



Celebrity Series of Boston

Sunday, November 18, 2018 at 3pm

NEC's Jordan Hall

Inon Barnatan piano

From the performer

Inon Barnatan shares the following thoughts on the program he performs today, which he entitles Variation on a Suite.

As a performer and listener I've always been fascinated by the conversations that music has across different eras. For this program I'm using the Baroque suite, one of the earliest forms of instrumental music, as template to explore how deeply connected music can be over a span of more than 300 years, and how each of these composers were able to simultaneously be inspired by the past and break free from it.

The first half is a variation on a suite—a piece I assembled together in the form of a baroque suite but in which each of the movements is by a different composer, each following the other without break.

The second is Brahms's set of variations exploring a theme from a Handel keyboard suite.

I'm excited to be back in Boston for this solo journey. I hope you enjoy this time-traveling adventure!

J. S. Bach (1685-1750)

Toccatà in E minor, BWV 914

The word *toccatà* entered the musician's vocabulary in 16th-century Italy from the verb *toccare*, which literally means "to touch." Keyboard instruments were played by what was called "touching"; over time, *toccare* acquired the figurative meaning, "to play." A *toccatà* was simply "something played." By 1607, when Monteverdi called the overture-like prelude to his opera *Orfeo* a *toccatà*, the word was applied to many different kinds of compositions. In the 17th century it was widely used as the name for virtuosic keyboard pieces designed to show off a keyboard player's touch and skill. Bach carried this usage into the 18th century, writing two *toccatas* for organ as showy introductions to fugues; he also composed more than a half dozen intended for the harpsichord. This one, in E minor, dates from around 1708-10.

Bach's harpsichord *toccatas* are loosely assembled compositions whose sections, generally an introduction, some slow music, and then a fugue, are almost separate movements, but are played without pause. In this appealing but relatively rarely performed *manualiter* (hands-only *toccatà*), the music, which can be understood as falling into four sections, begins with an extended, stately introductory flourish in the lower registers of the keyboard followed by a short, highly chromatic lively double fugue, *Un poco allegro* for four voices. The final section is a rambling, improvisatory fantasy, *Adagio*, marked by the term "Praeludium" in a manuscript copy, causing some historians to contend that it, and the brilliant three-voiced fugue, *Allegro*, to which it forms a kind of prelude, comprised the original work, and that the two preceding movements were added later. Some historians also question the origin of the concluding fugue; possibly it was taken from an anonymous composition found in a Naples manuscript, which has a similar subject although the episodes in the Bach work have more complexity. (In the Baroque era, "borrowing" from other compositions was considered flattery rather than plagiarism.) The *toccatà* ends with a fantasy-like flourish.

George Frideric Handel (1685-1759)
Allemande from Suite No. 5 in E Major, HWV 430

Throughout his later career, Handel was renowned as a keyboard improviser. His skills thoroughly impressed his audiences. He composed twenty suites; eight of them are generally grouped together, HWV 426 through 433; they are collectively referred to as the Eight Great Suites or the Eight Suites for Keyboard.

Suite No. 5 existed in several early versions before it reached its final form. Some of these have been traced to Handel's youth, when he studied keyboard playing and composition with Zachow in Halle, but the final version was published in London in 1720, when he was 35

Suite No. 5, like most of Handel's other suites, consists of stylized dance movements, preceded by a prelude. The key of E Major, which he chose for this work, was then considered the "highest"/sharpest key in frequent use, and was often associated with heaven or the heavenly.

Although the most often performed of the movements of this suite is the last, an air and variations known now by the name "The Harmonious Blacksmith," in this concert you will hear the *Allemande*, the second of the five movements; it, too, is often extracted and performed by itself because of its gracious beauty and fine structure.

Allemande (whose name means German) was a standard dance included in Baroque suites. The popular *allemande* originated in the 16th century, when it was a dance of moderate tempo; it had what was called a characteristic "double-knocking" upbeat and, indeed, seems to have come from a German dance of the same name, but paradoxically, no identifiable German dances from this era survive. The British Inns of Court did preserve the first known record of an *allemande* in which couples formed a line, taking hands and walking the length of the room, before balancing on one foot.

Jean-Philippe Rameau (1683-1764)
Courante from the Suite in A minor, RCT 5 . . .

