

Piet Jozef SWERTS



INSIGHT^{YOUR}INSIDE

24 Straight Strung Piano Sonatas

[2018]

ZODIAC EDITIONS

24 Straight Strung Piano Sonatas [2018]

Piet Jozef SWERTS

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Introduction

To put your hands on the piano keys connects straight to your soul. Guiding you into harmonies from your deepest Self, this unconditional, eternal covenant creates grand surprises. These sonatas originate in a whirl as if the piano whispers to you after many years, setting free the muse, letting arise the music in its most authentic form, intentionally pure, away from tendencies, timeless, honest and sensitive. Giving one's heart to music, insight arises into your inside.

I wrote my earliest piano compositions a long time ago, in the seventies. Since then, the desire for composing own piano music has remained unchanged. I've written about thirty pieces for the instrument to date: some of them were intended for educational purposes (Easy Variations I-IV), others were clearly inspired by the romantic literature (*Sonetto 63 del Petrarca* and *5 Preludes à la mémoire de F.Chopin*). There were also pronounced polyphonic compositions, such as my *Partita in memoriam J.S.Bach* and the *Five Two-Part Inventions*. In addition, I composed six piano concertos and recently, in 2017, even a *Double Concerto: Passions*.

In each case, the issue of the pianistic idiom recurs. It is not obvious to handle, or even avoid, pianistic ideas which have proved to be effective in the past literature; great composers also were in search for keyboard templates that serve well. In that sense, it seems that all possibilities have been explored completely. To discover a manner expressing a personal view of pianism that sounds characteristic and at the same time not too much related to impressionism or romanticism, was and still is my major concern. Perhaps pianistic templates needn't be avoided at all, but should rather be embraced and dealt with in a refreshing way. In my point of view, the piano functions at its best as a polyphonic instrument, where simple but transparent lines can be heard in an incomparable way.

My second and equally important consideration was and is the aspect of a large-scale form. I am not merely interested in writing some shorter pieces of ten minutes, but gradually got more and more fascinated by the large cycle idea, that surpasses the feeling of time by connecting internal relationships between subparts of a large-scale composition that may last for at least an hour.

In September 2017, I had the pleasure to visit the *Chris Maene Piano Factory* and to try his *Straight Strung Concert Grand*. A fantastic innovation, since the registers in this instrument sounds very particularly and are less blended than the conventional concert grand, because of the construction of the instrument. One of the reasons is the straight position of the bass strings. Another one is its connection to a high standard keyboard that responds perfectly, mechanically speaking; it offers the performer the opportunity to create extreme subtle colors and timbres. Two- or three-part writing might work wonderfully on this instrument.

Furthermore, the personal need of performing music in public as a pianist boosted up again, because for me, as a composer, it is sometimes not satisfactory enough to stay put for months, working on a composition in solitude. For that reason, performing my own music effects the compositional processes yet to come, in a very stimulating way.

The sound of this *Straight Strung Chamber Music 250 Concert Grand* and the idea of two or three part-writing, led me to the *sonatas* of *Scarlatti*. In that sense, his concept of short one-movement sonatas seemed to be a possible solution to integrate shorter pieces into a larger cycle. The answer on how to connect series of sonatas came to me when I reflected again about the 48 Preludes and Fugues of Bach's *Wohltemperiertes Klavier*. There, the connection towards unity has been established by the setup of keys, ordered chromatically and alternating systematically the major with the minor key, so C, c, C sharp major, C sharp minor and so on.

Contemplating on this order resulted in a new, transformed version: as opposite to Bach, my Sonatas should always start with the minor key, alternatively, the second one in the major, but then the next pair would proceed a perfect fifth downwards to the left:

01. a	02. A	13. es	14. Es
03. d	04. D	15. gis	16. As
05. g	06. G	17. cis	18. Des
07. c	08. C	19. fis	20. Ges
09. f	10. F	21. b	22. B
11. bes	12. Bes	23. e	24. E

So, beginning with a minor, the 24th concludes in E major. From there on, the second group of 24 might evolve in a retrograde manner, beginning with major, E, followed by e minor and progressing upwards a perfect fifth to the right upwards, finally concluding back in a minor again. As such, a large unity of 48 Sonatas may be generated.

