

THE PROCESS OF CONSTRUCTION AND REDUCTION IN KAREL GOEYVAERTS' FIVE LITANIES

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SUMMARY. The culmination of Karel Goeyvaerts' minimalist production is the Litanieën series (5 works), which combines his compositional methods from the 1970s with a formal coherence and structural clarity. These five pieces mark a turning point in the composer's stylistic development as they strike a careful balance between repetition and constant transformation. Established at the intersection of postminimalism and minimalism, the Litany series shifts from static repetition to a dynamic process of transformation. Goeyvaerts defines his method as "evolving-repetitive" music because he leans the balance even more in the direction of transformation compared to pure minimalism, which typically applies gradual change to reductive material. This article explores the construction and reduction process in the Litany series.

Keywords: minimalism, postminimalism, Karel Goeyvaerts, Litanieën, construction/reduction

1. Karel Goeyvaerts' Style and Compositional Concepts

Karel Goeyvaerts (1923–1993) was a key figure in the evolution of avant-garde music after World War II. He was exposed to a wide range of musical ideas during his early education at the Royal Flemish Music Conservatory in Antwerp and the National Conservatory in Paris, especially under Olivier Messiaen's influence. By fusing Messiaen's inventive rhythms with Anton Webern's demanding serialism, Goeyvaerts was the first to use total serialism, extending the technique's use beyond pitch to include rhythm, dynamics, and articulation. His 1951 composition *Nummer 2* for 13 instruments is considered the first complete serialist work. His close relationship with

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Karlheinz Stockhausen further cemented his influence, as seen in the latter's *Kreuzspiel*, which drew from Goeyvaerts' *Sonata for Two Pianos*. In the early 1950s, he also ventured into electronic music, seeking greater precision and control over sound, leading to works like *Nummer 4 met dode tonen* (1952), one of the earliest compositions intended exclusively for electronic realization.

During the 1960s and 1970s, Goeyvaerts' focus shifted as he explored experimental techniques, aleatory procedures, and electroacoustic music. While he no longer played a central role in shaping avant-garde movements, his works remained highly structured and conceptually rigorous. His *Stuk voor piano en tape* (1964) systematically examined the interaction between live performance and pre-recorded sound, reflecting his ongoing interest in controlled musical processes. By the late 1970s, he embraced repetitive techniques influenced by minimalism, culminating in his *Litany* series (1979–1982).

Goeyvaerts' final decade was marked by a synthesis of his earlier techniques with new expressive possibilities. His large-scale opera *Aquarius* (1983–1993) exemplifies this integration, combining serial structures, minimalist techniques, and neo-tonal harmonies within a visionary, abstract framework. The opera's finale, based on his string quartet *De Zeven Zegels* (1986), illustrates how his serialist roots continued to inform his later neo-tonal language. The use of symmetrical structures, numerical symbolism, and distributive pitch organization reveal a deep continuity in his compositional thought, despite stylistic transformations over the decades. Goeyvaerts' lifelong obsession with musical time and structural purity remained a defining feature of his work, ensuring his legacy as a pioneering yet deeply cohesive composer within 20th-century music².

2. Extra-Musical Realities Behind the Compositions of the Litany Series

2.1. Temporality

In a letter to Stockhausen dated September 9, 1953, Goeyvaerts writes that the principle he follows in composition is rooted in the concept of the immobility of Being, which he considers the valid and foundational basis for his musical approach. This principle revolves around a series of identical sounds that are proportionally expanded and reduced over time and space. These changes happen within the “optical field” of time and space, meaning

² ***, “Karel Goeyvaerts.” *Flemish Composers Database*, Matrix - New Music, <https://matrix-new-music.be/en/publications/flemish-composers-database/goeyvaerts-karel/>. Accessed on 9th of January 2025.

they are perceived as alterations within the constraints of temporal and spatial dimensions. However, Goeyvaerts emphasizes that these changes do not possess absolute existence in themselves. Instead, the true, absolute existence is conceived as an inconceivable Oneness or Unity, which transcends any form of alteration or change³.

The essence of Goeyvaerts' principle lies in the organization of space and time in a way that remains fundamentally static. The focus is on creating a structural form where transformations exist only as proportional expansions or reductions, rather than as actual changes. In this sense, the composition does not evolve or develop in the conventional sense but instead adheres to a static framework that continuously reflects a sense of unchanging unity.

