

THE PIANIST WHO DID IT ALL

Helga Karen's fifth concert for Doctor of Music degree

30.1.2026 klo 19

Organo

Program

Anton Webern (1883–1945)	<i>Variations</i> for piano op.27 (1937) (Peter Stadlen Edition)
Karlheinz Stockhausen (1928–2007)	<i>Klavierstück III</i> (1952)
Pierre Boulez (1925–2016)	<i>Douze Notations</i> (1945) 3. <i>Assez lent</i> 4. <i>Rythmique</i>
Morton Feldman (1926–1987)	<i>Piano Piece 1952</i>
Morton Feldman	<i>Piano Piece (to Philip Guston)</i> (1963)
Pierre Boulez	<i>Une Page d'éphéméride</i> (2005)
Karlheinz Stockhausen	<i>Klavierstück XIV GEBURTSTAG- FORMEL</i> (1984)
Karlheinz Stockhausen	<i>Klavierstück IX</i> (1962)

Helga Karen, piano

Throughout my experience of post-tonal and contemporary music, I couldn't help but notice that the style of piano playing that I knew from my studies into classical piano music was not quite enough and that I constantly had to learn new skills to prepare and perform more modern compositions. I had a particularly strong experience with Stockhausen's music, noticing that the more I practiced his works, the more skillsets and tools I needed to acquire; qualities that depended a lot on the stage of his compositional development. Thus, the

theme of my artistic research was born. The goal of my artistic research is to explore in detail the classics of post-tonal piano music—Karlheinz Stockhausen, Pierre Boulez and Morton Feldman, three composers deeply inspired by the compositional techniques of Anton Webern—and to look into their compositional journeys and their relationships to the piano, the pianist and the score.

In my first doctoral concert “The Pianist Who Does It All”, I presented an overview of styles and challenges and the pianistic tools required to perform Stockhausen’s piano works. It was a run-through of his whole piano composition journey and an overview of the research possibilities and their potential outcomes. My second, third and fourth concerts (“The Pianist Who Is in Control”, “The Pianist Who Listens”, “The Pianist Who Creates”) focused in more detail on the different roles of the pianist within post-tonal piano music. I compared and contrasted Stockhausen’s works with music by Morton Feldman and Pierre Boulez, showing how their compositional approaches went in similar directions and yet were characterised by completely different executions. This last doctoral concert is a mirroring of the four previous concerts, a moment of self-reflection, a research summary and an answer to the question “How much does the pianist need to be able to do on and around the piano in order to play post-tonal and contemporary music?”.

The inspiration and the beginning

Anton Webern, a representative of the Second Viennese School and a master of miniatures and the use of simple yet powerful music material, was a source of inspiration for the young composers of the post-Second World War world for a good reason: growing tired of the state of classical music at the time and not

seeing Arnold Schoenberg as being enough of a radical change in the world of new musical structures, Webern's approach to dynamics and compositional structure and his playfulness with traditional musical parameters enticed Stockhausen and Boulez. On the other side of the world, Feldman became inspired by Webern's use of space between notes and the transparency of the score that is applied in a thoughtfully constructed, fully notated work. Thus, the earliest piano works by these three composers (Boulez's *Notations*, Stockhausen's earliest *Klavierstücke* and Feldman's *Piano Piece 1952*) connect to Webern's piano work *Variations* op.27 in a way that is obvious beyond the theory: the piano scores look and *feel* similar. Even beyond the visuals, my body language, posture, finger work and mind click into identical positions when I see these scores (see Pictures 1 and 2 for examples). The body knows that the very core of this music—the breaking point of the century—imposes a certain role on the pianist: a precise score follower and an observer, a mathematical analytical mind and a lover of order. All three composers were also inspired by Webern's ability to write in a miniature form; this tendency can be seen in all three composers' compositions as well.

