

Sound, Politics, Darkness and Sex

Interview by Arash Yazdani

Few composers of artistic contemporary music have reached the level of success and appreciation that Georg Friedrich Haas has. Even fewer during their lifetime! His pieces on their best, are not just music or sounds. They are sensory explorations, or even adventure! His music doesn't sound like most things you've heard before. It's neither new nor old.

His music has been performed and praised by Sir Simon Rattle, Allan Gilbert, Susanna Mälkki, Jonathan Stockhammer and he has received commissions or performances by Berliner Philharmoniker, New York Philharmonic, Vienna Philharmonic Orchestra, BBC Scottish Symphony Orchestra, Opera National de Paris, The Royal Opera House of London among others.

Some of his pieces are to be performed in complete darkness, some partially in darkness and some in transitions between darkness and sudden beams of light. Yet in all of his pieces there is darkness lurking. One could say in the musical language of Georg Friedrich Haas, light is the lack of darkness!

Moreover he is a man who's not afraid of controversies or people's judgment. His 4th marriage to the American BDSM activist and sex educator, Mollena Williams-Haas; and his openness about their sexual life was greeted coldly by the music community.

I was his student at the Hochschule für Musik in Basel for 2.5 years, in a period that was a dream-like atmosphere for contemporary music, which was later dubbed the Basel school (or Basel ring). Until the day he confirmed the rumors of his sudden departure to the Columbia university of New York. Afterward we've been rarely in contact. I conducted few of his pieces with our Tallinna Uue Muusika Ansambel, and other ensembles, in a few countries and we infrequently exchanged emails, until now!

The aim of AFEKT festival was to invite Mr. Haas to Estonia as the festival's theme composer, after some problematic schedule changes I contacted him personally and finally he will come to Estonia! Georg Friedrich Haas is the special guest of the AFEKT festival 19-26 October and will visit Estonia on this period.

On 20th of October TUMA performs his piece ATTHIS alongside a premier by Toivo Tulev, in the newly inaugurated grandiose Estonian National Museum in Tartu. Few of his other pieces will be performed in Tallinn on 19th and 21st of October.

In the anticipation of Mr. Haas's arrival to Tallinn, I spoke with him over skype on the morning of the October 1st, the international music day, at first while he was in a car driven by his wife on a Seattle highway, and later from a motel room.

G.F.Haas: I'm so happy that we'll meet again!

A.Yazdani: Same here, it's been years!

G.F.H: indeed!

A.Y: My first question might seem weird! Mr. Haas, what made you become a composer? Was there some piece of music you listened and were surprised with, that made you want to do it for yourself, or just an accident?

G.F.H: It's weird, very early on I had a dream to become a composer! Can not really say what has been the reason for it, but just I wanted to express myself, or I just wanted to make music. But you must be conscious growing up in a place where absolutely not focused on art or culture; it was in southwestern Austria near the Alps. You would find skiing there and hiking, but no music, no culture. Today it's different, there is a music school system. I even had no chance to go to a music school although I wanted to do it.

When I became 16, as many young men who enter puberty, I became sentimental and wrote poetry. I had problems to express myself in poetry, and sometimes I made mistake of choosing the words based on their sound not based on their meaning, which might be problematic if you want to be a poet. Another important thing was when I first fell in love; I went to a piano and just played a chord. I felt this chord was much more powerful and helped much more clearly with expressing myself than I could do in my poetry. It was at this moment that I became a composer.

A.Y: From then on you passed a very long way to reach the success that you have now. Did you...

G.F.H: It was like a miracle that I could even pass the entrance exam to the music academy! I never studied in music school and yet passed the exam as a pianist, kind of a miracle! Then I was lucky to find very interesting young composition teachers who taught me the craft.

A.Y: But your success came quite late, it took a long time until you became the Georg Friedrich Haas that you are now, although some of your great pieces were already written before turn of century (In Vain is composed on 2000). My question was, did you have to finally compromise or reduce something in order to become as successful, or you only needed to wait for the music world to catch up with you?

G.F.H: I consciously never did a compromise, in aesthetical sense. Of course you do compromises, each composer who knows his craft does it, you must do compromise to enable an instrument and/or a human being to perform; but I do not do compromises in my musical language. If I look over my career, I think this is why I was accepted.

