

# **Four Studies on Basic Rows**

## **for Piano**

**STEFAN WOLPE**

**Critical Edition by  
AUSTIN CLARKSON and  
DAVID HOLZMAN**

*This edition prepared under the auspices of  
the Stefan Wolpe Society, Inc.  
[www.wolpe.org](http://www.wolpe.org)*

## PREFACE by Austin Clarkson

As a young pianist and composer in Berlin in the 1920s, Stefan Wolpe steeped himself in all things new. He performed late sonatas of Scriabin and early pieces of Arnold Schoenberg and Béla Bartók. He was a member of the circle of students around Ferruccio Busoni and the Melos circle of Hermann Scherchen. He attended premieres of Alban Berg and Anton Webern, visited Dada exhibitions, and joined the *Novembergruppe* of socialist artists. He believed that twelve-tone music was the music of the future, but as a Tolstoyan socialist he was critical of the bourgeois aura of the Viennese. Modern music, he thought, should be an agent for individual and communal liberation and thus accessible to unlettered and cultivated listeners alike. And yet he rejected Socialist Realism, the doctrine that music for the proletariat should be tonal, uncomplicated, and optimistic. He described such music as “dull pap, the diatonic barrel organ of the revolution.”<sup>1</sup> He regarded tonality and dodecaphony as nodes of an inclusive spectrum of musical resources, rather than as mutually exclusive systems. Thus, for Wolpe, twelve-tone music need not exclude tonality.

Wolpe declared that his goal as a composer was to “educate young musicians, guide older ones, and write the kind of music that, through the dialectic of its effects, shocks, influences, and teaches people to think about it.”<sup>2</sup> He taught that dialectics was not only a method of thought and argument, but was also a description of dramaturgical behavior.<sup>3</sup> Indeed, Wolpe’s music engages disparate voices, some tonal, some twelve-tone in lively and vigorous debate. Through the drama of such engagements, Wolpe sought to raise the consciousness of listeners and free them from habitual attitudes so they would learn to think musically for themselves.

The compositions that survived from Wolpe’s early years consisted for the most part of pieces for solo piano and song cycles and cantatas on poetry by Hölderlin, Kleist, Rilke, and Tagore. In 1927 he turned to musical theater, and two years later gave up his career as composer and pianist of concert music to join the workers’ music movement led by Hanns Eisler. Between 1929 and 1933 Wolpe wrote dozens of marching songs for Communist unions, agitprop troupes and dance and theatre companies. Such songs

as “*Es wird die neue Welt geboren*” [A new world is being born] were sung internationally from collections published in Moscow. And yet, while directing music for the theater company *Truppe 1931*, Wolpe kept his hand in as a composer. *March and Variations for Two Pianos* (1932–1933) was a stirring culmination of his Berlin years.

In March 1933 Wolpe escaped from Nazi-ruled Berlin with the help of the Romanian pianist and Dalcroze teacher Irma Schoenberg (1902–1985). After a brief visit to Russia, he made his way to Vienna, and during the fall of that year had several meetings with Anton Webern. When the Austrian police threatened to deport him back to Germany, Irma brought him to her home in Bucharest. Her parents had connections in British Mandate Palestine and they obtained papers to immigrate. In the spring of 1934 Stefan and Irma arrived in Jerusalem and were married.

The shock of exile affected Wolpe severely. Treatment by a psychoanalyst helped him recover, as did a course on conducting with Hermann Scherchen at Brussels. Returning to Jerusalem in the fall of 1935, Wolpe began again to compose. Irma recalled that “Some genie came back and took him, and it was amazing to watch. It didn’t happen right away, but gradually he started to work with the utmost intensity on his way of handling twelve tones. He was involved in every fibre, physically in agony.”<sup>4</sup> Between October 1935 and March of the following year, Wolpe composed “*Vier Studien über Grundreihen*.”<sup>5</sup>

