

GERHARD STÄBLER  
THE COMPLETE PIANO MUSIC

PAULO ALVARES PIANO

METIER

## Gerhard Stäbler: the piano œuvre

It may be surprising to some to learn that Gerhard Stäbler has composed a fairly substantial œuvre for the traditional piano. He is perhaps best known for his avant-garde stage performances, often utilizing films, scents and tapes, and a wide body of work for chamber forces, often of an unusual line-up. However, he regards the piano as an instrument for which there is still much to be said. Any listener will soon discover that the way Gerhard Stäbler treats the piano is unmistakably unique. Certain elements define all of these pieces – extreme virtuosity, a large dynamic range (from *ppppp* to *fffff*) and use of unusual techniques – but each is intrinsically different from the others.

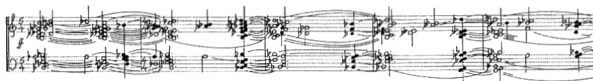
Stäbler composed *Dalí*, subtitled *Música mágica para piano*, for Bernhard Wambach in 1995-96. The inspiration clearly arose from the composer's visits to a Salvador Dalí museum in the painter's hometown of Figueres, and the piece could be seen as his reflections on the great Spanish painter – the ever controversial, idiosyncratic and unpredictable character of Dalí is omnipresent in the music.

*Dalí* is the lengthiest yet at the same time one of the most easily accessible works presented in this collection. During its course, the listener hears mostly flowing, subtle strokes, tempered occasionally by ones of ferocious intensity. Throughout the piece, blocks of notes continue to accumulate until near the end, when the pianist is required to play as many as eighteen notes at one time. The use of tone clusters clearly makes it easy to include sound decay and there are many moments during the piece when the listener hears only the gentle dying sounds of a cluster.

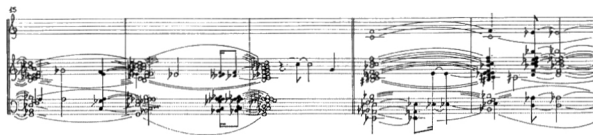
Dreamlike and graceful elements are also present throughout this piece, noticeably in quietly cascading notes in the high and middle registers of the piano. The tempo shifts very frequently throughout the piece – perhaps as quickly as the character of Dalí himself changed – with very fast sections being immediately followed by ones of a more lyrical and subdued nature and vice-versa. It ends much as it begins – with a loud blow slowly spiralling into the silent abyss. The spirit of Dalí is never far off. Perhaps a quarter of the way through the piece, and in a most unusual manner, the pianist begins to utter an enigmatic text adapted by the composer from the writings of the German philosopher Walter Benjamin, adding another exotic flourish to this suitably surreal template.

Lastly, though the listener may never be aware of it, a propelling force throughout this piece is the piano music of Franz Schubert, which the composer says went “beyond the musical conventions of the early 19th century”. Stäbler does not reveal his Schubert influence in any regular manner; rather, he uses arithmetics (one of his favourite processes) based upon his piano works as a subcutaneous musical layer. However, this

would never be apparent to the listener. To quote the musicologist Hella Melkert, “Stäbler took the fifteen piano sonatas of Schubert and read them through a magical number square, so to say, and from this pattern distilled the 52 components of *Dali*” (one of which is more than 30 seconds of silence).



IN EKSTASE (♩ = 124)



*Dali - Musica magica para piano* (1995/96)

*Traum 1/9/92* (*Dream, 1st September 1992*) was composed to commemorate what is now known as World Peace Day, but what was in 1939, a terrible day for the Polish people: on that day, German forces invaded their country and provided the trigger for World War II. Stäbler wrote his piece in 1992 in three different European cities – Rome, Essen and Lisbon – and took his inspiration from an utopian text by Bertolt Brecht. In this text, Brecht ponders whether a society could ever overcome an inevitable collapse into conflict and man-made catastrophes; perhaps only in a true utopia could an answer be found.

