

ONDINE

PĒTERIS VASKS

PIANO WORKS



REINIS ZARIŅŠ



PĒTERIS VASKS & REINIS ZARIŅŠ

PĒTERIS VASKS (b. 1946)

Piano Works

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**World première recordings*

Reinis Zariņš, piano

The world is charged with the grandeur of God.

– G. M. Hopkins

During the pandemic, I have been absorbing and savouring Latvian nature with intentionality that I lacked in my youth. And with every long walk or run, my conviction is only growing stronger — that the most direct and true way to really see a whole year of Latvian nature all at once is not to look at pictures, but to listen to Pēteris Vasks' *Seasons*. It mirrors better than a mirror.

I played the *Seasons* for the first time just a week after Pēteris' 70th birthday in the same GORS concert hall where this record was made. It was a choreographed version, danced by Kirill Burlov, who linked the cycle of nature with the arc of human life. As we began the performance in frozen stillness, so we ended with snow slowly falling on the stage. Pēteris was there, and afterwards rushed onstage beaming, hugged us, and played with the snow. Another time, we played and danced the *Seasons* in an old underground tunnel next to an active railway line and witnessed with astonishment how the trains passed by at precisely those moments when the music allowed for time to be stretched. And this is my point: when I look at the world through Pēteris' music, this world is charged with divine presence, with true truth, with perfection that makes sense of all — even the mess we make.

During the pandemic, Pēteris started composing a new piece for this album. I had no clue how far he was with it, when the news came that he had caught Covid. This was before the advent of vaccines, so there was some real anguish and many heartfelt prayers. But Pēteris kept composing the work throughout his illness. When I consider such devotion, I cannot help but remember his answer when I once pressed him about his calling: he said that he must, until his last breath, glorify God's world and people and his fatherland that inspires him more than anything else. The new work is now poignantly called *Cuckoo's voice*. *Spring elegy*, and I dearly treasure the memory of Pēteris showing me the fruit of his labour for the very first time on his home piano.

When the time to record this new music approached, I suddenly remembered a text message Orests Silabriedis had sent me long ago (turn the page and you'll see Orests' programme notes smiling at you). He had asked if I happened to know Pēteris' first published piano piece, the *Cycle*. I didn't back then, and I still didn't. But now that this message was on my mind, I fished out the only archival recording of the piece, found the music score — and instantly knew that it must make it into this album! Not only because there's hardly a soul who knows the *Cycle*; not only because it reveals a certain rebelliousness that we do not find in his later oeuvre; but because it completes a beautiful arc of Pēteris Vasks' life. His first, his last (to date), and his most monumental music for the piano. It's all here.

And now it is your turn to look at the world through Pēteris' music.

— Reinis Zariņš
Rīga, February 2022

Cycle (Zyklus) (1976)

Pēteris Vasks' childhood friend was the noted Latvian pianist and organist Tālivaldis Deksnis, who was also born in 1946. Both boys attended the Aizpute Music School and both were obsessed with music. Pēteris' parents were fortunate that the Soviet deportations of 1949 did not affect them, but Tālivaldis' family was violently uprooted and transported to a distant place. They were only able to return to Latvia with the wave of rehabilitations that came in 1956.

Tālivaldis, the son of a Baptist choir conductor, was not only a musician, but also a skilled craftsman who amid the unimaginable post-war poverty, enjoyed repairing independence-era bicycles of unknown origin. In any case, says Pēteris Vasks, Tālivaldis was a man of action and he describes how one Christmas eve he had found the entire Vasks family lying ill in a small apartment on the second floor of the Aizpute Baptist Church rectory and realised none of them were up to bringing home a tree for Christmas. Tālivaldis came to visit, evaluated the situation, and before long returned with a tree.

Pēteris Vasks moved to Rīga when he was twelve years old; Tālivaldis did the same a few years later. When Pēteris began to compose, Tālivaldis naturally became the interpreter of his early works and was responsible for premiering three of Vasks' first four piano works: *Cycle* (1976), *Eine kleine Nachtmusik* (1978), and *Autumn music* (1981).

