

DAN TEPFER PIANO
GOLDBERG VARIATIONS / VARIATIONS
J.S. BACH / TEPFER

GOLDBERG VARIATIONS | VARIATIONS

DAN TEPFER *piano*

1 | ARIA (BACH / TEPFER)

2-61 | J.S. BACH ↵ GOLDBERG VARIATIONS BWV 988
ALTERNATING WITH IMPROVISED VARIATIONS BY DAN TEPFER

62 | ARIA (TEPFER / BACH)

total time 77:45

	ARIA 2:32	01	
	VARIATION 1 0:48	02	03 0:46 IMPROVISATION 1
	VARIATION 2 0:47	04	05 0:49 IMPROVISATION 2
<i>canon at the unison</i> —	VARIATION 3 0:54	06	07 0:57 IMPROVISATION 3 — <i>canonic 1</i>
	VARIATION 4 0:28	08	09 0:35 IMPROVISATION 4
	VARIATION 5 0:39	10	11 0:41 IMPROVISATION 5
<i>canon at the second</i> —	VARIATION 6 0:57	12	13 0:57 IMPROVISATION 6 — <i>canonic 2</i>
	VARIATION 7 1:08	14	15 1:13 IMPROVISATION 7
	VARIATION 8 0:50	16	17 0:44 IMPROVISATION 8
<i>canon at the third</i> —	VARIATION 9 0:38	18	19 0:40 IMPROVISATION 9 — <i>thirds</i>
<i>fughetta</i> —	VARIATION 10 0:50	20	21 0:57 IMPROVISATION 10 — <i>fuguelike</i>
	VARIATION 11 0:59	22	23 1:06 IMPROVISATION 11
<i>canon at the fourth</i> —	VARIATION 12 1:17	24	25 1:36 IMPROVISATION 12 — <i>obsessive</i>
	VARIATION 13 2:48	26	27 1:49 IMPROVISATION 13
	VARIATION 14 1:08	28	29 1:29 IMPROVISATION 14
<i>canon at the fifth</i> —	VARIATION 15 2:09	30	31 2:25 IMPROVISATION 15 — <i>canonic 5</i>

<i>overture</i> —	VARIATION 16 1:32	32	33 1:14 IMPROVISATION 16
	VARIATION 17 1:00	34	35 1:23 IMPROVISATION 17
<i>canon at the sixth</i> —	VARIATION 18 0:48	36	37 0:50 IMPROVISATION 18 — <i>sixths</i>
	VARIATION 19 0:34	38	39 0:51 IMPROVISATION 19
	VARIATION 20 1:00	40	41 1:03 IMPROVISATION 20
<i>canon at the seventh</i> —	VARIATION 21 1:37	42	43 2:00 IMPROVISATION 21 — <i>sevenths</i>
	VARIATION 22 0:45	44	45 0:48 IMPROVISATION 22
	VARIATION 23 1:12	46	47 0:51 IMPROVISATION 23
<i>canon at the octave</i> —	VARIATION 24 1:23	48	49 1:13 IMPROVISATION 24 — <i>canonic 8</i>
	VARIATION 25 3:40	50	51 3:41 IMPROVISATION 25
	VARIATION 26 1:01	52	53 1:19 IMPROVISATION 26
<i>canon at the ninth</i> —	VARIATION 27 1:06	54	55 1:13 IMPROVISATION 27
	VARIATION 28 1:12	56	57 1:07 IMPROVISATION 28
	VARIATION 29 1:05	58	59 0:46 IMPROVISATION 29
<i>quodlibet</i> —	VARIATION 30 1:06	60	61 1:07 IMPROVISATION 30 — <i>mashup</i>
	ARIA 3:02	62	

*Aria and Variations by
Johann Sebastian Bach, BWV 988
Improvisations by Dan Tepfer
© 2011 Main Door Music (BMI)*

*Produced: DAN TEPFER
Co-produced: BEN WENDEL
Executive producer: FRANÇOIS ZALACAIN*

