

Review: Pianist Peter Serkin raises Bach's Goldberg Variations to a higher, reverent place



Peter Serkin performed Bach's Goldberg Variations Saturday at Central Moravian Church
(CONTRIBUTED PHOTO)

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J.S. Bach's enduring Goldberg Variations have been danced to, hummed along with, played romantically, passionately, and with joyful physicality. But it would be hard to imagine an interpretation of Bach's masterpiece performed with as much devotional, prayer-like reverence as pianist Peter Serkin gave it at the 2018 Bach Choir gala concert Saturday afternoon at Central Moravian Church in Bethlehem. Serkin raised this music to another, higher place, and most of the audience along with him.

Serkin pretty much let us know where he was going from the first piece on the program, Mozart's sublime and eerie Adagio in B Minor. Hunched over the keyboard, it seemed as if he

were channeling Mozart directly, extracting all the sadness and tension in this piece with graceful musical lines. This heartfelt passion extended into Serkin's fingertips, which would quiver as if trying to extract every ounce of tenderness from the keys.

Mozart's Sonata in B-Flat Major, certainly a sunnier piece, was graced with the same gentle touch. Even the dramatic second theme of the opening allegro, with its abrupt intervals of sevenths, was free from the sharp, staccato attacks many pianists give it. The high-kicking finale was all lighthearted charm, with wonderfully delicate trills.

If Serkin seemed to channel Mozart in the program's opening works, he had certainly entered the mind of Bach for the Goldbergs. The opening Aria was rendered with the same tenderness one might give the Ave Maria, and established a contemplative, spiritual atmosphere that pervaded the entire work.

Serkin's meditative reading of the variations certainly worked for me, but perhaps not for everyone. After all, there is a great deal of motion and physicality here, with many sections dance-inspired, none of which was very obvious from this performance. Yet there was something more rare and precious, I thought, in Serkin's ethereal approach. Call it less of Glenn Gould, and more of Arvo Pärt.

All this made Serkin's performance none the less virtuosic. His flamboyant yet carefully paced runs in variation 20, the acrobatic hand-crossings in variation 28, the rustic playfulness of the quodlibet, were all there. His left hand seemed to be a guide, methodically leading the listener through a religious experience. The lovely variation 25, in fact, evoked the same passion as any of Bach's most heartfelt arias.

No wonder it took Serkin, upon completing the Goldbergs, almost half a minute to decompress before he finally rose from the keyboard. The trance finally broken, the audience broke into well-earned, rapturous applause.

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