ablinger's MUSIC'S OVER *for computer-controlled piano installed at the Gray Center Lab.*
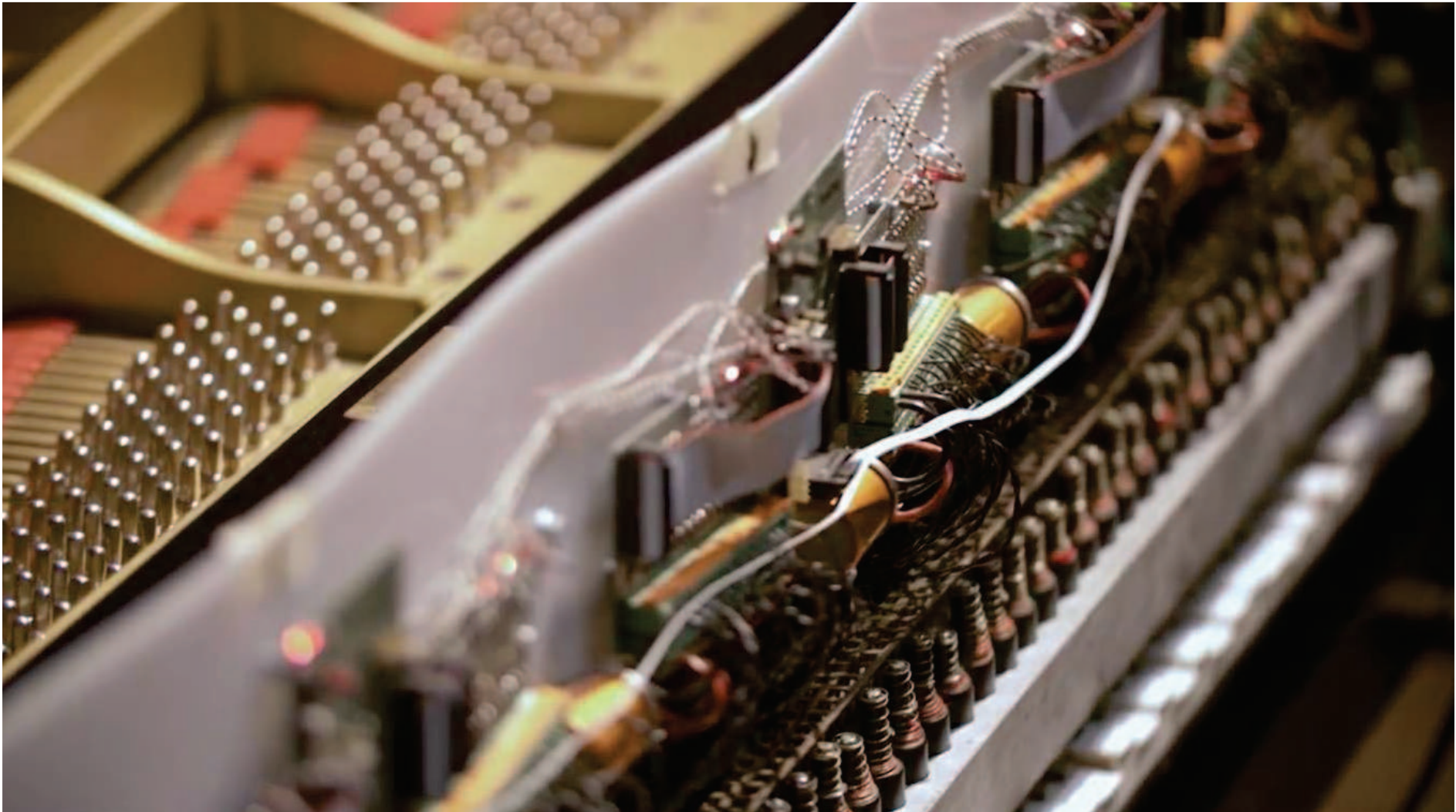
WE ARE CLEAR

