I LOVE IT WHEN FESTIVAL PROGRAMMERS SAY: PLAY WHATEVER YOU LIKE…”

An interview with pianist Terezie Fialová about her new recording of Pēteris Vasks’s piano cycle Gadalaiki.

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This year marks the anniversary of Latvian composer Pēteris Vasks (*1946), who is not only one of the leading musical voices of his country, but also one of the best-known and most frequently performed living composers. He began his career as a double bass player in prominent Lithuanian and Latvian orchestras and only became a professional composer in the 1980s. Virtually his entire output has been recorded, and albums featuring his works can be found in the catalogues of prestigious record labels.

This, however, does not diminish the significance of the achievement by pianist Terezie Fialová. She has made the fourth complete recording worldwide of Vasks’s piano cycle Gadalaiki (The Seasons), composed between 1980 and 2008, and the first ever to be released on vinyl. The album is officially released by Animal Music on 16 October and, alongside the physical CD and LP editions available through online retailers, will also be accessible on all major streaming platforms.

“I would like to invite all readers to give it a listen,” says Terezie Fialová. “Go for a walk and let Vasks fill your ears. His music is healing – and addictive…”

As a pianist, you are surely aware that competition among pianists is fierce. One of the keys to success and to standing out from the crowd may therefore be choosing the right repertoire. I feel that you have managed to find your way, even though the path you have chosen is not exactly an easy one: you seek out repertoire that is not overplayed, while at the same time being close to your heart. Would you agree with my assessment?

I have never really thought about it in those terms, but actually, it makes quite a lot of sense. From an early age, I was drawn to pieces that were not so well known, although my teachers never allowed me to bypass the classical repertoire. Nor would I have wanted to. I was simply curious about everything the piano repertoire had to offer.

I remember that when, in my third year at HAMU, I insisted on playing Sergei Prokofiev’s Piano Sonata No. 9 – a virtually unperformed but wonderful work – Professor Ivan Klánský nearly fainted. I then had to “make up for it” by playing Mussorgsky’s Pictures at an Exhibition and Brahms’s Op. 118…

So, to return to your question: I do try to discover less familiar repertoire, but not at any cost and not all the time. Balance is important to me. I do not want to be pigeonholed, and I certainly do not consider myself a specialist in contemporary music, even though I feel close to it and enjoy it very much.

One of the contemporary composers whose music you clearly feel close to and enjoy is Latvian composer Pēteris Vasks. How did you discover his music?

My first encounter with Vasks's music took place during my studies at the Hochschule für Musik und darstellende Kunst in Hamburg, where I was pursuing a master's degree in chamber music. With the Eben Trio, we were choosing a compulsory piece for an international competition, and among the five composers from whom we could choose was Vasks, with his Episodi e Canto perpetuo – an absolutely wonderful work for piano trio.

Although we did not choose it for the competition at the time, the piece made such a strong impression on us that I became a completely uncritical admirer of Vasks. A few years later, we studied Episodi, followed by his Piano Quartet, Partita for Cello and Piano, and The Fruit of Silence in its version for piano quintet…

And now it is the turn of his extensive piano cycle Gadalaiki. When did the idea of recording it and releasing it on CD and LP first emerge?

The first seed was planted in 2023 by Petr Ostrouchov from Animal Music. It happened after my Prague recital in the "Hybatelé rezonance" concert series, where I performed Gadalaiki for the first time. I had studied the cycle thanks to the invitation to give that concert. The artistic director, Dana Syrová, gave me complete freedom in choosing the programme, which was wonderful. I love it when festival programmers say: "Play whatever you like…"

Petr, who was in the audience that evening, then came up with the idea of making a recording. At the time, however, cellist Jiří Bárta and I were preparing a CD devoted to Janáček, so Vasks had to wait until this year.

It is also the year of the composer's eightieth birthday, which feels particularly fitting and celebratory to me. And besides, there is no need to rush things. I am glad that Gadalaiki had time to mature. Considering how demanding and extensive this piano cycle is, waiting proved to be a very good decision.

