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Dan Tepfer
Back To Bach

Four years ago, shortly before hit time at a small venue in the Czech Republic, well into a tour consisting primarily of solo free-improvisation concerts, pianist Dan Tepfer opted to do something different.

"It's a tall order to make up something every night, and I had nothing to lose," Tepfer recalled during a recent interview in his home base of Brooklyn. He had been carrying a score of Bach's *Goldberg Variations*, and decided to play several, using them as springboards upon which to improvise. "People responded strongly, and it took me to a different place." Over the next few years, he developed his Goldberg investigations into a project in which he played about half the variations and stretched out on the improvisations until, as he puts it, "it seemed obvious that I should do a record."

The result, *Goldberg Variations/Variations* (Sunnyside), is one of the more audacious, accomplished recordings of 2011. Rather than deconstruct or swing the repertoire, Tepfer treats the suite idiomatically, functioning alternately as a classical pianist—with a point of view that will make sense to Baroque aficionados—and as a virtuoso improviser saturated in the tropes and syntax of the jazz canon. In distinction to his live performances, he frames each invention precisely within the form, duration and implied narrative of the "chapter" upon which it is based. Some cohere more effectively than others, but the overall attitude is spontaneous and in-the-moment, denoting Tepfer's command of the raw materials and prolonged reflection upon the "text."

Tepfer, 29, recorded the variations three times before arriving at the final version. "I tried to identify elements in each variation that I found important, figure out what they actually evoked in me, and thought I'd express that idea," he said. For example, when extemporizing on "Variation 7," composed in G, he "imagined two people dancing, with the guy being a little shy; they're young, not great dancers, but there's some chemistry."

He added, "I absolutely do not want it to sound like an exercise. I want to sound like a person making a commentary on someone's music, and that person has to come through clearly. It was a huge challenge to play an improvisation in the studio and decide whether or not it had that tone—even on those variations where I tried to achieve something technically related to what Bach was doing, whether switching hands or playing very fast."

Tepfer observed that his five-year association with alto saxophonist Lee Konitz has



accelerated the process of what he calls "figuring out what I sound like." As is clear from their 12 fluid, extemporaneous conversations on *Duos With Lee: 2009* (Sunnyside), a highlight of Konitz's golden years discography, the octogenerian master and his acolyte both understand how a no-schmaltz, follow-the-line approach heightens the emotional resonance.

"Whatever the context, Lee sounds exactly like himself," Tepfer said. "Working with someone of that singularity has forced me to really think about *who* I am, what it means to be me playing music."

The identity that Tepfer is mapping out in notes and tones gestated in Paris, where his biologist father and opera singer mother, both native Oregonians, moved at the cusp of the '80s. Tepfer first studied Bach as a pre-adolescent conservatory student. On summer vacations in Oregon, his maternal grandfather, the eminent jazz pianist Chuck Ruff, offered "an open invitation to make music up and hooked me up with recordings." As intrigued with science and mathematics as with the arts, Tepfer took a degree in astrophysics at the University of Edinburgh, while singing in and conducting several operas and playing three nights a week in local jazz clubs. Then he attended New

England Conservatory, where Danilo Pérez, Bob Brookmeyer and Steve Lacy—an acquaintance from Paris—were consequential mentors.

"Danilo got me to develop a stronger sense of time," Tepfer explained. "He helped me get out of my European arrogance and reevaluate what I knew and didn't know about being an actual, happening jazz musician. He started me transcribing, which I'd never done, but now am doing more and more."

To illustrate the point, Tepfer sang a chorus of Lester Young's solo on "Shoe Shine Boy," a staple of Lennie Tristano's pedagogy that Konitz followed during his own formative years.

Then, in his own argot, Tepfer paraphrased Young's epigram, "You can't join the throng until you sing your own song." "I'm drawn to people with strong voices, who aren't interested in recreating something that already happened," he said, an assertion given weight by a glance at his early autumn itinerary, which included local gigs with individualists Noah Preminger, Will Vinson, Rob Garcia, and Alexis Cuadrado. "I value people who listen to a lot of music and can say whether something is good or bad, not whether it agrees with their certain stylistic viewpoint." —Ted Panken