I had a very interesting experience just one week ago, in a music center near Albany in New York. A pianist performed my Three Homages, composed for one pianist to be performed on two pianos tuned in quarter-tone. I composed these pieces between 1982 and 1984 when I owned two pianos tuned in quarter-tones, but I couldn't find a partner who'd play *quarter-tone music* with me. Therefore I had to compose something that I could play alone. To hear these pieces 34 years later, was for me a deep experience. The language of these pieces is different from the language of my music now, because my language of course has developed. Would have been terrible to remain at this point that I'd reached when I was 30. But I was very happy to learn that if you do something in which you believe 100%, it will be loved by someone else.

A.Y: We all know the famous praise by Sir Simon Rattle about your piece *In Vain*, calling it "... the first masterpiece of 21st century". I would say composing one piece like *In Vain* would be enough for any composer's career to be done! But you have even more masterpieces, you have Hyperion, you have Limited Approximations, you have your operas or string quartets.

How is composing after these great successes? Do you get overshadowed by yourself? Do you get pressure? How could you continue?!

G.F.H: When I was young I had no success, but this did not disturb my artistic vision. Now I have success and I hope this does not disturb my artistic visions either!

Success is fine, and I believe *In Vain* is a really strong piece. But I know exactly that there are many things I didn't do in *In Vain*¹ because it was only the first step. Just in terms of musicians technique for instance, I tried to step into a system of overtone chords with changing fundamentals². These fundamentals are connected to a tempered system. And when I composed that with a new system, I must've found combinations to switch over the fundamentals so they are not tied into the vicinity of tempered system³ but are free. And for example that's something that I'm gradually learning since the last 15 years after composing *In Vain*.

One of the questions for me is that I found a language with, let's call it, *micro-tones* but I have not found a language that deals with *micro-rhythm*. I believe in the rhythm there's so many things to do, I'm only at the beginning. I think those pieces that I experimented only with time are not being performed in Estonia, though.

I have the feeling that there's so much to do, there are so many possibilities. We live in such an amazing time, where musical language is developing in completely new ways that to say well I had one successful piece and so it is enough.... Never! Never!

A.Y: I meant more about the pressure of repeating a success. You don't feel that? Or you don't get bothered by it?

G.F.H: I hope, I hope I don't think on it. I would say different thing, it's made me free. When I write music, I never want success. What I want is to touch people. Take one of my operas, Thomas, for instance, one of the biggest success in a performance I had; it should probably appear on Guinness Book of World Records as the most microtonal opera in the history⁴. But at the end of premier in Schwetzingen Festspiele, about a third of the audience had tears on their eyes and crying. This, is success. They cried like people would do hundred years ago after a Puccini opera, so yes, this is success!

¹ *In Vain* is a piece for 24 instruments and lighting. Large portions of the piece has to be performed in total darkness. A.Y

² In acoustics, and other branches of physics, every pitch (wave) is a compound of many (theoretically infinite) higher pitches whose frequency is an integer multiples of the initial pitch. The initial tone is called fundamental and the multiplies are overtones. This also corresponds closely to the pythagorean tuning system and natural harmonics. A.Y

³ Equal temperament vastly dominated the western music since late Baroque time. Is based on equal devisions of an octave interval into 12 steps. The intervals smaller than these steps are generally called microtones- A.Y

⁴ The opera Thomas (2013) by G. F. Haas depicts a very powerful scene of a homosexual man's death in a hospital, witnessed by his partner and nurse. The opera incorporates over 1600 different pitches outside of tempered system. A.Y

A.Y: Now you have commissions from such old and traditional institutions as Berliner Philharmoniker, The Royal Opera House of London, Deutsche Oper Berlin, Opera National de Paris, and similar big institutions. Do you see yourself as a classic, and if you do, how does it affect you?

G.F.H: Let me answer this way, I was invited to write a piece in a festival I think on 2003, and the motto of the whole festival was the “Second Modernism”. I was asked to write some sentences about the *Second Modernism* but I said I can’t do it, I hate this term! They asked for explanation and I wrote the following sentence: Why second modernism?! I feel myself still as a part of the first modernist, and this first modernism starts approximately at 1240 when a monk named Leoninus composed two-part *Organum*”.

