

Review: Harpsichordist Charlotte Mattax-Moersch gives extraordinary performance of the Goldberg Variations at Bethlehem Bach Festival

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Hearing Bach's Goldberg Variations on the harpsichord instead of the piano somehow bears a stamp of authenticity, rather like reading Flaubert in the original French. As wonderfully expressive as the piano's complex bag of musical tricks is — its ability to sustain notes, its dynamic range, its power — sometimes the basic idea gets lost in the translation.

Harpsichordist Charlotte Mattax-Moersch's extraordinary sold-out performance of the Goldbergs at the Saal of the Moravian Church Saturday morning, part of the Bach Choir of Bethlehem's 111th Bach Festival, was a case in point. The intimate confines of the Saal, Mattax-Moersch's consummate skill and the fabulous sound of the period-correct two-manual harpsichord all contributed to an expressive, elegant reading of Bach's storied work.

The instrument's sound was surprisingly rich and resonant, yet with just enough dryness to preserve a remarkable clarity. One had the impression of looking at Bach's masterpiece through a lens, revealing details of its complex structure and symmetry. Mattax-Moersch's wonderful execution of the many sets of triplets in Variation No. 3, for instance, clearly revealed the interplay of its three musical lines.

Following her tender, lilting reading of the Aria, Mattax-Moersch really got into her virtuoso groove with Variation No. 5, with its numerous rapid 16-note sequences and hand-crossing movements. Those hand-crossings would get more dazzling as the work progressed, along with wonderful execution of swift running passages and lovely trills. The flamboyant rapid runs of Variation No. 20, a virtuosic two-part toccata, was a real delight, evoking — at least for me — a pair of playful mice scurrying after each other.

Variation No. 28 was a true tour de force of technical dexterity, demanding not only a great deal of hand crossings, but incredibly complex trills embedded in the melodic lines. Mattax-Moersch artfully turned out these rapid 32nd note (!) embellishments, sometimes with each hand playing in contrary motion, sometimes with both hands mirroring each other.

The harpsichord also brought out an additional unexpected treat: how incredibly French these variations sound, especially Variation No. 7, a marvelous French-style gigue. Many pianists treat this as a sort of foot race, while Mattax-Moersch performed it with the relaxed, unhurried tempo

it merits. In fact, despite the work's virtuoso demands, her entire performance seemed relaxed and well-tempered, with careful attention to phrasing and tender introspection shown throughout.

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