Stockhausen and Boulez were (mistakenly) convinced that Webern, with his precise dynamical notation, variety in note lengths within the same phrase and the use of meticulously calculated rests, started the movement towards total serialism: the idea that the series in the compositional structure controls not only pitches but all other aspects of music, from dynamics and note lengths to pitch registers and articulation. However, Webern had no such intention, and (I suspect) he must have misled his young followers with the scarcity of his notation. In fact, Webern's approach to composition was much more colourful, less strict and more passionate than his scores lead us to believe. This is revealed in the special edition of the *Variations* created by Peter Stadlen (1910–1996), an Austrian pianist, who worked on the piece with Webern himself and

who published the score of the *Variations* with the additional markings that came from his work with the composer. In the edition, we can see how deeply passionate and enthusiastic Webern was about all the parameters of music, but more importantly, his passion was not coldly mathematical¹. Stadlen recorded Webern's images for certain phrases, and those included such words as "elegiac", "precipitately", "enthused with pathos" and "mysterious drum"—the words of a musical poet.

This led me back to my artistic research and the importance of the musician's role in unveiling the secrets of the score. The interpretation of the score, no matter how precise, detailed, restricting or misleading, is still dependant on the performer; thus, the value that the pianist brings through the practice process of these works is enormous. This is perhaps not a new notion in the world of Western classical music but an important reminder.

Looking back at my first doctoral concert, I think I took the role of a precision-driven executioner too literally. I led myself to believe that being precise, to the point of disassociating from pianism and just becoming a (very stressed and tight) vessel between the score and the audience, was a natural choice. I refused to bring anything of myself into this music, even though despite all my efforts,

¹ Stockhausen and Boulez never met Webern; thus, I can only assume their primary sources of research into Webern's music were his scores and discussions with Webern's composition students. Even though we can assume that Webern's contemporaries would have passed on Webern's passion towards composing and musical insights, it is evident from the literary sources that Webern's presence and his performance of his own works was such a powerful experience that perhaps nothing other than meeting him personally could have conveyed that emotion, as his scores on their own leave an impression of a precise, meticulous but very reserved approach.

of course I did, because I am me—I breathe and live and I have a personal way of playing the instrument (I certainly hope so). I am happy to report that this is not the case anymore, and I believe Peter Stadlen's edition of Webern's *Variations* played a remarkable role in that. To see that the score is not an absolute truth, no matter how much it looks like one, is a relief. It inspired me to imagine what the scores of Boulez's, Stockhausen's and Feldman's early works would look like if there was no self-restriction, no attachment to compositional technique and no myth of the composer as an absolute truth source. There are manuscripts of these works with the markings of the pianists who worked with these composers closely. However, I think the fear of being seen as human, as a passionate creature, overtook the honesty in these early works. After all, these composers were very young at the time, in their early to mid-twenties; they believed in a monumental change, and they had to stick with it. Later on, their three paths were to look very different.

The transformation until the end

One aspect that I have enjoyed the most about my doctoral research project was to get to follow the changes and developments of these three composers up close. My work has allowed me to practice and play all these works from the beginnings to the very ends of their compositional journeys and to see the metamorphosis of their music linearly, to see them find their new inspirations, new excitements, disappointments, trials and errors, references to the old, unwillingness to move on or to move on too radically... to witness these transformations has been a privilege. Even though I look at these changes through their piano works, I believe that in the case of these composers, the piano repertoire reflects their more general compositional journey really well.

Morton Feldman is the composer whose approach changed the least of the three. He stayed true to textural simplicity and a transparent yet fully composed and notated musical material, with the exception of a few pieces here and there (he tried out graphical and mobile scores). What changed, and what Feldman developed constantly until his very last piece, was sonorities. From a one-note-at-a-time-mentality to a chordal cathedral-like sonority, Feldman tirelessly explored the impact of the piano attack on the string resonances and their intertwining with silence. I chose to perform his work dedicated to Philip Guston (1913–1980) from 1963 because it is his last piano piece whose length was suitable for this concert. It is in no way an ending point of his compositional journey for piano, but after 1963, the next piano work was written only in 1977, and from then on the piano works, as his many other compositions, started to last from 25 minutes up to an hour. Feldman also stayed true to his excitement and deep connection to the visual arts: being part of the New York School that did not only encompass music, but also visual and literary arts, Feldman saw his music in connection to the art of his contemporaries. Philip Guston, a Canadian American painter and muralist, who worked in the style of abstract expressionism (Picture 3) and neo-expressionism as well as made political commentary through his murals, was an inspiration behind two of Feldman's works; this piano piece and a four-hour long chamber music composition, *For Philip Guston* (1984).

