

PETR EBEN'S PIANO WORKS AND THEIR SIGNIFICANCE IN 20TH-CENTURY PIANO LITERATURE

Terezie Bártová Fialová

Abstract

The article explores the lesser-known and rarely performed piano compositions of the Czech composer Petr Eben (1929–2007). The author aims to explore the reasons why these works are rarely performed, as well as to argue why they should be played. She also identifies which pieces are suitable for both piano students and concert pianists, and why. The article provides an introduction to Petr Eben's life, the distinctive features of his compositional style, and his overall relationship to music. It then offers a detailed description of his piano works, including interpretative challenges and other specific considerations. Furthermore, it discusses why these pieces are not commonly included in today's active pianists' repertoire. The third chapter presents the results of a sociological survey conducted among teachers at Czech conservatories on this topic. Additionally, the article includes a complete list of Eben's piano compositions, along with various practical information and comparative analyses. This study is the result of many years of engagement with Eben's piano oeuvre, specifically as part of the author's doctoral research at the Academy of Performing Arts in Prague.

Keywords

20th-century Czech composers – contemporary classical music – Petr Eben (1929–2007) – piano repertoire – repertoire choices – performance practice – piano pedagogy – Czech conservatory teachers

Introduction to the life and work of Petr Eben

For most professional musicians, Petr Eben needs no introduction. His name has come to represent a composer and performer whose artistry placed him among the most important composers of the second half of the twentieth century – not only in the Czech lands but throughout postwar Europe. Petr Eben (born January 22, 1929, Žamberk – died October 24, 2007, Prague) was born into an educated family of both Jewish and Christian heritage. Music always held an important place in the household, and he himself embraced it from an early age. His first instrument was the piano, but he soon discovered the magic of the organ, which became his lifelong destiny. At just eleven years old, he was already serving as a choirmaster at St. Vitus Church in Český Krumlov, where he moved with his parents and lived until he graduated from high school. Living in this picturesque South Bohemian town influenced him as a composer as well. “For many years, I found it ungrateful to be living in the middle of one of the most beautiful towns and not to raise my voice for its praise.”¹

¹ Vondrovicová, Kateřina. *Petr Eben*. Mainz: Schott, 2000, p.

Petr Eben studied piano and composition at the Academy of Performing Arts in Prague under some of the most outstanding teachers of his time, including František Rauch and Pavel Bořkovec. Just as the organ enchanted him, so too did the human voice, leading Eben to dedicate many of his most important works to choir and organ. He was known for his tireless work ethic, broad knowledge, humility, and a warm personality. As a teacher, he was immensely beloved by his students. For more than thirty years, he taught and lectured at the Department of Musicology at Charles University in Prague (however, because of his opposition to the regime, he held only the position of lecturer until the Velvet Revolution in 1989). In addition to teaching, he was also an outstanding and active concert pianist, a brilliant improviser, and a gifted speaker who always introduced his performances with grace and elegance. For several years, he also served as the director of Prague Spring's International Music Festival.

In 1944, owing to his partial Jewish heritage, he was expelled from secondary school and forced to spend nearly two years in the Buchenwald concentration camp. This experience marked him for life. He later described it, saying:

“I experienced fear and hunger and looked death directly in the face more than once. At that moment, I had to grapple with some big questions that a fifteen-year-old boy might otherwise never ask: Did I just have the misfortune to be born into the wrong times? Was it all just bad luck and coincidence? Or is there a deeper meaning behind it all, a greater hope? And is death really a wall where everything ends, or is there something else waiting for me beyond it? It was there that I learned to love life, to hope, and to believe.”²

Petr Eben married Šárka Hurníková, the sister of the prominent Czech composer Ilya Hurník. They lived a happy life together and had three sons, all of whom have pursued music both professionally and as a passion. Eben's compositional legacy stands among the most outstanding works of the second half of the 20th century. His style is original and compositionally sophisticated, abundant in intervals and polyphony, deeply human and passionate, yet profoundly spiritual at the same time. He never concealed his strong Christian faith. On the contrary, he professed it openly, despite the social and professional challenges it brought him. His faith gave profound meaning to his life, and during difficult times, he often sought solace in churches. This unique fusion of deeply spiritual and intensely earthly perspectives on life is precisely what makes Eben's work so distinctive. “Nothing human is foreign to me,” he once said.³

Two monographs have been published about Petr Eben's life and work – by Kateřina Vondrovicová (1995) and Eva Vitová (2004)⁴ – and a wealth of information can be found online. For this reason, the present article will focus primarily on his piano works, which form the subject of my upcoming dissertation.

² Vondrovicová, Kateřina. *Petr Eben*. Mainz: Schott, 2000, p.

³ *Ibid.*, p.

⁴ Vitová, Eva. *Petr Eben*. Praha: Baronet, 2004.



Petr Eben in 1968⁵

Petr Eben and piano: Its importance and an overview of his piano works

As noted in the previous section of this article, the piano was a truly fundamental instrument for Petr Eben. He began learning to play as a young boy, kept the piano by his side throughout his studies, and spent countless hours at it while composing. He could not imagine his life without it. Yet, due to his innate modesty, he never considered himself an outstanding pianist – though the preserved recordings primarily (but not exclusively) of his own works clearly demonstrate that he was. Nevertheless, because he was more closely connected to the organ, he composed far fewer works for piano over his lifetime. It is important to note that in this article, I am specifically referring to works intended for advanced and professional pianists. In terms of quality, these compositions are exceptionally valuable and, by their nature, stand as authentic concert repertoire. I will now examine these works in greater detail to provide a clearer sense of their character.

⁵ Petr Eben: 1968. (Source: File: Petr Eben (c. 1968).png – Wikimedia Commons. (1968, January 1). https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Petr_Eben_%28c._1968%29.png#Licensing)

Sonata in D-flat (1951)

This sonata comprises three movements: *Molto inquieto*, *Andante cantabile*, and *Toccata – Molto vivace*. It was premiered by Petr Eben himself in Prague in 1952. The sonata's central idea captures an insight common to young people – that life is an ongoing struggle, an inner battle with oneself. The piece also shows clear influences drawn from the folk songs of the Beskydy region. With the composer's approval, the third movement is often performed as an independent concert piece. It has a dance-like, slightly jazz-inflected character and is highly virtuosic from a technical standpoint. The *Toccata* earned distinguished recognition through the Ukrainian-born pianist Valentina Kameníková (1930–1989), who lived and worked in Czechoslovakia.