Rameau, one of the musical giants of 18th-century France, is today known primarily for his compositions for harpsichord. During his lifetime, however, his enormous reputation was made in the field of opera, although now most of his operas are unknown. He composed sacred music as well as secular cantatas and harpsichord works, and he was also very interested in music theory. In 1722, he moved to Paris to oversee the publication of his *Traité de l'harmonie reduite à ses principes naturels (Treatise on Harmony Reduced to its Natural Principles)*, the first of his many influential and controversial theoretical works.

Harpsichords of Rameau's time were lightly strung, creating a swift, responsive action and silvery sound, and as such, were well matched to the virtuosic character he gave his magnificent Suite in A minor. One of his many solo harpsichord works, the suite was published in 1728 as part of his third collection of keyboard works, *Nouvelles Suites de Pièces de Clavecin ou Second Livre*, at a time when Rameau was still mainly composing operas.

For the *Nouvelles Suites* collection, Rameau wrote highly developed dance movements. The suite opens with the traditional dances, *Allemande*, *Courante* and *Sarabande*.

Rameau composed the *Courante* in A minor, a key that he often used in his mature writing. The graceful movement, the second in the suite, was based on a dance that originally was accompanied by jumping motions. It has been praised for its perfect blend of craftsmanship and emotional power. It challenges performers with its virtuosity, utilizing independent voices with many simultaneous contrasting rhythms, scalar figures and arpeggios, as it embellishes phrases built on harmonic and melodic sequences. Most of this two-part work is composed in three voices.

François Couperin (1668-1733)
L'Atalante from Pièces de clavecin, II, 12e ordre.

François Couperin was part of a French musical family who for many generations held the post of organist at the Church of Saint-Gervais in Paris. He was dubbed Couperin le Grand when he was only seventeen and was appointed to the post of organist in the service of King Louis XIV. Couperin held several positions as a musician to the royal court, teaching and serving as harpsichordist in many court chamber concerts. His keyboard music follows the style of the Court of Louis XIV and the 'French manner' of the 18th century influenced by Lully: the music is noble and ornate, fluent and graceful, sometimes stately yet often charming, and above all, delightful. When he was only twenty-five, Couperin was appointed a royal organist; later, he also became harpsichordist for royal chamber music. Chamber music was then very much in fashion at the French court and was regularly played for entertainment after banquets. Louis XIV even liked to have music played for him when he dined alone, when he got up in the morning, and when he went to bed.

Couperin wrote around 225 pieces, in four books, grouped in 27 *ordres* or suites, each of eight to twelve movements, according to key and, to some extent, mood; they include dances and pieces with fanciful or descriptive titles, which might be the name of a particular person, or a state of mind, or a familiar institution, or even a natural phenomenon. A few pieces simply have dance titles. Some function as little portraits. They were not intended to be performed in a complete *Ordre*, and were then almost never performed that way. In the 18th century, attitudes about publication and performance were very different from what they are now: composers grouped material by key or genre, expecting performers to make a selection of works, depending on their needs, how many pieces they would play and in what order, according to the constraints and opportunities of the particular occasion.

One unusual aspect of Couperin's pieces is the strange, often mysterious titles he gave to them. They usually suggest that the music will be unusual and descriptive. They all were elegant and melodious, rich (including very little chromaticism), expressive, and fitting the musical styles of the day. His work had great influence on later composers. Brahms performed Couperin's music in public and contributed to the first complete edition of Couperin's *Pièces de clavecin* edited by Friedrich Chrysander in the 1880s.

L'Atalante (Ordre 12, No. 8) may evoke the virgin huntress of Greek myth, renowned for her beauty and speed, or Couperin may have intended to reference the sorcerer Atalante of the late-medieval *Orlando* romances. The final piece in Ordre 12 of the *Second livre de pièces de clavecin* (1717), this selection is a *moto perpetuo* in two-voices, based on a three-note motive that recurs frequently at the beginning of phrases. The delightful *Atalante* certainly sounds fleet of foot in this selection in running notes over a regular pulse.

Maurice Ravel (1875-1937)
"Rigaudon" from Le Tombeau de Couperin ("The Tomb of Couperin")

At the outbreak of World War I in 1914, Ravel tried repeatedly to enlist in the French army, but he was rejected because of his height and physical frailty. He decided then that he would express his love for his country in music by composing a *Suite française* for piano. He based it not on patriotic songs but on old French dances of the kind used in the many harpsichord suites by François Couperin, the favorite composer of the "Sun King," Louis XIV. In 1916, while the work was still in progress, Ravel was finally accepted in the army, served for a few months as a truck driver under extremely hazardous conditions and then was discharged because of his failing health. When he regained his strength, he began to work at his music again, and in November 1917, finished the *Suite française* for piano.