Stäbler took this source one step further: he used as the basis for his own piece's pitch structure a motif from the song *Lob des Revolutionärs* (*Praise of the Revolutionary*) from the didactic play *Die Mutter* (*The Mother*) by Brecht and his frequent collaborator, the

times. While the term “elegy” has a long history, dating back to ancient Greece, it most usually denotes laments arising from personal loss. In *Windows*, Stäbler is not dealing with death, but he nonetheless expresses individual feelings about society and political circumstances.

Stäbler explores melodic terrain with great insight: he creates lines of great charm and delight and contrasts them with passages of mourning. While most of his pieces are characterised by complexity and parataxis – either audible to the listener or tangible to the performer, or perhaps both – this set seems too remarkably simplistic and homogenous. Large dynamic swings are absent and significant changes in tempi are also not a factor here. Nonetheless, the challenge is not to oversimplify these miniatures.

It may be easy for listeners to see a progression in Stäbler’s style from this work, the earliest in the collection, to the later works, but this music, though less absorbed with peripheral contexts, still demands attentive listening. Though on the surface, the charm of *Windows* may seem to belie an origin of simplicity, that assumption is not entirely true: Hanns Eisler, a presence in *Traum 1/9/92*, is present here as well. The Eisler piece this time is *Lob des Sozialismus (Praise of Socialism)*, which Stäbler uses as part of the musical material; melodies from Albanian folk music are also quoted. Whereas later works use these extraneous elements in a more manifest fashion, here they are buried, so to speak, beneath the surface.

*Total*, which, according to the composer, “verges on the unplayable”, is not notated in any traditional manner. It was written in Germany and the UK in 1986 for the British pianist John Tilbury and took its inspiration from the Miners’ Strike in the UK in 1984-85. Though the miners lost their strike, in the long term, the composer says that it “succeeded nevertheless in mobilizing the miners’ wives of entire regions away from the stove and out into the public to seek solidarity”. He also comments that this is “proof that momentary defeats pave the way for future victories”.

The piece is nearly impossible to play due to its “furious tempo”, but Stäbler also states: “however, the technical difficulties resulting from the extreme tempo should never become evident. The playing should be characterised by sovereign ease”. Naturally, this is an effect that is easier said than done. To perform the piece, the pianist listens to a click-track of 16th-notes through headphones, which serves as his orientation for two rhythmic models (fast, and very fast – the second of which is a barcode, à la *Hart auf Hart* from the same year). The velocity of the notes is determined by a base curve, forming part of the unusual score – which, in compact form, comprises seven pages of graphs, instructions and staves, all of which define the nature of the piece.

The shortest individual piece is entitled *Von Branntwein und Finsternissen* and is as exotic as its title. It was written in 1992 for the late American pianist Yvar Mikhashoff and is subtitled *Klavierballade für Zeiten roher Naturgewalten (mit Mundharmonika und gerecktem Kopf zu spielen)*, or *Piano Ballad for Times of Raw Forces of Nature (to be played with Harmonica and Extended Head)*. The inspiration came from a 1956 letter from Bertolt Brecht to the Berliner Ensemble, which was set to perform some of his best known plays in London.

The piece is only about 90 seconds in duration, but again requires much virtuosity. The piece begins with the pianist briefly whistling to himself, then playing only the piano, then again joining himself in a duet for the conclusion – this time on harmonica. The harmonica part consists of held clusters of notes and provides an intriguingly eerie effect.

The final piece in this collection, *Hart auf hart*, which dates from 1986, is a very unique composition. It has already been mentioned that Gerhard Stäbler has used Morse code as the source for many of his pieces; here, however, it is not Morse code, but rather the Universal Product Code (UPC) that is the inspiration of the piece. In fact, a barcode is not merely the inspiration for the piece: perhaps two or three actual barcodes (depending on the interpretation) comprise the work's score, in stark red and black. Though graphic scores are mainly associated with the New York School of composers (Earle Brown, John Cage, Morton Feldman, and Christian Wolff) and a few Europeans of the 1950s and '60s (including Sylvano Bussotti, Roman Haubenstock-Ramati and Bruno Maderna), Stäbler wrote his piece much later. In particular, the composer mentions the influence of the beautiful graphic scores (mostly consisting of slim black rectangles) of *November 1952* and *December 1952* by the late Earle Brown, among the earliest graphic scores.

