

Severance in Recital: Pavel Kolesnikov in J.S. Bach's "Goldberg" Variations (Sept. 24)

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CLEVELAND, Ohio — When Johann Sebastian Bach had his “Keyboard exercise, consisting of an ARIA with diverse variations for harpsichord with two manuals” published by Balthasar Schmid in Nuremberg in 1741, he noted in the preface that the work was “composed for connoisseurs, for the refreshment of their spirits.”

Whether or not the sizeable crowd in Reinberger Chamber Hall at Severance Music Center on Tuesday evening, September 24 regarded themselves as connoisseurs, the powerful ovation at the end of Pavel Kolesnikov’s 75-minute program suggested that their spirits had surely been refreshed — if not profoundly touched — both by the composer’s genius and the pianist’s captivating performance of the Variations.

Before opening this season’s Severance in Recital series, Kolesnikov told the audience in a charmingly self-effacing speech that he could talk for hours about the architecture of the Variations and the alchemy of Bach’s counterpoint. And while he doesn’t usually like to talk before playing this piece, he said “I could not come to Cleveland for the first time and not say hello.”

He did note that the work is born out of silence and fades into silence at the end, adding “I hope you enjoy what’s happening in between.”

Between the opening Aria and its reappearance at the end, Bach uses its bass line to craft 30 variations divided into 10 sets. The third in each set features a canon at ascending intervals — that’s the contrapuntal alchemy — while the other two explore a wide variety of Baroque forms, including a French overture at dead center.

If you’re a connoisseur, it’s fun to know that, but the composer wears his erudition lightly, never letting contrapuntal rigidity get in the way of the music. What you *do* need

to know is suggested in Bach's preface, which calls for a harpsichord with two manuals. In a number of variations, he writes lines that cross between the hands, creating tangles that need to be sorted out for the single keyboard of a piano.

Embarking on this eventful musical journey, Kolesnikov created an other-worldly ambiance in Reinberger, assisted by dimmed lighting that left the pianist in the isolated beam of a single overhead spotlight. That invited the listener to live inside his mind for the duration of a performance that was more mental than physical.

Technically speaking, Kolesnikov invoked playing styles idiomatic to the piano rather than simply transferring harpsichord techniques to the later instrument. His extremely slow tempos in some variations recognized the piano's ability to let strings ring longer when struck rather than plucked, and fast groups of notes that had melodic roles on the harpsichord became tossed-off gestures on the piano.

And the pianist used his instrument's ability to vary the volume and character of attacks by bringing single notes startlingly out of the texture from time to time. Late in the piece, isolated bass notes had the effect of explosions.

Using another technique favored by pianists like Robert Schumann, Kolesnikov held down the damper pedal in a few variations, letting notes float in a miasma.

Throughout, the pianist played with exquisite articulation, carefully balancing melodic lines, never forgetting that this music grows upward from the bass line, and restricting his dynamic range so that *fortes* truly became important.

All of this left the audience so apparently breathless and totally engaged that they sat on their hands for several long moments after the last notes of the final Aria had vanished.

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