



MAL WALDRON, 1992



DON PULLEN, 1988



KIRK LIGHTSEY, 1992



TETE MONTOLIU, 1993



BRAD MEHLDAU, 1994. © PHOTO MERCEDES RODRÍGUEZ



BARRY HARRIS, 1989



SAM RIVERS, 1991



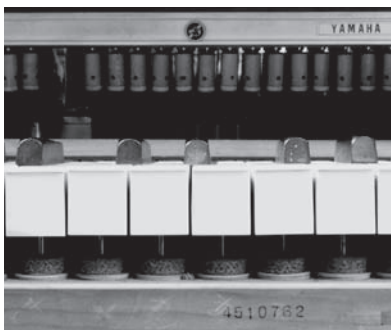
GEORGE CABLES, 1994



BEN SIDRAN, 1998. © PHOTO BEN SIDRAN.

Three legs, 246 strings, 88 keys, two tops, three pedals, and so on. Most pianos have the same type of equipment, but each has its own biography. This book tells the story of 4510762, a Yamaha C3 born in Japan in 1988. It spend twenty years at the Café Central in Madrid, making jazz in the hands of great masters like Don Pullen, Randy Weston, Tete Montoliu, Ben Sidran, Larry Willis, David Kikoski, Albert Bover, Mal Waldron, Brad Mehldau, Kirk Lightsey, George Cables, Barry Harris and Chano Domínguez. Finally, in 2008, it left the Café Central and wound up in a bourgeois house whose owners had no idea it had lived such an adventurous life. Chance and the infinite devotion of a jazz-lover from Madrid rescued it, which was a relief for the piano, and for many admirers who remember it fondly. This rescue was itself a paradoxical task, but its importance pales in the presence of the musical events we will be narrating. Reconnoitering the non-sonic surroundings of the jazz that came out of this instrument is so far from the ultimate meaning of the music—purely empirical and temporal—that it may be close to perverting it. But no. Moreover, the book contains a CD in which the piano sings again, outside its original context, but in the hands of some of the artists who played it at the Café Central.



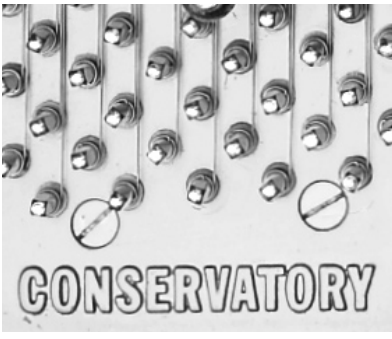


1 THE CONSTRUCTION OF THE PIANO At the beginning of the 18th century, Bartolomeo Cristofori invented the *clavicembalo col piano e forte* without knowing that it would become the finest tool for music making. Towards the end of the 19th century, a young Japanese watchmaker decided to construct his first harmonium. He soon won an Honorary Prize at the 1904 Saint Louis World's Fair for a grand piano. From then on, Torakusu Yamaha's energy became the cornerstone of a company that leads the world in the construction of pianos and other musical instruments. Yamaha has worked on the design and engineering in its quest for instruments capable of reaching the limits of artistic expression. But it has also known how to include the most innovative technological advances in the field of musical instruments, as it did in 1982, when it sold its first acoustic piano with digital implementation: the Disklavier. The Café Central's piano is one of those first prototypes, a C3 Conservatory model numbered 4510762, with a Yamaha MIDI Grand Piano plaque bearing the serial number 1.103. Johann Sebastian Bach once said: "there is nothing exceptional about playing the piano; it plays itself. All you have to do is hit the right key at the right time." We know that is not exactly the case, but it is certainly true that the technical conditions must be there in order for a virtuoso artist to use the keyboard and unfold all his expressivity. But what happens in the split second between the moment the key is pushed down and the moment when the sound emerges? How can so many nuances be transmitted through a mechanical device? How come every piano is different? The answers lie in the very factory where our protagonist was born, and there we will see how a similar piano is really built. They have been made the same way for years, yet no two are alike. The tone, intensity and character of the sound, the touch or sensibility of the keys is always different. That is what constitutes a piano's personality, and it is a fundamental element in the musician's relation to his instrument. In this chapter, we will narrate the building process that creates this personality—the moment when a piano stops being a piece of furniture with a calling and becomes a tool for musical expression. We will discuss every part of the constructive process, from the selection of the finest woods—silver fir, box, maple and birch—to the crafting of the over-5000-piece mechanism.

2 THE CAFÉ CENTRAL In the 16th and 17th centuries, writers such as Cervantes, Lope de Vega, Tirso de Molina, Calderón de la Barca and others chose what was then the poor neighborhood of Santa Cruz, on the outskirts of Madrid, as their home. Not quite thirty years ago, Gerardo Pérez and Nanye Blázquez did the same, renting a handsome venue to program live music. This space, which was one of the finest stores for stained glass, mirrors and glass in Madrid between 1908 and 1981, would become the best place in all of Spain for listening to jazz. The quality of the programming and the possibility of hearing the same group for an entire week made it possible to delve into the music in an uncommon way. In 1991, the British magazine, *The Wire*, ranked the Café Central eighth among the ten best jazz clubs in Europe. The legendary American magazine, *Downbeat*, also included it in its list of the 100 best places in the world to hear jazz. This chapter will narrate the evolution of the Café Central through the words of those who lived it, with photographs, newspaper articles, and all sorts of graphic material.