The composition by Pierre Boulez, *Une Page d'éphéméride*, is not only his last piano work, but his last composition all together. After this, he only expanded and completed an existing ensemble piece, *Dérive 2* (1988, expanded 2006). Boulez's love of the piano and traditional virtuoso piano playing stayed the same throughout his compositional path and can be excellently perceived in this work. It is worth noting that his very first (published) composition was also a piano solo piece: *Douze Notations*. Looking back at *Douze Notations* and

Boulez's excitement about the novelty of Webern, it is entertaining to think that a composer who in his younger years at the age of 27 wrote an essay titled "Schoenberg is dead" (1952), claiming that Arnold Schoenberg (1874–1951) did not bring anything new to the music of the time, restricted himself to rather traditional piano composition at the end of his own compositional journey. *Une Page d'éphéméride* is a wholesome, fascinating and very pianistic piece of music that has both deeply poetic and anxiety-driven features in it. It is full of contrasts and rapid passages across different piano registers, as is so typical of Boulez's piano writing. The title, which is translated as *A page from Ephemeris*, refers to a page taken from a celestial map of the trajectories of different astronomical bodies. The Ephemeris helps to predict the position of the objects at any given time, yet the piano piece itself is full of surprises. The unexpected twists and turns of the piano texture perhaps depict the difficulty of following the celestial objects, constantly reaching for the stars and trying to catch them as clearly as possible. The poetry within the piece is incredibly romantic and passionate. The parallels with his first piano work can also be seen: the masterful use of time, humour, clear structures and a fantastic use of miniature form—in all that, Boulez stayed true to his younger self. Through the developments and changes in his compositional path from the First Piano Sonata (1946, rev. 1949), approaching total serialism, to the aleatoric structure of the Third Piano Sonata (1955–57/1963) and to the madness of the revised *Incises* (2001), I hope Boulez found some closure in *Une Page d'éphéméride* with its musical depth and notational simplicity.

The very last *Klavierstück* from Stockhausen, number *XIV*, titled GEBURTSTAGS-FORMEL or "Birthday-Formula", was a birthday present for Pierre Boulez's 60th birthday. This work, as with the two *Klavierstücke* before, is closely related to the LICHT-cycle (a seven opera cycle for each day of the week), a project that occupied most of his time at the end of his life. Compared

to *Klavierstücke XII* and *XIII*, which are heavy, lengthy works of between 20 and 30 minutes and which are direct transcriptions from the operas DONNERSTAG aus LICHT and SAMSTAG aus LICHT, respectively, this piano piece is very short and was composed before the opera was finished. Only later did it become the second scene of the second act of the opera MONTAG aus LICHT. This makes the work stand on its own a bit more, as a piece of music that is unrelated to the theatrical context of the opera. It is also a witty little greeting to Boulez with humorous musical moments; for example, at the very end of the piece, I hear a motive from the Disney introduction melody, and I can't unhear it. It is yet left for me to discover if that was an intentional gesture from Stockhausen or just a happy coincidence.

The notational precision in this work is not dissimilar to the very first piano piece Stockhausen wrote, but a lot changed since then. The sonorities, the musicality and the musical material, the mystery, the passion— almost everything is totally opposite to where we started in 1952. As per Stockhausen's manner, he requires a lot of multitasking from the pianist, but this time that includes some theatrical demands and a little bit of playing inside the instrument. It is a miniature version of the more extensive theatrical piano pieces, but it gives a very good idea of where composer ended up with his piano compositions. While it is the last acoustic *Klavierstück* by Stockhausen (the rest are composed for electronic keyboards), it is not the last acoustic piano piece altogether. In early 2000s, Stockhausen composed a three-hour long work *Natürliche Dauern* (*Natural Durations*) and embraced an even larger world of sonorities and the piano's natural properties. However, in the sense of the pianist's roles and extensive multitasking capacities, the last acoustic *Klavierstücke* are definitely the peak of that compositional journey.

The full circle

I saved the best for last (literally): *Klavierstück IX*.