*Recorded May-June 2011 at Yamaha Artist Services
New York on the Yamaha CFX piano*

*Engineered: DAN TEPFER
Mastered: NATE WOOD
Graphic design: CHRISTOPHER DRUKKER
Photography: VINCENT SOYEZ
Piano technicians: KAZ TSUJIO &
HIROAKI MIZUTANI*

Special thanks:

*To my classical teachers, going way back:
Pierre Audon, Knut Jacques, Peter Evans,
Sophia Rosoff and Zitta Zohar, who showed me
that the Goldbergs weren't out of reach.*

*To Bonnie Barrett and Makia Matsumura at Yamaha
for giving me a space to record and a piano to play.*

*To Gabriel Kahane for Goldberg brinksmanship
in the early years.*

*To Ben Wendel and Augusta Caso for their big ears during
the process of making this record.*

And to my parents, for years of listening and encouragement.

Bradley Bambarger conducts a Q&A with pianist Dan Tepfer about his album *Goldberg Variations / Variations*



How do you feel about Bach's Goldberg Variations as a totem – this iconic piece that some of the greatest keyboardists measure themselves against? It takes guts to take it on.

Dan Tepfer: I grew up with the “Goldbergs.” I even remember clearly the first time I ever heard them, when I was 11 years old. I was playing chess with a friend, and he went over to the hi-fi and put one of his parents’ records on – it was the 1981 Glenn Gould recording. I flipped out from hearing just the Aria. I thought it was some of the most beautiful music I’d ever heard. I think if anyone has experienced it as this totem, I have – I own a ton of recordings of the *Goldberg Variations*. It has always been with me. But I never thought it would be something that I’d play myself on the piano until a few years ago. I just kept wanting to learn more of it, then all of it. Also, as a composer, I grew to experience very intimately just how perfect Bach’s music is, how complete. And I’ve always felt emotionally the almost sacred quality of the work.

That said, we should remember that the *Goldberg Variations* were originally published as keyboard studies. Each one is clearly trying to teach us something. There are technical ideas that Bach is making the pianist work through, as well as musical ideas that he is displaying. In his time, the Baroque era, there was a whole tradition of showing how things are done. It wasn’t just, “Buy this music so you can have fun playing it and it’ll sound nice.” It was, “Buy this sheet music so you can see how a canon or a fugue is made.” Bach is very thorough. In, say, Variation 26, when a fast line happens in the right hand and a slower melody happens in the left hand, with chords, he will always reverse it so that you get the same experience with the other hand. That wouldn’t be the case if the *Goldberg Variations* weren’t studies. But to the listener, that stuff isn’t necessarily relevant. That’s part of the genius of Bach: He is operating on all these levels – his music is mathematically and structurally perfect, but it also expresses the full range of human emotion. The “Goldbergs” aren’t just serious and dramatic; they are also funny and light. There is a whole world in this music. In Bach’s day, people probably responded to the practical, pedagogical aspect of the music, and in our time, people emphasize the hallowed, spiritual aspect of it. The piece has come to mean different things to people in different eras. That’s another thing that makes it great.

Did that hallowed, untouchable character of the Goldberg Variations put more pressure on you as a jazz musician approaching this music?

Dan Tepfer: Really, for a creative artist, that sort of pressure is fun to try to ignore. Moreover, my love of this music is so strong that I would never put something out there that wasn't respectful of it as a great work of art. Mine is definitely a personal reaction to Bach's music, but I contrast it with something like Duchamp's *L.H.O.O.Q.*, where he took a copy of the *Mona Lisa*, drew a mustache on her and wrote *L.H.O.O.Q.* underneath, which – if you read the letters fast – sounds like a French phrase for “She has a hot ass.” What I'm doing isn't satirical by any means. What I'm doing is definitely loving. Or let me put it this way: Instead of recording the *Goldberg Variations* and then writing lengthy liner notes about how I feel about them, I'm expressing how I feel about them in music, with my improvised variations on Bach's variations.