Inspirational sources and an overview of the first 12 sonatas

The musical inspiration for the sonatas came in an intuitive way and these ideas have not always been following the final order of the compositions themselves. The ideas for the first two sonatas were clearly inspired by *Scarlatti* and *Galuppi*, whose statue I noticed in *Burano*. Scales combined with a lot of mordents give the first sonata a very vivid pulsation.



In the second sonata, *Primavera*, the theme of a broken descending triad spread over two octaves is very typical Scarlatti-like, its opposite component with stacked ascending thirds seemed a favorite feature of *Benjamin Britten*.

Giocoso

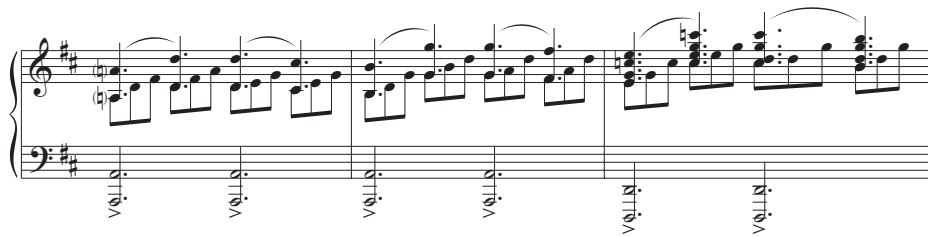


In the third sonata, I was seeking for complete solitude, I added a rest between the two most beautiful measures ever of Mozart's *Requiem*, because I had this impression that each measure needed this additional silence to reverberate the effect of its harmony longer. It created the opportunity to develop this wonderful motive further, finally concluding as catharsis in a cadence.

Andante moderato



The fourth sonata *Consolation*, opens very slowly, still influenced by the resonance of its previous sonata. When I thought about the subtitle, the reminiscence came from *Liszt's* piano piece, and probably that's why suddenly a short citation is heard of *Isoldes Liebestod* van *Wagner*; I performed Liszt's transcription several times.



In the fifth sonata, melancholy predominates. *Ground* has therefore been inspired on the bassline of the famous aria 'When I am laid in earth' from Purcell's 'Dido and Aeneas', but the chromatic descending line is extended into a wholly chromatic scale towards the tonic. In the middle of this piece, the scale inverts upwards.

Andante



The peaceful sixth sonata, *Pastorale*, sounds more open by its *Mixolydian* G-scale which is closely related to the major scale. The musical idea was mainly pianistic, creating a continuous dialogue between both hands alternatively.

Moderato



The seventh sonata adopts the beautiful and poetical *Scarlatti* Sonata in b K.87 as a model, admiring its three-part voicing. To me, it comes across as musical daydreaming.

Andante



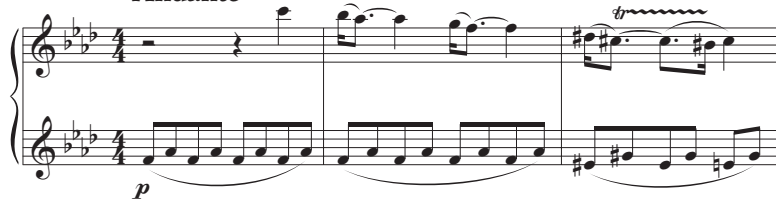
My eight, brighter sonata in C-major contains contrast in tempo and character. Frequently and constantly repeating the arpeggiated triad-figures creates an effect of a waterfall, therefore it's subtitle *Cascade*.

Vivace



The ninth, elegiac sonata explores more the vocal upper register of the keyboard with harmonic progressions of broken thirds in the middle range.

Andante



The energetic 10th sonata evolves from contrary motion figures, it sounds very refreshing, optimistic and to my opinion has a more southern, Italian character.

Moderato



Because of this impression during the creation process, I wondered if it might insert a typical Italian folk tune: after some research, I discovered a *Saltarella*, it appears at the end of the piece first in G major and then twice in F major with ascending chromatic seventh chords.