LIKE A CRYSTAL

Peter Ablinger

with

Seth Brodsky

Philip von Zweck

&

Zachary Cahill

In January of this year the Berlin-based Austrian composer Peter Ablinger visited Chicago for the first time as part of a nine-day residency to inaugurate Gray Sound, an experimental sound and music performance series created by musicologist and Gray Center director Seth Brodsky. Titled Music's Over: Listening with Peter Ablinger, *the residency was co-sponsored by Goethe-Institut Chicago and took place at the University of Chicago and throughout the city, and included performances, talks, and a new installation. On the last day of his residency, Ablinger met with Brodsky and artist Philip von Zweck for an interview with Bad at Sports, a Chicago-based contemporary art podcast. They were joined by* Portable Gray *editor Zachary Cahill. What follows is an excerpt from their conversation, edited for clarity; it can be found in its entirety at: http://badatsports.com/2020/episode-723-peter-ablinger/*

Peter Ablinger

PvZ — So this may be an obvious question, but how do you feel about the term "experimental"? Do you have an opinion, a concern about the word?

PA — Well, at minimum, I'm aware of a very different use of the term here in the U.S. and in Europe. I have a sense for what the meaning of experimental is for you here. In Europe, it's different. Let's say many of the younger generation would pick the American use of the word and use it in a similar way. But for the older generation, it has another meaning which is much more specific and doesn't at all capture what experimental is for you here. So, experimental music, which is the same thing in German [*experimentelle Musik*], is limited to a very few people working in that genre. In Germany, people like Dieter Schnebel maybe, Josef Anton Riedl. Mainly people who, in the early 1960s, started including other . . . *objects* for performances—even if it was sound art, it was still concert/performance art, but they started to include musical materials and objects that go beyond classical instruments, also beyond "classical electronic" use, as with Karlheinz Stockhausen's work in the electronic studio in Cologne. So, until the 60s we had basically what was called "new music"—either with classical instruments or with electronic or tape music or some combination of the two. And so it was a departure when Josef Anton Riedl did his "paper music" working with the different sounds of paper [grabs and begins rubbing paper with relish]—"let's hear the different sounds of paper!"—or, Dieter Schnebel's work, with *many* different kinds of objects. Schnebel, in his early years, was teaching in an ordinary school, somewhere in Southern Germany, and there, in his classes, you would invent experimental situations. For example, he composed a piece using only coins. So, you have very different kinds of coins and you perform different kinds of movements with them— spin them or push them or staple them or throw them around and so on; and, so, it's a very, very differentiated score. With my former ensemble in Berlin, we played this coin piece often.

Back to experimental music. The term is sort of limited. But maybe explorations of materials beyond their classical settings, you could say.

PvZ — So, if you contact-mic a cactus, it's experimental music, but if it's being played on piano, it wouldn't be, regardless of the composition.

PA — Right, exactly. And applying this kind of limited term to this specific historic period—or genre within music, let's say . . . what would be a good way to put it? I'm searching for something that is not so friendly, that [captures] those snobby new music types in Europe who would look down on experimental music, who would be like: "it's not completely serious. No, serious is a symphony orchestra or a string quartet"—this kind of thing. And dealing with a cactus or with coins is not entirely serious. It's more like a child playing. It's a thing before we come to the serious thing. So that's why in the European context, it's a bit difficult to speak of "experimental music." For me, it would be difficult to use or identify myself with the term experimental. But I know here in the U.S. it's completely different and I wouldn't have a problem being called experimental . . .

PvZ — So, in the Gray Center this last week was a new installation piece titled *MUSIC'S OVER*, with a piano being controlled by a computer. And it was amazing. It was really loud, for one. But it's derived from a live recording of the Doors performing in 1970, which is then fed through a computer, which then somehow analyzes the frequencies and converts it all into files so that this device with all these little solenoids on it then plays the keys of the piano. Right? Is that . . . ?

PA — That's perfect.

PvZ — Could you just talk a little bit about how that works technically, how it functions? I was thinking of it a bit in relation to pointillism, or even Chuck Close paintings in a way—that you stand back far enough and you have this image of a face, but you get up close enough and it's a thumbprint or a small abstract square in a relationship. And I know that you've talked about coming from a visual art background and the idea of photorealism and "phonorealism," which I didn't know at the time when I first was thinking about it in relation to something like Chuck Close or pointillism. And, so, I found it reassuring or remarkable to feel like it was sort of on the same plane . . .