Cycle was premiered in Rīga in December 1976. The two Aizpute natives also celebrated their thirtieth birthdays that year. Tālivaldis had graduated from the Academy of Music two years earlier, while Pēteris was a late student in the composition class. Latvia's pre-eminent scholar of music Arnolds Klotiņš wrote: "This four-part cycle makes us think that in his music P. Vasks resides primarily in polar contrasts and feels particularly well at the pole of highly tense heightened emotions and desire in repetitive muscular sound gestures. The in-between zone is less populated for now. It is true, though, that in the final Epilogue he shows us that he is capable of balancing

contrast by titrating sound matter out in finely dosed nuances. Still, it is evident that the energy of the earth takes the upper hand over esthetic play. The voltage of Vasks' creative disposition is high and it bodes well – this is only to note a need for its rational distribution.”

Three years later Rita Strautiņa performed *Cycle* at the Latvian Youth Song Festival in Montréal, Canada. At the end of World War II, members of many Latvian families went into exile overseas. When Pēteris became a composer, his music began to gradually travel along family networks into the USA and Canada.

Although Pēteris Vasks was still considered a young composer at the time, the effect on his colleagues was intense. One year later, musicologist Viesturs Vītolīņš said in a radio broadcast: “The ubiquitous black sweater has become a piercing symbol. He has many admirers, especially among the ambitious young musicians. His judgements garner attention, especially from the young. His music is like a detonator for ovations in the concert hall and sharp exchanges in corridors. You could almost declare him a living legend. Is that putting it too strongly?”

***The Seasons (Gadalaiki)* (1980/1981/1995/2008)**

Motifs from the natural world are of tremendous importance in the work of Pēteris Vasks. In an 1982 interview, the composer stated:

I would like people not to forget love. And nature. Because there are no lies, petty calculations, or pretense in nature.

In Vasks' cycle, the seasons begin with winter.

*Some time ago, I wrote the musical score for Ansis Bērziņš' animated film *Abi gali balti, viducis zaļš* [What is white at both ends and green in the middle?]. White Landscape came into being a few years later. It is possible that this small film created the first impetus for my sonic reflections on the yearly cycle. For me as well, the year begins and ends with the colour white.*

Winter turned out to be pure and white. Every year should start that way – doing better works, thinking better thoughts. Think about it – on a January morning everything dirty is covered by snow and we have the year ahead of us. There is whiteness and silence, cleansed of everything. Here we have two sonic images that complement each other. There is a feeling this could all go on indefinitely without change.

The springtime piano work was commissioned by the Svenska Rikskonserten.

This work is the transition from a frozen, white state of peace to the first springtime droplets that descend from icicles. Spring draws you in gradually. I have endeavoured to capture the miracle of spring's return every which way I can with my ten fingers and sixty-four keys. This was the first time I tried to weave a bird's voice into a piano work. These aren't exact quotations from specific birds but my sense of what that bird song is like. By the way, every year I make note of when birds return and when the first songs ring out. I go to the nearest woods and I listen. Spring music holds the widest possible range of emotions from spring snow showers to forest sunrises; it is ecstatic delight at God's ineffable miracle – springtime.

The new work depicting summertime came at the composer's own initiative to make the annual cycle complete.

This work celebrates Latvian summer. The wild spring, a beautiful but rather difficult time, has come to an end – it is impossible to comprehend it all. Things are different in the summertime. Summer is joy – spontaneous pagan joy. This outlines in a somewhat idealised way my nation's strong abiding life force, which I hope will never be extinguished.

Two images are at play here. One is the height of summer when human beings understand how to rejoice without artificial aids. The other is more romantic with the potential for inner development; the earth, the fields, meadows, and gardens are full of fragrance. It is not the aroma of mown grass but rather that of a gentle meadow in

full bloom. And there is one personal association in the conclusion. Summer solstice night [Jāņu nakts] strikes me as one of the year's saddest moments – everything has been achieved and we are on our way in the opposite direction.