Pedagogical value of *Sonata in D-flat*: This work is well suited to an advanced pianist who is drawn to the Romantic style yet is equally prepared to engage with a modern structural framework, rich intervallic writing, and toccata-like textures, all of which call for heightened rhythmic sensitivity. I encourage students to approach the sonata as a whole rather than focusing solely on the *Toccata*, as its complete performance more clearly reveals the work's overall character and coherence. Through this work, the pianist can further develop the art of alternating between horizontal and vertical phrasing, refine nuanced pedalling, and enhance polyphonic control over individual voices. The approximate duration of the piece is twenty minutes.

The image shows a musical score excerpt for Petr Eben's *Sonata in D-flat*, first movement. The score is in 3/2 time and marked "Molto inquieto (Tempo I) M.M. = 120". It features a piano (*pp*) dynamic and includes markings for "poco" and "cres-". The score is divided into three systems, with the second system marked "poco" and the third system marked "mf" and "Tempo II".

Example 1. Petr Eben, *Sonata in D-flat*, excerpt from the first movement.

52

The image shows a page of musical notation for a piano piece. It consists of four systems of music, each with a grand staff (treble and bass clefs). The first system is marked with a measure number '52'. The notation includes various rhythmic values, accidentals, and dynamic markings. A prominent instruction 'sempre stacc' is written above the first system. Other dynamic markings include 'mp' (mezzo-piano) and 'pp' (pianissimo). The key signature has two flats (B-flat and E-flat), and the time signature is 3/4.

Example 2. Petr Eben, *Sonata in D-flat*, excerpt from the third movement.

***Concerto for Piano and Orchestra* (1960–61)**

This concerto, which debuted in 1962 with a performance by František Rauch and the Czech Philharmonic, sharply contrasts with the distinctly symphonic approach of Eben's first organ concerto by adopting a far more concertante and soloistic character. The first movement features two themes and opens with a highly energetic introduction that sets the tone for the entire movement, in which the composer allows no respite for the pianist. The second movement begins with an extended orchestral meditation without the piano; the piano enters only after some time, limited primarily to variations of trills. This includes an unusually large and gradual crescendo that culminates the movement, which then impressively softens and calms, evoking the image of a sea after a storm – for me, one of the most powerful moments in the composer's writing for piano. Eben forgoes the burden of

strong metric accents, favoring instead the free, continuous unfolding of extended melodic phrases. The trills in the second movement also serve an acoustic purpose, preventing the rapid fading of sustained tones. The third movement unfolds as a rondo brillante, concluding with all the instruments uniting on a sustained, single-barred C.

Pedagogical value of *Piano Concerto*: This work is strongly recommended for a soloist-level performer with substantial experience, ideally possessing a wide hand span and agile keyboard technique. The concerto demands significant technical proficiency, particularly at higher dynamic levels; preparation on chordal etudes is therefore advisable. At the same time, the performer develops the ability to combine polyphonic and chordal textures at a rapid tempo, with a particular focus on ornamentation, especially trills, executed across a variety of dynamic layers. The symphonic orchestral accompaniment further supports the performer's ability to navigate the score and comprehend large-scale musical structures. The approximate duration of the *Concerto* is twenty-five minutes.

***Octave Etude* (1965)**

This etude develops the technical skill of octave playing. Composed as a required study for the Carl Czerny Competition.

Pedagogical value of *Octave Étude*: As its title suggests, the piece is devoted to developing octave technique in both hands, practiced separately as well as together. At times, the octaves are alternated with ninths and sevenths or incorporated into four-note chords, thereby strengthening the performer's command of intervallic relationships. The étude is recommended for conservatory students and for all pianists wishing to refine their octave technique. The approximate duration of the work is five minutes.

***Letters to Milena* (1990)**

This work represents Eben's most ambitious, inventive, and atonal contribution to the solo piano repertoire. *Letters to Milena* is a five-movement piano cycle inspired by Franz Kafka's letters to Milena Jesenská. Eben, an avid admirer of Kafka's writings, was deeply moved by the mood of these letters, though he claimed they were impossible to set to music. Nevertheless, he ultimately did so, giving each of the five movements a title inspired by a Kafka quotation, which imparts to each its own distinctive character and atmosphere. The cycle is marked by striking musical austerity, with nervous, restless passages alternating with explosive, almost aggressive outbursts – unmistakably Kafkaesque in spirit.

Alongside his use of the middle, so-called prolongation pedal, Eben includes brief "post scriptum" measures that echo the postscripts found in Kafka's letters. Petr Eben entrusted the premiere of this work to the British pianist William Howard, which took place on May 22, 1990, at the Brighton Festival in England. The Czech premiere followed at the British Embassy in Prague on July 28, 1990.

Pedagogical value of *Letters to Milena*: The piano cycle *Letters to Milena* is intended for the highly advanced pianist with substantial concert experience. It emphasizes formal cohesion, detailed control of dynamics and agogics, technical mastery as well as the ability to shape sound with a flexible piano touch. The work also makes use of the tonal resources

of the so-called prolongation pedal. This cycle is especially challenging due to its detailed and unconventional phrasing. It is particularly effective to combine the performance of this work with a reading of Franz Kafka's text, creating an engaging interplay between music and literature. The approximate duration of the composition is eighteen minutes.

Franz Kafka (1883–1924) ranks among the foremost and most influential writers of the twentieth century. A Czech writer of Jewish heritage who wrote in German, Kafka met the journalist and translator Milena Jesenská. Their brief but intense relationship is documented through the many letters they exchanged.