This is such a multi-layered work, packed with information and usefulness from the perspective of music history, composition, music theory, post-tonal and avantgarde piano music development, about which I could tell you a lot of fascinating facts. I could tell you that this is a piece from the second set of *Klavierstücke* Stockhausen composed between 1954 and 1964 (piano pieces from *V* to *X*) that excellently combines all the challenges related to that set of *Klavierstücke*, but in a gentle miniature form; here, we have tempo changes, but not too dramatic; dramatic dynamical contrasts, but not too fast; fast material changes, but not simultaneously; simultaneous tones with different lengths, but not too many; many pianistic challenges, but not too extreme. I could tell you that this piece combines most of the pianist's roles that I researched in detail for my previous four concerts: the pianist who controls everything, from the fingertip to their mind; the pianist who listens, learning to shift the primary focus from the chaotic piano texture to the complete or near-silence between the music events in the piece and to become an observer of the music, which dissolves into the air one sound wave at a time; the pianist who creates, creating the path between the score and the audience, balancing a full obedience to the score and allowing the inclusion of human-error into the interpretation of the work; the pianist–mathematician, learning to understand compositional techniques that are based on mathematical concepts and seeing those concepts come to life in the score. I could tell you that the mathematical principle of this work is a Fibonacci scale² and that the numbers 1, 2, 3, 5, 8, 13, 21 and 34 constantly circulate in the piece in the form of the measures and tone lengths. I

² The Fibonacci scale is a series of terms (numbers in the case of Stockhausen, and generally speaking in non-mathematical language) where each number is the sum of the two previous numbers (Jonathan Kramer, *The Fibonacci Series in Twentieth-Century Music* (1973))

could explain that the first chord repeats 137 times in the first measure and 87 in the second, and that it is a statement never heard before in post-tonal music in that shape or form. I could mention that this is one of the more known and more popular piano works by Stockhausen and, due to the relative transparency and clarity of the score, it is the *Klavierstück* with which many pianists have their first encounter with Stockhausen or even post-tonal music in general. In the same breath, I could tell you that, due to the same reasons, there are a lot of unsuccessful interpretations of this work that either tend to make fun of it and consider it a humorous piece of music because of the lengthy chord repetitions or that don't bother to reach the level of precision that makes this piece what it is: a diamond of serial composition. Lastly, I could say that because Stockhausen was simultaneously working on *Klavierstück X* and *XI* and was going through a transitional period in his compositional journey, *Klavierstück IX* is often left overlooked by music scholars, possibly due to relatively clear structure compared to the works composed at the same time and thus not seen as a ground-breaking work.

But instead, I will tell you that it is one of my favourite pieces of music. I will tell you that it is how I found the world of contemporary complex piano music in the year 2013, and this piece is the reason why I am still doing it, and why I am doing this research in the first place. I will tell you that I still play from my first copy of the score that I got from my teacher in Vienna, when I was studying there as an exchange student completing my piano pedagogy studies. My copy is flaking away and dissolving, but I will never stop playing from it. When I opened this score for the first time, not even knowing who Stockhausen was, I didn't know where to start as I had never seen anything like this before. At the same time, I was so intrigued: every single note had its own dynamic marking, its own articulation, length and attack. I could tell that here every detail mattered on a level I had never experienced during my classical piano

training. When I was playing classical repertoire, I *knew* that details were important, but I never *truly felt* how important they were. Here I did. It was clear to me that the composer is communicating his demands through the score. So, I started learning it; I chose one page from the middle, the one that looked the least daunting and most transparent, and practiced it until I could execute everything that was written on the page. I loved the choreography of the fingers, executing different dynamics and note lengths simultaneously within the same chord. I loved making sure I played at exactly tempo 60, in which the majority of the piece was written. I loved repeating this page again and again and again until the execution of it was as close to the score as possible, and once it was, I achieved a feeling of success in finding the endpoint of the practice session, the satisfaction in knowing that I had done literally everything that composer asked for—a feeling of success so unknown to me during my piano studies. Again, I *knew* I had successful moments, but I never really *felt* them. The joy in knowing that everything was pre-determined for me in this piece, that I didn't have to decide for myself and thus that nobody could ever tell me that my interpretation wasn't successful, because once I'd done everything that is meticulously notated in the score, I had done exactly enough. I was so restricted in this score, yet I never felt more free.

Now, years later, I know that it was a very naïve, a little bit childish, rebellious attitude towards classical music in general (we all have those moments, especially at the end of our studies, don't we...). I also know that there is no limit to the concept of interpretation, and I fully understand that my first attempt at *Klavierstück IX* was far from perfect and not as obedient to the score as I imagined it back then (I heard my recording of that first performance; it is absolutely dreadful). But that experience created a bond between me and that work and later with this music that, at least for now, seems unbreakable. Finally, I know that besides all the interesting facts about this piece that I

proceeded to explain to you, nevertheless, to me this piece is simply beautiful. It is *my* piece, and I am thrilled to be able to finish my doctoral concert series with it.

