

# Dan Tepfer at Le Poisson Rouge

By ANTHONY TOMMASINI



Richard Perry/The New York Times

The jazz pianist [Dan Tepfer](#) first heard Bach's "Goldberg"

Dan Tepfer The jazz pianist playing "Goldberg Variations/Variations" at Le Poisson Rouge on Thursday.

Variations when he was a teenager and a friend played him a recording. He was instantly awe-struck by the music. He also recognized in Bach a fellow spirit, a fellow improviser.

Mr. Tepfer, 31, a [busy jazz artist](#) who has [performed](#) and recorded with giants like [the saxophonist Lee Konitz](#), told this story to an audience at [Le Poisson Rouge](#), the Greenwich Village club, on Thursday night. He then performed his [signature version](#) of Bach's monumental work, "Goldberg Variations/Variations" by Bach/Tepfer. He recorded it in 2011 (on Sunnyside Records).

Bach's keyboard masterpiece is written in the form of an alluring aria with 30 variations. In Mr. Tepfer's riveting and inspired version, after performing each Bach variation, he follows up with his own improvised one that becomes a musical commentary and takeoff on the Bach. "It's always an adventure," Mr. Tepfer told the audience.

Adventure was the right word for the brilliant performance he gave. Naturally, each time he plays his improvised takes on Bach's variations, the music turns out differently. He has a basic concept of each one in mind, he said during a brief interview after the concert. But the resulting notes are different, sometimes very different, especially in the slow variations, when "I have more time to think," he said.

As he also explained to the audience before playing, Bach's work is a set of variations not on a melody, but on

a bass line and series of chords (a harmonic pattern). This is close to what jazz musicians do when they play improvisations on a standard, Mr. Tepfer said. They improvise variations over the “changes,” that is, the chord patterns of the theme.

I was engrossed from the start of the 90-minute performance, when he played Bach’s aria with such sensitivity and grace, then brought articulate touch and naturalness to Bach’s jaunty first variation. His improvisation on that variation picked up on the dancing gait of the Bach but made it more jerky and unpredictable. He let his imagination go with strands of syncopated passagework and clashing harmonies. The playful walking bass figure in Bach’s second variation became a galumphing bass line in Mr. Tepfer’s improvisation, with a sassy, biting right hand.

Mr. Tepfer’s variations were often bold adventures in modern jazz. Bach’s ninth variation, [written as a canon](#) at the third (a contrapuntal technique), became an exercise in soft thick chords with wrong-note contrapuntal inner voices. Bach’s 14th variation, a burst of virtuosity that builds to passages where the right and left hands have feisty showdowns of racing turns and spiraling runs, became a gnarly, gnashing and relentless improvisation in Mr. Tepfer’s conception: imagine Bartok as a jazz pianist. The mournful Variation No. 25, which Mr. Tepfer played poignantly, was in his reimagining a soulful rumination: a searching melodic line tries to break free from hushed, piercing cluster chords.

This is no stunt, but a fresh musical exploration. Mr. Tepfer invites you to hear this masterpiece through his ears. I bet Bach would recognize a kindred spirit in Mr. Tepfer.

The Lee Konitz and Dan Tepfer Duo performs on Sept. 23 at SubCulture, 45 Bleecker Street, East Village; [subculturenewyork.com](http://subculturenewyork.com).