To provide a clearer sense of Kafka's style, which Eben set to music in this composition, a short excerpt from *Letters to Milena* is presented below:

“Sometimes I feel we have a room with two doors on opposite sides and each of us is holding his doorknob and, at the bat of one person's eyelash, the other jumps behind his door, and now if the first person utters a single word, the second is sure to close the door behind him, so that he can no longer be seen. He is bound to reopen the door, though, since it may be a room impossible to leave. If only the first person weren't exactly like the second, then he would be calm and pretend not to care in the slightest about the second; he would slowly go about ordering this room the way he would any other. But instead, he repeats the same thing at his door; occasionally, even both people are standing behind their doors at the same time and the beautiful room is empty. Agonizing misunderstandings are the result. Milena, you complain about some letters that you turn them in all directions and nothing falls out, but if I'm not mistaken those are precisely the ones where I was so close to you, my blood so restrained, restraining your own, so deep in the forest, so resting in rest, that nothing needed to be said, except perhaps that you can see the sky through the trees, that's all. And these words are repeated an hour later, and there really is “not a single word which hasn't been well weighed.” But this only lasts for a moment at the longest, the trumpets of sleepless night will soon sound again.

Consider too, Milena, how I have come to you, the 38-year journey I have traveled (and because I'm Jewish, another, much longer one as well) and if, at what appears to be an accidental bend in the road, I see you, whom I never expected to see, especially now, so late, then, Milena, I cannot cry out, nor does anything inside me cry out, nor will I utter 1000 foolish words, they are not inside me (I am excluding a different foolishness which I have in abundance) and I only realize I am kneeling because I see your feet right before my eyes and I am caressing them. And do not demand sincerity from me, Milena. No one can demand it more than I do myself, and even so, I'm sure that many things escape me, maybe even everything. But cheering me on during this hunt does not cheer me up; on the contrary, it paralyzes me, everything suddenly becomes a lie, and the pursued become the hunters. I am on such a dangerous road, Milena. You are standing fast by a tree, young, beautiful, your eyes are subduing the sorrows of the world with their brightness. We're playing *škatule, škatule, hejbejte se*,* I'm creeping in the shade from one tree to the next, I'm halfway there, you call to me, pointing out the dangers, wanting to encourage me, you're scared by my faltering step, you remind me (me!) how serious the game is—I can't make it, I fall down, already prostrate. I can't listen to both the terrible

*) Alle Sechzehntel rhythmisch gleich / All semiquavers rhythmically equal

Example 3. Petr Eben. *Letters to Milena*, excerpt from the first movement.

più f *ff*
pp *P delicato* *sim.*

Example 4. Petr Eben. *Letters to Milena*, excerpt from the fifth movement.

inner voices and to you simultaneously, but I can listen to what the voices are saying and confide this in you, trusting you like no other person in the world.”⁶

Veni Creator Spiritus, a concertante fantasy for piano (1992)

This work is a detailed written-out improvisation drawing from the Gregorian chant *Veni Creator Spiritus* (an invocation to the Holy Spirit).

Pedagogical value of *Veni Creator Spiritus*: This piece is suitable for both students and concert pianists and provides an excellent introduction to Petr Eben’s piano writing and compositional approach. Though relatively short, *Veni Creator Spiritus* is carefully structured, offering a variety of contrasting textures and a compelling conclusion. The pianist develops strategies for addressing unconventional technical challenges, including aleatoric passages and the close-hand textures that Eben occasionally employs. The approximate duration of the piece is six to seven minutes.

The image displays a musical score for Petr Eben's 'Veni Creator Spiritus'. The score is written for piano and features several aleatoric techniques. The tempo is marked 'Listesso tempo, ma tranquillamente'. The piece begins with a piano (*p*) dynamic and a mezzo-piano (*mp*) dynamic. The right hand is marked 'P cantabile (independente)' and the left hand is marked 'pp'. The score includes several passages with aleatoric techniques, indicated by the number '5' and '6' in boxes, suggesting improvisation or chance. The score is divided into three systems, each with a treble and bass clef staff. The first system shows a complex texture with overlapping lines and dynamic markings. The second system continues the aleatoric passages with a '5' in a box. The third system shows further development of the aleatoric techniques with a '5' and '6' in a box. The score concludes with a final cadence.

Example 5. Petr Eben. *Veni Creator Spiritus*, use of the aleatoric techniques.

⁶ Schocken Books. (1990). Kafka to Milena Jesenská. https://www.kkoworld.com/kitablar/frans_kafka_milenaya_mektublar-eng.pdf

***Universi* (2002)**

A single-movement concert work composed as the required piece for the piano competition at the 56th International Music Festival Prague Spring. The composition is based on the Gregorian gradual for the first Sunday of Advent, incorporating the melismatic ascending verse *Via tuas, Domine*. This four-part work features contrasting rhapsodic themes within a single movement.

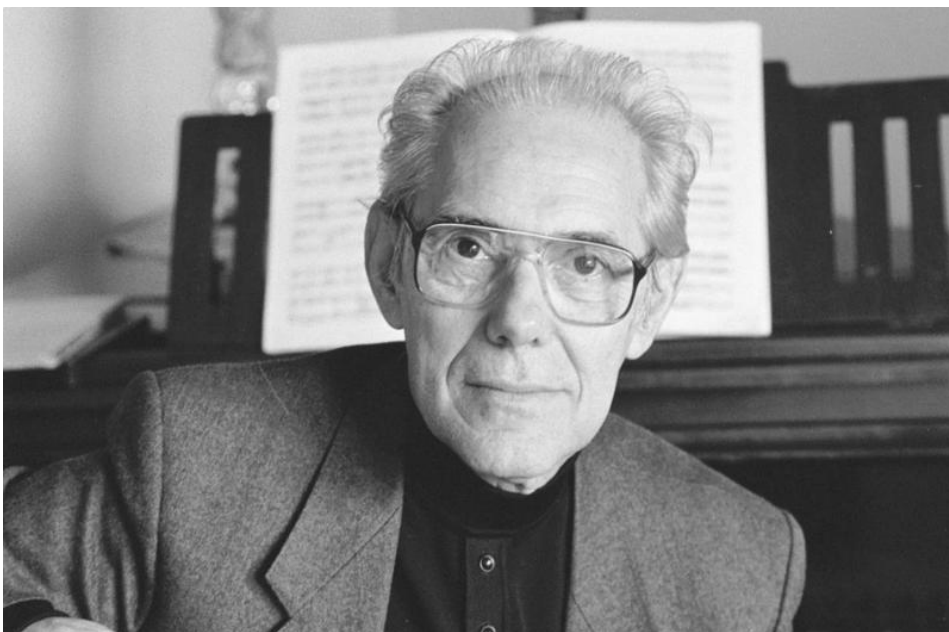
Pedagogical value of *Universi*: In scope, *Universi* is comparable to *Veni Creator Spiritus* and is suitable for both students and concert pianists. It emphasizes polyphony and voice leading, as well as the construction and shaping of phrases. The approximate duration of the composition is seven to eight minutes.