Sonata n°11 was composed 27th of May 2018, five days after I had visited *Berlin*. I was very moved by the *Holocaust monument* or *Denkmal für die ermordeten Juden Europas*. It consists of 2711 concrete blocks of variable heights between 20 and 450 centimeters. Every block is positioned with a space of 95 cm between them. American architect *Peter Eisenman* designed this monument, it has been produced by the company *Degussa*.

Entering and wandering through this created space made me a feel of isolation and disorientation. All these emotions are expressed in this slow sonata, which is built up with very limited tones. Much to my own surprise, the opening motif *c-des-f* is a transposition of *D-e-g-ussa*. *Mahnmal* is the name Berlin citizens are using.



The last sonata opens and concludes at the same time with the beginning of the very first sonata but now in major. It creates a feeling of unity between the first 12 sonatas.



Overview of the last 12 sonatas

When I realized that the thirteenth sonata might be the opening of the second group of 12 sonatas, I thought of the opening prelude of *Bach's Wohltemperiertes Klavier*, the first book. Personally, by its frequent use of pedal notes and a 7/16 meter, I obtains an obsessional character.



Sonata N°14 in E flat major called *Alla Turca* and it makes fun of all ingredients of *Mozart's* famous march, in a musical way: generally spoken, all minor sections in *Mozart's* march are major and in contrary motion in my version, all fast sections like his F sharp sections in 16th notes are augmented in 8th notes but in major. Also, all major sections are inverted into minor sections. As a result, it sounds very humorous and light.



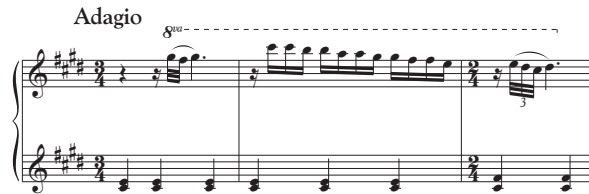
Sonata N°15 in G sharp minor was a more abstract sonata, where I reminded the listener to the opening of the first sonata, hence creating links with the first twelve first sonatas. Because of its bright and fierce character, I called it *Purple*, referring to a small purple sculpture I had received as a gift from my friend, the sculptor *Lieven Debrabandere*.



For the 16th sonata in A flat major, I imagined the vibrations of *silence* as a musical idea. I designed three different versions to finally end up with this one in 5/4.



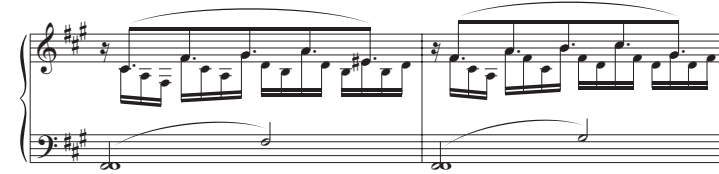
Sonata n°17 in c sharp minor utilizes very simple means of expression with its repeating dyads as accompaniment. It creates a very desolate atmosphere.



The theme of Sonata N°18 was found by coincidence, exploring the key of D flat major in arpeggiated triads over all ranges. Initially, the iv-v-i progression in the bass line seemed to be once-only, but just by repeating it and looking for variations in the right hand, the sonata developed into this *Riff*. It is a very sparkling piece of music.



With sonata n°19 in F sharp minor I was seeking austerity. The subtitle '*Schicksal*' is more an indication of what I tried to express musically: I was merely exploring the quality of the minor key F sharp minor. N°19 has been composed after, and not before N°20, and this was certainly an influential element.



The third and last sonata also inspired by Mozart, is N°20. The idea of using his first two bars of the second movement of his sonata *Facile* in C major came to me after writing the 13th sonata. Transposing these measures in G flat major was very attractive in pianistic terms. In the end, this sonata flirted with enharmonic relationships between the major seventh chord of G flat major and the minor seventh chord of F sharp minor. To my opinion, this sonata, through its so-called simplicity, might be the most divine piece of music in the entire cycle.



The last four sonatas form one entity, N°21 in b minor found his initiation in the pianistic grips of broken triads and sounds quite dramatic.

