

Improvised Variations

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At age 29, Dan Tepfer has developed a habit of conversing with old masters. Since 2007, the jazz pianist has formed half of a duo with 84-year-old saxophone legend Lee Konitz. He has played in a trio with Gary Peacock, joining the 76-year-old bassist in Zen breathing exercises before performances, and jammed with drummer Paul Motian, who passed away last month at the age of 80. In his latest project, though, Mr. Tepfer builds a bridge across centuries and genres to spark a dialogue with Johann Sebastian Bach.

On his new CD, "Goldberg Variations/Variations," Mr. Tepfer not only enters what to many pianists is hallowed ground—he leaves his self-assured footprints all over. He presents his vision of Bach with performances on Thursday at the Mansion at Strathmore in Bethesda, M.D., and on Dec. 21 at the Rubin Museum of Art in New York City. For Mr. Tepfer, who was born in Paris to American parents, it's an attempt to braid together the different strands of his life: his classical training, his innate love of improvisation, and even his interest in the transcendental symmetries of astrophysics, in which he obtained a B.Sc. from the University of Edinburgh.

On a recent afternoon Mr. Tepfer, dressed in jeans, a pintucked shirt and leather slippers, lounged on the sofa in his Brooklyn apartment, which he shares with a 1932 Mason & Hamlin baby grand. He vividly recalls the first time he heard Glenn Gould's 1981 recording of the Goldbergs as a teenager, thinking "that's the most beautiful thing I ever heard." But, he says, it was only as a graduate student at the New England Conservatory of Music that he obtained the score and began to learn the variations. One night, backstage during a tour of the Czech Republic, it occurred to him to use one of them as a springboard for his own improvisations.

"Then this really cool thing happened," he recalls. "My improvising would reveal to me something that I hadn't heard in the variations. I'd improvise on a variation and I'd think, oh, maybe this is what that variation is about. And then I'd go back and bring that up in the variation. So it really felt like I was having this dialogue with Bach."

The album is essentially a record of that conversation. Each variation by Bach is followed by an improvisation by Mr. Tepfer on that variation. The point of departure changes: Often it is the mood and character of the variation on which Mr. Tepfer reflects; other times he takes an element of structure—a rhythmic figure in the bass, a certain ornamental flourish—and riffs on that. His rendition of Variation 24, for instance, captures the childlike innocence of the Bach; the following improvisation turns into an impish goblin dance. The hushed mystery of Variation 21 with its chromatic layers inspires a nocturne iridescent with Debussy-esque colors. Sometimes Mr. Tepfer's take on the Bach is more unexpected. In his Improvisation 12, marked "obsessive," the repeated quarter notes in the bass that lend a stately gait to Bach's variation turn menacing, with bruising bass notes pounded out by the left hand underneath shards of sound scattered by the right hand.


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Ryan Inzana

Even without the improvised interludes, Mr. Tepfer's Goldbergs proclaim his jazz roots. They show through in the crisp articulation and rhythmic clarity of his counterpoint, in his glass-sharp attack and, above all, in his supple approach to time, a legacy of his graduate studies with Danilo Pérez at the New England Conservatory. "He's Latin, and for him rhythm is everything," says Mr. Tepfer. "I grew up in Europe, so I was new to the idea that time itself is this incredibly magical and profound and difficult thing."

As a jazz pianist, Mr. Tepfer says, the challenge in recording the Goldbergs was to remain true to himself in both the baroque and the contemporary idiom. "Ideally, if you're in the right zone," he says, "you could be talking about or playing anything and it should still sound like you, your tone of voice."

That zone is something Mr. Tepfer is also searching for in his collaborations with Mr. Konitz. On tour and on their 2009 album, "Duos With Lee," they alternate standards with free improvisations and Mr. Tepfer's own compositions, always vehemently on guard against cliché. "The philosophy that Lee has is that it's beyond instruments and it's purely about music," says Mr. Tepfer. Sometimes that will lead him to pick up the saxophone—an instrument on which he professes to be an amateur—or to them both singing. "The music is in our heads: It's not in the fingers or in our instruments."

It's an attitude they share with Bach, who frequently transcribed his works. That was a fact Gould invoked as giving him license to play the Goldberg Variations—originally written for double-manual harpsichord—on the piano. "Bach wrote very well for instruments, very idiomatically, but he transcribed all the time," says Mr. Tepfer. "With him it's so clear: He wrote music."

With a grandfather who played jazz piano and a mother who sang at the Paris Opera, Mr. Tepfer recalls that from an early age, "improvisation was something I really owned. As a kid, I made up my own version of things, my own pieces. I was really into boogie-woogie for a while, after the film 'Great Balls of Fire' came out." At the same time he got "hooked" on Bach's keyboard music, which formed the foundation of his *conservatoire* training.

"What really interests me in art is transcendence," says Mr. Tepfer. That interest, he says, also led to his studying physics and astronomy at university. "Astrophysics is the science of transcendence, of people looking out into the universe. In music, too, I'm trying to connect to that feeling—I'd rather not call it a God; I'm too much of a rationalist for that. But the fact is that as human beings we all need to feel that connection to something outside of ourselves. That sense of amazement."

Perhaps it is fitting, then, that Mr. Tepfer recorded his Goldberg Variations, his exploration of "the intersection between what we are today and the great art from long ago," at night. He recently signed on as a Yamaha Concert Artist and obtained permission to record them on one of the company's CFX concert grand pianos in the New York showroom—alone, after hours, using his own recording equipment.

"It was a magical experience," he says. "Bach's craft is incredibly profound, but there are loads of areas of freedom. The more I do this, the more it feels like, in [playing] the Bach, I'm making up these notes."

Ms. da Fonseca-Wollheim writes about classical music for the Journal.