

The New York Times

June 3, 2009

The Score and the Story, Inseparable

By MARK BLANKENSHIP

THE score of the Off Broadway musical “**Coraline**” is full of unusual sounds. Musical notes are joined by scrapes and scratches and thuds, and on first listen it sounds as if the composer and lyricist, Stephin Merritt, leader of the indie band the Magnetic Fields, has written his music for an array of unusual instruments. In reality, though, his score is bare bones. Not only is it performed by a single musician (with assistance from the cast), but it’s also composed almost entirely for pianos.

Many pianos, to be exact. As 9-year-old Coraline explores her dreary British home — and an alternate dimension on the other side of her drawing room door — everything from song melodies to sound effects gets created on keyboards. This MCC Theater production, which opened Monday at the Lucille Lortel in the West Village, doesn’t even have a sound designer, which is rare for a musical.

But that’s not to suggest every moment sounds the same. There are three types of pianos in the show: uprights, which make the familiar piano sound; toy pianos, which create whimsical noises; and a “prepared piano,” which produces those odd scrapes and thuds because it has objects like screws, banana clips and playing cards attached to its strings.

Sitting in the Lortel with the musical’s director, Leigh Silverman, and its book writer, David Greenspan, Mr. Merritt explained that he limited his instruments to unify the story’s various worlds. The upright is used, for instance, when Coraline (played by the adult actress Jayne Houdyshell) is in her real home, and the prepared piano sounds when she gets trapped in an increasingly malicious fantasyland.

“Musically you need to know what language you’re speaking throughout, or else things will stop making sense,” Mr. Merritt said. “The piano is a symbol of domesticity, the prepared piano is a symbol of attacks on domesticity, and the toy piano is a symbol of childhood.”

Musically most of the pressure falls on the pianist Phyllis Chen, who must underscore spoken scenes, accompany singers and occasionally create a spooky effect by scraping a ruler across the strings of a piano. Sometimes she plays two instruments at the same time. When Coraline sees the door between worlds, for instance, Ms. Chen simultaneously sounds the prepared piano and an upright.

“It’s like having eight brains going at once,” Ms. Chen said. “It feels like a humongous piano is behind you and on top of you and everywhere. But it was composed so that it’s manageable.” (Ben Brantley, in his review for The New York Times, praised Ms. Chen as “impressive.”)

Ms. Chen said the score’s structure reflects the story it tells. A specialist on the toy piano, she said the instrument is particularly well suited to the tale of a little girl whose world keeps surprising her. “The toy piano is a very elusive instrument because it appears like a piano, but it sounds quite foreign,” she said. “What we expect to hear is different than what we end up experiencing.”

The score has influenced most other elements of the production. The set is made almost entirely of pianos, which suggests a world built from music, and the decision to perform without amplification has affected everything from acting choices to pacing.

The show’s theatricality is also evident in Ms. Chen’s prominent position onstage; the gender-, race- and age-blind casting; and the frequent rhyming couplets. Ms. Silverman said that this was all in keeping with the imagination of Neil Gaiman’s 2002 novella “Coraline” — which inspired an animated film released this year — and that the creative team’s commitment to playfulness inspired bolder choices.