The title *Hart auf hart* has no literal English translation; the composer, therefore, prefers that it be called *Red on Black*. This title, though à la Mark Rothko, clearly refers to the score itself and not to any particular non-musical association.

Though the piece is performed here on piano, the graphic score enables it to be performed by any number of players or ensembles; although not included here, video and/or tape could also be a part of this piece, as could a conductor, if the size of the ensemble necessitated one.

Stäbler calls it “improvisatory and calculative” and there could not be a more accurate description of it. Completely aleatoric in nature, the performers choose the instruments, the duration and most of the other important aspects of this piece, making Stäbler not so much a dictatorial composer, but more a guide, reservedly giving suggestions to his musicians.

“A graphic print, using familiar and computer-sensitive Universal Product Codes (UPCs)

of different sizes, monitors the internal and external development of the compositional activity. The graph can be interpreted, as with traditional notation, from left to right. Re-ordering, inversion, retrograde and so on are further variations, which, with enough training, can also be interwoven within the piece, thus creating further concentration.” Stäbler also writes that “looking at closer detail of the graphic image, bars of varying size and clearly marked off spaces are related to each other red on black; they anticipate and desire musical interpretation”. There are also minute numbers, which could certainly be used as indicators of rests and other musical signifiers.



*Hart auf Hart - Red on Black - Music for ensemble(s). Improvisatory.Calculative (1986)*

(the red here is seen as light grey)

Initially, the performing forces work in opposition – certainly in line with the red vs. black scheme of the score – but gradually they mould into one coherent whole. The colours red on black may thus be seen as simultaneously very loud and very soft, extended and yet fragmentary, painful and yet soothing, or as the composer says, “the opposites become superimposed and blended, and the extremes collide in dispute”. The ultimate goal of the piece is, in the composer’s words, “the attempt...to eliminate individual players, i.e., for a group of players to avoid tendencies of confrontation”.

## GERHARD STÄBLER

Gerhard Stäbler was born in Wilhelmsdorf near Ravensburg on July 20th 1949. In 1968 he enrolled in the composition programme at Nordwestdeutsche Musikakademie in Detmold; two years later Stäbler continued his education at the Folkwang-Hochschule in Essen. Among his teachers were Nicolaus A. Huber (composition) and Gerd Zacher (organ). After his apprenticeship Stäbler himself became a teacher not only at the Essen Hochschule (1982-94) but also in numerous guest appointments at international universities, including Northwestern University, Chicago and University of Illinois, Urbana.

The dense, highly energetic and extremely multi-layered music of Gerhard Stäbler consistently embodies experience of the world, by reacting specifically to colourful and often contradictory aspects of reality. The political or social questions that concern Stäbler go to the very heart of his compositions; in his opera *CassandraComplex* and in his ensemble-work *Spices (3)* he engages with the theme of war. Stäbler also works into his music impressions from his daily life and travels (*Zeitsprünge*, *Den Müllfahrern von San Francisco*); these everyday elements are always portrayed in a new, artificial light which, however, is not allowed to get in the way of an essentially playful approach. Stäbler has a novel way of establishing close connections between text and music, such as converting poetry into Morse code to shape the actual sounds, constructing an artificial language as a component of the music (*Apparat*), or using a philosophical text as a hidden framework (for example, Paul Virilios's essay "Politics and Speed", in *Ausnahme.Zustand*).

In this context it comes as no surprise that Stäbler frequently seeks links with other artistic disciplines, and enjoys collaborating with other artists. His love of theatre and things theatrical is evident in his 'performances' (*Rachengold*, *Rosenkranz*); recently Stäbler has been involved in Nam June Paik's performances with the German-Korean composer Kunsu Shim. Collaborations with the dancers Avi Kaiser and Christine Brunel led to the project *Essentiellement*, with electronic music and improvised dance.