To complete this overview, I would like to mention two additional piano cycles:

***Small Portraits* (1968) and *Differences and Contrasts* (1969)**

These cycles occupy a borderline position between concertante and educational works due to their technical demands. For this reason, I do not consider them part of Petr Eben's purely concert repertoire and therefore, they are not a primary focus of this analysis. Nevertheless, they are certainly excellent works for talented pianists roughly between the ages of 10 and 15 who wish to experience performing Petr Eben's music. Particularly in *Small Portraits*, each movement bears a descriptive title – such as Restless, Distract, Mild, Meditative, Affectionate, Resolved, Courageous, among others – offering vivid character sketches that support the interpretive development of young pianists. The complete list of Petr Eben's piano works, including all instructional pieces, is provided at the end of this paper.

Pedagogical value of *Small Portraits* and *Differences and Contrasts*: Both of these cycles are characteristic of the transition from beginner to more advanced piano repertoire. Neither the technical nor the musical demands are particularly high; phrases within individual movements are shorter and clearer, so there is less emphasis on maintaining long-form structure. Through this repertoire, the pianist gains familiarity with Eben's lightly polyphonic writing and learns to convey the narrative or programmatic intent of each movement. It is suggested to begin with two or three selected movements before gradually including the others. The approximate duration of the cycles is ten to fifteen minutes.



Petr Eben in 1995⁷

Petr Eben studied piano at the Academy of Performing Arts in Prague under the distinguished pianist František Rauch, while simultaneously pursuing composition studies under Pavel Bořkovec. He gratefully dedicated his graduation composition, the *Concerto for Piano and Orchestra*, to his mentor František Rauch. In 1962, the concerto was premiered by the Czech Philharmonic under the direction of Karel Ančerl, featuring František Rauch as the solo pianist. Eben was deeply honored and genuinely pleased that Rauch had committed to premiering the work even before its completion. Throughout his life, he felt a profound debt to the piano, an instrument to which he owed so much. It is worth noting that this concerto was only the second concertante composition of his career, written ten years after his first major piano work, the *Sonata in D-flat* (1951).

I would like to take a moment to focus on the *Concerto for Piano and Orchestra*, since it was the first solo piano work by Petr Eben that I studied. This piece raised numerous questions for me and sparked a lasting interest in his piano music – an interest that ultimately led to my doctoral research on this topic at the Academy of Performing Arts in Prague, in the field of Performance and Performance Theory.

When I began studying the *Concerto for Piano and Orchestra* in 2018, I was struck by how rarely it had been performed since its creation. I was able to trace only a few performances,

⁷ Petr Eben 1995 (Source: Television, C. (2023, November 8). Documentary: Petr Eben. IMZ International Music + Media Centre. <https://news.imz.at/industry-news/news/documentary-petr-eben-12055804/>)

none of which were documented, so the concerto never found its place in the broader awareness of the piano community. To this day, there are only two existing recordings: the first from the 1962 premiere (František Rauch with Karel Ančerl and the Czech Philharmonic, released by Supraphon) and a later radio broadcast (Božena Steinerová with Ondřej Kukul and the Prague Radio Symphony Orchestra). Naturally, this raises the question of why this is the case. The concerto is undeniably of high artistic merit – original and, in many aspects, unique. Moreover, when considering Czech piano concertos, it would be highly appropriate to expand the practical performance repertoire beyond the continually presented works of Antonín Dvořák and Bohuslav Martinů (and only occasionally those of Luboš Fišer or Pavel Bořkovec).

In my opinion, there are several key factors behind this situation, most of which – apart from point two – also apply to Eben's solo piano works:

- **Difficulty:** The piano part is written with the highest technical demands and is extremely challenging to master. Eben frequently calls for a wide hand span, incorporates chordal and technically demanding passages, makes extensive use of forceful fortissimo dynamics, and allows little opportunity for rest. The texture is highly layered – perhaps echoing his practice on the organ's multiple manuals – and is richly inspired by chorale writings, especially those of Gregorian origin. The concerto features large and frequent leaps, chordal rhythmic structures with shifting meters, and alternating strong and weak beats. Essential requirements include considerable manual freedom and physical stamina on the part of the pianist.
- **Expanded symphonic ensemble:** The orchestra requires a larger ensemble than a typical orchestral setup, making performances both acoustically challenging (due to hall requirements) and economically demanding (as additional musicians must be hired for the performance).
- **Copyright and performance fees:** Each performance entails paying royalties to the Czech Copyright Protection Association (OSA) until 2077 (seventy years after the composer's death). Performers must also pay rental fees for the performance materials, which are owned by the publisher Schott Music.
- **Limited recognition and outreach:** Petr Eben's music suffers from being heavily "pigeonholed"; the vast majority of the musical world knows him only as a composer of organ and choral music. To a certain extent, this is understandable, since a significant portion of his output indeed belongs to these two areas. Nevertheless, many of Petr Eben's other works – including his piano compositions – have therefore been overlooked and neglected.
- **Availability of sheet music:** As I have already mentioned, Petr Eben is – and will remain for a long time – "a protected" composer, and his works are therefore subject to copyright fees. collected by Czech Copyright Protection Association (OSA). This means that the sheet music cannot be downloaded from the internet (at least not legally!) and certainly cannot be performed without proper licensing – a point that applies especially to the *Concerto for Piano and Orchestra*. The availability of materials for the piano concerto in Czech libraries is very limited, if not practically non-existent (with just a few piano reductions available), and the orchestral parts can be obtained only by paying rental fees to the publisher Schott Music. For the solo piano works I listed above, there is the option to order them from various online

bookstores. Works composed after 1970 have been published by Bärenreiter and Schott Music. Unfortunately, the *Sonata in D-flat* from 1951 and the aforementioned *Concerto for Piano and Orchestra* have not been reissued. The *Sonata in D-flat* is only available for borrowing from the libraries of the Prague Conservatory and the Academy of Performing Arts in Prague.