Moderato



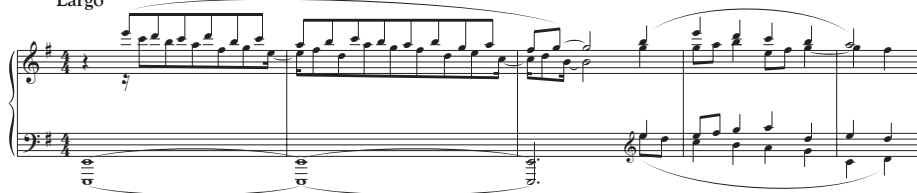
N°22 in B major is entitled *Ilo*, which is Finnish for *delight, joy*. I experienced this kind of positivism in this piece of music in a certain sense as distant, and thus associated it with the northern part of Europe.

Allegro

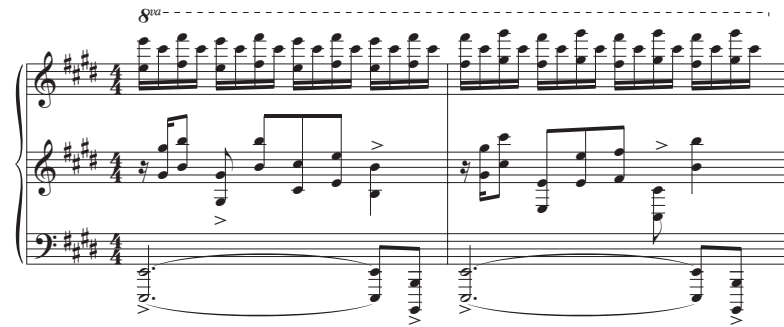


The *Bach-choral O Haupt* from his St. Matthew Passion in my 23th sonata in e, came to me as a sort of catharsis after all other Sonatas, from here on I could better prepare the final sonata.

Largo



Earlier this year I heard the bells of a monastery in *Feofaniya* in *Kiev*. We were fascinated to hear the very particular sound of these bells, with their complex rhythmical interactions. Evocating this atmosphere on the piano seemed to be a challenging, though attractive, idea as a conclusion.



The key to the interpretation, particularly for this large cycle, is to treat each sonata as a part of the unity and always to take in consideration what comes next. All tempi and colors and timbres should be linked together as one large musical adventure. Then, the listener might experience a rich world of varied emotions and diverse music.



CHRIS MAENE

Straight Strung Concert Grand

In the late 19th century, *Steinway & Sons* successfully brought to fruition the concept of the modern cross-strung grand piano. Ever since then, this construction concept has been imitated by all piano builders. It has resulted in a standardization of piano building and a uniformity of piano sound. As a reaction to this, the second half of the 20th century witnessed an intense quest for performance practices using historical instruments that bring back the greater sound diversity and transparency of older times.

As part of this movement, the *Chris Maene Factory* soon began specializing in building harpsichords and pianofortes, based on Chris Maene's renowned and unique collection of more than 300 historical instruments. This gradually led to the desire to build his own grand piano with different sonorous properties, aiming to offer a valid artistic alternative to existing concert grands. To accomplish this, Chris Maene went back to the original basic principle of straight, parallel stringing, where the bass strings are not crossed over the other strings but run parallel to them.

In 2013, *Daniel Barenboim* commissioned Chris Maene to build "*the perfect parallel-strung concert piano*". He wanted to reconcile the unique characteristic sonorous richness of the historical piano with the volume, clarity, power and playing comfort of the best modern concert pianos.

Chris Maene had already been thinking of this new concept for a while, and with this project he could finally make his ultimate dream come true: building a concert piano that would bring together tradition and innovation.

In May 2015, *Daniel Barenboim* inaugurated his new straight strung grand piano with Schubert recitals in Vienna, Paris and London. The sound of the unique instrument was very well received by press, audiences and musicians alike.

By now, the *Chris Maene Straight Strung Grand Piano* is played all over the world by the best international concert pianists, and the Chris Maene Factory is building a full range of straight-strung grand pianos.

The *Chris Maene Straight Strung Concert Grand Piano* is regularly used for concerts and recordings by artists such as *Martha Argerich, Pierre-Laurent Aimard, Emanuel Ax, Eric Le Sage, Hannes Minnaar, Liebrecht Vanbeckevoort, Jan Michiels, Julien Libeer, Jef Neve* and *Bram De Looze*.

