

# THE INTERIOR HEARD

**I**n the built environment, not all boundaries are marked or visible. Many exist as subtle thresholds that guide our behaviour without signs. Architectural space often influences how we move and act, using quiet cues rather than explicit instructions. We sense these invisible lines instinctively.

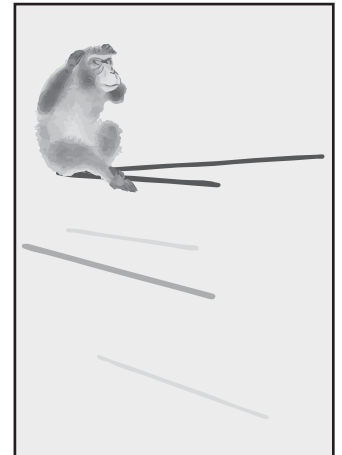
In my home living room, a grand piano sits within an open-plan space. Its lid, whether closed, half-open or fully raised, forms an unspoken boundary between private thought and public expression. No rule dictates its position, yet it carries meaning, from quiet reflection, to cautious sharing, to open performance. In this domestic setting, the piano becomes a hinge between interior feeling and outward presence.

This essay responds to Advanced Cultural Studies Theme 1c, examining an interior threshold that is not officially marked but clearly felt. Through the piano lid's three positions, I explore a movement from inner immensity to public resonance, drawing on Gaston Bachelard's theory of intimate space. Alongside this, I reflect on cultural works by Sampha and Ramón Gener, both of whom frame the piano as a vessel of memory and identity. Accompanying this, I also look into the legacy of Arthur Rubinstein and how his trajectory as a renowned pianist helped him maintain these traits. In doing so, I show how a familiar object in a personal space can reveal deep, invisible boundaries that shape how we express ourselves and connect with others.

## CLOSED LID

The closed lid hides away the strings and hammers, rendering the instrument mute to the outside. Within this closed form lies an intimate immensity. Philosopher Gaston Bachelard, in *The Poetics of Space*, suggests that interior silence can hold infinite creative space: *"immensity in the intimate domain is intensity... When the dreamer really experiences the word immense, he sees himself liberated from his cares and thoughts"* (Cirigliano, 2016). In this sense, the closed piano holds a more personal connection to the user. Beneath the closed lid lies the full mechanism of the piano: 88 keys, over 200 strings, and a wooden body designed to resonate with sound. In its stillness, the piano holds the possibility of sound that can shape a space. The piano becomes a private space for thought, much like a quiet room where one can think without distraction from the outside world. As Bachelard writes about the comfort of small, enclosed spaces, the shut piano offers a kind of calm and protection. It separates the player's inner world of sound from the quiet of the room around them.

Following this, a closed piano evokes *intimacy*. Renowned pianist Arthur Rubinstein faced challenges with his sight, hearing, and memory toward the end of his life as seen in a video showcasing one of his masterclasses (Jerusalem Music Centre (2017) [05:15]). Despite these difficulties, his lifelong relationship with the piano allowed him to maintain his presence and identity. Though he required support in daily life, the moment he sat at the piano, he seemed to transcend his limitations, becoming one with the instrument,



Closed Lid Illustration



Strigs and Hammers

effortlessly delivering flawless musical expressions.

In a home setting, the lid is typically down when one is playing for oneself, or perhaps not playing at all but simply remembering melodies. British musician Sampha captures this sentiment in his song “(No One Knows Me) Like the Piano”. The title itself is a cultural tribute to the piano as a keeper of personal history. Sampha wrote this minimalist ballad in the living room of his late mother’s home, on the piano of his childhood (WVAU, 2017). “No one knows me like the piano in my mother’s home”, he sings, suggesting that within the closed, familiar piano resides an entire autobiography of emotions and memories. The instrument became his confidant, witnessing his joys and sorrows without judgment.

In the closed lid state, the piano is essentially furniture of memory, a piece of the interior landscape containing private sentiments (Giudice & Giubilaro, 2015). Here, the unmarked threshold is strong and comforting: it cannot be crossed by uninvited ears. The lid down is an implied sign of privacy. This condition resonates with the concept of home as a protective shell to protect memories and comfort where the mind can wander freely without outside intrusion (Cirigliano, 2016). In architectural terms, the closed piano is like an inner sanctum or a small room within a room, acoustically and symbolically enclosing the self.