I believe, I see myself as a person educated and grown up into this tradition. I’m not sure that this tradition really will be the only one in next 200 years, but frankly, the next 200 years are not my problem!

A. Y: I remember once, when I was studying with you in Basel, you took me to the rehearsal of an exam-piece by one of your junior students (who had a minor in composition); then I asked you how could you have students whose music has little to no resemblance with yours, or they have not much in common with your language of music? And you told me it would’ve been frightening/unsettling if their music was similar to mine!

But now that you are very much performed, you could hear a lot of people *try* to be similar to you. I call them Haas imitators! What about this? Does this bother you?

G.F.H: Hmm, it happens sometimes, I would call it a kind of amusement! (he laughs!) Austrian Jewish author of 20s and 30s Egon Friedell wrote a book *Kulturgeschichte der Neuzeit*⁵ and on the first pages he writes there does not exist any plagiarism. If somebody steals, as Marx says, there are two possibilities: Either he does it better, then he is legitimize to do it; Or he does it worse, then he is blamed. So if somebody takes my material and creates something very special and new based on this, I’m very happy. Sometimes I’m not sure if they’re really copying me!

I heard this anecdote about two composers on 20s who went to a court, blaming each other of stealing their ideas. They asked the specialist to answer, and his answer was: well the person who’s been stolen from is Mendelssohn! And in the same way I don’t know if somebody steals from me, I’ve stolen too! Maybe they steal Grisey and don’t know it’s Grisey so they believe it’s Haas, I don’t know!

A.Y: Haas in Europe and Haas in U.S, what’s the difference? As a witness or someone who listens to your music, there seems to be quite a difference; it is perhaps possible even to divide your career before and after moving to the States.

G.F.H: I personally felt myself being between the two continents. Of course I’m educated in the Austrian tradition. My teachers Gösta Neuwirth and Ivan Eröd on one

⁵ Translated into English as “A Cultural History of The Modern Age”. A.Y

side were from tradition line of Schreker and the other teacher Friedrich Cerha belonged to tradition line of Webern and Schönberg, and this is a very important fundament for me. But I also am very interested in the very direct, non-ideological approach of American tradition. I think these two elements both have importance and influence on my language.

Let me tell a story, about the general attitude toward my music which is *microtonality*. A short story about *microtonality* in Europe! My management asked me do you have music for mezzo soprano? I said no, don't have, I have operas but no music for mezzo soprano. Later I got another message from my management, there is a mezzo soprano who definitely wants to sing your music, can you find something, they insisted. Don't have anything, sorry, I replied. They called a third and a fourth time, that this mezzo soprano insists and it is for her very important because she's convinced, somebody told her, she must be the best performer for my music. So I said OK, I should really listen to her, and searched her name on YouTube and heard her. It was one of the most beautiful voices I've ever heard, but it was the most terrible intonation I've ever heard too! (he laughs!) Then I understood somebody had made a terrible joke about this poor singer and about me; because Haas is this guy whose music has all these wrong pitches and she always sings wrong pitches so she could sing Haas perfectly! That's the European approach to microtonality!

The American approach to microtonality is: yes, of course! We do have it in jazz, we do have it in barbershop singing, which is an amazing tradition of microtonal shifting. And in American tradition microtonality does not mean to sing wrongly, but to sing expressively. And this makes my life in States much easier!

There's something else, and that is the difference in university climate. In Austria specially, though I think it shouldn't be much different in Eastern Europe, there is a very hierarchical structure of universities. In Austrian terminology there's a saying that loosely translates to "professor is the owner of a teaching chair" which seems to be a joke. But it seriously clears it that the professor is the owner of the tool, and the fact that he's got this job makes him automatically, by the grace of God or the emperor, the owner of the tools! You always find at the Austrian, German, Swiss universities, these kind of battles between one owner of the tools and another owner of the tools. In States the situation is absolutely different. Here the more opinions are the better. You can be best friends with somebody with whom you have fundamental disagreements in scientific or artistic world. This is impossible in Austria, or Germany or Switzerland!

Of course there's a third thing that I changed my life here; I married a wonderful American woman and I'm very happy.