Reflecting on the *Four Studies on Basic Rows*, Wolpe said his aim was “To make out of little much; to make out of the neutral the individual; to permeate the piece with one interval and its multiples; to make a large body of material out of one cell; to make out of one interval a spectrum of related intervals; to make the interval a total theater of its own, each new appearance real unto itself.”<sup>6</sup> This approach to musical material drew on Wolpe’s experience at the Bauhaus. In the early 1920s Wolpe traveled often to Weimar and sat in on the preliminary course of Johannes Itten. Itten assigned his students texture studies constructed of found objects in order to explore contrasts of large-small, much-little, thick-thin, etc. For Wolpe, “These objects became our friends, meaning we really extended our eyes, like humble people, to the little unseen things which became formal elements

1. Stefan Wolpe, *Diary II*, p. 382. Stefan Wolpe Collection, Paul Sacher Foundation, Basel. (SWC)

2. Stefan Wolpe, “Referat 1: Weltzentrum für jüdische Musik (1938),” *Musik-Konzepte* 150 (July, 2010), p. 27.

3. Herbert Brün, “Recollections of Stefan Wolpe,” [www.wolpe.org/page10/page10.html#Herbert%20Brün](http://www.wolpe.org/page10/page10.html#Herbert%20Brün).

4. Irma Wolpe Rademacher, “Recollections of Stefan Wolpe,” [www.wolpe.org/page10/page10.html#Irma%20Wolpe%20Rademacher](http://www.wolpe.org/page10/page10.html#Irma%20Wolpe%20Rademacher).

5. He began a fifth study but did not complete it. See Sources E and F.

6. Stefan Wolpe, “Frances Parker lecture (1963),” *Contemporary Music Review* 27, 2/3: 195–196 (2008).

7. Stefan Wolpe, “Lecture on Dada (1962).” In Thomas Phleps (ed.), *Das Ganze ist überall; Vorträge über Musik 1940–1962* (Saabrücken: Pfau, 2011), p. 151.

## NOTES FOR THE PERFORMER by David Holzman

As Austin Clarkson has shown, the *Four Studies* are a synthesis of many stylistic influences. Wolpe underlines this transformation with some of the most daunting works he ever composed. Whether it is the rapid-fire chords, the dizzying passagework, the rhythmic complexities, or the interweaving lines, the performer needs both physical and mental endurance to learn and perform them. The *Studies* are as challenging to the listener as to the performer, so that one hearing will not suffice. The performer must master the score so fully that the spontaneity, power, and nuanced emotions are palpable to audiences, inspiring them to listen again and again, thus making what was forbidding more friendly. There are four central challenges to achieving this mastery: (1) passagework, whether in single lines, double-notes or chordal motions; (2) rhythm; (3) clarity of texture; and (4) sensitivity to the overall shape. While the challenges differ in degree for each Study, they are present throughout.

### On Form

The shapes of the first three Studies are not easy to grasp. Sections either melt into each other imperceptibly, or else jolt with sudden injections of utterly contrasting material. On closer familiarity, performers will feel the pushes and pulls of the inner structure, allowing the listener to grasp the solid shape beneath the chaotic surface. The *Passacaglia*, by contrast, can be grasped readily as a clearly articulated five-part form. All four Studies have an arch-like symmetry. While the mirror shapes are seldom emphasized, they create degrees of balance and tension. Sections may return varied and in reverse order and may culminate in climaxes of great violence and harmonic stasis, as in the *Sonata "Stehende Musik"* from the Berlin years. Studies No. 1 and No. 2 follow this pattern and come to relatively quick and quiet conclusions. No. 3 allows for no such grace. It keeps growing in an overwhelming and seemingly misshapen mass until the coda brings it to a close. Wolpe subtly delineates sections with a "tonal" reflection of the initial series. Two tones from the six-tone theme become inner boundary markers. Recognizing the outlines of these free and organic structures allows the tension and momentum to increase and subside, rather as in a late Beethoven sonata. What follows is a brief description of the forms.