To commemorate French musical culture Ravel recreated the Baroque dance suite, using modal harmonies and 18th-century ornamentation, but filtered it through the chromatic lens of the neo-classicism of the early 20th century. After many delays, the great French pianist

Marguerite Long, to whose late husband the *Toccata* of the piano suite was dedicated, performed the premiere on April 11, 1919.

Ravel renamed the suite *Le Tombeau de Couperin* (literally “*The Tomb of Couperin*” or “*Couperin’s Tombstone*”), after the 17th- and 18th-century French practice of using the word *tombeau* in the title of memorial compositions. He wrote that the work was “really less a tribute to Couperin than to 18th-century music in general, asserting that the association with Couperin also represented the continuity of the logic and refinement of French civilization. He dedicated each of the six piano movements to the memory of a friend who had died in the war and explained that he included music that he felt radiated joy: “The dead are sad enough, in their eternal silence in this time of despair and nihilism.”

Ravel orchestrated four of the movements in 1919 for a very successful production by the Swedish ballet of Paris; it is now much more often frequently heard in that form than in the original piano suite.

The finale of the Suite is a spirited *Rigaudon*, a lively folk dance in duple meter from Provence that had gained popularity at Louis XIV’s court. This *Rigaudon* has bright sonorities and, in the center, a section in which a pastoral melody is supported by pizzicato-like chords. Ravel dedicated the *Rigaudon* to two brothers, Pierre and Pascal Gaudin, who had been his close friends.

Thomas Adès (b. 1971) **Blanca Variations**

British composer Thomas Adès composes in a personal, intimate, and deeply communicative way. He succeeds in conveying pure emotion, and his work has been likened to a mixture of that of the 20th-century composers Ligeti and Kurtág, but with a sprinkling of the kind of innovation found in the 18th-century Mozart.

Adès’s successes came early. When he was seventeen, he composed *Five Elliot Landscapes*, now known as *Op. 1*. A year later, the BBC Philharmonic performed his *Chamber Symphony*. After graduating from Cambridge, Adès joined the Hallé Orchestra as Resident Composer. In 1993, he wrote *Living Toys* for the London Sinfonietta. Adès’ first opera, *Powder her Face*, was a large success.

From 1999 to 2008, he was artistic director of the Aldeburgh Festival. He has received many awards and regularly conducts the Los Angeles Philharmonic, Boston Symphony, London Symphony Orchestra, the Royal Concertgebouw, Melbourne and Sydney Symphonies, BBC Symphony, and City of Birmingham Symphony Orchestra. As an opera conductor Adès has conducted at the Royal Opera, London, and the Zürich Opera, as well as at the Metropolitan Opera in New York and the Vienna Staatsoper. He has played solo piano recitals at Carnegie Hall in New York and the Barbican in London, and made concerto appearances with the New York Philharmonic.

The Clara Haskil International Piano Competition in Vevey, Switzerland commissioned Adès’s *Blanca Variations*. The piece was included in the plot line of the composer’s highly acclaimed third opera, *Exterminating Angel*, (in Act 1) featuring high-society operagoers who, attending a dinner party after the theatre, find they are unable to leave the party. Adès based his work on Luis Bunuel’s 1962 film of the same name.

Blanca Delgado, a famous pianist, was among the guests at the dinner party; she entertains guests at the keyboard with a work based on *Lavaba la blanca niña*, a traditional folksong in Ladino, the dialect spoken by Sephardic Jews, a minority who lived around the Mediterranean. Its text is: *The pale girl is washing and spreading the clothes./She is washing with tears, she is spreading with sighs./A knight came by and asked for a cup of water./With the tears from her eyes she filled seven jugs./“Why are you crying, my lady? What’s wrong?”/“Everybody has come back from the war except the one I am waiting for./ I have*

waited for him for seven years, more patiently than other wives./ If he does not come back I shall live like a widow."/ "I am your husband, I have come back from the war."/ They kissed; they embraced; and they went to lie down.

Blanca as a character has a subtext of Jewish exile; her music Adès said has “an unassuageable harmonic structure very typical of longing and bereavement.” *Blanca Variations* unquestionably evokes the pathos-laden singing style of Spanish folk music; its five variations are marked by inflected hesitations and rhythmic uncertainties, exotically ornamented themes and cadenza-like passages. The last variation, embellished with sensitive, beseeching mordents (turns) and wild trills, is especially moving.

