

## Tri-C Classical Piano: Tepfer & Bach

by Jarrett Hoffman



It wasn't unexpected that Bach and jazz improvisation went back and forth. After all, Dan Tepfer is known for not only playing the Goldberg's, but also using the work's thirty variations as a jumping-off point into his own spontaneity. In this case, for a pre-recorded recital that debuted on April 18 on the Tri-C Classical Piano

Series, he limited himself to the aria and the nine canons.

What *was* unexpected came after that ninth canon and ninth improvisation. Here Tepfer transitioned into free improv, then tied that off in just such a way to set up a seamless reentry into Bach — specifically that aria that opens and closes the Goldberg's, heard here in an especially heavenly form. The only way I can describe that ingenious maneuver, which brought this special journey full circle, is that it felt like Tepfer had stabbed you in the heart, in a good way.

Of course, the significance of that journey's end necessitates a deeper understanding of what Tepfer did along the way. To begin with, his interpretation of Bach was sensitive and beautifully phrased, but also articulate and self-assured of direction. Energy seemed to emanate from his fingers with each new musical idea.

On the other side of the package, his fresh and impressive improvisations were fascinating to hear, and hopefully to discuss. Since each canon is built around a different interval, from unison to ninth, Tepfer tailored his creations cleverly around those same musical distances. But the challenges go further than that: as Tepfer said in an [interview](#), he also strives for brevity in his improvisations, so that they fit in well

next to the variations. On that note, almost all of Sunday's improvisations were perfectly short and sweet; only one felt a bit long compared to its canon sibling.



Another question: how closely should the improvisations hew to the atmosphere of the variations? Here, perhaps one or two strayed too far, but the majority struck an exquisite balance: staying in the same general realm of mood as the corresponding canon, while still staking out new territory. A great example came after the gorgeous, minor-mode Variation 15 — Tepfer's improvisation beautifully matched Bach's emotional depth, but still ventured into more mysterious, modern territory with the peculiarity of its parallel fifths.

Of course, that free improv near the end also deserves a special mention. Its moody character was engrossing, and its unisons between plucked piano strings and keyed notes served as compelling markers along the way. But most importantly, it served as the perfect doorway back to the aria, capping off this incredibly rewarding and deeply original musical experience.

The final third of Tepfer's 45-minute recital was devoted to three of his own jazz compositions. The middle work, *Minor Fall*, provided a powerful sense of introspection, while the outer two were outgoing and uniquely percussive. Tepfer basically drummed on an A in the introduction to *Hindi Hex*, then literally drummed on the frame of the piano to begin *Roadrunner*. Those two pieces also share an enticing rhythmic energy, even swagger — a particularly fitting word for *Roadrunner*, where Tepfer never ran out of juice in his left hand, and with his right pulled off one stunning display of technique, seemingly with ease.

Now, for Bach to improvise on that.

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