These ideas about extra and intra-musical temporality can be seen in the method of developing the sound material used in all 5 Litanyes. It is about unity - represented by coherent musical phrases of a few sounds, its construction by the joining of foreign entities - as a sign of a development without loss of identity, then its reduction, which most often represents a dissolution into a new entity that appears and will follow the same process of transition. If these realities about time are valid at the micro-structure level, we can observe that the entire series of Litany preserves its identity, precisely through the composer's fidelity to the compositional process that fits into the minimalist style - thanks to the austere material used.

In general, the musical discourse is largely shaped by its temporal articulation, where time plays a central role in composition⁴. Time can be understood through various perspectives, including theological, philosophical, and artistic lenses. One notable interpretation is sacred time, which introduces eternity into the flow of natural time. The ruptures between the ephemeral and the eternal creates an eschatological perspective that reflects the intersection of time and eternity, leading to a deeper understanding of existence⁵.

Composer's view of time reminds us of Lemeni's opinion that time is not merely linear but also a cycle of regeneration and participation in eternity⁶.

³ Misch, Imke, Markus Bandur, and Stockhausen-Stiftung für Musik. *Karlheinz Stockhausen bei den Internationalen Ferienkursen für Neue Musik in Darmstadt 1951-1996: Dokumente und Briefe* (Karlheinz Stockhausen at the International Summer Courses for New Music in Darmstadt 1951-1996: Documents and Letters). 1st ed., Stockhausen-Verlag, 2001.

⁴ Coroiu, Petruța. *Semantic and Hermeneutic of Music (Semantică și hermeneutică muzicală)*. Universitaria Publishing House, 2018, p. 77.

⁵ "Theological, Philosophical, and Scientific Aspects of Temporality" (*Ipostaze teologice, filosofice și științifice ale temporalității*). *Ziarul Lumina*, <https://ziarulumina.ro/societate/religie-si-stiinta/ipostaze-teologice-filosofice-si-stiintifice-ale-temporalitatii-76036.html>. Accessed 10th of December 2024. I

⁶ Lemeni, Adrian. *The Eschatological Meaning of Time in Life and Consciousness in the Horizon of Temporality (Sensul eshatologic al timpului în Viață și conștiință în orizontul temporalității)*. Basilica Publishing House, 2015, p. 25.

This convergence of time's ephemerality and eternity aligns with the philosophical conception of time as both objective (scientific) and subjective (artistic/human). Just as the ephemeral world is understood through its relation to the eternal, music captures this essence by engaging with temporal dynamics that transcend the limitations of the immediate moment, leading to a sense of unity that resonates beyond the music itself⁷.

2.2. The meaning of the Litany

The five compositions are titled *Litanies*, directly referencing one of the oldest forms of collective prayer. The composer explains this choice in the opening pages of the scores, stating that this archaic form of prayer naturally aligns with his concept of ostinato—repetition with the addition of sonic elements (in the form of development) and the layering of entities.

In prayer gatherings, as in the case of the Litany⁸, there is a remarkable interplay between the individual and the collective. These two forms of spiritual expression do not distinctly separate from one another; thus, the individual-collective dichotomy paradoxically signals an inseparable whole, precisely as the composer asserts. Through communal prayer, while preserving individual dignity, a unique temporal experience is created, enabling an unparalleled fusion between personal and ancestral will. *"Prayer must occupy a delicate position that offers a supportive, mutual experience, while also protecting the individual's sense of agency; it must accept ambivalence alongside faith,"* argues Esther Sperber⁹.

Thus, following the two extra-musical realities mentioned earlier, the works analyzed in this article engage with simultaneity and succession—configurations that determine the layering of sounds (and serve as a metaphor for monophony and polyphony in prayer). Additionally, they reflect the most fundamental relationships between objects: repetition and change (which pertain to time and temporality)¹⁰. These aspects define and shape the construction and reduction process in the Litany series.

⁷ Preda-Uliță, Anca. *The Concept of Harmony. A Structural Perspective*, Bulletin of Transilvania University of Brașov, Series VIII: Performing Arts, Vol. 14 (63) No. 2, 2021

⁸ Litanies are prayers led by a priest or deacon, consisting of petitions with fixed responses from the congregation. They began in the 4th century and were later included in the Mass.