*Study No. 1* is a ruminative, mystical work where phrases and sections reflect upon each other with either subtle shifts of speed, or with near-chaotic

mockery. Each section ends with harmonic "tonics": the bells of m. 96, the arpeggios of m. 130, and the *Stehende Musik* climax of m. 189 have the same harmonic underpinning. The gentle coda with the smooth mirror shape is virtually identical in meaning to the coda of the *Passacaglia*. Tying these strands together requires some of the longest "mind-breaths" (the term is discussed below) of the entire opus, and the juxtaposition of ironic dialectics versus melting fusion will differ at each performance.

*Study No. 2*: Much like the previous Study, the eighth-note perpetual motion winds seamlessly into new phrases, and sections divide subtly or in mocking rebuke. Measure 12 presents the essence of the work both in its emphasis on the opening hexachord and its ever-present syncopation that leads to hemiola and more complex rhythmic counterpoints. The major sections: (1) m. 44, with an omnipresent minor third on D above the hexachordal theme; (2) m. 62, with a typical two-tempo debate that functions as a development and a long transition to the climax; (3) m. 97, a bald canon that reflects m. 12 rhythmically and serially. There are whispers of the very opening in bars 125 and 128, and the work ends with a perfect cadence on a D-F minor third.

*Study No. 3*: The sections are marked off violently. The G<sup>b</sup>-F dyad is the unyielding harmonic marker of phrases and sections. There are three competing sections that in their time-chunk character seem completely disparate in style: (1) The dotted rhythm of the hunt; (2) m. 26, harmonically strident and rhythmically chaotic; (3) m. 83, the proletarian march music (this section ends at m. 112 with the enharmonic motive F<sup>#</sup>-F<sup>b</sup>); (4) the chaos of m. 113 imperceptibly leads mirror-like to the apogee of m. 182, a stationary reiteration starting again on F<sup>#</sup>-F<sup>b</sup>; (5) the mirror shape is clear, as the proletarian music returns at m. 198 and the hunt motif returns more subtly under a tremolo (m. 243), a tremolo that consumes virtually the rest of the piece. The three pages of tremolos do not lead gently to a coda; rather, they are naked intervallic progressions that build violently towards the true climax of the entire Study at m. 280. To fully achieve the violent sound requires the whole arm and body, painful though it may be. The two-page coda makes use of all the materials, and, given what has occurred, is indeed a good-humored farewell.

*Study No. 4*: Welding the five-part structure of the *Passacaglia* into a whole is exhilarating for performer and listener alike. The three large inner movements are all composed of strophes that lead to intensified variations of what has just transpired in regard both to interval and rhythm. Measure 66 is clearly the

## SOURCES

### Editions

**A** *Four Studies on Basic Rows*. Bryn Mawr, PA: Merion Music, 1974. 76p.

Contents: 1. Study on Tritones, 1936. 2. Study on Thirds, 1935. 3. Presto furioso. Study on a Set of Expanding and Contracting Intervals, 1935. 4. Passacaglia. Study on an All-Interval Row in Conjunction with 11 Basic Rows, 1936.

Dedication of No. 4: "To Irma Wolpe."

**B** *Passacaglia For Piano Solo*.

New York: *New Music Quarterly*, Vol. 20, No. 1, October 1946. 23 pages.

Dedication: "To Irma Wolpe."

**B1** *Passacaglia For Piano Solo*.

Print of **B** corrected and revised by SW. Stefan Wolpe Collection, Paul Sacher Foundation (SWC).

Corrections pasted onto page 1. Additional revisions in red and black pencil.

**B2** *Passacaglia for Piano Solo*.

Print of **B** corrected throughout by SW. SWC.

The first page of the piece (p. 4) is lacking.

**B3** *Passacaglia For Piano Solo*.

Print of **B**. Gift of Irma Wolpe. SWC.