Where have you performed the complete Gadalaiki before its release on CD?

Over the past four years, I have performed it six times in total: in Prague, at the festival in Kutná Hora, this year in Brno and Olomouc as part of the philharmonic subscription series, and in September in Česká Lípa at the Lípa Musica Festival.

I also like to include one or two movements from the cycle in recital or chamber music programmes from time to time. It works very well, and audiences welcome it as something particularly interesting. For example, when I performed "Rudenz Muzika" at a concert in Istanbul, it caused quite a stir – in the best possible sense. For a Turkish audience, Latvia is, after all, rather far away and represents a completely different climate, not only musically but in many other respects as well.

How did the recording sessions themselves go, and who was involved in making the album?

The recording took place in the Bohuslav Martinů Hall at HAMU, my alma mater, and I am very grateful to the university for making this possible.

The hall was an obvious choice for me because its 2005 Steinway concert grand is one of the most colourful instruments available in our country. It is a unique piano, not an instrument for everyone or for every style of music, but it was simply magnificent for Gadalaiki.

We had three four-hour recording sessions, which was neither a small amount of time nor an excessive one. Ondřej Urban was the recording engineer, while the musical direction was entrusted to cellist Jiří Bárta. This was something I had very much wished for. He knows how to motivate me while respecting me at the same time, and I have complete trust in his musical judgement.

I am grateful to Hana Knížová for the photographs and to Zuzana Lednická of Studio Najbrt for the sensitive graphic design. Through their photographs and design, both women captured the mood and style of the recording beautifully, in the spirit of Winter Landscape.

Petr Ostrouchov oversaw the entire preparation of the album with his discerning ear and eye. I really enjoy that special time in front of the microphones. There is something almost magical about it – the act of capturing the present moment.

Gadalaiki is an hour-long musical "colossus", as you yourself have mentioned, and a demanding one at that. I imagine that approaching the interpretation of such a work requires a different kind of thinking than preparing a programme consisting of a series of shorter pieces. How did you prepare for performing it? And has your interpretation of the cycle, your artistic understanding of it, evolved over time?

It is a very specific work that requires an unusually long period of preparation, both physical and mental. It also demands enormous concentration.

I play from a small-format score, meaning that the notes are really tiny; for me, it serves more or less as a kind of navigational map. Although Vasks sometimes writes in a relatively idiomatic pianistic manner, his notation is nevertheless quite distinctive. He makes extensive use of the extreme registers of the keyboard and loves rapid octave leaps, even within those extreme registers. This is something we do not encounter very often in the repertoire. It takes a long time to decipher the notes in the sub-contra register or those with three or four ledger lines above the staff, and to memorise exactly where I have to jump.

Other characteristic features include toccata-like and irregular rhythms, as well as extremely soft and extremely loud dynamics. He loves combining tenths with seconds in a single chord, which means that my not particularly large hands suffer quite a bit. But it is rather like physical education at school: you can train yourself to do a great deal, and even your reach can be improved to some extent…

Another distinctive feature is the notation without bar lines, with time indications given in seconds, specifying the duration of pauses, caesuras and transitions. Time flows quite differently on stage than it does in the auditorium, and maintaining tension throughout a movement that lasts twenty minutes and contains not a single bar line is certainly no easy task.

All these aspects of Vasks's score are extremely important and should be respected just as much as the conventional forms of notation we classical pianists are naturally more familiar with, since we have grown up with them from childhood, unlike the more modern approaches.

And has my interpretation evolved over the four years? Absolutely. But every time I have to perform Gadalaiki, it remains a challenge for me. I would like to say that the fifth or sixth performance will be easier, but that is simply not how it works. And perhaps that is a good thing.

When you were looking for the key to your own interpretation of the cycle, did you also draw inspiration from the recordings available, or did you allow your own intuition to guide you from the very beginning?

For me, the key recording has always been the first one, made in 2010 by Vestards Šimkus. Incidentally, Vasks dedicated two of the cycle's four movements to him. Šimkus is an inspiring pianist and composer, with a great many beautiful albums to his credit.