3 CARING FOR A PIANO When a piano leaves the factory, its personality is still provision. Over time, the musicians who play it, the type of repertoire they play on it, its successive tunings, voicing, harmonizations and adjustments give it its true character. The Café Central's piano has had a very active life as the steed of countless riders with different temperaments—many of them, extremely strong. Night after night, the piano took shape, and also aged, so it often need more than just a quick tuning. We can estimate the number of times the keys of the Café Central's piano are pushed on a single concert night. Let us imagine, for example, a straightforward twelve-bar blues, probably with 32 choruses,



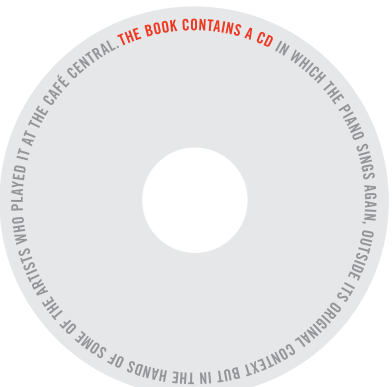
including the opening and closing melodies and two musicians playing solos of fifteen choruses, each. The pianist will accompany them with different voicings, using “So-What” chords, block chords, quartal harmonies, more dissonant chords, or whatever. So we can set an average of 5 notes per chord, with repetitions four times to the bar as well as the pianist’s solo, which will be filled with eight notes, or even more if the piece is up-tempo. That could easily mean hitting a key thirty times per bar, which adds up to 11,520 times in just one piece. And if the musicians play eight pieces in each of the two sets, the keys will actually be hit almost 200,000 times a night. That calls for significant upkeep: adjusting the mechanism, voicing, tuning, replacing strings, and so on, in order to maintain a uniform sound and correct touch so the players can continue to ride. That is where professional piano technician, Eduardo Muñoz, steps in. Part artist and part craftsman, he has taken care of the Café Central’s piano for many, many years. Muñoz is the fourth generation of a family of piano restorers and technicians dedicated to this fundamental aspect of music since 1860. After learning the profession from his father and studying at the best international schools, he worked in Hazen Yamaha until taking over the family business. He has prepared pianos for the finest musicians to visit Spain, and accompanied Sviatoslav Richter on his Spanish tour in the early 1990s. Muñoz has also been in charge of pianos for various editions of the Madrid Jazz Festival and for concerts at the San Juan Evangelista Music and Jazz Club. In this chapter, we will discover the successive repairs that led up to the final restoration that brought new, though anonymous, life to this piano before it was rescued. We will also see what how it fared in the hands of certain musicians.



TETE MONTOLIU, 1993

4 THE MUSICIANS AND THEIR MUSIC This chapter occupies the central portion of the book as the piano ceases being the sound of a good instrument and becomes the sound of the soul—or mind—of the musicians. Here, we will discuss the most important musicians who made it sing, listing every one of nearly a thousand groups that passed through the Café Central, including those that didn’t use the piano in their music, such as Lou Bennet, Ben Sidran and others. We will also more extensively document those concerts that were especially memorable for their musical quality—especially those in which the group was led by a pianist. The piano plays a fundamental role in jazz, with harmonic, rhythmic and melodic responsibilities. It is not only a good solo voice, but also a sophisticated accompaniment. From James P. Johnson through Cecil Taylor, innumerable pianists have contributed approaches to this instrument that are still valid today. The musicians that sat at the Café Central’s piano were influenced by Bud Powell, Horace Silver, Thelonious Monk, Winton Kelly, Bill Evans, Herbie Hancock, McCoy Tyner, Chick Corea, Red Garland, Kenny Barron, and many others. Sometimes that influence was very direct, as is the case with Barry Harris, who was the immediate heir to Bud Powell; Brad Mehldau, who owes so much to Bill Evans; Randy Weston and Mal Waldron, who carry on the tradition of Thelonious Monk; George Cables, who traced his path between Hancock and Tyner; and Tete Montoliu, who drew on both Powell and Al Haig. All those influences made themselves heard through the hands and talent of the musicians seated at the piano in the Café Central.

5 AROUND THE PIANO AT THE CAFÉ CENTRAL This section will include articles, essays and opinions by people linked to the Café Central: unpublished documents written especially for the occasion and other texts by specialist such as Nanye Blázquez, Pedro Calvo, Javier de Cambra, Juan Claudio Cifuentes, María Antonia García, J.M. García Martínez, Federico González, Miquel Jurado, Raúl A. Mao, Gerardo Pérez, Xavier Rekalde, José Ramón Rubio, José ignacio Sánchez-Cuenca, Ebbe Traberg, Ramiro Villapadierna and others.





PAOLO FRESU, 1992



GEORGE CABLES TRIO, 1994



FLAVIO BOLTRO, 1991



RALPH MOORE, 1993



CENTRAL PIANO, 2009



GEORGE ADAMS, 1989



PERICO SAMBEAT, 1992



ART FARMER & BERNARDO SASSETTI, 1994



CINDY BLACKMAN, 1989