We all play different roles around the piano, whether conscious of them or not. Each piece is an undertaking; each work is a new beginning, where different roles can create a shield between the musician and the extreme demands of the composers, scores and hundreds of years of piano playing traditions.

Undertaking each role and experiencing my own shapeshifting through these works has been a fulfilling experience. It has also been interesting to watch up close, consciously, my own transformation happening beside and through the music. But after all these concerts, all the exploration of the complex contemporary repertoire, new music scores, endless hours of counting, seeking for precision and the perfect execution, I conclude that perhaps there is no need to overcomplicate our attitudes towards the different roles. Perhaps the only role that matters is the role of a decent human being. But that topic is outside the scope of this particular research. Maybe next time.

Thank you.

Sehr schnell ♩ = ca 160

5 6 7 8 9

4 5 3

mf p mf f

mf p mf f

Picture 1. Visual similarities between the scores of Anton Webern's *Variations* (top left) and Feldman's *Piano Piece 1952* (top right), Stockhausen's *Klavierstück III* (bottom left) and Boulez's *Douze Notation* (bottom right).

Sehr mäßig ♩ = ca 40 Anton Webern, Op. 27

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8

3.

Assez lent

p avec intensité

cresc.

mf

decrec.

UE 18310

Picture 2. Boulez (*Notation 3*, bottom picture), clearly inspired by Webern's use of symmetry and symmetrical inversion, uses it in his work, but on a larger scale, omitting the registers (but not the rhythms).



Picture 3. Painting by Philip Guston *Untitled* from the same year the piece by Feldman dedicated to Guston was composed (1963).

(Source: <https://www.artsy.net/artwork/philip-guston-untitled-86>)

Helga Karen is a Finnish pianist and researcher specialized in performance of classical contemporary music. She has performed as a soloist and chamber music musician in various music festivals such as Huddersfield Contemporary Music Festival, Lucerne Festival, Lucerne Forward Festival, SoundScape, Musica Nova, Stockhausen Courses and Concerts, Impuls Academy, Mizmorim 2023 and International Summer Course for New Music Darmstadt. Helga has given world premiere performances of works for piano solo and chamber music, as well as played as a member of such orchestras and ensembles as Ensemble Lemniscate, Basel Symphony Orchestra, Basel Sinfonietta and Lucerne Festival Contemporary Orchestra. Helga is a member of Earth Ears Ensemble with the goal of enlivening contemporary music performance with focus on experimentation and presenting lesser-heard ideas and voices in new concert settings. In 2021 Helga started working as a member of Lucerne Festival Contemporary Leaders and became a co-curator of the autumn event Lucerne Festival Forward, and is also working as a piano coach during the Lucerne Festival Academy.

Helga has worked at Daniel Barenboim Stiftung as an assistant for Daniel Barenboim in creating an educational music program for children in collaboration with Boulez Saal, Barenboim-Said Academy and Berlin Cosmopolitan School. Educational projects are a big part of Helga's career as she creates and produces children shows for different festivals and venues, such as Lucerne Forward Festival, Mizmorim Festival and Boulez Saal.

Helga has won several prizes at various competitions, as a soloist and with chamber music groups, including 1st prizes in Giovani Musicisti music competition, Stockhausen Concert and Courses, Karlsruhe Contemporary Music Competition and Orpheus Chamber Music Competition. In 2020 Helga received a Fritz Gerber Award supporting young musicians in the field of classical contemporary music. Helga has worked together with such composers as Clara Iannotta, Lisa Streich, Helmut Lachenmann, Rebecca Saunders, Jörg Widmann, Vinko Globokar, Uljas Pulkkis, Helena Tulve, Jouni Hirvelä, Jalalu-Kalvert Nelson, Charles Uzor and Liza Lim.

Helga has received her Diploma in piano pedagogy from Metropolia University of Applied Sciences, completed her pedagogical studies in Universität für Musik und darstellende Kunst Wien and received her Master in Specialized Performance in Contemporary Music Degree from Basel Music Academy in 2016. Currently Helga is working on her PhD on Stockhausen's piano pieces at The University of Arts, Sibelius Academy in Finland.