I have listened to his recording countless times. Although there are certain passages with which I do not entirely identify, I consider his interpretation compelling and a benchmark.

The recordings by Marcel Worms (2015) and Reinis Zariņš (2022) do not resonate with me quite as strongly.

In general, I try to develop my own ideas about interpretation from within myself, or through listening to other works by Vasks, particularly his incomparable chamber, string and vocal compositions, which fascinate me.

Gadalaiki was not originally conceived as a cycle, and its individual movements came into being over a long period of time, almost a quarter of a century. What makes it so distinctive, inspiring or even unique in your opinion?

I have already spoken about the specific demands of its piano writing, but I would like to return to the question of its uniqueness, which you have aptly raised and partly answered yourself.

Without a doubt, what makes the cycle unique is the very way in which it came into being. The movements were not composed consecutively, and they were written with enormous intervals of time between them. I find this admirable; it demonstrates the composer's extraordinary sense of musical completeness and imagination.

The cycle does not begin with the customary spring, but with winter. The movements differ greatly in length, character and inner emotional intensity, yet they coexist beautifully and create a perfect and unique musical circle.

Vasks captures each Latvian season wonderfully. He combines vivid musical depictions with the emotions of the Baltic natural landscape. From the very first note, he transports the listener to his homeland. His seasons are, quite simply, truly his own.

I find the opening movement, Winter, particularly remarkable. I cannot recall any other musical cycle of the seasons – and there have been quite a few throughout music history – that begins in this way. How do you explain this?

That is an interesting question, one I have thought about for quite a long time.

I was particularly preoccupied with it when I first began studying the piece. I have a somewhat obsessive tendency to look for information about the background of musical works: I investigate their origins, influences, the composer's state of mind… I am interested in even the smallest detail from the period in which a piece was written.

I could not find another musical cycle of the seasons in the literature that begins with winter. So I developed my own hypothesis: I compare Vasks's seasons to the cycle of human life. An idealised human life, of course.

Since life begins before birth – at least that is how I perceive it – winter represents the prenatal period for me: a peaceful time, free from fear, protected by the safety of the mother's womb.

Spring is birth, the first weeks, months, perhaps even years of life, the process of discovering the world – turbulent yet conciliatory, wild and full of movement.

Summer represents adulthood, the productive and intellectual peak of human life.

Autumn is old age, ageing in all its forms, a gradual calming down and the final chapter of each of our lives.

I am not a musicologist, and who knows what Vasks himself would say about this interpretation. But this is how I feel internally whenever I perform Gadalaiki. Emotionally, it simply makes sense to me.

You have described Vasks's piano style in considerable detail. Yet one could say that his natural domain is string instruments, which is understandable given that he studied the double bass and earned his living as an orchestral musician playing that instrument for many years. He has written numerous concertos for string instruments, as well as works for several wind instruments. Why do you think he has not composed more music for piano?

I would not say that he has written very little piano music. There is certainly more of it than, for example, in Janáček's output. But it is true that, apart from the cycle Gadalaiki, his piano works tend to be smaller forms; there is neither a sonata nor a piano concerto.

The piano has one fundamental disadvantage compared with string and wind instruments, and indeed even the human voice. We cannot work with pitch and the character of a note to the same extent. I am thinking, for example, of vibrato, or of subtle adjustments of pitch and intonation depending on whether the music is in a major or minor key, and so on.

When used intelligently and skilfully by the performer, this is one of the things that gives Vasks's melodies an extraordinary added dimension.

The piano, of course, has other advantages of its own. But perhaps the absence of this fundamental possibility of shaping the structure of a sustained note is one of the reasons why Vasks has not composed more large-scale solo works for the instrument.

Nevertheless, we should not forget his chamber works involving piano. They are absolutely essential pieces in which the piano plays a very important role.

Pēteris Vasks is renowned for his interest in the performers of his music. If he cannot attend a concert, he often calls the performers beforehand. You have experienced this yourself. What does such a moment evoke in you?

