

EMPAC

MABEL
KWAN

TROIS HOMMAGES

by
GEORG
FRIEDRICH
HAAS

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A woman with dark hair tied back, wearing a black top and a light-colored cardigan, is seated between two grand pianos in a recording studio. She is looking down at the keys of the piano on her right. The studio has a wood-paneled wall and a microphone on a stand behind her. The lighting is warm and focused on the pianist.

Georg Friedrich Haas

Trois Hommages for 2 pianos
(tuned a quarter-tone apart), 2 hands

Hommage à György Ligeti (1984)
Hommage à Josef Matthias Hauer (1982)
Hommage à Steve Reich (1982)

Mabel Kwan, pianos

EMPAC

The Curtis R Priem Experimental Media and Performing Arts Center (EMPAC) is where the arts, sciences, and technology interact with and influence each other by using the same facilities and technologies, and by breathing the same air.

EMPAC hosts artists and researchers to produce and present new work in a building designed with a sophisticated architectural and technical infrastructure. Four exceptional venues and studios enable audiences, artists, and researchers to inquire, experiment, develop, and experience the ever changing relationship between ourselves, technology, and the worlds we create around us.



Trois Hommages

From the mid 1700s until today, Western classical music has typically divided its musical scales into 12 notes per octave (divided by half steps: C – C# – D – E b – E – F – F# – G – G# – A – B b – B). Tuning by quarter-tones inserts an additional note in between these half steps, increasing the scale to 24 notes per octave. Across two pianos, this provides 176 notes instead of the typical 88. For this performance of *Trois Hommages*, the piano on Ms. Kwan's left is tuned “normally” while the one on her right is one quarter-tone lower.

There are very few pieces for two pianos tuned a quarter-tone apart. Charles Ives wrote the most historically well-known in 1923, and film composer Henry Mancini used them in the score to the 1967 Audrey Hepburn film *Wait Until Dark*. Typically, works for this instrumentation are played by two performers. As far as can be ascertained, there is only one piece for two quarter-tone pianos played by a single pianist: *Trois Hommages*.

Georg Friedrich Haas' *Trois Hommages* are dedicated to three of the 20th century's most unique and forward-thinking composers. Each was an explorer unsatisfied with the existent boundaries of music—much like Haas himself. But where Reich, Hauer, and Ligeti were interested in how things fit together, Haas seems to want to take them apart. Deconstructing sound itself is a hallmark of his music, as much as his willingness to incorporate the structural elements of Romanticism, minimalism, and serialism. Ultimately, for Haas and his hommages, it's the relationship—sum or difference—between the parts and their whole.

Hungarian composer György Ligeti (1923–2006) was one of the most innovative and influential composers of his time. Creating work across several genres, from electronic to instrumental to opera, Ligeti is best known to general audiences for his significant contributions to the soundtrack to Stanley Kubrick's film *2001: A Space Odyssey*. One of his most compelling techniques, termed micropolyphony, was achieved by densely layering melodic fragments and rhythms on top of one another to create clouds or “cobwebs” of sound.

Josef Matthias Hauer (1883–1959) is perhaps best known for not being known. His greatest accomplishment, *Zwölftonspiele*—a compositional system that uses all 12 tones before repeating them—is more often attributed to Arnold Schönberg, a more prominent composer who had been working independently on a similar idea. A prolific composer—with almost 600 works—of diverse compositional aesthetic, Hauer’s music is today almost only known in the US by specialists and die-hard connoisseurs of “new music.”

One of the foremost American composers of the 20th century, Steve Reich (b. 1936) is credited as a pioneer of minimalism. Influenced by traditional African drumming, Reich’s music often features rapid, interlocking patterns that combine to create the psychoacoustic effect of disorientating whirls of sound. One of his seminal works, *Piano Phase* for two pianos (and two pianists) experiments with “phasing,” in which the two parts begin synchronously but slowly become out-of-phase as one line accelerates, creating “combinatorial rhythms” that dance from one moment to the next.

EMPAC would once again like to thank our piano technician Cristina Kauffman. She continues to provide care and support for the strange things we do to our instruments.

MABEL KWAN

Chicago-based pianist Mabel Kwan has been praised by the *Chicago Classical Review* for “stunning virtuosity, musicality and resourcefulness that was almost as enjoyable to watch as to hear.” No stranger to contemporary music, she is pianist for the esteemed Ensemble Dal Niente as well as the trio Pesedjet. She last performed at EMPAC in 2015 for *Pianoply*, handling work by Evan Johnson, Eliza Brown, Rebecca Saunders, and Gerardo Gandini.

GEORG FRIEDRICH HAAS

Austrian composer Georg Friedrich Haas is known and respected internationally as a highly sensitive and imaginative researcher into the inner world of sound. His music synthesizes the Austrian tradition of grand orchestral statement with forward-looking interests in harmonic color and microtonal tuning that stem from both French spectralism and a strand of American experimentalism. Since 2013 Haas has been the MacDowell Professor of Music at Columbia University.

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