As I noted above, points 1, 3, 4, and 5 apply both to the *Concerto for Piano and Orchestra* and to Petr Eben's solo piano works. In these sections, I have attempted to summarize the main reasons why I believe Eben's piano compositions are neither a regular nor a particularly rare part of the repertoire of Czech pianists. In the following chapter, where I analyze specific data from my sociological survey of piano teachers, I further explore this topic through the individual questionnaire items.

The Complete Piano Works of Petr Eben

(arranged chronologically; artistic works are in bold; instructional cycles are in italics)

Year	Title (English)	Title (Czech)	Type	Scoring	Duration
1951	Sonata in D-flat	<i>Sonata in Des</i>	Artistic	Piano solo	ca. 25'
1955	<i>Cuckoo, where have you been</i>	<i>Žežuličko, kde jsi byla</i>	Instructional	Piano solo	ca. 2'30"
1955	<i>The world of children</i>	<i>Svět malých</i>	Instructional (20 pieces)	Piano solo	ca. 10'
1959–60	<i>One hundred folk songs for piano</i> (expanded by <i>Folk Songs and Carols</i>)	<i>Sto lidových písní pro klavír</i>	Instructional (folk song arrangements)	Piano solo	variable
1960	<i>Spring motif</i>	<i>Jarní motiv</i>	Instructional	Piano solo	ca. 3'30"
1960–61	Concerto for piano and orchestra	<i>Koncert pro klavír a orchestr</i>	Artistic	Piano & orchestra	ca. 26'
1963/ 1978–79	<i>The little green forest</i>	<i>Hájičku zelený</i>	Instructional	Piano four hands	ca. 12'
1964	<i>Four winter pictures</i>	<i>Čtyři zimní obrázky</i>	Instructional (4 pieces)	Piano solo	ca. 10'
1965	Octave etude	<i>Oktávová etuda</i>	Artistic (étude)	Piano solo	ca. 2'
1968	<i>Small portraits</i>	<i>Malé portréty</i>	Instructional (7 short pieces)	Piano solo	ca. 9'30"
1969	<i>Differences and contrasts</i>	<i>Rozdíly a protiklady</i>	Instructional (movement etudes)	Piano solo	ca. 8'30"
1971	<i>Let's play with pictures</i>	<i>Hrajeme si na obrázky</i>	Instructional	Piano solo	ca. 2'
1990	Letters to Milena	<i>Dopisy Mileně</i>	Artistic (5-movement cycle)	Piano solo	ca. 18'

Year	Title (English)	Title (Czech)	Type	Scoring	Duration
1992	Veni Creator Spiritus	-	Artistic (concertante fantasy)	Piano solo	ca. 6'
2002	Universi	-	Artistic (single- movement piece)	Piano solo	ca. 7'

Czech Contemporary Piano Repertoire: A Survey of Conservatory Teachers

Since the start of my studies, I have been interested in whether solo piano works are performed and whether they appear in the repertoire of students at Czech conservatories. It is within these institutions that pianists most often develop their relationship with specific composers, as well as with modern and contemporary music. A pianist's choice of repertoire shapes their future artistic direction, whether they later follow a teaching or performing path. It is important not to shy away from lesser-known but highly valuable works – pieces through which students truly grow as pianists and that genuinely help them 'learn something.' Petr Eben's piano compositions certainly belong to this category. They support technical proficiency, phrasing, memory, choral and polyphonic awareness, and demand a variety of touches as well as detailed pedaling work.

However, after conducting a brief informal survey, I found that these works are unfamiliar not only to students but also to teachers. In fact, they are hardly known at all. For this reason, I decided to conduct a detailed sociological survey among piano teachers at Czech conservatories, asking them questions about composers from the second half of the 20th century. The questionnaire was anonymous, and to avoid revealing my particular interest in Petr Eben's works – and thus influencing responses in his favor – I included his name alongside several other notable Czech composers from the same period. Along with Petr Eben, I inquired about Luboš Sluka (*1928), Luboš Fišer (1935–1999), Ilja Hurník (1922–2013), and Viktor Kalabis (1923–2006). All of these composers contributed piano works during a similar timeframe, which is why I selected them for comparison.

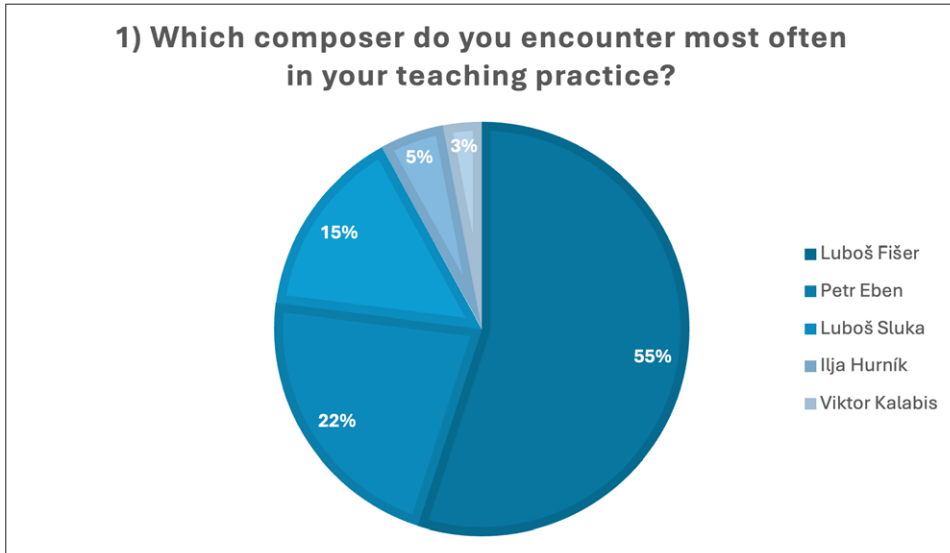
I reached out to 76 piano pedagogues who currently teach piano as a primary subject at Czech conservatories. This accounts for 97.4% of all active piano teachers, with contact details unavailable for just 2 of the 78 in total.