At the work's climactic point there suddenly appears a pensive, ethereal pianissimo. I imagine it is the morning of Jāņi, everyone has gone to bed, and wreaths float on the Gauja River in loneliness. We are absent, as the wreaths make their way to the sea.

However, at the very end, the festive mood returns – I have faith and will always have faith.

Finally, the cycle concludes in autumn.

I envision a sunny, late September day, translucent cobwebs in the grass, as often happens in late fall. That is the small, repeating motif that weaves throughout the entire sonata. The other theme is reflective – the beauty of nature endures, yet the year is coming to an end. The theme takes the shape of a monologue; there are dramatic collisions, and after the heavy fall storms there is clarity, and following all of these culminating moments, there is the first snowfall which puts everything in its place. The snow covers all the dirt, of which there is so much in our homeland. Snow comes as a symbol of sacred experience.

If the entire cycle is performed, the works must be performed in this order. Every season can, though, always be performed separately.

Cuckoo's Voice. Spring Elegy (*Dzeguzes balss. Pavasara eļējija*) (2021)

The cuckoo bird has a significant role in traditional Latvian songs and beliefs. Even those who can't distinguish an eagle from a sparrow, recognise the cuckoo's voice. In ancient times, it was an animal of many roles but its primary function was to foretell destinies. In the spring, when you first hear the cuckoo, it is important to count the number of calls – it presages the number of years you have left to live. If you hear the

first cuckoo while hungry or without money in your pocket, little good will come of this summer. The cuckoo is also present for brides as they are married, connected with the weeping each bride must endure as she leaves her parental home for life in the wider world among strangers. The cuckoo is associated with Laima, the deity of destiny, and understood as an avian harbinger.

There is a well-known (and true) story about the efforts cuckoo birds make to lay eggs in the nests of unrelated smaller birds. One horrifying Latvian proverb states that a cuckoo will eat five wagtail children in order to raise one cuckoo child. It is possible that even today there are people who still believe that after summer solstice cuckoos turn into hawks. The circumstances are clear – cuckoos usually arrive in Latvia some time in April and we hear them until *Jāņi* (summer solstice). They then become silent but then hawks make an appearance. So a metamorphosis must have taken place... There are many ideas about this musical bird and it is only natural that the cuckoo has found its way into musical compositions.

This time let us leave Handel, Beethoven, Delius, Mahler, Respighi, and others aside and turn to Pēteris Vasks who simply says: “In Amatciems, where we have our summer home, there are many cuckoos. A wonderful bird.” The cuckoo recently sang out in Vasks’ Second violin concerto.

Pianist Reinis Zariņš felt that for this album, a new composition would be fitting and desirable. Long story short, Reinis asked and the composer responded with *Cuckoo’s Voice*. The piano work’s title echoes poet Māris Čaklais’ 1967 poem: in the din of the city “among stones and motors ... between snarls, roars, whistles” there is suddenly a naïve “ku-kū”— “too fragile for this century,” it has no place in the dynamic daily life of our merciless city. You can’t expect that everyone will understand what this naïve “ku-kū” means to you or me. Thus writes Māris Čaklais.

In the literature, we read that the interval of a cuckoo’s call ranges from a major second (two semitones) to a fourth, and, on rare occasion something like a tritone (three full tones). Ornithologists say that the most common interval is the minor

third (three semitones). Pēteris Vasks has chosen the major third (four semitones) as his foundational interval, although fourths and minor thirds occasionally make an appearance.

The piano work begins with the cuckoo's motif, and it continues as a rather bright springtime elegy – which is, in fact, the work's subtitle. Springtime – a little sombre and elegiac. The A flat major is choral-like and luminous with an interplay between the A flat and the C chords. Some agitation ensues and then a return. Shortly before the end, the texture swells like a blow to the heart and after this the cuckoo remains all alone. Without noting any specifics, the composer says: “A very personal string vibrated in this work.” But isn't that the case will almost all of Vasks' works?