⁹ Sperber, Esther. *The Paradox of Communal Prayer*. Jewish Telegraphic Agency, 24 Sept. 2015, <https://www.jta.org/2015/09/24/ny/the-paradox-of-communal-prayer>. Accessed 10 Mar. 2025.

¹⁰ Georgescu, C. D. *Syntactic Categories (Categoriile sintactice)*. *Revista Muzica*, no. 2, 2017, <https://www.ucmr.org.ro/Texte/RV-2-2017-2-CDGeorgescu-Categoriile-sintactice.pdf>. Accessed 2nd of Mar. 2025.

3. The Construction and Reduction Process

I have employed the terms construction and reduction as used by Mark Delaere¹¹, one of the key analysts of Karel Goeyvaerts. These concepts are also prevalent throughout minimalist art, including architecture¹². They refer to the use of a limited artistic material that is built (developed) through the addition of elements and dissolves through reduction.

In Goeyvaerts' work, he employs a construction phase, signifying evolution or development, during which musical elements are added or modified within an initial structure. This is followed by a reduction phase, where the musical writing is progressively simplified. In very few instances, the reduction or dissolution phase is absent altogether, as we will see next.

3.1. Litanie I

Composed in 1979 for piano, *Litanie I* already displays from its very first page the main characteristics discussed in this paper, revealing a compositional strategy based on a fixed temporal module and a constant tempo and metre, within which Goeyvaerts develops a highly controlled process of construction and reduction characteristic of minimalist aesthetics.

Throughout the work, sequences are gradually built by adding small sonic elements and then slowly dismantled through systematic subtraction, while several sequences may overlap in different stages of growth and decay. Rather than relying on literal repetition of entire modules, the piece achieves continuity through the repeated placement of the same aggregates in identical rhythmic and metrical positions, each time slightly expanded or reduced. Dense passages emerge when multiple sequences coexist, some still under construction, others already fading, creating a layered texture in which chromatic, dissonant material is organized with extreme economy.

¹¹ Delaere, Mark. "Staff: Mark Delaere." *Department of Musicology*, KU Leuven, <https://www.arts.kuleuven.be/musicology/staff/00007214>. Accessed 2nd of May 2024.

¹² Dief-Allah, Mohammad Hamed. "Reflection of Morphology of Construction and Minimalism." *Journal of Architecture, Art & Humanistic Science*, vol. 5, no. 24, 2020, pp. 347–360.

E.g. 1

1+2 $\text{♩} = 144$
 3+4 *sempre simile*
 5+6
 7
 8

Karel Goeyvaerts, Litanie I, first page (sequences 1 and 2)

In the musical example above, two superimposed layers can be observed, which are processed according to the methods described above.

After a long series of additions and superimpositions of three further sequences, the process of reduction of sequence 2 can be observed in the musical example below (as un upper layer).

E.g. 2

2nd volta: ff

Karel Goeyvaerts, Litanie I, bars 180-181

The overall form is symmetrically balanced around a temporal centre, and each sequence follows a clear trajectory from minimal presence to maximal density and back to near disappearance. This method, closely related to early American minimalism, transforms repetition into a process of gradual transformation, in which musical material is constantly reshaped through restrained, incremental change.

3.2. Litanie II

In *Litanie II* for three percussionists (1980), Goeyvaerts continues and expands the processes of construction, superimposition, and reduction observed in *Litanie I*, while introducing a more clearly articulated formal principle. Dedicated to an ensemble from Cincinnati that premiered and frequently performed the work, this piece is likewise based on the gradual building and dismantling of layered material; however, in contrast to the continuous transformations of the piano work, these processes are repeatedly interrupted by a forceful refrain. This recurring, harsh motif functions in a manner comparable to a rondo, punctuating the evolving textures and marking moments of renewal.

E.g. 3

The musical score for Karel Goeyvaerts' *Litanie II* illustrates the construction of three layers. The first system (measures 10-13) shows Layer 1 on Xylophone and Layer 2* on Glockensp. The second system (measures 14-17) shows Layer 1 on Xylophone, Layer 2* on Glockensp., and Layer 3 on Marimba. Layer 3 begins with a dynamic marking of *p* (piano).