PA — You more or less said it already. It's exactly that. It has a very long story. This idea goes back to the time when I was a still a jazz musician around the age of 20 . . . long before real public access to digital media. And for me, it took another 15 years until I started to work with digital media. So, I didn't have a solution at that time, but I understood that when the photorealistic painter starts with the photograph, I had to start with a *phonograph*, which means a recording of whatever. It can be anything—it can be a voice, it can be street noises, it can be music—and then somehow translate that back to a classical instrument . . . Only more than 15 years later, in 1995, when I first got proper access to digital possibilities, in an experimental studio in Freiburg . . . this immediately gave me the idea of how I could approach the sort of pointillistic, photorealistic, *phonorealistic* technique. I had a clear description. It was an intuitive description, but it was very clear: I knew I would need to work with a sort of grid. We could compare it with the photographic grid used in newspapers. Or we could also translate it into much more modern techniques, like the pixels in a TV, or a photograph. That's the principal idea of how I analyze my recordings. I make a grid both in spectrum, so to say, the horizontal grid, and in time, so to say, the vertical grid. And within one of the resulting squares, I get the information, let's say, the frequencies from middle C to middle C sharp, and from second zero to second 0.5 . . . I get clear information of what pitch and dynamic is within that little square, and when I have all the squares together, all the full pixels of my picture, of my image, I can create the illusion of continuity.

SB — One of the things I find most amazing is your decision to use a piano . . . This idea that the fastest that the piano can play is about 16 notes per second. You can press a key 16 times in a second.

PA — Right.

SB — Which then quite literally means the piano is—if it's a camera for sound, it's operating at a rate of 16 frames per second.

PA — Early 20th century.

SB — Yeah, and there is this extraordinary, just, retro aspect. Like a Brechtian alienation effect, that comes from hearing this *thing* represented on the piano. The piano becomes kind of a camera for the history of music or for technically historical objects, to the degree that they've already been recorded and around for a while.

And certainly with the *Voices and Piano* series [some of which were performed during the residency by pianist Eric Wubbels]—they are these extraordinary historical documents, sound documents, often of people talking who've had a significant influence on the 20th century.

I do wonder about the decision to use the piano, when in fact, right, you could have a less-inspired choice but more precisely successful one—you could have come up with a synthesizer that perfectly recreates the sound recording and makes the whole effort sort of beside the point . . .

PA — It's very easy. It's very simple, no, if I would just work with sine tones, I could re-synthesize them. I could use even smaller grids than 16 per second, so the grid becomes absolutely smooth and inaudible . . . Yes, I could re-synthesize whatever recording with sine tones to a degree that you even don't hear anymore that it is a re-synthesized version—and that's boring. So, it's interesting only when there is some . . . *Widerstand*, what's the word?

SB — Resistance.

PA — Yeah! Resistance, resistance. That's exciting. When you feel how difficult it is to approach this kind of real phonorealism. No? And to do it with a real physical piano, which of course is not made for such a mimetic procedure, no? Different from the means and materials that a [visual] artist worked with, which had been, from

the beginning, designed for mimesis . . . But instruments were never made for that and that's why we don't have so many mimetic elements in music. And if we do, they're sort of a bit ridiculous, a bit childish now—like a cuckoo song or the rhythm of a gallop [imitates a gallop] . . . instruments are not about that. So, there is a stronger resistance, we can say, in using a classical instrument, a piano in this case. We feel it points to a perfect representation in the phonorealistic sense, but we never completely lose where it comes from. And it comes from a very different thing. Not the piano in our living room playing some Chopin or Mississippi Blues. I don't know what.

SB — This is kind of blowing my mind. Something sort of clicks now about your work as a whole for me—this idea that music itself has *always* been kind of phonorealist without realizing it. It's just been taking pictures of *itself*, basically. And the 19th-century piano, right, the "bourgeois piano," is like a great example of this. You go to it in order to represent *music*. But music is always very uncomfortable with representation . . .