In particular, teachers from the following conservatories were contacted: Plzeň Conservatory, Teplice Conservatory, Janáček Conservatory in Ostrava, Conservatory of the Evangelical Academy in Olomouc, Kroměříž Conservatory, Brno Conservatory, Prague Conservatory, Jaroslav Ježek Conservatory, Pardubice Conservatory, and International Conservatory Prague.

A total of 63 responses were received, meaning that 82.9% of those contacted participated in the survey. The questionnaire was conducted between August 20 and September 30, 2024. To clarify the results, each question includes a pie chart displaying the percentage breakdown.

Question 1

(Participants could select only one option.)



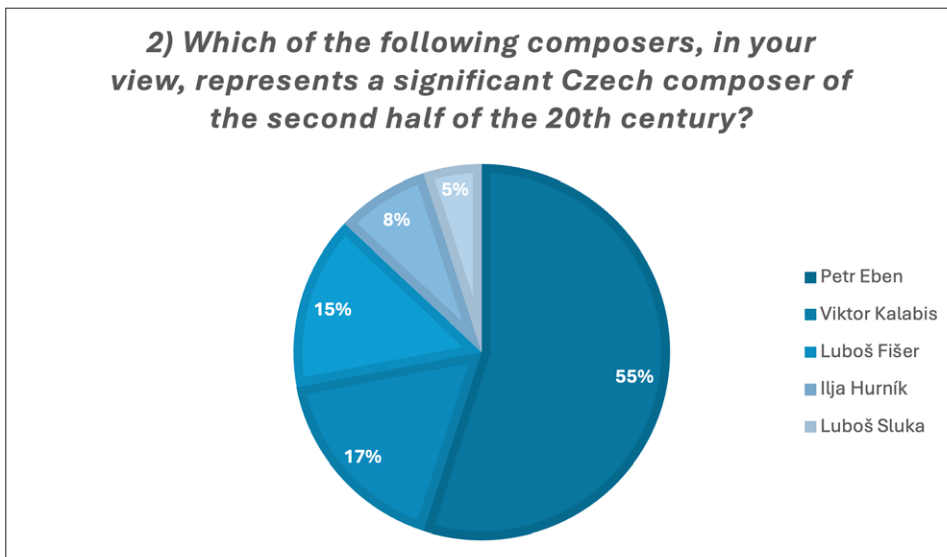
Results:

- 55% Luboš Fišer
- 22% Petr Eben
- 15% Luboš Sluka
- 5% Ilja Hurník
- 3% Viktor Kalabis

These results clearly show that Luboš Fišer is the composer most often included in the repertoire of students at Czech conservatories. Petr Eben ranked second, with 22% of the votes. (I address this point in more detail in the commentary on Chart 4)

Question 2

Which of the following composers, in your view, represents a significant Czech composer of the second half of the 20th century?



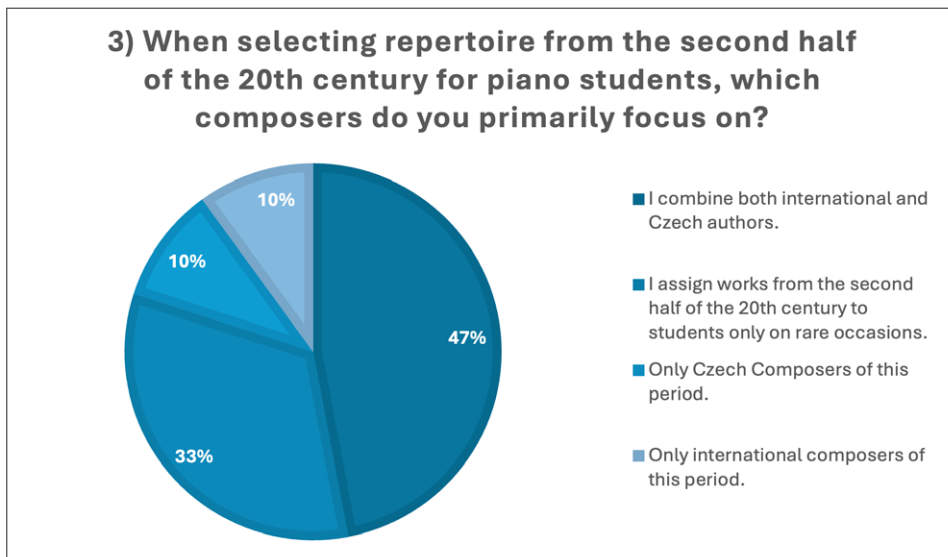
Results:

- 55% Petr Eben
- 17% Viktor Kalabis
- 15% Luboš Fišer
- 8% Ilja Hurník
- 5% Luboš Sluka

The outcome here is particularly interesting to me, especially in comparison with Question 1. They show that a composer's reputation for significance, whether on the Czech or international stage, by no means guarantees success in quantitative terms. These findings clearly show that Petr Eben is unquestionably regarded as an important figure – more than half of the respondents (55%) identified him without hesitation as a major composer. However, barely a quarter of teachers (22%) actually choose his piano works when selecting repertoire for their students. We must therefore find the reasons why this is the case and consider whether it is possible to influence the repertoire choices of piano teachers and their students in favor of Petr Eben's piano works in the future.

Question 3

When selecting repertoire from the second half of the 20th century for piano students, which composers do you primarily focus on?