Page 3: Dedication in SW's hand: "... after many years have passed: no one else but you came so close to the fierce grandeur in playing this piece and only you gave to the song(ness) in the piece the grave air of which it is full. St."

Irma Wolpe kept the copy in an envelope (imprint, The Metropolitan Museum of Art). On the cover of the envelope she wrote: "Precious! / *Passacaglia with/ dedication!* / Precious".

### Manuscript Sources

**C** *Studies Nos. 1, 2 and 3*.

Holograph in ink. 37 pages. SWC.

Paper type: Vellum masters. "Circle Blueprint, 14-line." Gift of Herbert Sucoff.

Title page: *Four Studies for Piano / on Basic Rows / Stefan Wolpe / 1935/1936 / 1. Study on Tritoni. 2. Study on Minor Thirds. 3. Presto furioso. Study on a set of expanding and contracting intervals. 4. Passacaglia. Study on an all-interval row in conjunction with 11 basic rows.*

Date: Revised c. 1955 in preparation for the edition (**A**).

**C1** *Studies Nos. 1, 2, and 3*.

Blackline print from **C**. 37 pages, gray paper covers. Gift of Irma Wolpe. SWC.

Annotations in hand of Irma Wolpe in Nos. 1 and 2, but not in No. 3.

**C1.1** *Study No. 1, Study on Tritones*.

Blackline print from early version of **C**. 12 pages. Gift of Irma Wolpe. SWC.

Ring-bound with black covers. Numerous markings in ink by SW regarding dynamics and tempo that were transferred to **C**.

**C1.2** *Study No. 1, Study on Tritones*.

Blackline print from an early version of **C**. 12 pages. Fire damaged. SWC.

SW's markings in pencil of tempo and dynamics.

**C1.3** *Study No. 3, Presto furioso*.

Blackline print from final version of **C**. Pages 1-12 only. Formerly ring-bound. Gift of Irma Wolpe. SWC.

Title page: *Four Studies on Basic Rows / Stefan Wolpe / 1936*.

Annotations by SW and fingerings by Irma Wolpe in pencil.

**D1** *Passacaglia*.

Blackline print from vellum masters. 25 pages. Gift of Irma Wolpe. SWC.

The whereabouts of the vellum masters (**D**) is unknown.

Paper type: "Maestro No. 105, 12-line." Sewn-bound in light brown cloth covers.

Cover: "*Passacaglia for Piano / Stefan Wolpe / 1936*." Above the title is an inscription that is hatched over and illegible.

Heading, p. 1: "*Passacaglia Op. 23 no. 3 / Stefan Wolpe 1936 / Dedicated to Edward Steuermann*."

Additions and corrections in ink by SW and David Tudor (cf. mm. 162, 180, 183, 188). Date: c. 1941.

**D2** *Passacaglia*.

Blackline print from an early version of **D**. 25 pages.

David Tudor Archive, Getty Museum, Los Angeles.

Many annotations by Tudor, some incorporated by SW in the later version of **D**.

**E** *Vier Studien über Grundreihen*

Holograph in ink, fair copy. 75 pages. Library of Congress, Washington, DC.

Paper type: 14-line. No imprint.

Performer's markings by Irma Wolpe.

Title page: "*4 Studien über Grundreihen / für Klavier 2 händig / (oder grosses Orchester) op 23 Stefan Wolpe / Jerusalem Oktober – März 1935-1936*."

Contents: 1. *Rasch, fliehend* [Study on Thirds]. 2. *Frisch, in sehr guter Laune*. [hatched over] 2. *Adagio* [Study on Tritones]. 3. *Passacaglia*. 4. *Presto furioso*.

Opposite the title page in SW's hand: "*Gift / Stefan Wolpe / Dec. 1962*."