ZC — Peter, one of the things that strikes me about listening to your music, both in the concert I was at a week ago and then last night, is how much I don't think I've experienced it in quite the same way twice. It makes me, as an audience member and a listener, aware of *my* presence in the piece, as opposed to just you

telling me something, like a composer telling me, "Listen to X, Y and Z." You approach things in a very different way. I wonder if you could talk a bit about that, or if that's even true, or how you think about composition in the sense of—I'm always going back to visual art—"thinking like the viewer." (Sometimes artists talk about "thinking like the viewer" when they compose.) It seems like the *3 Places Chicago* piece, on the last concert of the residency, is very much about the audience being aware of their presence with the piece.

PA — Yes, exactly. That's a really nice question, and it's an important issue for me, very, very important. And exactly as you said, that's really what I want, not to tell you something, but to offer a certain arrangement. Metaphorically, I might compare it with an architectonic intervention, a temporal one—the architecture only lasts for 20 minutes, only as long as the musicians are there. But during this time, it's like a set-up for a specific space, in which perception can move or you can find yourself within . . . If I make another metaphor—it is a bit of a fairy tale, so to say, maybe Romantic, but still—I sometimes compare it with like a completely imaginary old ritual of some ancient pagan community, something like—we could imagine Celtic people, and the priests go out at night in the moonlight and find their place in the middle of the forest. And then what they do is arrange a circle of stones. They create a stone circle with simple

Peter Ablinger with his piece MUSIC'S OVER *for computer-controlled piano.*

stones, not Stonehenge, but big and small stones on the ground to designate the area, to distinguish a specific area from the unspecified other area outside the circle. Not in order to make the circle—it does nothing, it is only the delineation of that specific moment of these 20 minutes, the period in which the piece lasts.

So, the instruments I choose, the time that I choose, the space that I choose, all this . . . could be seen as this circle. But then, when everything is set up, I don't do anything more. Then we just sit still and wait, and it can happen. It doesn't always have to happen, but sometimes it happens. And that's like, I don't know, something appears, like an apparition, no? And I must say, in this piece, in the *3 Places* piece, I quite often feel, "Now it happened. It just was there. It was like an angel ran through the room."

ZC — Angel music.

SB — I was talking about this to Matthew Oliphant, who played horn with horn player in a•pe•ri•od•ic in *3 Places Chicago*. He was thinking exactly the same way. It was one of these things where, when they rehearsed it, nothing happened other than the carrying out of the instructions—which were enjoyable in themselves, they produce tones that are nice to listen to, and they make manifest the instructions, which is its own form of satisfaction. But then there was the irreplaceable situation of *being in the room on that night*, having gotten there by walking from one room to another one, and then to a third one.

What's so interesting too, in this case, is that there's nothing necessarily supernatural about those moments. I mean, one completely materialist explanation is that those were moments when players "hit" the frequency of the room with their own tones. And because the tones in the score of *3 Places* originally

come *from* the room—the sound of the room is essentially analyzed through a complex process and then distilled into these long tones for the ensemble—then the tones become a kind of echo. a•pe•ri•od•ic brought their specific instruments and ways of making tones to their situation; it could have been others. And those long tones float in and around each other, but they occasionally do produce the overtones of the actual fundamentals of the room in a way that you would never otherwise hear. And in those moments, there's an uncanny recognition or something like that, but [Matthew] talked about it the exact same way.

I think of another example, like the *Voices and Piano* pieces Eric Wubbels played a few days ago. I mentioned these earlier, but basically, the process Peter described for MUSIC'S OVER, this phonorealist process—a much more pixelated version of that process, a much lower-res version, [occurs in *Voices and Piano*] where the piano

Detail view of Peter Ablinger's MUSIC'S OVER *for computer-controlled piano.*

plays alongside [a relatively hi-res] recording of the voice of Hanna Schygulla or Cecil Taylor or Nina Simone. But it plays a highly pixelated "piano version" of that recording. I've always loved these pieces, but it was only really on Thursday night, at Experimental Sound Studio, with Eric playing, where I just got completely—I was just in a completely different space . . .

PA — Yeah, Eric was so great. It was breathtaking.