In your improvisations on Bach's variations, what were you trying to say that Bach didn't? There is obviously some contemporary spice in your dissonances.

Dan Tepfer: I'm just trying to react. Bach uses the same chord progression throughout the entire “Goldbergs.” That's really what we do in jazz, particularly when playing standards. We take the chord progression of a tune, and it's often as simple as Bach's Aria in the “Goldbergs,” and we make variations on it. I've been playing with Lee Konitz for the past four or so years, and he's been playing the same tunes his whole life. One of the amazing things about him is you'll play the same song on tour night after night – say “All the Things You Are,” the most standard-y standard there is – and it will be really different every night. So if you recorded all of those and put them end to end, it might sound like what Bach had done with the “Goldbergs,” taking one simple piece of material and weaving all these different emotional states into it. So that was part of my challenge: How much diversity can I get out of this chord progression? I would take Bach's example to get to that diversity.

What's really important to me as an improviser is to have a voice. So I'm reacting to Bach with my own voice, my own tone, my own vocabulary. Bach is re-harmonizing the chord progression a lot throughout the different variations, so that's where I took my cue – if he's doing that his way, then I'm going to apply my own harmonic taste to the structure. But I'm always operating within the structure. Dissonance is very much a part of my voice. I don't really enjoy gratuitous dissonance, though, in that I feel dissonance should be justified with a release. If the dissonance is gratuitous, it's something that most listeners react to negatively, or at least I do. So I'm trying to ride that line between the kind of dissonance I really enjoy and this very tonal structure that I'm playing over.

This recording is a very rich, cumulative experience, but are there moments that you're especially proud of?

Dan Tepfer: I'm proudest of the slow ones. With the faster variations I had to really think about how I could convey the spirit of Bach's virtuosity in my own way. With the slow ones, I just sat down, and after playing Bach's variation, started improvis-

ing. I think some of them are the most honest musical statements I've ever made, often just first takes. I'm proud of that because one of the cool things about improvisation is its Zen aspect; the best-case scenario is the music just flowing out of you.

You recorded this album totally on your own – what was the aim in that?

Dan Tepfer: Originally, I was going to make this album at home, where I have a Mason & Hamlin piano from the 1930s. I thought it could be a grassroots, homemade record, something funky and almost indie-rock sounding. But I really just wanted a situation that would allow me as much time as I wanted to record without costing a fortune in a studio. A lot of the work was feeling my way toward what this record could be. Live, I had been doing only some of the variations and then improvising on them at length. I thought it would be something like that, maybe on two CDs. Finally, though, it became something more concise, with everything on one CD – all of Bach's variations and my improvisations. The improvisations became something sort of strict, using the original chord changes and lasting about as long as Bach's variations. In that whole process of conceptualizing and re-conceptualizing the record, how it should sound also changed. And right about the time I got serious about recording, the opportunity came up to become a Yamaha artist. Part of the appeal of that was being able to use their Artist Services Piano Salon in Manhattan to record, and they had just got in the brand-new Yamaha CFX hand-built concert grand pianos, so that's what I recorded on – an instrument that has far more expressive potential than my piano at home. I spent a lot of time with the microphones and the different pre-amps that I had, but the main goal was for the sound to be transparent, to give the impression of someone just sitting at a piano in front of you and improvising – which tied into my original intent in a way.

I think if Glenn Gould were recording the “Goldbergs” with our technology today, he would've wanted to do it just as I did. He loved to work late at night, and he would be basically alone in the studio with just the engineers in the booth that he had to have. In the situation that I had, I could work alone all night long if I wanted. I wasn't trying to impress anyone, there wasn't any pressure. There was just me, the piano and me listening to myself. I could take my time figuring things out. It was ideal.

You studied in the Paris Conservatoire system – what has been your other background with classical music?

