

FROM BACH TO 'BILLIE JEAN,' PIANIST DAN TEPFER REWORKS THE MUSIC HE LOVES

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By Andrew Patner/For Sun-Times Media



Over the past week, Ravinia has presented three solo pianists with powerful conceptual programs. (The end of summer is a busy time for pianists in Highland Park: The festival had two others last week — and four coming up this week — but in less unusual, though very worthy, repertoire.)

[...]

And Saturday young French-raised, Brooklyn-based American jazz artist Dan Tepfer went double for nothing with two engrossing 90-minute performances separated by little more than an hour break for supper. The afternoon brought his ongoing “Goldberg Variations/Variations” where he plays the full classic Bach work — from memory — and follows each of the 18th century composer’s own 30 variations with an often improvised variation of his own. The evening held a jazz program of 12 works, six of them his own compositions and the other six transcriptions

of or new takes on his own improvisations on the works of others. As Tepfer, 32, played and recorded most of these first as parts of duets or trios; almost all are transformations.

It must be interesting to be Tepfer. Born in Paris to American parents — a scientist and an opera singer whose own father was a jazz pianist — and raised there, he has movie star looks, a theoretical scientist’s mind (his undergraduate degree, from Edinburgh, Scotland, was in astrophysics), a writer’s way with words, an athlete’s digital dexterity and an artist’s soul.

In fact, just days before his Bennett•Gordon Hall double-bill, he penned an illuminating essay on his “Goldbergs” adventures that has been circling the Internet globe. “I’m a jazz pianist,” he reminded Saturday’s audience before starting the Bach-Tepfer odyssey. “I came to this work backwards.” And he went on to wholly make the case, as Glenn Gould did half a century before, for the inherent structured yet improvisatory quality of the Bach, a sort of proto-jazz.

Tepfer learned the Bach slowly, over years, including while pursuing his master’s in jazz performance with Danilo Perez at Boston’s New England Conservatory. That he has made a performing career out of working with legends more than 40 and 50 years older than he — alto sax player Lee Konitz, coming up on 87, bassist Gary Peacock, 79, and others — has added to a deep understanding that improvisation is not noodling and that the 20th century jazz masters worked as Bach did: taking the bass line and chords of an initial song or “aria” — not the melody itself — and making variations.

Jazz trained or not, Tepfer plays the Bach with deep affinity but not hushed reverence. The improvisations, which range from gentle and mysterious to highly physical, almost pounded, display a knowledge not only of Bach’s counterpoint and two-hand (or two keyboards in Bach’s original, written for the harpsichord) ideas and methods, but for the ways these played out in subsequent music history, from Satie to Schoenberg to Thelonious Monk.

There were times where Tepfer appeared emotionally — though never musically — lost in his playing, pulling us along into what he called that evening “a feeling of being in an alternate universe.” His range of emotions — never gimmicky, and always coming out of the changes and repeating canons themselves — and deep maturity were breathtaking. I was not the only member of the large, hushed audience moved to tears at the end by his conception and realization. That Cole Porter’s “Every Time We Say Good Bye” made an appearance with its chordal ancestor after the return of the opening aria further reminded listeners of Tepfer’s own investment. Surely Bach would have found this journey fascinating as well.

It was not surprising in the evening, with a similarly large, focused and enthusiastic audience, to hear early 1950s works originating from Konitz — with whom Tepfer was set to play in Quebec on Sunday (Konitz’s “Subconscious-Lee”) — and Miles Davis (an encore of the ever-provocative “Solar”). Nor to hear Tepfer’s blending of strict musical analysis with near-absolute musical freedom in the Kern-Hammerstein classic “All the Things You Are,” the 1939 bedrock for complexity in the American Popular Songbook, or his confession that he places Monk on a par with Bach as a composer and inventor following his own animation of Monk’s 1951 “Ask Me Now.”

But with Jacques Brel’s 1962 paean to his native West Flanders, “The Flat Land,” and Michael Jackson’s 1982 “Billie Jean” — “released the year I was born,” he reminded the audience — Tepfer displayed his techniques with pieces that might initially seem more mundane or simple, both opening them up and making them his own.

His own works, mostly written for his sax-piano pairing with his Brooklyn neighbor Ben Wendel or his trio, jumped almost immediately to their own reworkings, slowly revealing Tepfer’s original ideas as they went along. One, “745,” featuring 7/4, 5/4 and 4/4 time laid over each other, was a direct display of how physical skills, mental acuity and physical dexterity are interwoven in all Tepfer does. In addition to thinking and smiling, he even had the audience trying to simultaneously rub our heads and pat our tummies after the piece’s last bravura chords.