SB — He was pretty astonishing . . . You could hear the closeness of the piano to the voice, but you also just could hear the absolute and constant non-identity of the piano. And all of a sudden, you're listening and it's like, "Oh, *that's* a nice tone. Oh, *those* are nice tones. I wonder who's responsible for those." And the answer is—it's not clear. Right? It's not just Peter. I mean, he wrote them down. He selected some tones and not others, right?

But it's not a music that comes *from someone*, saying, "I have something to say to you. Let me say it." Or, "I want to express something," you know? This seems to happen a lot in art but it's still fucking weird in music. Sorry, am I allowed to say that on Bad at Sports?

PvZ — Yes, you are.

SB — It's weird. It's weird in music, it's still a strange thing. We're talking about this the night after the Grammys. Anyone can pick on the Grammys for being populist and LCD, but it's not just that, it's that there's still this completely hegemonic idea of music and aurality that doesn't have room for this experience of . . . going out into a forest and arranging things.

ZC — That reminds me of what linguist Itamar Francez was saying about [*MUSIC'S OVER*]; he kept asking, "Why can't I just hear that as music instead of a recording of the Doors?" Is that kind of what

you mean?

SB — Yeah, and that's what gets us back to this question of the status and genres of experience we started out talking about. One of my colleagues, Lauren Berlant, writes about genre in the most extraordinary way: that we know who we are in large part because of genres. The question, "Is it a thing? Is this a thing?" is connected to this idea. We live through genres, we see ourselves living through genres. If you can mess with genres, if you can mess with the underlying order that controls experience, then you can produce really interesting effects.

And most music tends to do two things: it goes and insists on itself as music [through performance], and then, on another level, it says, "And by the way, this is music." What happens if you disconnect these two things, if you have something that is like music and then it is also sending you a message on the bass fundamental

frequency that it is *not* music, or it doesn't know if it's music or not? Or: "Maybe this is something else?" Or: "I don't know, did you get the memo?" Or: "You better check first with someone," before you find out.

PvZ — Peter, I believe you said somewhere that your compositions are music about music? That they also contain *the idea* of music as well somehow?

PA — Could be, I don't remember. Sounds likely. Yes. Yes, I would say . . . I can't describe how I like to talk about the terms of the work. For me, the work is not the individual piece that is played, *Doo-doo-dooh* or *Voices and Piano* or *MUSIC'S OVER* . . . For me, the individual piece is a *specific view onto the work*, and the work can never be given in its entirety. I can only show different possibilities. Some are speculations. I'm guessing sometimes, "Is it that? Is it an animal or is it human or is it a machine? Is it a cloud? Is it just gas?" Sometimes, in some pieces, I go very close, like with a magnifying glass. I would use a magnifying glass and go very, very close maybe. Like if I would come very, very close to you with the magnifying glass until I see the individual beard stubbles? Yes? I don't see that now from a one-and-a-half-meter distance, but if I would come very close, I would have a very different view of the structure of your skin, your pores and beard stubble, and so on. Could this be the basis of a composition? I think it could be. It may say something about the micro-

surface of my work. But in the next piece I might go a little bit farther away to see the entire head, for example. From the same detail I observed before, now I realize the general color that it has, so to say, or I see the contrast that it makes with your dark hair and so on. I see the color of your eyes and get a completely different image. Then in another piece I would even go farther away, and then I see that Seth is sitting next to you and Zach is on the other end of the table. I see already a social connection, how my piece connects with others, how it is situated in history with other pieces. What is the difference I saw and that becomes important? And sometimes I move backward, even farther away, like onto the other side of the street to see this group of people and which building they are in, and in which history they are embedded, and what that history does with them. In shifting focus, I get very different information about the same thing.

And this going back and forth could be the reason for the enormous variety of means that I am using. In my earlier days, there was quite often the criticism that my music doesn't have an "idea," because sometimes it's like sound art, sometimes it's for classical instruments, sometimes it's using objects, sometimes a symphony orchestra; sometimes just stones, something just a text in words. Very diverse approaches.

SB — This, by the way, is what I meant about "voice." Those were critics who are asking,

"What's your voice? What's your voice? What's your voice?"

PA — Exactly, exactly, exactly.

SB — And you were saying, "What if I have something else?"