Latvian belief states that when the soft buds of spring are gone, the cuckoo's tongue grows stiff and the bird is no longer able to call out. The red patches on birch and alder leaves are taken to be the cuckoo bird's tears.

Orests Silabriedis

(Translation: Dace Veinberga)

Truth and beauty: these are the qualities Latvian pianist **Reinis Zariņš** seeks in the music he chooses, the interpretations he sculpts, and the collaborations he enters. Equally at home in classical and contemporary repertoire, his passion lies in the crafting of conceptual programmes that encourage interaction between music, philosophy, history, and theology.

2022 highlights include a complete performance of Messiaen's *Vingt regards* at the London's Wigmore hall, the premiere of a new triple concerto with the Liepāja Symphony Orchestra, performances of Bach's complete multi-piano concertos with the Tallinn Chamber Orchestra, and a handful of new piano music premieres. During the pandemic lockdowns, Reinis devised a home concert series that was livestreamed on his YouTube channel.

Ever since his concerto debut at the age of ten, Reinis has performed as a concerto soloist, recitalist, and chamber musician throughout Europe and North America. He has participated in prestigious music festivals including the Lucerne Festival, the Bath International Music Festival, and the Scotia Festival of Music. His thoughtful virtuosity has delighted audiences at Amsterdam's Concertgebouw, London's Wigmore hall, New York's Weill Recital Hall at Carnegie Hall, and the Tchaikovsky Concert Hall in Moscow. Reinis has collaborated with leading orchestras including the London Philharmonic Orchestra, the Moscow Chamber Orchestra, Kremerata Baltica, and the Ostrobothnian Chamber Orchestra, and with conductors Pierre Boulez, Peter Eötvös, Pablo Heras-Casado, and Andris Poga, among others. His performances have been broadcast live by BBC Radio 3, NDR, Polish National Radio, and King FM. In 2018, he was Artist-in-Residence at Latvian Radio 3 and the Cēsis Concert Hall with his Trio Palladio.

Reinis Zariņš regularly performs in his native Latvia and has won the country's Grand Music Award four times in the Outstanding Interpretation category. He champions the work of Latvian composers — several of Reinis' albums are dedicated to Latvian music. For his service to Latvian culture, Reinis has been awarded the Order of the Three Stars.

Reinis's striving for exchanges of beauty in all art forms has resulted not only in a vibrant collaboration with his Trio Palladio, but also in various multimedia projects including a production of Vasks' *Seasons* in collaboration with choreographer Kirill Burlov, and a performance project with visual artist Maryleen Schiltkamp.

Following his foundational studies in Latvia, Reinis won several scholarships to refine his talent at the Yale School of Music in the U.S.A. and the Royal Academy of Music in London. His most important teachers have included Boris Berman, Raffi Kharajanyan, Christopher Elton, and Renē Salaks.

Away from the piano, Reinis enjoys long-distance running, playing chess with his children, and reading on philosophy.

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(this version for early-mid 2022 only)

Special thanks to my dear wife Ligita and our children, to my team Normunds Šnē and Gints Jurga, to the ever-so-welcoming GORS concert hall, to Ilona Rupaine, Ilze Rubina, Jānis Poriētis and, of course, the Ondine team

The production of this album was possible thanks to the generous support of Valsts Kultūrkapitāla Fonds



Publisher: Schott

Recordings: 7–9 March, 2021 & 28–29 September, 2021, GORS,
The Embassy of Latgale, Rēzekne, Latvia
Executive Producer: Reijo Kiilunen
Produced, engineered and edited by Normunds Šnē
Final Mix and Mastering: Enno Mäemets, Editroom Oy

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Booklet Editor: Joel Valkila
Cover & Artist photos: Andris Sproģis
Photo of the composer: Jānis Poriētis

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