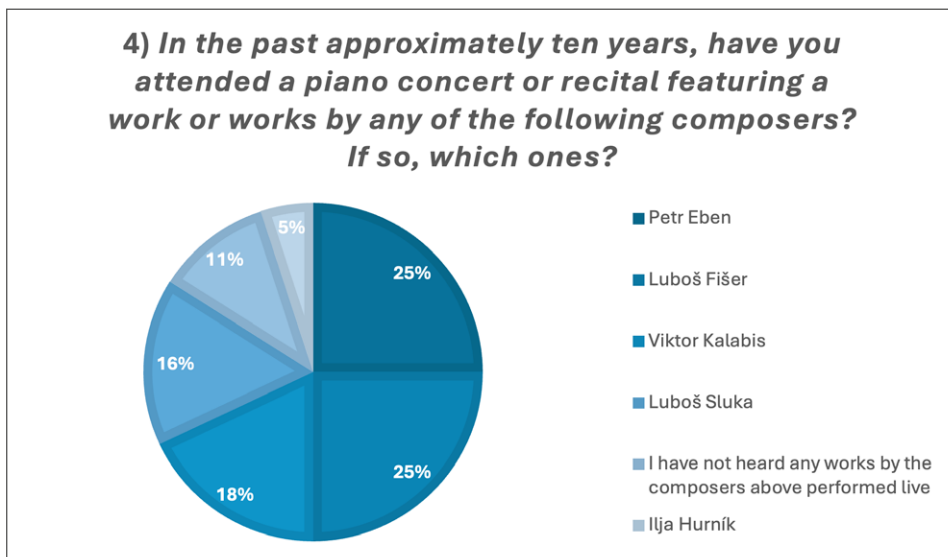


Results:

- 47% of teachers combine works by both foreign and Czech composers from the second half of the 20th century
- 33% of teachers rarely assign pieces from this period to their students (!)
- 10% of teachers assign works exclusively by Czech composers from this period
- 10% of teachers assign works exclusively by foreign composers from this period

The second figure (33%) is somewhat alarming, as it reveals that over a quarter of conservatory piano teachers essentially do not engage with works composed after 1950, whether by Czech or international composers. This leads me to believe that, in a way, musical development is being limited, and young pianists are not receiving a sufficient overview of works composed over the past seventy years.

Question 4



Results:

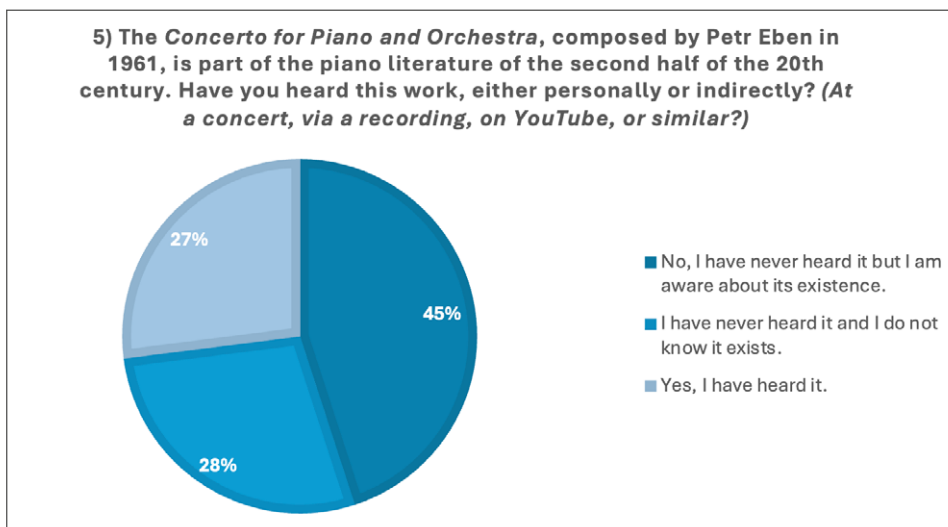
- 25% of respondents heard piano works by Petr Eben (*this result gives me hope that Eben's works have not entirely disappeared and that there is still a foundation to build on*). I assume these were mostly concerts or recitals by Czech pianists, likely held in the Czech Republic, though this detail was ultimately not of primary importance.
- 25% heard piano works by Luboš Fišer
- 18% heard works by Viktor Kalabis
- 16% heard works by Luboš Sluka
- 11% have not heard any works by the composers above performed live
- 5% heard works by Ilja Hurník

In connection with this question, I would like to note that Luboš Fišer's works are the most popular among students in the Czech Republic (as my survey also confirmed – see Question 1). His compositional style is completely different from Eben's – Fišer leans toward romanticism, expressiveness, and a passionate style that he consistently maintains, which is typical of a composer known for a large number of film scores from the 1960s through the 1980s. This helps explain his greater popularity and the more frequent performance of his works, as his music became well known through famous Czech films (for example, *Oil Lamps* directed by Juraj Herz, *The Death of the Beautiful Deer* directed by Karel Kachyňa, among others). Eben's style is mostly stripped of romantic elements (with the possible exception of his *Sonata in D-flat* from 1951 – an early piece written when he was just twenty-four years old). His music engages deeply with life's spiritual dimension, in conjunction with

a humble human approach. One can hear a clear inspiration from Gregorian chant; he often incorporated his own improvisations, which he would later transcribe into written form.

Might we then assume that a romantic young person on the threshold of adulthood would be more drawn to romantic expressiveness than to Gregorian chant idioms?