The Chris Maene Chamber Music Concert Grand CM//250, used for *Piet Jozef Swerts'* recording of his *24 Straight Strung Piano Sonatas*, is specifically inspired by the best straight strung grand pianos of the 1860's, such as *Bechstein, Blüthner, Pleyel* or *Erard*. A more delicate design, a thinner rim and in sound referring even more to the glorious instruments of the end of the 19th century, make this model perfectly suited for song recitals, chamber music, smaller concert halls and private collections.

For more information, please visit www.chrismaene.com

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Piet Jozef SWERTS

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Dr. Swerts, Piet Jozef (b. November 14, 1960, Tongeren) is a Belgian composer, conductor and pianist of international acclaim; his large catalogue of more than 300 works includes stage, orchestral, chamber, choral, vocal, and piano works.

Dr. Swerts studied from 1974-'89 at the *Leuven College of Arts* (LUCA) Campus Lemmens in Leuven, where he obtained ten first prizes, and, for the first time in the history of the same institute, the special *Prize Lemmens Tinel* for composition and piano with great distinction. Among his teachers were Alan Weiss (USA) and Robert Groslot.

Since 1982, he is Professor of *Composition and Orchestration* at the same institute, now Department of Drama and Music associated with the *Catholic University of Leuven*. He has been invited as guest professor in the *Sweelinck Conservatory*, Amsterdam, Netherlands, in the *Department of Electronic Music* at the *University of Huddersfield*, GB, the *Polytechnic Institute* in Castelo Branco, Portugal, as well as in the *Polytechnic Institute North Karelia*, Conservatory of Joensuu, Finland, and the *Conservatory of Barcelona*, Spain.

As a composer, he has received more than ten awards, including the *Baron Flor Peeters Prize* (1983) for **Apocalyps I** and the *Prize of the Belgian Artistic Promotion* (1985) for the song **Ardennes**. He has also received the *SABAM Prize* (1986) for his *Piano Concerto No. 2 (Rotations)*, which was chosen as an imposed concerto during the finals of the *International Queen Elisabeth Competition* later that year. His other awards include the *Camille Huysmans Composition Prize* (1986) for **Dream pictures** and the *Prize for Composition of the Province Limburg* (1986) for **Capriccio**. In addition, he has received the *Silver Trophy of the Cultural Youth Passport Belgium-Netherlands* (1988) as a promising young artist, the *Prize of the Gazet van Antwerpen* (newspaper) (1989) for **Symphony No. 1** and the *Prize for Composition of the Province Brabant* (1993) for a choral work.

As a composer, he considers himself as autodidactic. Nevertheless, in summer 1981, he participated in a composition summercourse with Witold Lutoslawski and Vladimir Kotonsky in Poland. From 1985 until 2005, he became also conductor of the *Ensemble for Contemporary Music* at the Institute and since

that time, he has mostly worked on the base of commissions. Among commissioners are the *Royal Philharmonic Orchestra of Flanders*, the *Symphony Orchestra of Flanders*, the *Opera of Antwerp*, the *Radio Orchestra*, *European Brass Band Championships*, *l'Orchestre de Strassbourg*, *Rubio String quartet*, *Gaggini Quartet*, *Flanders Recorder Quartet*, the *International Queen Elisabeth competition*, and many others.

In 1993, his violin concerto **Zodiac** was selected out of 154 works from 28 countries as the compulsory concerto for the finals of the *International Queen Elisabeth Competition for Violin*. For this piece, he received the *Grand Prix* in the *International Queen Elisabeth Composition Competition, 1993* (the first Belgian composer to win the prize). Included in the jury at the competition that year were Henryk Górecki and Franco Donatoni. In the same year, a double CD of the world première performance of his **Passio Domini Nostri Jesu Christi Secundum Marcum** for four soloists, chorus and large orchestra (composed in 1988-89 and first performed in 1993) was released. In 1994, the international organization *Jaycies* awarded him as one of the *Ten Outstanding Young People*.

Dr. Swerts has been invited as a guest-conductor in Austria, the Czech Republic, France, the Netherlands, Poland, and China, where he conducted the *Shanghai Symphony Orchestra* in 1994 with his own works. In October 2005, he was guest conductor of the *Simon Bolivar Symphony Orchestra* in Caracas, Venezuela, where he conducted a full program Belgian music, including his own compositions.