Page 1, heading: "*Studie über die Grundreihen der kl.*

to Irma Wolpe

# FOUR STUDIES ON BASIC ROWS

## for Piano

Duration: c. 30'

### I. Study on Tritones

STEFAN WOLPE

January 1936, rev. c.1955

Musical score for "I. Study on Tritones" by Stefan Wolpe. The score is in 3/4 time and consists of four systems of music. The first system (measures 1-4) starts with a tempo of 60, then 66, then 76. The second system (measures 5-8) includes a "rit." marking and a tempo of 66, then 76. The third system (measures 9-13) includes a "mp" marking. The fourth system (measures 14-17) includes tempo markings of 66, 76, "rit.", 66, and 60. Dynamics include *p*, *f*, *mf*, and *pp*. The score features complex rhythmic patterns and tritone intervals.

Accidentals remain good throughout the bar, only in the octave indicated. Some cautionaries have been added for ease of reading.

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# II. Study on Thirds

STEFAN WOLPE  
October 1935, rev. c.1955

♩. = 126

The first system of the piece consists of four measures. The right hand (treble clef) plays a series of eighth-note chords, while the left hand (bass clef) plays a corresponding eighth-note bass line. The first measure is marked *p* (piano), and the third measure is marked *mf* (mezzo-forte). A *mp* (mezzo-piano) dynamic is indicated at the end of the system with a hairpin.

The second system consists of four measures. The right hand continues with eighth-note chords, and the left hand continues with eighth-note bass notes. The first measure is marked *p*, and the third measure is marked *pp* (pianissimo). A *p* dynamic is indicated at the beginning of the system with a hairpin.

The third system consists of four measures. The right hand features dotted eighth notes and sixteenth notes, while the left hand continues with eighth-note bass notes. The second measure is marked *fp* (fortissimo-piano), and the third measure is marked *p* (piano). A *p* dynamic is indicated at the end of the system with a hairpin.

The fourth system consists of four measures. The right hand plays eighth-note chords, and the left hand plays eighth-note bass notes. The first measure is marked *mf*, the second *f* (fortissimo), and the third *mf*. A *mf* dynamic is indicated at the beginning of the system with a hairpin.

# III. Presto furioso

## Study on a Set of Expanding and Contracting Intervals

STEFAN WOLPE  
October-November 1935, rev. c.1955

$\text{♩} = 152$

*f*

5 *sf* *p* *mf* *più f*

9 *p* *pp* *sfp* *mf* *f* *p*

13 *f* *p* *f* *p* *sfp* *non* *sfp* *f* *pp*



15 *mp* *p* *p dolce*

18 *pp* *p*

21 *pp* *p* *ppp*

25 *p* *ppp* *p* *mf* *(mf)* *poco accel. ----- tempo*

29 *sva---* *p* *sfp* *mp* *p* *mp* *3* *pp* *3* *pp* *sfp*

Detailed description: This is a page of a piano score, numbered 52. It contains six systems of music, each with a measure number at the beginning. The first system (measures 15-17) starts with a treble clef and a piano (*p*) dynamic, followed by a mezzo-piano (*mp*) dynamic. The second system (measures 18-20) continues with a piano (*p*) dynamic and a pianissimo (*pp*) dynamic. The third system (measures 21-24) features a pianissimo (*pp*) dynamic, a piano (*p*) dynamic, and a pianississimo (*ppp*) dynamic. The fourth system (measures 25-28) includes a piano (*p*) dynamic, a pianississimo (*ppp*) dynamic, a mezzo-forte (*mf*) dynamic, and a mezzo-forte (*mf*) dynamic. It also contains the instruction "poco accel. ----- tempo". The fifth system (measures 29-32) starts with a piano (*p*) dynamic, a sforzando (*sfp*) dynamic, a mezzo-piano (*mp*) dynamic, a piano (*p*) dynamic, a mezzo-piano (*mp*) dynamic, and a piano (*p*) dynamic. It also includes a triplet of eighth notes marked with a "3" and a pianissimo (*pp*) dynamic, and a sforzando (*sfp*) dynamic. The score is written in 6/4 time and includes various musical notations such as slurs, accents, and dynamic markings.