PA — Yes. And this diversity is not meant for its *own* sake. It is not different to be different, it's the *opposite*. It's different to show it's all about the *same*.

PvZ — It's part of an investigation? That there is a core that you are interested in and that these are different ways or different angles of investigating?

PA — Different angles, exactly. Yes, but it's all the same thing. It's all the *same*. Whether it's two stones or a symphony orchestra, they're both the same thing. That's why I object to Marshall McLuhan saying: "The medium is the message." I say, "No, it's not the message. The medium isn't it."

PvZ — I see. If these are all different investigations about the same thing, that thing is music itself. It's how we define music. It's how we listen to music. It's perception—or is it something else entirely? What is that thing that all of these sort of orbit around?

PA — That's the point, I don't know.

SB — Nor should you. Keep it up!

PA — [laughs] Maybe it's "object a."
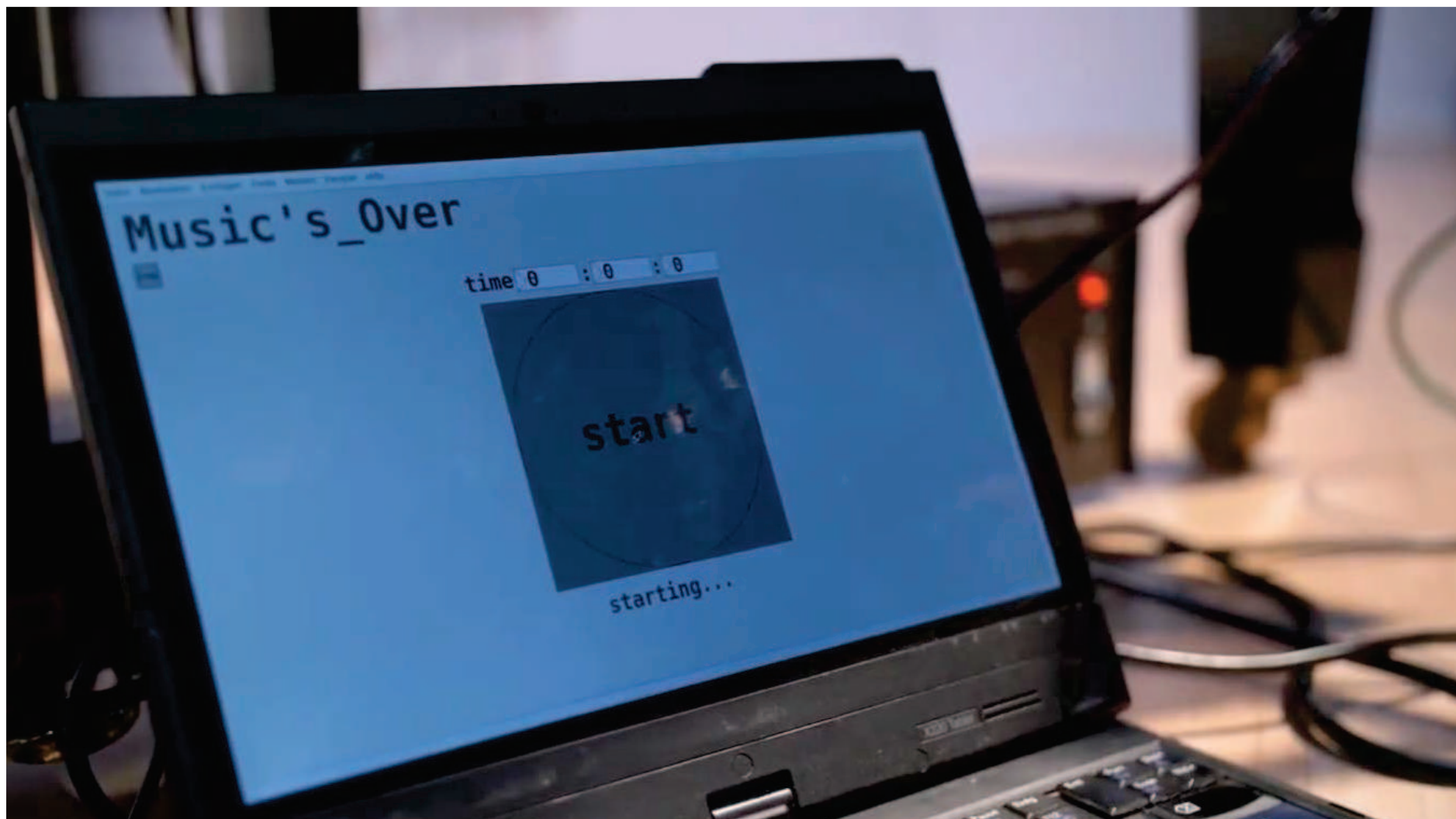
Detail view of Peter Ahlinger's MUSIC'S OVER for
computer-controlled piano *installed at the Gray Center Lab.*

