just trying to do what I'm told and keep up and do the best that I can

/ James Saunders

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just trying to do what I'm told and keep up and do the best that I can (2025) puts the pianist in an increasingly difficult situation where they are asked to respond to a series of instructions which get progressively harder to follow. The piece reflects on the experience of managing situations where the flow of information and requirement to respond accurately and efficiently becomes overly taxing and impossible to maintain. In these situations, coping strategies might be developed to find a manageable solution or to accept defeat. In the piece, artificial voices give live-generated text instructions that are not known in advance by the pianist, forcing them to respond to each instruction as they hear it. In parallel an AI voice comments on the activities and can be engaged in conversation by the pianist, seeking advice or assisting with the task in different ways. The character and attitude of the AI voice sits somewhere between a benign but largely unhelpful assistant and the intelligence of a telephone automated menu, although it has the potential to transcend both depending on what it is asked. The unforgiving nature of the artificial voices delivering instructions with no accountability or reciprocity with the human player aims to reflect on situations where control is beyond us, but we must still complete the arbitrary tasks we are given.

piano
sampler
objects
artificial voices

duration: variable (ideally at least 10 minutes)

Commissioned by Zubin Kanga as part of Cyborg Soloists, with the support of a UKRI Future Leaders Fellowship and Royal Holloway, University of London.
It was premiered by Zubin Kanga on [date and venue details]

SETUP

RESOURCES

piano (grand or upright)
sample player (keypad/keyboard/tablet as preferred) with preloaded samples
local speaker for sample playback
collection of objects (corresponding with the cues in the object cue list)
table for objects

Macbook
justtrying app

PA
Radio mic

PREPARATION

PA setup
Only the artificial voices and other computer audio playback (e.g. music and field recordings) should be sent to the PA.
They should be clearly audible to the pianist and the audience, perhaps overbearingly so.
The samples should be played through a speaker next to the piano so that they are clearly associated with the pianist cueing them and separate from the artificial voices on the PA
It may be useful for the cues to be sent to headphones for the pianist too.
The pianist's mic should pick up only the pianist's voice, not the artificial voices from the speakers in order to prevent them initiating cues from the AI voice (although it's fine if occasionally this happens). The pianist's voice can be amplified if needed. The pianist's mic should be set as the input for the Mac so that the app will listen for it.

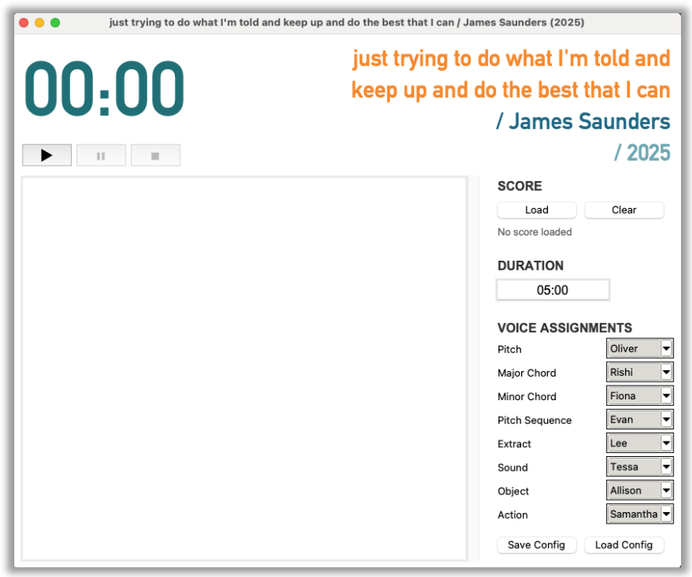
Objects setup
Select a range of sound-making objects from those items in the cue file objects.csv
The suggested set is: bell, whistle, paper, aerosol, horn, ball, cap gun, brush, harmonica, buzzer, squeaker, box
Other objects may be substituted as needed (more or fewer objects is also possible), but the object.csv file in the categories folder needs to be amended in a text editor to correspond with the chosen objects.
Arrange the objects on a table or other convenient surface so that they are within easy reach.

Sample setup
The sounds folder contains over 50 samples that can be used in the piece.
These are all named in the cue file sounds.csv in the categories folder.
When setting up the piece, choose as many samples as required from this list (c.16-24 may work well) and load them into the sample player so that one pad/key is linked to one sample.
It may be useful to label these for easy access in the performance.
Edit the sounds.csv file in the categories folder in a text editor so that only the loaded samples are listed.

