Kautsky Piano Studio Recital, Feb. 4, 2014, Harper Hall

**The Goldbergs—Past and Present**

*A note of thanks to my fabulous class of students, who have taken on this project with remarkable diligence and even enthusiasm (!) despite the fact that it entailed hours of additional practice and classes and sometimes required learning music they weren’t sure they liked and took place at exactly the same time as important auditions, competitions, and recitals. Kudos to an incredible group for their unfailing good humor, curiosity, and superb musicianship!*

Bach’s *Goldberg Variations,* written in 1741, are among the greatest examples of variation form in the entire canon of western music. Rivaled in the keyboard literature only by Beethoven’s *Diabelli Variations*, the work’s encyclopedic treatment of a brief theme over the course of 40-75 minutes of music (we’ll be on the low end of that, you’ll be happy to hear—no repeats) is nothing less than mind-boggling. Bach delightedly examines the myriad possibilities inherent in such commonplaces as scales vs. arpeggios, parallel vs. contrary motion, and step-wise motion vs. massive leaps, not to mention the complexities of three-part counterpoint and the constant imitative options it creates. He does all this while remaining unswervingly in the key of G, departing from the major mode to move to the parallel minor only three times (var. 15, 21, and 25) in the entire set.

Bach’s theme here is the bass line of a 32 measure “Aria,” written in binary form. Always conscious of numbers, Bach must have taken joy in writing a theme with 32 measures and building an enormous structure with 32 parts around that theme. The “Aria,” an utterly beguiling sarabande, is played at the beginning and end of the work, and in between are 30 variations. Ever conscious of the symbolism of the number 3 as pertaining to the Trinity, Bach features the three note mordent in the aria and a number of the variations, writes a canon as every 3rd variation, and builds those canons on intervals progressing from the unison to the interval of the ninth, or 32.. In between the canons are genre variations (e.g. a gigue, a passepied, and a fughetto), and virtuosic variations, which were intended to be performed on a two-manual harpsichord. Interestingly, a 2 manual Steinway piano does exist and is owned by UW-Madison, where Christopher Taylor has performed the Goldbergs on it, but Lawrentians, like most pianists approaching the Goldbergs, have had to cope with the hazards of innumerable hand-crossings and resultant left and right hand collisions as they attempt to play on one keyboard what was already difficult enough on two! Needless to say, the challenge is both daunting and exhilarating, and the music itself seems designed to reflect the exuberance and daring of such physical exploits.

Like other musical journeys away from and back to a theme (the last movements of Beethoven’s late piano sonatas, Op. 109 and Op. 111 come immediately to mind), the return to the Goldberg Aria after such long absence is particularly wonderful, the boisterous Quodlibet (an amalgam of two popular songs of the day) which precedes it serving as the perfect foil for its radiance.

Goldberg Variations by J. S. Bach

Aria, Variations 1, 2 Anthony Capparelli

Variations 3, 4 Emily Blandon-Kovar

Variations 5, 6, 7 Cameron Pieper

Variations 8, 9 Jessica Castleberry

Variations 10, 11 Le Kong

Variations 12, 13, 14, 15, 16 Elizabeth Vaughan

Variations 17, 18 David Voss

Variations 19, 20 Laetitia Lehman-Pearsall

Variations 21, 22 Anthony Capparelli

Variations 23, 24 Michael Gold

Variations 25, 26 Jonathan Fagan

Variations 27, 28 Gabi Makuc

Variations 29, 30 Tess Vogel

Aria Anthony Capparelli

*Thirteen Ways of Looking at the Goldberg* was commissioned by the Irving Gilmore Keyboard Festival and was first performed by pianist Gilbert Kalish in 2004 at the Festival. It consists of 12 new variations by living composers -- only Lukas Foss has since died -- on the “Aria” on which J.S. Bach based his famous *Goldberg Variations.* (The 13th piece is the Bach Aria, which you will have just heard, and we are thus not repeating.) The new variations vary enormously in style, mood, and the literalism with which they stick to the original theme. Some are more jazzy, some more tonal, some more astringently modern. Some are based on the bass line of the original Goldbergs, on which Bach himself based his variations (e.g. “Rube Goldberg Variation” of C. Curtis-Smith and “Variation of Variation with Variation” by Ralf Gothóni), some highlight the original ornamentation (e.g. “Ghost Variation” of Mischa Zupko), some incorporate recognizable snippets of the melody line (e.g. “Fantasy Variation” of Stanley Walden), others focus on the motoric aspects of baroque style (e.g. “The Gilmore Variation” of Jennifer Higdon and the ”Goldmore Variation” of Lukas Foss) or baroque procedures (e.g. “Variation Fugato” of Bright Sheng). And, needless to say, none of these categories are mutually exclusive. Many of the variations replicate Bach’s original binary form, even going so far as to provide cadences on I and V, despite other more atonal moments. (See, for example, David del Tredici’s, “My Goldberg” or William Bolcom’s “Yet Another Goldberg Variation.”) A number of the pieces feature variations within variations, where the original 16-bar halves, each of which Bach repeated verbatim, are here repeated instead with variations. (See “Melancholy Minuet” of Fred Hersch and “Ghost Variation” of Mischa Zupko) Taken together the set provides a fascinating overview of the state of composition in America at the beginning of the 21st century and documents a remarkable project which views one of the great masterpieces of the western canon through a set of diverse and imaginative new eyes.

Rube Goldberg Variation C. Curtis-Smith (b. 1941)

Emily Blandon Kovar

The Gilmore Variation Jennifer Higdon (b. 1962)

Gabi Makuc

Ghost Variation Mischa Sarche Zupko

Le Kong

Fantasy Variation Stanley Walden (b. 1932)

Jessica Castleberry

Variation Fugato Bright Sheng (b. 1955)

Tess Vogel

Kontraphunktus Derek Bermel (b. 1967)

Cameron Pieper

My Goldberg (Gymnopedie) David del Tredici (b. 1937)

David Voss

Chasing Goldberg Fred Lerdahl (b. 1943)

Elizabeth Vaughan

Yet another Goldberg Variation (for left hand alone) William Bolcom (b. 1938)

Laetitia Lehman-Pearsall

Goldmore Variation Lukas Foss (1922-2009)

Tammy Li

Variation of Variation with Variation Ralf Gothoni (b. 1946)

Jonathan Fagan

Melancholy Minuet Fred Hersch (b. 1955)

Michael Gold