Dan Tepfer: I've always considered myself an improviser. I started improvising immediately after I started playing the piano; there are recordings of me at age 6 doing it. But I listened to a lot of classical music growing up. My mom is an opera singer; she sang in the chorus of the Paris Opera the whole time I was growing up, even before, while she was pregnant with me. Classical music was around all the time, and I loved playing it. Even when I was studying astrophysics at the University of Edinburgh, I was a member of the Opera Society there and sang in a couple of operas, even conducted a concerto and an opera at the Edinburgh Festival. And the first piece I've composed that has a lot of challenging written-out material – The View from

Orohena, a concerto for symphonic wind band and improvised piano – was premiered in Prague last year. So, classical music continues to be a part of my aesthetic. I've always played it, and I even kept taking classical lessons for a long while. Still, as I said, I do consider myself primarily a jazz pianist.

Part of the challenge of the “Goldbergs” project was to see how it would be to switch gears in the middle of something – playing this classical music that's a real test for me and for so many pianists, then the next minute really improvising and being free. When it came to the improvisations, the challenge was two-fold: first, be myself, and on the other hand, have it make sense with the Bach. I don't want to shoehorn his music into some bag where it doesn't fit. When it came to the “Goldbergs” themselves, just playing the Bach well is a great challenge. But, of course, the very best players of the “Goldbergs” manage to perform the written music while sounding completely individual, which is a real accomplishment.

What are some of your favorite recordings of the Goldberg Variations, the ones that most informed your feel for the music?

Dan Tepfer: The ones that mean the most to me are the very different 1955 and '81 Glenn Gould versions, as well as the later recording by harpsichordist Pierre Hantaï, the one from 2004. I have the early-'90s Hantaï version, which is really nice, but I absolutely love his most recent recording. He does more with the music, just amazing. It's so loose rhythmically, but also super-grooving. And his ornamentation is outasight. That's something that I don't really get into when playing the Bach, especially since I don't play any of the repeats, just keeping it simple. Anyway, I'm not usually a fan of harpsichord recordings. Keith Jarrett has a recording of the “Goldbergs” on harpsichord, and I find it pretty boring, to be honest. But the new Hantaï recording is exciting as hell.

As for the Gould, I like both the '55 and '81 recordings equally. The '55 is more perfect in terms of every voice being brought out just right, and I can see why a lot of people like it best; but the '81 is more mature, and I guess I'm more attached to that one, it being the first one I heard. The only element lacking in Gould is creative ornamentation, which the Hantaï really has. But what is amazing about Gould is his sense of time – it's insanely good. That's something jazz musicians think very hard about – what good time is, what groove is, what swing is. Gould is rhythmically one of the most precise and rooted players I've ever heard. You can't listen to his recordings of Bach and not want to tap your foot. They're so dancing. And that's important in Bach. Not that it was dance music, but his forms emerged directly from dance music. Gould brings that out in a way that feels really modern. There is also the perfection of his understanding of the music. The more I studied the “Goldbergs” and the more I personally identified what I wanted to hear, the more I could go back to Gould's recordings and realize just how much he really nailed everything. There's the dancing quality and the bringing out of the right voices, but there's also this profound musicality. Gould was someone who thought deeply about how the piece as a whole would affect the listener. Unlike most classical play-

ers, Gould doesn't take all the repeats. And why most people do now is beyond me. To look at that music and think you should do all the repeats is akin to reading the Bible and thinking what you're reading actually happened that way, rather than as an allegory, like the creation. It seems obvious to me that some of the variations call for repeats and some don't – and Gould was all over that. I might've held taking all the repeats against Hantai, except that he is so creative and fresh with the ornamentation that you want to hear it the second time around because it's totally different from the first time.