A.Y: Moving to the U.S you also decided to be more open about your personal life. There was this famous [interview with the New York Times](#) on which you opened up about your sexual/private life or what'd be considered private life. Why did you do that and was it like coming out of closet?

G.F.H: For three reasons. The first and simplest is that I didn't want to hide. I wanted to avoid all the gossips that everybody was saying, and I wanted just to be open. It

was becoming too complicated to hide, and I believe I do nothing that needs to be hidden.

The second reason is I'm a composer who writes a lot of music, and I'm able to compose this music because my wife is submissive and her love is to make this possible.

I think I need to explain this to the public, because the public money is used so that my music could be performed and I must say I'm able to write so many different pieces in such a short time because my life is 100% focused on it - well maybe not exactly 100% - and it is only possible because I have this lifestyle.

The third reason is, I'm not alone. I think at least 75% of people are pervert, which means the term perversion is wrong. If only the 25% of people are not pervert then they are the real perverts! But most of them, like myself, fell guilty. Ashamed about their perversions.

I lost 40 years of my life that I could have been happy, but was unhappy. I made other people unhappy, I married 3 times and my wives could not be happy with me because we couldn't conform on these important issues. My life would've been better had I made the decision that I want to live my life, earlier.

And I want to encourage those who are hiding it, like I used to do, to not do so. Because everything that happens between 2 adults, between persons who are at the same level in equivalence, not as an employer and employee but something like this, is just fine. All that happens between 2 or more adults in consent is good.

My wife is a professional sex educator, goes to conventions and teachings. On these conventions there are people who just teach some tools or techniques, but she is teaching and speaking about psychology. About what does it mean to be submissive, what does it mean to be dominant. Many times we had people whom we did not know, came and thanked us saying we could show this article to our parents and they said OK now I understand what you're doing.

I think this interview was very important for those who were in a similar situation like my wife and I are.

A.Y: So you basically see it as coming out of closet for yourself?!

G.F.H: Yes! And I can tell you I'm so much more happy because first I have nothing to hide and second I have nothing to be ashamed of. When I talked to you and you were my student, I was so ashamed of my orientation and I had to hide everything, I was so afraid that somebody might find out!

A.Y: I understand. Do you see yourself a voice for people who might feel like you? A champion perhaps?

G.F.H: No! No not

A.Y: So it was more a personal decision?

Mollena Haas: YES! Write that his wife says yes! (both laughing)

G.F.H: She is the champion! (continues jokingly) my slave is the champion. (Suddenly very seriously) Please take care of the word slave, because I don't know the connotation. I think you translate it into Estonian?

A.Y: Yes!

G.F.H: I don't know what connotations this word has in Estonian. I would never use the German word *sklave*.

A.Y: But the English word too has the same connotation.

G.F.H: The English word has also the connotation of the community. When my wife says I'm a black person and I do this because this is an important step and it's a part of freedom. There is a fundamental difference between her slavery with me and the slavery of her ancestors. She can say goodbye! At every moment. And I have to take care that she really gets what she needs, because if I don't take care of her needs she will say goodbye. And this is the difference.

A.Y: I see. It's like... Ok! I wanted to say that, as you know actually we have a rather conservative community, the music community. It's quite closed. And that interview of yours received a very divided reaction. It received a huge backlash, but of course it was appreciated by many too. It really divided the music community.

G.F.H: Well I don't know the backlashes. There are some articles which I read, that are really disgusting. But well, OK!

A.Y: Did you expect it? As far as I know you, you would not make arbitrary decisions, you were very conscience about what you were doing. So did you expect it's going to have this negative reaction?

G.F.H: I was surprised that there were lots of positive reactions, and I think it was really risky. First step was to start with the interview, to accept the invitation. I didn't go to NY times and say look I have this story do you want to publish it? No, they came to me of course, it always works like this. And if the journalist was as bad as some journalists in Germany it would have been a disaster.

A.Y: But some of our colleagues, some of your colleagues, accused you of being Chauvinist, or called you names. They were really angry.

G.F.H: It's their problem!

A.Y: Ok!

G.F.H: Most of them I don't know, and if [they call me these things] why not?! Maybe some people are happy when they can say oh I hate this pervert. It's easier for them to say this than to say OMG he's writing this music.