György Ligeti (1923-2006)
Musica Ricercata: Nos. 11 and 10

György Ligeti, a Hungarian-born composer, began his studies in composition at the Music Conservatory in Cluj, Rumania, in 1941. In 1944, the Nazis forced him, like many other Jews, into labor. From 1945 to 1949, he returned to his studies at the Franz Liszt Conservatory in Budapest before dedicating a year to researching the folk music of Hungary. The fruits of his research gave him material for theoretical writing as well as for his original musical compositions. Ligeti actively researched Romanian folk music for a while after he graduated, then returned to the Budapest Academy as professor of harmony, counterpoint and analysis. In 1956, he fled Hungary during the uprising, settling in Cologne, Germany, where he worked at Westdeutscher Rundfunk, the locus then of one of the most progressive schools of composition. He continued to compose and teach both in America and Europe, where he received many awards, including Hamburg’s Bach Prize of the City.

Although Ligeti’s earliest music is neo-classical, he soon took up more radical and experimental techniques. The most widely known of his works is *Atmosphères*, which was used in the musical score of the film *2001: A Space Odyssey*.

He has described his goals: “My most basic aim as a composer is the revivification of the sonorous aspect of musical form. Those factors of contemporary composition which do not manifest themselves directly as acoustical experience seem to me of only secondary importance. However, this emphatically does not mean that I intend to limit myself to the invention of new tone-colors or other sound-phenomena. It is much more important to me to discover new musical forms and a new manner of expression...”

Ligeti wrote *Musica ricercata* in 1953, before he fled Hungary, when he was in his late twenties and still deeply influenced by Bartók and Stravinsky. The title comes from the Italian “*ricercar*,” meaning “to research or investigate.” The early Baroque genre of the *ricercar*, an elaborately imitative development of a theme, was the forerunner of the Baroque fugue. In *Musica ricercata*, Ligeti includes a large variety of musical styles and techniques within eleven miniatures from jazz to fugue, dance to meditation.

Ricercata also connotes “sought for” or “sought after,” a reference to Ligeti’s aim to construct his own personal compositional style, “out of nothing,” as he put it. He arrived at a system for the pieces of *Musica ricercata*: he began with only two pitches (and their octave equivalents) and added one pitch for every new piece in the series until, cumulatively, by the 11th piece, he was using all 12 chromatic pitches in the octave.

Consciously limiting pitches caused Ligeti to emphasize elements like rhythm and dynamics to stimulate interest. He noted that he composed No. 11, *Andante misurato e tranquillo*, the series’ final piece, as a fugue on a very chromatic subject, in homage to the early 17th-century Italian organist and composer Girolamo Frescobaldi (1583-1643), a master of the severe *ricercare* style and also a bold innovator in the use of chromatic melody. Ligeti explained that his own piece “is severe, almost noble” and that it, with its complex counterpoint, is the most highly developed piece of the series.

The penultimate piece of the series, No. 10, *Vivace, capriccioso*, is characterized by its sardonic humor. It merges diatonic sound with atonal clusters and dissonance and features scurrying scales made up of minor 2nd intervals alternating with bi-tonal arpeggios. The large tone clusters that Ligeti directs to be performed “spitefully” and “like a madman” stop abruptly, as they give way to smooth, soft arpeggios descending into the keyboard’s lower registers.

Samuel Barber (1910-1981)

Fugue from Piano Sonata in E-Flat minor, Opus 26

Samuel Barber was one of the most distinguished members of the generation of American composers who came to maturity shortly before World War II. He began his musical studies when he was only six years old, and at seven, was already composing. At 14, he entered the Curtis Institute of Music, and at 21, joined its faculty. Barber’s music was always firmly rooted in the traditional vocabulary and techniques he learned at Curtis, which did not prevent him from composing works of great fantasy and expressivity. His music is rich in texture, free in rhythm, and always melodic. He wrote two operas, two symphonies, three concertos, and a great deal more in almost every musical form.

In 1948, when the League of Composers was celebrating its 25th anniversary, it solicited funds from two eminently successful composers of popular music, Irving Berlin and Richard Rodgers. The League’s goal was to commission a large-scale work of concert music from a less well-known American composer. Berlin and Rodgers responded generously, and Barber was commissioned to compose his Piano Sonata. Although Barber only had a three-movement structure in mind for the sonata, Vladimir Horowitz, who played it at a kind of “try-out” performance in Havana, Cuba, in December 1949, and then performed its official premiere at Carnegie Hall in New York a month later, convinced Barber that the work needed a “flashy finale.” Barber obliged, in spades, a year after the other movements were completed, when he composed the closing titanic fugue.