One more thing for anyone who thinks they know Gould and the “Goldbergs” is that they have to listen to that early live recording of him in Salzburg from 1959. In a lot of ways, that is him at his best – it will revolutionize your thinking of him if you haven't heard it. He's loose, he's adding stuff all over the place, and he's often far more musical than he is in the studio recordings, playing with dynamics a lot more and not as dry. But what shines through about Gould whether it's that live recording or his studio records is his vitality, the visceral energy in his playing. That's important in Bach. The music shouldn't feel too pretty. Bach was a badass, after all –the man had like 20 kids, always went his own way, kept getting into trouble with authorities telling him to hang back on the strange notes. He was a force. So, Gould really owns Bach's music in the right visceral way, and you can't help feeling, as a listener, that he really desires to play every note and means every one. That's inspirational, perhaps particularly for a jazz player.

You quote “Never Let Me Go” and “Everytime We Say Goodbye” in one of your variations/improvisations. Tell me about that.

Dan Tepfer: In Variation 30, track 61 on the album, I'm responding to the Quodlibet in the “Goldbergs,” where Bach quotes two popular tunes of his time, “I have so long been away from you, come closer, come closer” and “Cabbage and turnips have driven me away, had my mother cooked meat, I'd have opted to stay”. Those songs have a theme of farewells, or the end of things. So I chose two standards that similarly deal with goodbyes and things ending. This is one variation that definitely sounds jazzy, because I'm playing those tunes; there is even a swing to it. It's at the end of the album, so it's also about me alluding to where I come from. But there's pretty much no swing in the rest of the record. Some of my linear vocabulary could be identified as coming from jazz, plus some of my phrasing. But even in modernist classical music like Ligeti's Etudes, there is an appropriation of jazz phrasing, which is a part of the broader musical consciousness now.

What did the process of making the album teach you about aspects of idiom and individuality, the tussle between the two?

Dan Tepfer: More than any project, this has helped me get a little closer to the question of, who am I? The most important quality in any of the improvisers I admire the most – and probably my favorite is Thelonious Monk in this respect – is having a personal voice. The “Goldbergs” project forced me to identify what that is. It became clear to me as I was recording when an improvisation of mine had a tone that felt really personal, where each note felt like I was singing – and when it didn't, where

it felt like I was playing an exercise. Another thing that this process forced me to think about was, what does it mean to record a project like this? I mean, doing this live is one thing – it's exciting. You don't know what's going to happen, and audiences get into that, especially if it's something unusual. But I wanted to make a record that people would want to listen to over and over again. That's why this album became very structured, where I'm playing each of Bach's variations and my improvisations have basically the same parameters – short and with these clear emotional places that they go to immediately, then leave immediately. In the spirit of Bach, I wanted the album to be fairly strict and structured, even though I'm improvising. There's no dabbling around.

In making this record, I thought a lot about why we even improvise – is it that jazz players are lazy and don't want write the notes out ahead of time? No, I think it's because the real advantage of improvisation is that you only have to play the notes that you feel like playing in that moment. That's the ideal impulse for improvisation, and if that's the case, then the music should feel as real and true as it possibly can.

*Finally, what do you hope a listener takes away from your **Goldberg Variations / Variations**?*

DT: One thing I hope listeners feel is a sense of surprise – surprise that something like this can work. Before they hear the album, a lot of people may think it's just a crazy idea. But I hope that by the end of it, a listener thinks about Bach's work in a deeper way; that is, you might not have noticed an element in one of his variations before that you now notice because I'm bringing it out in my improvisation. I also hope people come away with the realization of music being music and that two approaches to it can co-exist. And, of course, I hope people are just moved by the record, because I think Bach's *Goldberg Variations* are one of the most profoundly affecting masterpieces ever. From this tiny piece of material, Bach was able to express this incredibly full range of feeling, from a visceral delight like the sense of skiing down a mountain at full speed to the most introspective, meditative sadness. And the fact that all the variations flow together so beautifully and they make this complete whole is a way for Bach to convey how all these different emotions are part of life and that they belong together. You can't expect to have a life that's all visceral delight, and you certainly wouldn't want a life that's all sadness. The contrast is what makes a complete life, and a complete work of art.

