



Musical Interludes | The Secret Piano

PREFACE

Musical Interludes explores connections between music, literature, history, and culture. This season, each concert was developed in response to a book. We conclude the 2021-2022 season with a program inspired by the memoir, *The Secret Piano: From Mao's Labor Camps to Bach's Goldberg Variations*, by Zhu Xiao-Mei.

At the age of ten, Zhu enrolled at the Beijing Conservatory. However, when the Cultural Revolution began in 1966, music schools closed. One by one, Zhu and her fellow students, teachers, and family were sent to prison or labor camps. Zhu's memoir tells her extraordinary story of how music, and her piano, sustained her sense of courage, hope, and humanity during and after her imprisonment.

For Zhu, two pieces embody her experience of transformation and liberation: Bach's Goldberg Variations and Beethoven's final piano sonata, Op. 111.

PROGRAM NOTES

By Brian Lauritzen

In an old Peanuts comic strip from way back, Lucy--ever infatuated with the mercurial pianist Schroeder--says, "I'm looking for the answer to life, Schroeder. What do you think is the answer?"

Schroeder's reply knocks Lucy backwards from her perch at the foot of the piano.
"BEETHOVEN!"

"Beethoven is it, clear and simple!! Do you understand?"

Schroeder then lowers his head and starts playing a bit of Ludwig's music. All Lucy can muster in response is, "Good grief."

But what happens when an answer generates more questions? Beethoven, despite all the undeniable masterpieces, certainly left us with more than a few questions. Some are as simple as, "What if?"

What if Beethoven had access to a nine-foot Steinway concert grand piano? The instruments he had at his disposal weren't even close to what we hear in concert halls today. After composing his final epic Op. 111 Piano Sonata, Beethoven famously remarked that the piano is "after all an unsatisfactory instrument."

On the surface, that comment seems preposterous. Upon further reflection, it's rather obvious. Beethoven's piano music repeatedly stretches the limits of what the piano was at the time. He lived in a moment when the piano was evolving (growing, mostly) and the music he wrote was more for the instrument that the piano would become rather than the instrument which existed at the time.

The mark of a true visionary. Beethoven imagined a sound world that didn't exist and created it. Before it could exist. The grand scale of the largest of Beethoven's piano sonatas would only be realized once the technology of the piano caught up with Beethoven's vision.

The opening of Beethoven's final sonata vacillates between defiance and bravura. Insolence turns into swagger and back again. Eventually at the end of the first movement, Beethoven settles into serenity which acts as both a satisfying arrival and sets us up for what is to come in the final (second) movement.

Thomas Mann referred to the second movement of Beethoven's Op. 111 as a "farewell to sonata form." Certainly, in simply composing a two-movement sonata, Beethoven had already chucked convention out of his Vienna apartment window. As tempestuous as the opening movement is, the finale is the opposite. Beethoven takes us to a place of transcendent beauty that only he can create. This is not the journey from struggle to triumph that Beethoven has taken us on so often (5th and 9th Symphonies, Egmont, Fidelio, etc.), this is something otherworldly. And so, so sublime.

Like Beethoven's curious comment regarding the insufficiency of the piano, J.S. Bach's Goldberg Variations tends to raise more questions than it answers. It does so by its mere existence. It has been described as a "masterpiece without consensus," by David Patrick Stearns, a classical music critic for the Philadelphia Inquirer. "There are no hidden enigmas," Stearns writes, "and next to no questions about what J.S. Bach actually put on paper. The essence of the Goldberg Variations is right there in front of you. So much is there, but so much is not, creating all kinds of loopholes."

Those "loopholes" result in vastly different interpretations of the same set of notes, oftentimes from the same artist. Glenn Gould made two commercial recordings of the Goldberg Variations and there are at least two live bootleg recordings that are relatively easy to access. All are wildly different from one another. Same pianist, same Aria, same 30 variations.

In an interview with the eminent music writer Tim Page, Gould said, "All the evidence suggests that Bach didn't give a hoot about specific sonority or even volume, but he did care to an almost fanatical degree about the integrity of his structures."

To use an architectural metaphor: if the Goldberg Variations are a house, as long as there's a kitchen, bathroom, and a place to sleep, it doesn't matter what it looks like. Or, if that seems a bit much, how about this: a house is a house no matter what color you paint it. Either way, Bach is extending an invitation for interpretive freedom.

About the Goldbergs, pianist and Bach specialist András Schiff said, "Aller guten Dinge sind drei." (All good things are three.) Bach divides the 30 variations into 10 groups of three. Each group has a virtuosic display variation, a quiet contemplative variation, and a variation in canon.

The structure is impeccable. Bach gives musicians the "what." He leaves the "how" up to them.