Karel Goeyvaerts, *Litanie II*, first appearance of the layers

The composition is structured around the superimposition of three evolutionary and repetitive sound layers, in which motifs are expanded or reduced through incremental modifications.

E.g. 4

This musical score is for the song "The Little Drummer Boy" and is arranged for three percussion instruments: Xylophone, Glockenspiel, and Marimba. The score begins at measure 36. The Xylophone part features a melodic line with eighth and sixteenth notes, including some triplets. The Glockenspiel part provides harmonic support with chords and single notes, also featuring triplets. The Marimba part plays a steady, low-register accompaniment with a mix of eighth and sixteenth notes. The notation is in treble clef with a key signature of one sharp (F#).

Karel Goeyvaerts, Litanie II, becoming of the 3 layers

When the material becomes sparse through progressive depletion, the refrain reasserts itself, initiating a new cycle with fresh sonic material drawn from the wide range of percussion instruments.

E.g. 5

45 4 Temple Blocks Xylo *ff* Temple Blocks

Xylo *p* Chin. opera cymb. Susp. Cymb. (med.) (high) Chin. opera cymb. *p*

Cymbal (high) *f* *f* *p* *mp* *f* *p*

Med. Tam-Tam *f* *f* *p* *mp* *f* *p*

Wood Blocks *p* *mf* *f*

Bass Drum Tarn-Tarn (high) Bass Dr. *p*

Timp. *f* *f*

Karel Goeyvaerts, Litanie II, refrain

Rooted in what Goeyvaerts describes as a “wild-sacral” basis¹³, the work evokes ritualistic and trance-like practices reminiscent of Balinese and African traditions, situating its minimalist construction–reduction techniques within a broader context of incantatory and quasi-ritual musical expression.

¹³ Goeyvaerts, Karel. *Litany II: for Three Percussionists*. Chamber music, percussion ensemble (3 perc). Publisher's no. 15995, Donemus.

3.3. Litanie III

In *Litanie III* for orchestra, composed in 1980, each individual instrument or pair of instruments functions as a distinct generator of minimalist layers that are gradually superimposed, continuing the same developmental technique based on the progressive addition of sonic entities followed by their systematic dissolution. As in the previous Litanies, musical material is constructed through incremental processes, in which small units are accumulated, transformed, and eventually reduced, creating a constantly evolving texture. Some of these entities are incisive and sharply articulated, while others remain more static, diffuse, and sonically diluted, contributing to a dynamic balance between movement and stasis. Through the interaction of these contrasting layers, Goeyvaerts shapes a carefully structured and coherent sonic landscape, in which timbral variety, density, and spatial distribution play a central role. The orchestral medium allows for an expanded palette of colors and textures, reinforcing the ritualistic and process-oriented character of the work, while preserving the minimalist principles of repetition, gradual transformation, and formal clarity that underpin the entire Litanies cycle.

3.4. Litanie IV

In *Litanie IV*, composed in 1981 for soprano, flute, clarinet, violin, cello, and piano in response to a commission from Radio France, Goeyvaerts further refines the compositional principles that govern the entire Litanies cycle. The work is shaped by a continuous process in which small musical units gradually unfold, reach a point of saturation, and are subsequently dismantled, with several such processes unfolding simultaneously. This overlapping evolution generates a strong sense of continuity and contributes to the work's ritual-like and meditative atmosphere.

In contrast to the more clearly differentiated layers of earlier pieces, *Litanie IV* is largely constructed as a single, intricate sound continuum, articulated collectively by the six performers. The voice plays a central role, moving fluidly between abstract phonetic sounds and fragments that suggest semantic meaning. From the opening moments, vocal gestures supported by dense instrumental sonorities establish a hybrid space between speech, song, and pure sound.

Starting from measure 45, we find a clear example of the construction of a vocal cell, which is progressively expanded every two measures, as shown below.

The image displays five staves of handwritten musical notation for a vocal line. The notation is in a single system, with each staff containing a vocal line and its corresponding lyrics. The lyrics are: "E - ti - a -", "Te - ne - ti - a - o - ti - o", "Te - ne - ti - a - o - ti - a - ti - o - ti", "Te - ne - ti - a - o - ti - a - ti - o - ti - a - ti - o - ti", and "Te - ne - ti - a - o - ti - a - ti - o - ti - a - ti - o - ti". The musical notation includes various notes, rests, and dynamic markings such as *f*, *p*, and *pp*. The staves are numbered 1 through 5.