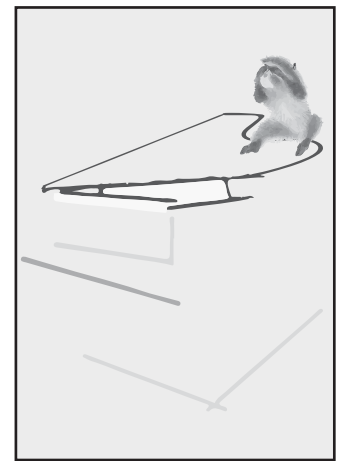
### SEMI-OPEN LID

Lifting the piano lid to its semi-open position is a delicate act of crossing where the boundaries begin to dissolve. A short support stick is used to keep the lid partially open. In this state, the piano’s interior begins to reveal itself where the bronze plate and strings become

visible, and the sound can propagate more freely into the room. This semi-open lid is symbolic of uncertainty: neither fully enclosed nor fully exposed. It represents a *threshold of vulnerability*. Just as a door left slightly open signals a gradual easing of the boundary between private and public environments (Elman, 2024). The piano’s half-lid suggests a musician ready to share, but gently, and on their own terms. The music played now projects outward, but in a moderated form where volume and brightness are increased from the closed state, but not at the full intensity a fully open lid would allow. Listeners in the room can hear the melodies clearly, whilst the piano maintains a subtle sound to provide levels of intimacy with the audience.

It represents the hesitant steps we take when sharing personal feelings or creative work with others. We begin to open the door of our inner world, showing some vulnerabilities while holding others back. Imagine an interpreter playing a new piece-in-progress to a close friend, the lid half raised to invite care and encouragement. The physical stance of the lid reinforces the psychological stance of the performer in that moment. In *Green Book*, Dr Don Shirley, a distinguished African American pianist navigates the racial tensions of 1960s southern America, and uses the piano not just as an instrument but as a vessel for self expression. Each note he plays is measured, expressive and personal, this transcends his performances into emotional statements (Lemire, 2018). For Shirley, the piano is both a sanctuary and a shield, a place where he can maintain control, dignity and identity in a world which denies him all three.

This state of partial openness is also reflected in the fragile boundaries of memory, even when Rubinstein’s memory faltered during performances in his later



Semi-Open Lid Illustration



Rubinstein’s Process of Encouragement

years, his ability to improvise allowed him to gracefully navigate forgotten passages, demonstrating that his artistry remained undiminished (Guinn, 1982).

*"Music is not a hobby, not even a passion with me, music is me. What people get from me is this outlook on life, which comes out in my music. My music is the final expression of all that."*

- A. Rubinstein

The clear line between present and past, self and surrounding, blurs when an internal threshold dissolves. There are moments when a familiar song or tune can suddenly shine through the mental fog. Neurologists have observed that music often serves as a bridge across damaged parts of the memory. Dr. Rudy Tanzi, an American Alzheimer's researcher, notes that music is *"the bridge to the soul"* because even when the condition has ravaged much of the mind, the *music memory* remains and can temporarily revive lost connections (Reed, 2023). It is as if the act of seeing and touching the piano half-opens a door in one's mind. The threshold between the interior self and the outside world, normally sealed by the condition, gives way just enough for the music to flow out and fill the room. In these instances, the piano's half-lid is a powerful metaphor: it signifies how a deeply interior realm can partially open and communicate. The tune becomes a familiar friend crossing over from the intimate darkness into the shared light of day, blurring the line we thought uncrossable. There is vulnerability in this

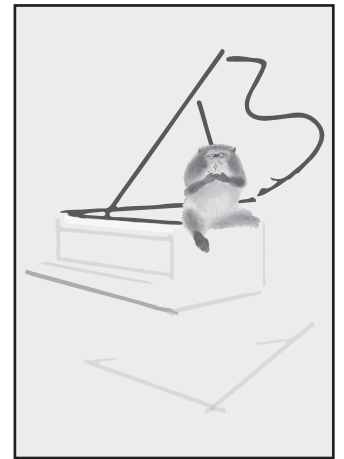
as the player may not fully grasp what they've shared, and the listeners are aware they are witnessing a rare moment. The half-open lid condition thus speaks to the heart, it reminds us that between the extremes of silence and performance lies a delicate space where personal memory and collective experience meet, resisting to the idea that volume is the only register of power (Allen, 2006).

## OPEN LID

When the piano lid is raised to its full position, the boundary is crossed completely. The inner structure is fully revealed. Strings, hammers, and the resonant body are in plain sight, and the sound reaches its full potential. This is the standard setup in a concert. The lid is angled to project sound toward large audiences, but it also signals something symbolic. The piano becomes an open voice rather than a private companion.

The open lid produces a shift in atmosphere. The performer moves from a space of quiet preparation into one of full exposure. With the first note, music fills the room and the interior world of the musician begins to unfold. The line between the private and the public disappears. What was once internal is now shared. The sound leaves the piano with strength and clarity, but also carries vulnerability. The performer cannot guide how it is heard, felt, or interpreted. It is an act of trust. Each phrase is shaped by skill, emotion, and memory (Xinyue, 2023), but once released, it belongs to the listener.

