



LAWQ
CLASSICS

Sanae
Yoshida

My
Microtonal
Piano

Buene/Harada/Mæland/
Magalhaes/Gundersen

A Paradigm of Discipline and Order

As a musical instrument the piano is, both literally and figuratively, black and white. A paradigm of discipline and order, the natural notes here, the sharps and flats here, carefully tuned such that all intervals between the notes are the same, and that all keys, major and minor, sound with an absolute maximum of consistent, consonant clarity.

Composers tend not to be interested in or satisfied by black and white. Indeed, even all the myriad shades of grey in between are often insufficient. Regardless of what it may look like, and how it might have been designed, arranged and built, for many composers an instrument is less a full stop than a question mark, a collection of materials that have the potential to constitute a panoply of multicoloured technical possibilities.

So it is with the music on this album. To compose microtonal piano music, to explore the infinitesimal gaps between the white and black keys, is to embrace the necessity to rethink, retool and, of course, retune the instrument in order to expand or simply reconfigure its tonal makeup

and capabilities. Such an exploration extends to other aspects too, to timbre, structure, melody, and most obviously—and radically—to harmony.

The five composers on this album all take a distinct, individual approach in their exploration beyond the conventional limits of the piano. Perhaps the most immediately accessible is **Eivind Buene's** *Three Studies for Microtonal Piano*. Taking his starting point from three sonatas by Franz Schubert, Buene's music is obviously rooted in a familiar musical landscape of harmonic relationships. The opening *Andantino* is in a distorted but nonetheless clear key of F-sharp minor, moving later to its dominant of C-sharp, a process made less secure by clusters, before returning to the 'tonic' at its close. The two *Interludium* movements act as short progressive bridges. The first uses C-sharp as an enharmonic modulation to D-flat in the central *Adagio*, though Buene makes the harmonic foundation more mobile here, touching on B-flat before increasing amounts of embellishment lead to a fascinating sequence with the impression of descending tolling bells

in the upper register, and deep oscillating gongs in the bass.

The second *Interludium* takes the final note, B, and uses it to move back to C-sharp in the closing *Andante sostenuto*. Again, though, Buene keeps the harmony on the move—G-sharp, E, B, back to C-sharp—seemingly drifting away from clear tonal focus yet never displacing it. This is microtonality as colouration, part of a balance between stability and fluidity, where harmony is made liquid while coalescing around common focal points in a way that is easy to grasp and follow.

We hear something similar in Øyvind Mæland's *Boiling Web*, though its familiarity is more stylistic than harmonic. The music is lively and playful, initially displaying three distinct layers: a bouncy upper surface, moody bass below and a driving percussive beat running through the middle. Mæland makes the tempo seem elastic—it often appears to be stretching and flexing—and at times alludes to jazz-like ideas and gestures. In addition to using the piano as percussion, Mæland uses a superball mallet to elicit strange

moans from the piano strings, and the sound of the pianist's voice to introduce brief moments of syllables, which in their nature fall somewhere between melody and rhythm.

This seems to define the limits of the music's experimenting, yet it later enters a sequence of rapid repeated notes, so muted they sound almost dead, sustained at such length it becomes like an acceptance that, by entering this territory, not only will not everything sound as we expect, it might not even sound at all. *Boiling Web* finds its way back to somewhere similar to its starting point, but those dead repetitions reappear, undermining the playfulness heard elsewhere.

A particularly striking aspect of the two pieces by Michelle Agnes Magalhaes is their elusiveness. *Snow Soul*, a tribute to poet Emily Dickinson, seems to suggest the rudiments of a possible melody in its opening mix of plucked and strummed strings (often evoking a harp). Yet unusual sounds of friction cause the music to become tremulous, such that everything sounds decorative, like an embellishment of something rather than the thing itself. Bear-

ing in mind the title, its textural qualities bring to mind the way our perception of snow tends to be on its totality (snow!) rather than the detail of individual flakes. Magalhaes' approach to such elusive sounds is playful, informed by an interesting collection of equally ambiguous clunks and skitters, later becoming more punchy and forceful. Her two-minute homage to German textile artist Anni Albers, *Tecelagem*, is similar in many respects, though amidst its bubbling caprice and free-wheeling rhythms can be heard tangible chiming notes above, which at the end are reinforced with low tolling notes in the bass. These act as signposts, points of reference that help us to navigate through the music's weaving ornamental texture.

Most experimental of all these pieces is 唄-媒-培 (*BAI-BAI-BAI*) by Keiko Harada, which moves furthest away not only from the conventional tuning of the piano, but also its timbre and treatment. The music exists in a harmonic / timbral hinterland where sounds clunk, fizz and shimmer, where pitches often materialise only via their overtones or in the midst of a buzzing

cloud of notes, or as brief unidentifiable impacts. The presence, at times, of the pianist's voice, quietly singing, blurs the nature of what we're hearing still further.