Horowitz had not played much American music, but Barber's Piano Sonata appealed to him greatly because he felt it continued the tradition of the large, brilliant sonatas of his countrymen Prokofiev and Rachmaninoff. Its general effect is the result of a powerful imagination at work; Barber produced music that many Europeans find typically American in harmony and rhythm, full of complex piano writing that provides splendid effects and is very difficult to play. Within it, Barber used some of the then current serial procedures of the twelve-tone method of composition.

This sonata combines lyrical expression with piano virtuosity, and is one of Barber’s most important works. In the final movement, the monumental sonata reaches its dramatic climax. A fully developed Fugue, *Allegro con spirito*, it traverses a wide range of moods, using many Baroque period devices: inversion, augmentation, diminution, and stretto adapted to fit the fugue subject and its countersubject, with their syncopated, jazzy feel. In the movement’s center, a sudden calm allows a lovely melody to be introduced before the movement’s latter half with its spectacular climax, replete with a dazzling cadenza and flowing sound blocks tumbling over much of the keyboard, leading to a very exciting conclusion.

Some critics feel this movement includes something of the Broadway sensibility, perhaps in deference to the source of its commission, and yet, grandeur and majesty unquestionably make their presence felt.

Johannes Brahms (1833-18970)
Variations and Fugue on a Theme by Handel, Opus 24

Composers who wrote extended instrumental solo pieces in the 16th century took up the idea of theme and variation as a way of adding interest to repetitions of a melody. Two hundred years later, Haydn and Mozart included variation movements in their extended works, and also wrote separate sets of variations. The latter were more likely to be either light, entertaining compositions for amateurs or brilliant display pieces for virtuoso performers. Beethoven wrote several great, independent sets of variations, but young Brahms, whose early composing ambitions were inhibited by what he described as the “mighty tread of Beethoven” behind him, did not mind challenging the great master in this particular field. Brahms composed several sets of piano variations in a series that reaches its climax with the present work, which dates from 1861, when he was 29.

Brahms’ *Variations and Fugue on a Theme by Handel* has often been compared to Bach’s *Goldberg Variations* and Beethoven’s *Diabelli Variations* because of its wide scope and pianistic achievement. Brahms’ biographer Richard Specht declared, “The *Handel Variations*, in its purely pianistic problems, in the powerful and healthy concision of variants resembling a series of portraits by old masters, in its sonority and manifold architecture, surpasses even the boldest of Beethoven’s works in the form.”

Brahms was profoundly interested in the music of the past at a time when the draw of the new was strong. He chose a theme by Handel, a composer who died more than a century before, on which to base a theme and variations. Investigating Handel’s harpsichord music, he found an aria published with five “doubles,” a theme with five variations, in the Suite No.1 in B-Flat, published in 1733. In 1861, Brahms began his work with its elegant and symmetrical melody and invented 25 variations, creating a wholly new musical universe, in which he used traditional and new techniques to create a feeling of growth without ever abandoning Handel’s theme. The variations are formal, staying very close to harmonic structure of the original, and showing strict control of the development of motives. The variations display the theme as versatile enough to support both poetic contemplation and high-spirited, muscular pianistic technique. At the end, as a kind of gigantic 26th variation, Brahms created a fugue, a work of awesome power, virtuosic and intricate, made all the more impressive by the realization that its brief subject expands just two or three notes beyond Handel’s theme.

The work was completed in a month, the month of Clara Schumann’s birthday; Brahms gave it to her, his very good friend, as a birthday tribute. Three months later, she premiered the work in Hamburg. Knowing that he had created an important work, Brahms often played it at his own concerts, and chose it to perform for his December 1862 Vienna debut as both pianist and composer. In Leipzig, where Brahms’ work was resisted for a long time, in 1874, he included the *Theme and Variations* in a concert, finally winning over the difficult, critical public there.

Throughout the work, Brahms includes a wide range of keyboard styles, expressive moods, and pianistic colors. He follows tradition by composing several of his variations in the minor mode. He also chooses to decorate the theme in musical genres popular in the Baroque period: the *siciliana* (Variation 19), *canon* (Variation 6), *musette* (Variation 22), and, of course, the final fugue. Although he displays his reverence to the past, he does not, however, shed his own individualism. He bases the massive fugue that crowns the work on two intervals of ascending melodic seconds taken from the opening phrase of the theme.