Often, Stäbler formulates his works as action scores (*Speed*, *Trama/Gewebe*) or written scenarios (*Die Spieldose*) which require the performers to become particularly involved in the realisation of his ideas, but also offer them a great deal of freedom and joint responsibility for the result. Since the beginning of the 1990s he has shown a notable tendency to bundle compositional energies together, writing several pieces on one topic or based on the same material, such as the chamber music pieces in *energy-light-dream*: this work consists of two pieces heard simultaneously (one for solo soprano, large orchestra and tape, the other for a distant ensemble with baritone) – sometimes autonomous and sometimes synchronised, commenting on or supplementing one another, they exploit spatial effects.

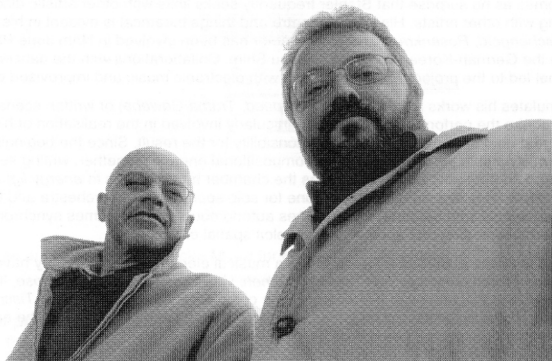
Just as Stäbler's pieces have absorbed all kinds of extra musical elements, so, later, they have extended to pure sound, calling for particular lighting – *Winter*, *Blumen*, video images – *Die Spieldose*, the use of flying objects – *MetalSeasons*, and even the incorporation of smells – *Die Nacht sitzt am Tisch* and *Internet 4 (Adriatico)*. His music always stimulates the listener's imagination, opening up the ears and other senses to new and unexpected perceptual possibilities.

## PAULO ALVARES

Paulo Guimarães Alvares, born in 1960, finished his piano studies at the University of São Paulo in his native country, Brazil. After further studies in the U.S.A. under Caio Pagano and Steven de Groote, he received his Masters in Music from the Texas Christian University in Fort Worth. A DAAD scholarship enabled him to attend the Musikhochschule in Cologne, where he studied with Aloys Kontarsky (piano) and Hans Ulrich Humpert (electronic music). Alvares has received the Kranichstein Music Prize at the Darmstadt New Music Courses, among other awards; he is much in demand as a solo and chamber musician, particularly in contemporary music.

His solo recitals and engagements with orchestras have taken him all over Europe, the Middle East, Asia, and North and South America. Having been based in Germany since 1988, he has undertaken many collaborations with orchestras such as the Westdeutsche Rundfunk Sinfonieorchester, Gürzenich Orchester Köln, Bochumer Symphoniker, Saarländisches Rundfunk Orchester, and various new music ensembles; he has worked under conductors and composers such as Mauricio Kagel, Helmut Lachenmann, Luciano Berio, Earle Brown, Tristan Murail, Emmanuel Nunes, Peter Eötvös, Dieter Schnebel and Gerhard Stäbler. Since 1997 Alvares has taught contemporary chamber music and improvisation at the Musikhochschule in Cologne and founded the school's Ensemble for Aleatoric Music.

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[www.gerhard-staebler.com](http://www.gerhard-staebler.com)



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# THE COMPLETE PIANO MUSIC

music by **Gerhard Stäbler**

performed by **Paulo Alvares**



## Disc 1

1	Dali	33:01
2	Traum 1/9/92	10:25
3	Internet 1.1	3:42
4	Internet 1.5	3:00
5	Internet 1.9	6:40

Total Time 57:36

## Disc 2

1	Windows 1	3:00
2	Windows 2	4:36
3	Windows 3	3:46
4	Windows 4	1:45
5	Windows 5	2:11
6	Total.	12:23
7	Von Branntwein und Finsternissen	1:10
8	Hart auf hart.	4:41

Total Time 34:25

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