That is true! Yes, I have experienced it, and to be honest, it was quite a shock for me.

He called me for the first time in 2023, just before the dress rehearsal of a concert, and it took me a little while to recover. How would you feel if Chopin or Mozart called you…?

It was motivating, but at the same time it made me feel a certain responsibility.

We were in contact again this spring, before my recitals in Olomouc and Brno and during the recording of the album.

Vasks is an incredibly kind and warm-hearted person. He also provided me with a handwritten page from his score for the CD and LP booklet.

He does not use any social media, and these days he does not even use email. In the past, he travelled extensively around the world to attend performances of his works.

I was fortunate enough to meet him briefly in person when he came to Hradec Králové for a performance of his Cello Concerto No. 1, played by Jiří Bárta with the Czech Radio Symphony Orchestra.

I had imagined a formally dressed composer, but the reality was quite the opposite: a rather inconspicuous gentleman arrived in sportswear, carrying a small backpack. You could almost have mistaken him for a member of the orchestra's technical staff.

It reminded me once again that true stars do not behave like stars.

When you performed Gadalaiki in Brno, I noticed that the audience included many people who do not normally attend the city's philharmonic concerts. Most listened very attentively, but a few seemed to have come expecting "The Four Seasons" and did not get what they had anticipated. Have you noticed this elsewhere as well?

As the classic line goes: "We've got a bit of a problem here…"

I think you have aptly described a new phenomenon that I have noticed at events that have been particularly well marketed – in other words, those with a very effective PR campaign.

We live in an age of endless advertising, social media and an overwhelming number of events all competing to attract audiences, including people who might not normally seek out classical music.

But if you target them effectively, with a good photograph, an appealing slogan or some other catchy form of promotion, you can suddenly find people in the concert hall who have not come for the music itself, but simply to attend an attractive-looking event and see what happens.

On the one hand, I understand this and do not blame anyone. Every organiser wants to sell out, and every audience member has the right to experience classical music for the first time. They even have the right to be disappointed.

On the other hand, such listeners are often unhappy from the very beginning, because they are not getting what they thought they would. Their energy can disturb the entire evening, not only for the performer but for everyone in the hall.

And that is what happens when someone expecting Vivaldi's "Four Seasons" turns up at a performance of Vasks's Gadalaiki.

However, there is another particular aspect of Gadalaiki that I would like to mention, and I am curious whether you will agree with me.

The most enthusiastic feedback I receive comes from people who hardly ever listen to classical music.

So the work does not come across as purely classical music, but rather as something original and timeless, perhaps even transcending genres. A kind of Baltic crossover, wouldn't you say? ☺

I am not sure I would call it a crossover, but my – fairly extensive – experience in programming music from the Baltic countries certainly supports what you are saying. I think this has a great deal to do with folk music and folklore in general, which in the Baltic region is, in certain respects, more diverse and perhaps even more interesting than, for example, Czech folklore. It is important to emphasise, of course, that the folklore of each Baltic country is entirely different.

What matters is that contemporary composers draw on it in their own music, and Vasks is no exception. It is not a stylisation or idealisation of folk music as we find in the Romantic period; it is simply present. Do you yourself feel Latvia and the Baltic region in Gadalaiki? And I do not mean only the natural landscape, which you have already mentioned…

In the third, "summer" movement, entitled Green Landscape, a Latvian folk song serves as the musical theme. Its distinctive, irregular, at times almost jazz-like rhythm becomes the leitmotif of the entire movement.

It is quite obvious how different Latvian folklore is from our own. And exactly as you say: it is not stylised; it is simply there.

By the way, I would very much recommend that readers watch the German documentary about Vasks entitled Composer and His Heaven. It is currently even available through Czech Television's iVysílání online platform.

What do you hope will come of releasing Vasks's Gadalaiki on CD and LP?

It is a dream come true for me, the documentation of a chapter in my life.

An inner joy. A message. Emotions. An artefact.