In December 1996-January 1997, his first opera **Les liaisons dangereuses** was premièred by the *Flemish Opera* (who commissioned it) in Ghent and Antwerp. In the magazine, *Opera Now* (UK), it was hailed as one of the most remarkable events of that season. In January 1997, there was a CD release by *Eufoda* devoted to his piano compositions (1985-95), recorded by the composer himself.

In September 2000, his **Symphony No. 2 (Morgenrot)** was given its world première to unanimous critical acclaim; since, his **Clarinet Quintet**, recently recorded by the Finnish *Tempera String Quartet* en *Roeland Hendriks*, clarinet for the label *In Flanders' Fields* has also been given a successful première. His fifth piano concerto **Wings** performed and recorded by the composer has

received already many performances after the first year of its creation: 4 performances in Germany, December 2004, 3 performances in Japan August 2004, 6 performances in Belgium in 2003, 2 performances in Québec, Canada in April 2005, and performances in Singapore, France 2006, USA December 2005. His **Dance of Uzume** for alto saxophone and concert band was his first commission from Japan for the famous EMI-artist *Nobuya Sugawa*, recorded in January 2005 by the famous *Tokio Kosei Wind Orchestra*. His large-scale piece for choir and orchestra **Living Stone**, a set of 14 pieces and 60 minutes of music to be built in an exposition with the same name and content in the Museum site M in Leuven, from September 2005 until January 2006 has been recorded on CD.

In 2006, his **Kotekan** for saxophone and strings has been commissioned by the *International Adolphe Sax Association* as compulsory concerto during the finals of the competition in November 2006. He played in USA in 2005, 2007, 2010 and gave recitals in Ethiopia, Addis Abeba.

In 2011, he became *Doctor Ph.D. in Arts* with the greatest distinction at the Leuven University College of Arts with a comparative research of compositional canonic techniques in the *L'homme armé Masses* of the late 15th Century and contemporary composers who utilized the same melody in their music.

He is currently holding a doctors degree at the Catholic University of Leuven, where he is professor *composition and orchestration* at LUCA, Leuven University College of Arts, campus Lemmens and is *Senior Researcher* at the Department *Music & Drama*.

In 2012, he composed his **6th Piano concerto 'Indian Summer'** and was also involved as soundtrack composer in an international film project '**Atlantic.**' by the Dutch director *Jan-Willem Van Ewijk* from Amsterdam.

In 2013, he became member of the *Royal Academy of Arts of Belgium*.

In 2014, Vienna Philharmonic harpist *Anneleen Lenaerts* played the première of his **Etoiles** for harp and orchestra.

In 2016 he received a commission of the *National Orchestra of Belgium* for a new orchestral work named '**l'Apogée**' *Hugh Wolff*, which was premiered in May 2017 conducted by this American conductor.

In September 2017, his large oratorio '**Symphony of Trees**' (86') commissioned by the *City of Ypres*, was premiered as a commemoration of the First World War in the Cathedral of Ypres with *Thomas Blondelle*, tenor, *Lee Bisset*, soprano, a children's choir, a 280-man mixed choir, two organs and the *Flemish Symphony Orchestra* conducted by *David Angus*. Its Cd is released by PHAEDRA. In November 15th, 2017, he conducted the Ukrainian Symphony Orchestra at the Gala Concert in Kiev as closure of the *Golden Saxophone Competition* under surveillance of the Belgian Embassy.

In 2019, commissions led to first performances of **Passions**, a new Double Concerto for two pianos in Belgium and Rotterdam 2019, **Serenata** for wind ensemble, commissioned by *Il Gardelino*, a new Suite, **Horta** for saxophone and piano, commissioned by *Arno Bornkamp*, presented at the *World Congress* in Zagreb in 2018, **Retro** for the *Kugoni Trio*. In 2019 he conducted the Radio and TV orchestra in *Tirana* with his double concerto *Passions*.

In February 2019, the Roeland Hendrikx Ensemble will create his large chamber music cycle **Le Bestiaire**, for clarinet, piano and string quartet.