Karel Goeyvaerts, *Litanie IV*, starting from bar 45, vocal line

At the end of the construction phase, this vocal cell, now transformed into a melismatic figure, enters a phase of reduction, while new sonorities from another cell are superimposed; this second cell can be seen dissolving in its final appearance in the example below.

E.g. 7

Karel Goeyvaerts, *Litanie IV*, starting from bar 62-67, vocal line

Throughout the work, subtle transformations of vocal and instrumental material evoke distant associations with liturgical chant, lullabies, and traditional theatrical forms, yet these references remain elusive and transient. Rather than forming stable allusions, they are absorbed into the ongoing musical flow, which steadily advances toward a persistent ostinato conclusion¹⁴.

Through this synthesis of vocal expression, unified texture, and gradual transformation, Goeyvaerts creates a complex and coherent sonic environment.

3.5. *Litanie V*

In *Litanie V* (1982), the final work of the cycle, Karel Goeyvaerts constructs an extended ritual-like form for at least three harpsichords, based on canonic sequences distributed across six tonal zones arranged in descending whole-step intervals. These zones unfold successively—from D through C, B-flat, A-flat, F-sharp, and E—before returning to the initial D, thereby

¹⁴ Goeyvaerts, Karel. *Litanie IV: voor sopraan, fluit, clarinet, viool, violoncello en piano*. Vocal music, voice and instruments (zang, fl, cl, vn, vc, pf). Publisher's no. 18919, Donemus.

completing a circular tonal process. The composition begins and ends with the same principal sequence, reinforcing its symmetrical design and sense of formal closure. Performers may combine live playing with prerecorded parts, allowing precise synchronization, while maintaining a steady pulse throughout the work. Within each zone, several sequences can be reordered or selectively omitted, provided that all parts follow the same structure and that every tonal region is presented in the prescribed order.

Below, I present an example of the treatment of the section in A-flat, articulated through two different rhythmic frameworks, which clearly highlight the principles of construction and reduction. This excerpt illustrates how the musical material is gradually expanded through the systematic addition of sonic elements and subsequently reshaped through controlled processes of subtraction. By placing the same tonal area within contrasting rhythmic contexts, the example reveals the flexibility of Goeyvaerts's compositional method, as well as the consistency of his structural thinking. The interaction between these two rhythmic profiles emphasizes the progressive accumulation and dissolution of musical cells, demonstrating how minimalist procedures generate formal coherence through subtle yet continuous transformation.

E.g. 8



Karel Goeyvaerts, *Litanie V*, Ab section – original version

E.g. 9

V1

V2

Karel Goeyvaerts, *Litanie V*, Ab section – variations 1 and 2

Although the harmonic language remains strictly tonal, it avoids traditional functional relationships, instead progressing through adjacent pitch areas in a stepwise manner. As the longest of the *Litanies*, this work emphasizes continuity, repetition, and gradual transformation on a large scale, culminating in a return to its opening material. Conceived as a musical rite, *Litanie V* embodies Goeyvaerts's vision of minimalist process as a ceremonial experience, in which formal rigor and meditative listening converge.

4. Conclusion

In conclusion, the five Litanies represent the culmination of Karel Goeyvaerts's mature minimalist language, bringing together the diverse strategies of construction, superimposition, interruption, vocal expression, and large-scale formal organization examined throughout this study. From the layered and symmetrical processes of *Litanie I*, through the ritualized refrains of *Litanie II*, the expanded orchestral textures of *Litanie III*, the unified vocal-instrumental continuum of *Litanie IV*, and the canonic, tonal cycles of *Litanie V*, a consistent compositional logic emerges, grounded in gradual accumulation and controlled dissolution. Each work demonstrates how repetition functions not as static reiteration but as a vehicle for continuous transformation, confirming Goeyvaerts's concept of "evolving-repetitive" music. Situated between minimalism and postminimalism, the Litanies replace mechanical recurrence with dynamic processes of growth and decay, resulting in forms that are both rigorously constructed and perceptually fluid. Through their shared emphasis on construction and reduction, these works achieve a balance between formal clarity and expressive depth, fulfilling the aims outlined in the abstract and affirming the Litany series as a central achievement in Goeyvaerts's late compositional output.

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