Harada ramps up the complexity by using an approach to structure that, far beyond the kind of episodic arrangement heard in some of the other pieces, could almost be described as atomised. How do different sounds, events and passages relate to each other? Individual bars seem to be just that: individual, momentary sound events that are gone almost as soon as they've begun. Yet Harada holds this in check by manifesting a fragile emotional quality that makes 唄-媒-培 much more than just an experiment with miniscule musical motes. The centre of the piece, in particular, features a delicate sequence like a melody heard through a heat haze, where it's as if each and every note were being considered before the key is pressed, only gradually becoming lightly florid after. The result is music held in a complex, even paradoxical equilibrium,

disconnected and interconnected, cool and warm, lyrical and alien, all at the same time.

Andreas Gundersen's *Microtonal Pieces* bring us back full circle, to a soundworld much more rooted in familiarity. Gundersen's experimentation is limited to pitch, aligning a piano and a MIDI-piano that are tuned a quartertone apart from each other. The effect of this is not merely to expand the instrument but to enable the pianist to straddle two parallel worlds. As such, in this context we could say that the microtones are essentially equal to the tempered pitches (rather than an effect), being as they are the 'correct' relative pitches for their world. Gundersen moves between these worlds fluidly—all of the music involves both pianos—but the entire character of the music seems to question whether that fluidity is actually an illusion. Each of the *Microtonal Pieces* is lyrical yet halting, a heartfelt but broken music seemingly made up of half-remembered fragments.

In the first movement, 'remnants of what may still exist', we hear glimpses of melody,

which initially seem plausibly connected. Yet that becomes dubious when the sustain pedal is released toward the end; suddenly it's revealed to be cold and faltering, nothing like it was before. The second movement, 'and so forth the...', turns from fragments of melody to chords, scrunchy distorted clusters that at times suggest there might be something lyrical lurking within them. They hover in front of us like puzzle pieces; Gundersen later adds lower register chords, but while bass often underpins music with a clear foundation, here the deep clusters only add to the uncertainty and disorientation. The last piece, 'if only this, then so be it...', breaks up the music in assertive, forceful runs and heavy crashing chords, all polarised to the high and low regions of the piano. It's an acrobatic display that roughly pushes past the hesitance and austerity of the first two movements, yet its conclusion provides no resolution: still halting, still polarised, still obscured by the clashes from the tunings and the clusters. There's a distinct sense that, even if both the pianos were in tune with each other, the music would still remain, somehow, out of tune with itself.

Beyond black and white, beyond shades of grey, beyond even multicolour, the compositions on this album utilise microtones and other techniques to enable journeys into musical realms that lie far outside the piano's usual territory. They question, and make us question, what the piano really is, what its nature is like, what its capabilities are, what its limits might be. They do this through experiment and play, but also through personal reflection and expression, offering insights into both the heart of music as well as the human spirit.

— Simon Cummings



My Microtonal Piano

The solo works on this album have all been commissioned during my time as an artistic research fellow at the Norwegian Academy of Music. Through my project I have tried to demonstrate, as a performer, how microtonality can increase the expressive possibilities of the acoustic piano.¹

It was in fact *Vortex Temporum* (1994–96) by French composer Gerard Grisey, that, when I heard it and later got a chance to perform it myself, became a turning point for me, and led me to artistic research. The work is scored for six instruments and requires a piano where four of the pitches are tuned a quarter tone lower.

In a remarkable way, these few de-tuned² piano pitches contribute to the overall microtonal structure of this highly original work, and the piano could even be re-tuned in a fairly short amount of time. I felt so fascinated by all this, that I started taking lessons in piano tuning in order to de-tune pianos myself.

I had of course heard and performed microtonal ensemble music before listening to *Vortex*, but it was a very different experience when being able to perform the microtones oneself. As a pianist suddenly working with intonation and colours, the way of listening was changing, and I felt like I was thrown into a new world of sounds. Such a shame most pianists don't get to experience this, I thought!

It may be mentioned that what we call "microtonal" is much older than the piano. Today, pianos exist everywhere, and 12-TET - the tuning system of the modern piano where all intervals are exactly the same - has already long since colonized the world of music, also in my home country in the far East. Even music *without* any piano has adopted this tuning, which has in turn changed the way we experience something as "out of tune" or not. A global uniform tuning system has clearly been convenient for musicians and the music industry, and only some musical minorities

¹ I define *microtonal piano* as a piano including intervals not found in the standard 12-tone equal temperament (12-TET), whether it requires de-tuning, string harmonics/preparations or other microtonal modes of playing.

² I use this term to describe "tuning the piano string(s) to a pitch different than how it is normally tuned".