Question 5

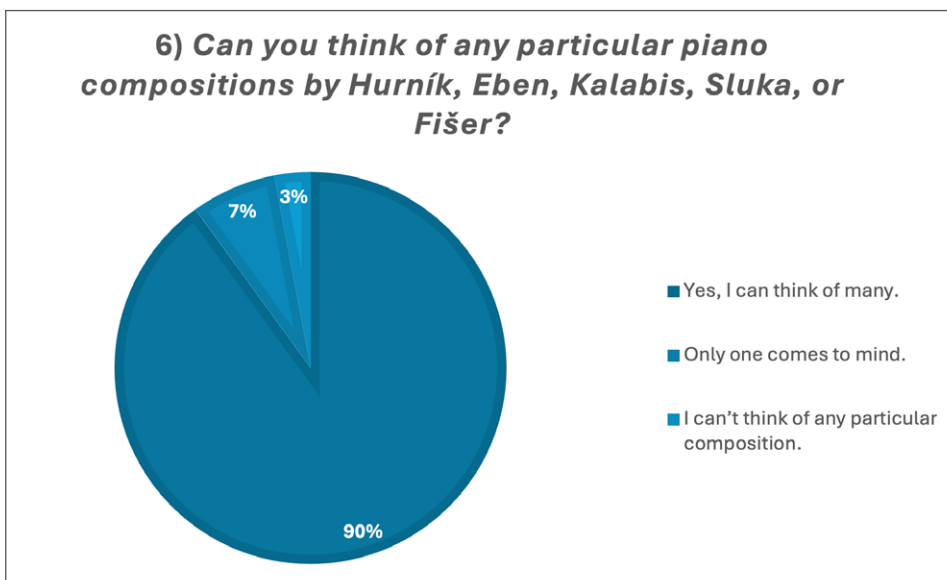


Results:

- 45% of participants have not heard the piece but know of its existence
- 28% of participants have heard the piece
- 27% of respondents have never heard the piece nor knew it had ever been written

I am surprised that more than a quarter of respondents have heard Petr Eben’s *Concerto for Piano and Orchestra*, whether in a live performance, on a recording, on the radio, or via YouTube. Based on my initial estimates, I expected this figure to be significantly lower. Since 2018, when I began actively studying, performing, and researching the *Concerto for Piano and Orchestra*, I have discussed this work with many musicians and pianists, and its existence has almost always come as a surprise to them – just as it once did to me.

Question 6



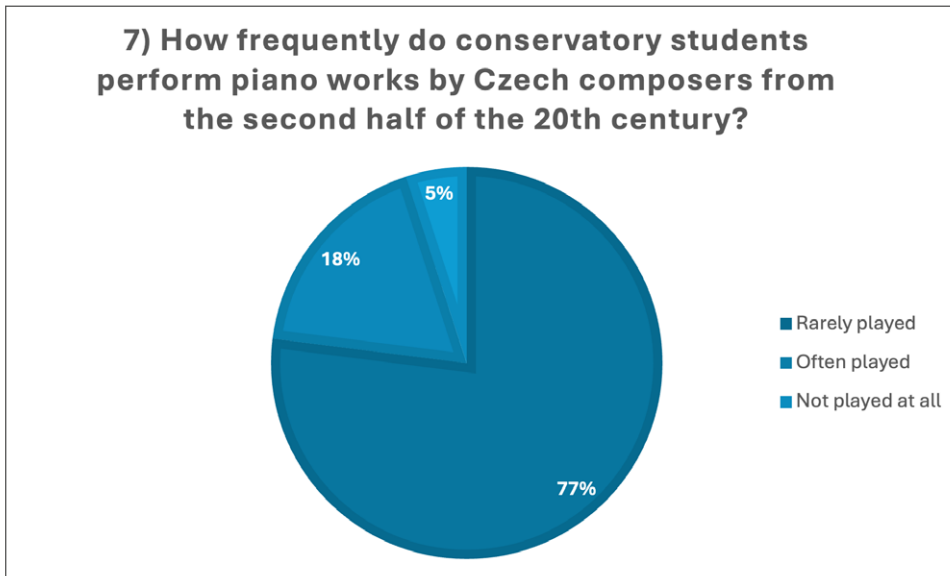
Results:

- 90% of respondents said they could think of many compositions
- 7% of respondents said they could think of only one composition
- 3% of respondents said they could not think of any compositions

I am very pleased that compositions by Czech composers are predominantly well known among the teaching staff.

Question 7

(For context, conservatory students in the Czech Republic are typically 15–21 years old.)

**Results:**

- 77% of teachers reported that such works are generally rarely programmed
- 18% of teachers reported that they are, on the contrary, performed very often
- 5% of teachers reported that they are not performed at all

The final question of the survey was designed to determine how frequently piano works by Czech composers from the second half of the 20th century are chosen in comparison with works from other musical periods.

Conclusion

What final thoughts can be offered on the topic of Petr Eben's piano music? From the standpoint of a concert pianist, I can confirm that Eben's piano works were a true discovery for me in every aspect – both as original and distinctive contributions to the 20th-century piano repertoire and as exemplary expressions of Eben's unique compositional style, which can offer a valuable source of enrichment for pianists of all levels. The availability of these piano works allows us to engage with Eben's music firsthand through performance, not merely as listeners of his organ, choral, or other compositions. Over the course of fifty-one years – from his first piano composition in 1951 to his last in 2002 – we witness the composer's remarkable development and growth, while he consistently retains a distinctive compositional voice, identifiable within just a few measures. I am therefore even more confident that Eben's piano works deserve their place on the concert stages of pianists across all generations.

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I would like to thank all of the respondents for taking part in my survey (Prague, September 25, 2025).

Ethics statement

I hereby declare that I take full responsibility for the originality of this work, its factual accuracy and formal quality, and for adhering to ethical principles. I further declare that I am the sole holder of the copyright to this work.

About the author

Terezie Bártová Fialová (performing under the artistic name Terezie Fialová) is a Czech concert pianist, chamber musician, teacher, and music organizer. She completed her piano studies at the Academy of Performing Arts in Prague with Ivan Klánský and her chamber music studies with Niklas Schmidt at the Hochschule für Musik und Theater Hamburg. She broadened her education through numerous masterclasses held across Europe as well as the USA, and she is an active performer, especially alongside her husband, the internationally recognized cellist Jiří Bárta. She has had a personal connection to the music of Petr Eben since her youth, which deepened through meeting Eben's wife, Šárka Ebenová, and through her long-standing involvement with the Eben Trio – a piano trio that continues the legacy of the original Petr Eben Piano Trio.

✉ tfialova@icloud.com