A.Y: Allow me to clarify it, so you're saying you have no problem by being called a Chauvinist?

G.F.H: Why Chauvinist?

A.Y: Like being too macho, machismo, perhaps?

Mollena Haas bursts out laughing with joy! We all laugh with her reaction!

A.Y: Ok that was self-explanatory!

G.F.H: But I think we have to be serious about this. I think most people have no idea what a dominant. Submissive relationship is. They believe it's as you said Machismo. It's definitely not. They think it's being brutal or something like that.

A.Y: Or anti-feminist was also another term that was used.

G.F.H: Well, my wife is very feminist. And she says it's her wish to live in this way, consciously. I love it, she loves it. Let's go back, I think there's a fundamental misunderstanding about what is submission and what is masochism. Masochism means that you cheat your body. If you get pain the body produces endorphin. And the masochist is somebody who learns to practice this technique to get this endorphin and accept the pain for that. And the job of a Sadist is to help them to get it. Sometimes the dominant person is the real submissive, because he has to check everything.

I compare a Sadistic session with cunnilingus. You have just to find how to do it, and as each man who has done it knows, if you only enjoy licking it's not a good success! You have to do it by finding the way that makes the woman happy. The same goes if your having sex with somebody of the same sex. It means to find out what the submissive person wants, and that's it.

And I would go one step forward, when you use words like Chauvinism or anti-feminism. My wife and I have agreed to have this life. We both are happy with it. I'm able to write a lot of music, somebody else is happy with this music. Why must somebody be annoyed with this I do not know. Somebody says you must not do it because it's not moral or whatnot. I would say this approach in my opinion is fascism. To say you must be normal and you have to be like this or you have to do like that. No, I do what I want! My wife also does what she wants. Several times in her seminars she's said she was looking for the right dominant for 17 years, until she found me. It's such an honor for me, I'm so happy about this!

A.Y: I merely quoted those terms from the articles or comments that were as reactions to your interview.

G.F.H: I found these comments themselves Chauvinist and racist often times.

I have to add, if you are a dominant, whether male or female, whether heterosexual, homosexual or bisexual, you are in a very good situation. Because there exists much

more submissive than dominants. Dominant means you should really love your partner that you feel what they need. And this is very human.

A.Y: As I quoted some of negative reactions from colleagues, of course there were many who were very relieved by this openness from you. But were you in any way affected by the consequences of your decision professionally? Did you lose some options because of coming out?

G.F.H: So far I've not had this experience. And if somebody says because you said this we stop the commission, I think they are to blame not me.

I was very unhappy, I was suffering because I had no success until the age of 36. But on the other side it has 2 important positive consequences. One is that it gave me time for studying, I was a student until 36 and I made my share of beginners mistakes, secretly not in public. And the other side I learned to accept the ignorance of my work. And if this comes again, OK!

A.Y: Politics, darkness, sexuality. Let's talk about politics in your music, and darkness. Of course we spoke a little bit about sexuality. These three elements are big part of your music, your operas specially, but also the other pieces. It seems some of these elements are becoming less, and some more evident on your music; maybe politic is getting less visible but then you recently wrote the solo trumpet piece. Since you're living in the U.S how these elements, been affected on your music, more specifically politics but you can talk about either of these three.

G.F.H: Let's start with the term *Darkness*, and black. The skin of my beloved wife is dark, she is black! And we sometimes have the discussion why to speak about the darkness of the music or a black character, because maybe black is not really something negative.

But politics, it's a very complicated question. I've tried several times to write political music, and frankly I think it never worked with the political statement. Let's say *In Vain*, where I'm writing about the shock that they are back again. You know they are now more back than ever! So I transform this in music. But this motive, what represents this motive, the elements of the beginning of *In Vain*, is much too beautiful for that. One of the problems with political music is that I can not say the simple sentence: *you are wrong*, in music! Because in that moment when I give it into music, I make it right. The biggest mistake in *In Vain* is, although being a very strong and beautiful strong, as a political statement it's very problematic.

Or on the opera *Nacht* which is about losing of utopia, it's composed like losing a beloved person. But these are two different things; you can not sing about losing an utopia in this kind of emotional way. I love the music, also the expression is correct, but the political message is not very clear.