Extract setup
Select any thematic index from a collected edition of piano pieces, such as the Henle Beethoven Piano Sonatas Vol.1 (see example below). Any single or multi-composer collection can be chosen, and in any style of music.
If there is a numbering of pieces on the page use this as the cue number for the bars (e.g. 1-15 in the example below or 16-32 if using Vol.2) or renumber them as preferred. Make sure the file extract.csv in the categories folder uses the same numbering.

App installation
Install the app using the installer JustTrying_Setup.command.
This will install the app, all the score and audio files and necessary Python dependencies.
When run for the first time, it will prompt for an OpenAI API key.
This can be generated here: https://platform.openai.com/api-keys
Once installed and the API key is added the app will load.

APP



The app manages all the interaction for the piece. Once loaded it will present a default 5-minute version with a preloaded set of voices.

Before using, select a voice for each of the categories. The dropdown menus are populated with all available voices on the Macbook. Other voices can be added via System Preferences>Accessibility>Live Speech>Voice, then scroll to the bottom of the list and choose Manage voices…

This configuration can then be saved and loaded for future use, as can alternatives, by clicking Save Config or Load Config.

The duration can be set by typing directly in the Duration box in the form MM:SS.

The app also has a score reader. Click Load to load one of the scores in the folder.
The scores give time points where changes to the currently active cue categories are set, as well as other more direct instructions.

Once a score is loaded, this will be confirmed in the output window. Click the play button to start and the score will begin to play. Use the pause and stop buttons to pause or end playback (clicking play after stop will restart the score at the beginning.

The cues are listed in the output window when the score is running. This is only for reference and does not need to be read in a performance.

New score and category files can be saved within the app subfolders.
To access the subfolders, right click or control-click the app icon, and select
Show Package Contents>Contents>Resources.
In this folder you will find the scores, categories and music subfolders.

PERFORMANCE INSTRUCTIONS

The piece requires the pianist to respond to the cues given by the artificial voices, attempting to follow all the instructions as they are given, as well as interacting verbally with the AI voice. In places the density may be too great to manage, but the aim is to try to follow as many as possible and adopt strategies to cope where this becomes difficult.

In the performance, click play to begin, then respond to the instructions as they are generated.
Each realisation will produce a different sequence and density of cues, structured broadly by which instruction types are available at any point. At a given point, only a selection of the cue categories will be used. The pianist may also talk to the AI voice which will respond to questions and also provide additional cues.

The app generates a random stream of spoken cues in eight different categories. Each of the categories is spoken by a different artificial voice. The voices are located spatially at different positions in the stereo field to aid differentiation.

PITCH CUES

pitch	play the single named pitch in any octave
chord major	play the named major chord as a straight chord or arpeggio
chord minor	play the named minor chord as a straight chord or arpeggio

In general, consider pitching the material in a way that relates to the timbre/pitch of the voice giving the cue: low voice and low register, high voice and high register etc. Chords can be in any inversion, register and density, or arpeggiated to any degree from a simple broken chord to something more dramatic.

pitch sequence	copy the sequence of pitches in any octave

The pitch sequence cue is announced by a voice, and then a series of pitched tones is presented to copy.

ACTION CUES

extract	play the numbered extract from the material provided

For the extract cues, play as much of the material as you can before another cue directs you to switch. If you complete the extract, just wait until the next cue.

sound	play the named sound on the sample player
object	make a sound on the named object
action	complete the specified action

Some of the action cues may be contradictory or make completing other cues difficult or impossible. If this happens, just try to work out what to do, or perhaps ask the AI for advice.

AI VOICE

The AI voice is separate from the other artificial voices. It is always Daniel and is slightly louder with reverb. It will give you other instructions which may be a more general commentary on the performance as well as specific things to do that do not fit into the main categories.

You may also engage it in dialogue, asking it questions or advice and responding to what it says. Normally for more complex questions it will give you a holding text (e.g. “I see”, “Got it” etc.) before responding. Sometimes it will not respond at all, so you can either ask again or move on.

The AI voice will also respond to some specific (and occasionally fuzzy) keywords. These can be spoken individually, but will also be picked up in the middle of a sentence if they are recognised. The keywords have the following effect:

that is all	end the session [only use for rehearsal if needed]
pause/hold/wait/hold on	pause the session (starts hold music)
continue/resume/carry on	resume from pause
slower	decrease voice rate by 20 WPM and increase gaps between cues by 40%
faster	increase voice rate by 20 WPM and decrease gaps between cues by 40%
normal speed	reset voice rate to 150 WPM and gaps to 100%
field recording/space/natural	play natural field recordings
focus music/focus/ concentrate	play ambient focus music
relaxing music/relax	play relaxing background music
motivational music/motivate/ high energy	play motivational music
stop the music/stop music/ turn off music/music off	stop all music
stop	stop all audio playback

Do the best you can.