(certain folk music traditions and perhaps historically informed performance practices of earlier classical music) have resisted it and kept or rediscovered their alternative tunings/intervals as a crucial facet of their musical identity.

Within contemporary art music, microtonality has become common knowledge among most instruments, but my own beloved life-long partner still retains an inflexibility in this matter.

Recently, I've been wondering if a *deeper* driving force throughout this project has been to give a voice to "the hidden or forgotten pitches and intervals between the keys", so to speak.

In the 20th century, a few composers, theorists and performers *were* constructing new piano instruments focusing on finding "the ultimate tuning"; such as with chromatic quarter tone/fifth tone/sixth tone instruments or just intonation instruments. But, in a time of widely different aesthetics, many composers and musicians today use microtonality

without necessarily searching for such a universal tuning. With the approximately 230 strings of the piano, there are however lots of interesting possibilities, even if the composer or pianist chooses only to detune a few of them, or even none.

Rather than focusing on scales, I have been interested in increasing the amount of possible piano *timbres* through microtonality, and there are various ways of doing so. By experimenting alone and together with composers, I have sought to overcome seemingly practical obstacles in order to commission viable works for the microtonal piano. I have built up a repertoire of nearly 30 works written for my project. The works have been written for solo piano or my ensemble, Ensemble Temporum, as well as a microtonal piano concerto (the latter recorded on the LAWO Classics label with the Norwegian Radio Orchestra).

And the Microtonal Piano project lives on, both through new commissions and new performances of the already premiered works, and through albums such as this.

The works on this album approach the microtonal piano in different ways.

Buene's "old piano" has an out-of-tune quality that may sound brutal or nostalgic. He uses the Vortex tuning but, in addition, there are two keys where their corresponding strings are tuned just a little differently.

Magalhaes creates both a new mode (all C#s and F#s are de-tuned) and in Tecelagem almost a new instrument due to various preparations. Furthermore, she requires more playing inside, such as fingers triggering magnets to shake or "dance" onto the strings, creating complex colourful microtonal sounds.

Mæland's *Boiling Web* follows a simple idea of ticking persistently until the very last note. With three de-tuned pitches and several preparations, he creates, to some degree, several instruments in one, where there are both beatings, bubbling microtonal runs, various glissandi sounds, and pitches "suppressed" so that they're forced to bend.

Gundersen's piece is definitely a borderline case in this collection, as the acoustic piano has no microtones at all. However, the speakers from the detuned midi-piano are facing the inside of the grand piano, in order to let the sound "go through its acoustics" and its vibrating strings. Together, they create a twisted spectral landscape. Gundersen writes that the piece is a memorial of the, to a large degree, forgotten culture of his own Sámi people, and that the three movements "represent parts of a lost testimonial, with only fragments preserved for us to experience".

Harada's compositional approach is derived from her research of Shima-Uta (島唄: island songs) from the Nansei Islands of Japan. In spite of several percussive elements (often preparations), she claims that, "To perform this work, the song (唄: BAI) is necessary." There is a long section where the voice blends with dense chords in the middle range—a certain limited range creating new vibrations as every single key is a "micro-cluster" (three strings tuned differently).

— Sanae Yoshida



Sanae Yoshida

Sanae Yoshida is an Oslo-based pianist performing both contemporary and classical repertoire, both as a solo and chamber/ensemble musician. She has been working closely with a number of composers and has premiered a large number of works. She is a founding member of Ensemble Temporum, a Norwegian ensemble for contemporary music, and the pianist of Ensemble Ernst. Yoshida has recorded chamber works by Monrad Johansen (the CD was nominated to *Spellemannprisen*, Norway's Grammy, in the classical music category) and Halfdan Cleve (SIMAX), and solo/chamber works by Øyvind Mæland (LAWO Classics).

After her studies in Toho Gakuen School of Music in Tokyo, Sanae Yoshida went to Norway to study with prof. Jiri Hlinka at the Barratt Due Academy of Music, and later on she studied with prof. Håkon Austbø. From 2017, she was undertaking artistic research at the Norwegian Academy of Music.



Credits

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Eivind Buene (*1973)

Three Studies For Microtonal Piano (2019)

1. I. Andantino—05:49
2. Interludium I—00:43
3. II. Adagio—04:23
4. Interludium II—00:41
5. III. Andante Sostenuto—03:49

Keiko Harada (*1968)

6. 唄-媒-培 (*Bai-Bai-Bai*) (2019–2021)—11:34

Øyvind Mæland (*1985)

7. Boiling Web (2020)—15:14

Michelle Agnes Magalhaes (*1979)

8. Snow Soul (2022)—07:05
9. Tecelagem (2022)—02:26

Andreas Gundersen (*1993)

Microtonal Pieces (2022)

10. ...remnants of what may still exist—04:21
11. ...and so forth the...—02:57
12. if only this, then so be it...—04:01