Even *I can't breath*, the trumpet solo piece, if you analyze the music itself it's also problematic. The process of choking is a musical process and creates expressive music. But *I can't breath* is different. The reason I'm mentioning this piece, is because it's a kind of public support for *black lives matter* movement. It doesn't

matter what music I'm writing, the fact that I dedicated the piece to Eric Garner⁶ makes the piece working. When I became a member of Bavarian Academy of Fine Arts, this piece was performed and 450 important art and politic people were forced to meditate for 20 minutes about what happens on the black people in States. This side effect is important. I don't believe the music itself is able to convey a political message.

To this day I'm very conscience about political situation., to see what happens in Austria at the moment makes me feel terrible. There are similar developments in other countries. I don't know how it is in Estonia but I think there's a strong nationalism too. Of course on the States I'm very afraid, even if the disaster passes this year, who knows what happens in 4 years or 8 years.

And yet I still believe that art is able to open the emotions. If I write music like Atthis, that is a private music there's no political message in this piece. But it's also a music where the private emotions are on the center. And if you follow this, I dream, that those who listen to this music are more open to their emotions and to the emotions of other people.

A.Y: So you use the music as a political manifestation?

G.F.H: Well I do use manifestation in that moment when I use the material as I like it. The fact that I'm composing in the way that I use the material makes it clearly a demonstration of doing it, I think this is the message.

And I think it's fine! Imagine if music could really change the philosophy of somebody. Let's assume you go to a concert of Olivier Messian, you don't expect anything and you come out of hall and you are suddenly catholic! (laughs) It's good that music isn't able to do this! But what music of Messian is able to do, is to make you open for spiritual emotions. And this is not a direct message.

I want to explain that why Haas's political message on music maybe, maybe can work. The most terrible time of my life was the 6 months that I was a soldier in Austrian army. The whole day everyday I had this terrible *Muzak*⁷, but thanks God around 10 pm it became quiet and I could listen to radio. It was a time before internet and YouTube. The most important source to learn something about contemporary music was a radio show a 10 pm every Thursday. I remember then hearing for the first time the Sonatas and Interludes of John Cage. It was 1975, but I still can hear the beginning of the 1st Sonata [in my mind]. The message that I immediately understood is that here is a human being, the composer John Cage, who with his surrounding, the social pre-determined elements like a piano, does what he wants. His imagination of sound is stronger than the system. And this message was very important soldier, it gave a kind of utopia!

⁶ Eric Garner was one of the victims of Police brutality against African-Americans in 2014. He was unarmed, attacked by two officers and choked to death. The video of his fatal arrest, on which he's repeating "I can't breath" together with the decision of a Richmond County's grand jury not to indict the responsible officers, stirred anger and nationwide protests across United States. A.Y

⁷ Term generally used for generic or elevator music. A.Y

Maybe in this way John Cage is more political than Luigi Nono for instance. Maybe more people's lives changed after listening to Cage, than people became communist after listening to Nono!

A.Y: My last question is something I always wondered, do you have a hobby?! I heard you saying your wife lays Pokémon! Do you play something, or cook perhaps? How do you steam off as they say in U.S?!

G.F.H: At the moment no. I had some mushrooms in Austria, but there are very few mushrooms in New York! And those that exist are so different I really don't know them! (He continues jokingly) Of course I have hobbies but I don't speak about them, not even in New York Times! (Laughing) OF COURSE I'm talking about mushrooms!

But in all seriousness, I tried to make it clear, I would be very happy if you could explain this, I'm under impression that people assume we have torture chambers at our home and our walls are bloody, spanking or things like this. NO! Not at all! It is very intimate. If you see a couple in a sadomasochistic sex scene, they aftercare⁸. You rarely see vanilla couples⁹ being so full of love, so full of tenderness, so full of emotions, so sweet!

I really want to make it clear that if you compare the sadomasochism with real torture, is the same as comparing true love with rape. They have nothing in common, nothing!

⁸ Specially in BDSM the caressing and attending to the sexual partner. A.Y

⁹ Couples who practice conventional or normal sex, in oppose to BDSM or other kink. A.Y