The release of the LP was also made possible thanks to a crowdfunding campaign on the Donio platform. The required amount was raised in an incredible eleven days, so this is a shared achievement, created through the support and energy of many people.

I never look at releasing albums as a marketing product. For me, it is purely an artistic matter.

Do you intend to build on your experience with the cycle Gadalaiki? Would you like to study other works by Vasks, explore the music of other Latvian or Baltic composers? Or is this a closed chapter, with the wind already carrying you somewhere else?

I would certainly like to study something else from the Baltic region, whether by Vasks or another composer.

Perhaps I will take a short break now, catch my breath and look around to see where the wind will carry me next…

Or perhaps I will start straight away. I can be rather indecisive and impulsive in this respect.

So, rather than ending our conversation with hypothetical considerations, let us talk about something more concrete. What do you have planned for the near future? And, if possible, let us follow the seasons: what are your plans for this autumn, winter, then spring and summer?

I will outline just the autumn, which is going to be very busy. And very jazzy!

Together with Jiří Bárta, Jirka Stivín and Petr Dvorský, we will perform Claude Bolling's Suite at the Lednice-Valtice Music Festival and at the Pro Musica Nostra festival in several towns in Slovakia.

I also have a premiere coming up with a jazz trio – a big step outside my comfort zone, and something I am both looking forward to and a little afraid of!

I will perform with members of Sinfonia Iuventus in Warsaw, and after several years I will reunite with the Eben Trio for a concert in the FOK season.

I will also perform with Jiří Bárta in a recital as part of the St Lawrence season of Prague Spring and at Trutnov Autumn.

I am looking forward to a doctoral conference and the conference The Clash of Theory and Practice, and perhaps also to a few less busy days, finally…

But above all: the album Gadalaiki is officially released on 16 October!

Animal Music – Album information

On Friday, 16 October 2026, the year of Latvian composer Pēteris Vasks's 80th birthday, Animal Music releases a recording of his piano cycle Gadalaiki (The Seasons), performed by pianist Terezie Fialová.

This is only the fourth complete recording of the cycle, following earlier recordings by Vestards Šimkus, Marcel Worms and Reinis Zariņš.

Pēteris Vasks is regarded as one of the leading representatives of contemporary Latvian music and has achieved an international reputation unmatched by any of his predecessors. He has become a true national composer for his country: his music is the voice of contemporary Latvia, a country that spent many decades under Soviet rule (1940–1990). His work draws on Latvian folklore and the distinctive beauty of the Baltic landscape.

Nature is one of the principal sources of inspiration for Pēteris Vasks's music:

“Nature, for me as a Latvian, as a Baltic person, is constantly present. It influences all my music. Nature is the ideal world as created by God. Its beauty will survive everything, provided that people, who have embarked on a senseless competition with its power, learn to respect and care for it. My enthusiasm for the life of nature is now even more intense than it was in my childhood,” says the composer.

The piano cycle Gadalaiki is rarely performed in its entirety and was not originally conceived as a unified cycle.

Its first movement, White Landscape (Baltā ainava), and its fourth movement, Autumn Music (Rudens mūzika), were composed by Vasks in 1980 and 1981 for Latvian organist and pianist Tālivaldis Deksnis.

They were followed by Spring Music (Pavasara mūzika) in 1995, premiered by Swedish pianist Bengt Forsberg.

It was not until 2004 that Vasks decided to complete the cycle. Green Landscape (Zaļā ainava), inspired by summer, was completed in 2008 and became the third movement.

Terezie Fialová first encountered the music of Pēteris Vasks during her studies at the Hochschule für Musik und Theater in Hamburg.

She first performed the complete cycle Gadalaiki in Prague in 2023. In 2026, she returned to it for the second time, marking the occasion of Vasks's 80th birthday, in a solo recital as part of the 70th season of the Brno Philharmonic.

This is Terezie Fialová's third album released by Animal Music. Her previous recordings include the complete Beethoven Sonatas for Piano and Cello with Jiří Bárta (ANI 101, 2021) and the album Janáček, also recorded with Jiří Bárta (ANI 122, 2024).