SB — Yeah, if you're lucky. I mean, this is an interesting question actually. For instance, *MUSIC'S OVER*, or the *Voices and Piano* piece—they're all part of the *Quadraturen* series, they're all "square-ings." That started later than the *Weiss/Weisslich* series, right?

PA — Oh, yes.

SB — Would you say the installations in *Weiss/Weisslich* are another work?

PA — No . . . I would say it's also this one single work, the same as *Quadraturen* but described from a, let's say, very principled, abstract angle. Not wanting to go into detail, but to grasp the very outline of certain principles—so in a sort of highest abstraction. To go back to the example of looking at you, I am thinking about Alberto Giacometti's metaphor, his idea of thin figures, when his girlfriend on the other end of the Place de la Concorde vanished in the fog of the night and only a small thin line remained of her, and this is the essence of a person. This is Giacometti's own example of his single work.

SB — Yeah, I get it now. I like very much this idea that you talked about the other day, in the seminar at Northwestern University, about the concert hall, how the concert hall is an inversion of sorts. We think of the idea that we build concert halls in order to house publics which are there in order to listen to music, which people study in various ways and rehearse their entire lives to be able to learn how to play. And Peter,

you inverted the whole thing very elegantly with the idea that actually, the people learn to play the music in order to draw the publics there, in order to justify the building of a space, in order for us all, more or less, to be quiet for a while and just listen.

And of course, if you're just listening, it's nice to have something to listen to. Give them what they want, some music is a nice bonus. But it was this notion of how easy it is to forget or repress the idea that on some level, what's really going on in a concert is that people are *listening,* and that they're gathering together to—in one way or another—be silent. I think this could even go for an EDM concert or something like that, which is otherwise quite noisy, and nobody is experiencing this prohibition on speech or making sound. But on another level, everybody's understanding that the music is an opportunity to be in a different state of quietude.

PA — I would add that this one thing I take as the most—um, *wertvoll*? Worthy? . . . Precious? And within music? Its quality . . . or its *possibility . . . a-bility . . .* to sometimes turn off thought and make us still. Because, outside of music, in our everyday life, we are 99%, if not 100%, just—thought. From the very beginning, when the clock rings in the morning, until the end when we fall asleep at night, it's all like on one thin line: a thought line. We know we have to get up and then we do *that* and then "Seth will pick me up, I have to be ready at 12:15," and then we go to the studio

and make that recording, and then we hopefully have a short coffee break before we go to the lecture, and then this next thing too . . . and so on and so on. And on this kind of thought line, we are hanging. And we are pulled through the day, and through our whole life. And so, that's why I think it's one of the greatest qualities of music—or of *listening*—to sometimes be able to make that stop. And even only for a *second*. Of course, when we listen to music, it's not free of thought. But there are moments in it, quite often, when we have no words. We are wordless. But we are [wordless] in a very precise way, we are very . . . it's not that we are just dreaming and on our way and sleeping. We are very *there*. We are even more there than we are when we are in our words. We are clear like a crystal. We listen to sound, we have no term for it, no explanation of what's going on. This comes later and then, OK, it fills, again, the emptiness. But this moment of empti-ness, of this clear kind of precise emptiness. That's very special and that's the greatest part of music, I think. Or, of listening.

With special thanks to D. Edward Davis.

From left to right: Seth Brodsky, Philip von Zweck, and Peter Ablinger, pictured on January 27, 2020.

PHOTO: ZACHARY CAHILL