The piano becomes a medium through which identity is not just expressed, but shared. This relates to experiences that all of us encounter. We often guard our thoughts and feelings and hesitate to open up, whether this is in music or conversation, there is always a risk. There is no certainty in how we will



Open Lid Illustration



Memorised Keys

be received. Playing with the piano's full capacity is a gesture that conveys openness.

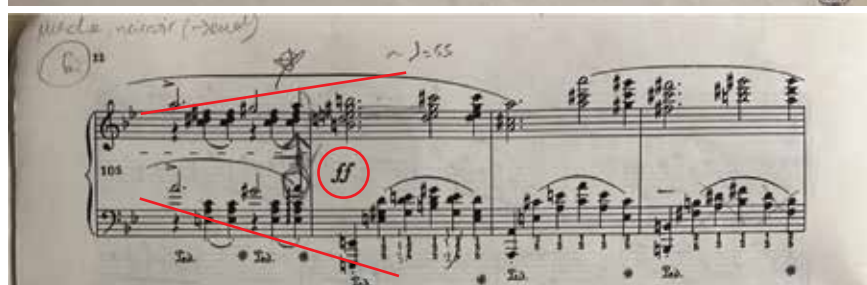
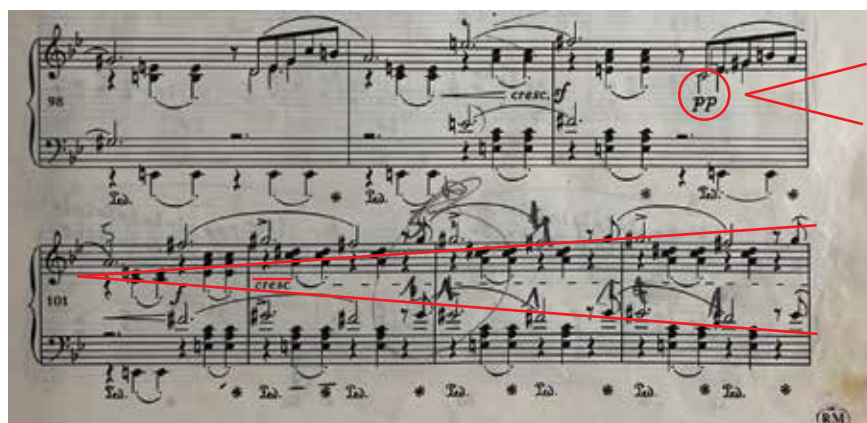
Over time, a piano used in this way accumulates marks and wear. It collects stories. This is the focus of *Historia de un Piano* by Ramón Gener, who imagines a piano recalling the lives it has touched. Each player leaves a trace. A lullaby, a slow piece played alone, a student's recital, a farewell sonata. The piano becomes a witness and holds these memories quietly, so when its lid is opened again, they seem to rise with the sound. Gener's reflection reminds us that instruments are not only tools. They are companions to emotion, containers of time, and keepers of memory.

In this state, the piano becomes more than an object. It enters into dialogue with the space and the people who fill it. Sound crosses the room and meets listeners where they are. What begins in the hands of one becomes an experience shared by many. Rubinstein reinforces this when he says: *"On stage, I will take a chance. There has to be an element of daring in great music-making"*. He embodied the image of a fully open piano, vulnerable, expressive, and deeply human. Even in illness, he continued to channel emotion and meaning through his music, communicating with audiences in a language beyond words (Lebrecht, 2021).

The fully open lid turns the piano into a bridge. It links personal expression with public space. It turns sound into memory. The boundary once defined by privacy becomes a space of connection. In this transformation, something lasting is created. The performance may end, but the shared moment stays with those who were there. The piano, now silent, carries that echo within it. And the next time the lid is raised, something of that memory returns.

## CLOSING REFLECTION

For me, the piano lid is more than just a piece of furniture. It carries the weight of choice: whether to keep a piece intimate or to let it resonate outward. Each time I lift it, I cross a quiet threshold between who I am when I play for myself and who I become when I offer that music to others. It is in that in-between space that meaning is born. The degree to which the piano is open reflects how vulnerable or expressive I am willing to be, shaped by my connection to the listener. In this exchange, my interpretative choices become subject to the audience's internalised codes of what music should be. This connection is deeply influenced by the musical movement. It is a feeling shared by all pianists, and it becomes especially clear in Rubinstein as he shares his passion in an excerpt from his masterclass on Chopin's Romantic Ballade No. 1 in G Minor at the Jerusalem Music Centre (2017) [03:30].



Rubinstein's Most Expressive Excerpt [03:30] from Chopin's Ballade No.1



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