

Salt Bay Chamberfest – August 11, 2017

JOHANN SEBASTIAN BACH Goldberg Variations for String Trio, BWV 988
(Transcription by Dmitry Sitkovetsky)

IANNIS XENAKIS *Persephassa*

Movement is dependent upon space and space implies a relationship between objects. This evening the festival explores unusual configurations of space in a concert environment, where, instead of an invisible boundary between audience and performer at the lip of the stage, all barriers are removed as the audience surrounds the musicians in one case, and, in the other, is in turn surrounded by performers and a diversity of sounds. In the case of Bach, the purity and primacy of the written pitches rise above mere tone color and are given new life through a unified but varied ensemble. In the case of the Xenakis, pitch in the traditional sense is almost irrelevant, but timbre, range, dynamic, direction, and blends of pure sound are the essence of the experience.

No composer has inspired more transcriptions than Johann Sebastian Bach. One reason for this is that he composed so many great works for the organ, an instrument of imposing grandeur, immobile but with overpowering variety of timbre and volume. Transcriptions for orchestra have provided a way to capture that greatness in a concert hall rather than in a church. Another reason is that a number of his compositions—such as *The Musical Offering* and *The Art of Fugue*—do not specify the instrumentation. In these pieces and in much of Bach’s music, there’s an idealized, purely musical thought that rises above tone color.

The *Goldberg Variations* are written expressly for the keyboard and, since the remarkable recording by Glenn Gould, the piece has become a proving ground for the interpretation of Bach’s music. Bach’s style is highly contrapuntal, often with two upper voices in canon and a basso accompaniment creating three individual voices, a texture that seems quite natural in the hands of three stringed instruments. In fact, there are moments in the *Goldberg Variations* when the keyboard writing is so dense and the lines so independently conceived that one has difficulty imagining it played by fewer than three people.

The foundational core of Bach’s greatness is his mastery of counterpoint, here manifested in *canon*. A canon is a strict form of counterpoint in which one voice leads with a line or melody and, after a brief rhythmic space, another voice enters with exactly the same line (usually transposed to another pitch level), producing a melody that overlaps and harmonizes with itself. While writing canons is part of every composer’s foundational training, it is a hallmark of advanced musical craftsmanship to compose a canon that is graceful and expressive. The task that Bach set himself in the *Goldberg Variations* boggles the mind. Simply to compose 30 distinct, attractive, and memorable variations on a single theme is a feat beyond most composers. In this case, Bach composes each third variation as a canon. If it is a challenge to compose a single canon, imagine the difficulty in composing ten different canons—all of them over a rigidly predetermined structure (the subject of the variation). Then, to top it off, the ten canons progress systematically up the intervals from a unison (the second voice enters on exactly the same note as the first) through the octave and beyond, to the ninth.

Bach allows himself certain small liberties. The bass is free, in that it does not participate in the canonic games going on above it, though it is the carrier of the *Goldberg* theme. As the theme is divided into two halves, so is each canon; and at this midpoint, in many cases, the voices switch roles (who enters first). Two canons are inverted, meaning that the imitating voice plays the same intervals as the first voice, but as though seen in a mirror (Variations 12 and 15). The astounding counterpoint aside, each variation has its own unique style, giving the piece the character of an extended suite. Variation 7 is a gigue, Variation 10 is a fughetta, Variation 16 (the midpoint of the entire work) is a brilliant and grand French Overture followed by a fugue, and Variations 13 and 25 are both slow, ornamented arias, with the first in major and the latter in minor. All of these details are nested within a vast architectural plan rounded off by a return to the elegant simplicity of the opening aria.

Born in Romania of Greek heritage, Iannis Xenakis observed the ruins of ancient Greece as a youth and believed his future would be in archaeology, studying the architecture of the past. Living in Greece during World War II, the distress of the violence convinced him that musical expression was essential to his future. Years later, in Paris, he pursued studies in engineering, mathematics, architecture and music, with a desire to fuse these disciplines:

I sensed the link that is often made between music and architecture very strongly, and their respective influences on me were fundamental. For example, musicians learn at the Conservatory that they must begin by choosing a theme, and from it they create a form, by juxtaposition, expansion, reduction and so on. In architecture [on the other hand], the starting point is the terrain, and then appears the program, and within it the necessary functions and forms; then come the materials. So we work from the global to the detail...In reality the two approaches are not contradictory. On the contrary, they demonstrate that as an architect one must deploy both synthetic and analytical thought, just as I instinctively did in music, because of an internal necessity that is common to both arts.

Persephassa was premiered at the Shiraz Festival in Persepolis, Iran in 1969 and, at nearly 30 minutes in length, is one of the major works for percussion ensemble in the history of music. The title refers to Persephone, the bride of Hades who is responsible for fertility and the change of seasons; her descent to the underworld causes the onset of winter, and her rise for the other half of the year brings spring. Xenakis writes for six percussionists who surround the audience, each with a nearly identical array of instruments, divided into four categories: skin, metal, wood, and stone. At times, long intervals of silence pass between each drum stroke that reaches the hearer from different directions. Gradually, the nature of the instruments evolves through the categories and ranges, until, in the finale, an accelerated crescendo passes around through all six percussionists, creating an exhilarating, spiraling swirl of sound that encircles the audience.

By Mark Mandarano