

Music@Menlo 2008

Carte Blanche Concert

Stephen Prutsman: Bach and Forth

SUNDAY, JULY 20, 10:30 A.M.

Stent Family Hall, Menlo School

Music@Menlo dedicates this performance to Koret Foundation Funds with gratitude for its generous support.



TODAY'S PROGRAM AT A GLANCE

BACH (1685–1750)

Selected Preludes and Fugues from
The Well-Tempered Clavier, Book II (ca. 1740)

and works by

RAMEAU, BEETHOVEN, WAGNER/ LISZT, SKRYABIN, RAVEL, SCHOENBERG, YES,
Charlie PARKER, Purandara DASA, Osvaldo GOLIJOV, and Walter HAWKINS,
and traditional UZBEK and RWANDAN songs

Pianist, composer, and arranger Stephen Prutsman celebrates the timelessness of Johann Sebastian Bach's music from a unique perspective. "Bach and Forth" shuttles between selected preludes and fugues from Bach's seminal keyboard primer, *The Well-Tempered Clavier*, and works by subsequent generations of composers touched by Bach's inescapable influence.

PROGRAM

Johann Sebastian BACH (1685–1750) | Prelude and Fugue in c-sharp minor *

Jean-Philippe RAMEAU (1683–1764) | La Boiteuse (Lame Girl) (1724)

Johann Sebastian BACH | Prelude and Fugue in g-sharp minor *

Ludwig van BEETHOVEN (1770–1827) | Adagio sostenuto from Piano Sonata no. 14 in c-sharp minor, op. 27, no. 2, “Moonlight” (Sonata quasi una fantasia) (1801)

Johann Sebastian BACH | Prelude and Fugue in A Major *

Maurice RAVEL (1875–1937) | Une barque sur l’ocean (1904–05)

Johann Sebastian BACH | Prelude and Fugue in D Major *

Aleksandr SKRYABIN (1872–1915) | Prelude in b minor, op. 22, no. 4 (1897)

Johann Sebastian BACH | Prelude and Fugue in b minor *

Richard WAGNER (1813–1883)/Franz LISZT (1811–1886) | Liebestod from Tristan und Isolde (1867)

Johann Sebastian BACH | Gavotte from English Suite no. 6 in d minor, BWV 811 (before 1720?)

Arnold SCHOENBERG (1874–1951) | Musette from Suite for Piano, op. 25 (1923)

Johann Sebastian BACH | Prelude and Fugue in B Major *

INTERMISSION

Johann Sebastian BACH | Prelude and Fugue in C Major *

YES | Sound Chaser (1974)[†]

Johann Sebastian BACH | Prelude and Fugue in d minor *

Charlie PARKER (1920–1955) | Ornithology (1946)[†]

Johann Sebastian BACH | Prelude and Fugue in G Major *

Purandara DASA (1484–1564) | Govinda[†]

Johann Sebastian BACH | Prelude and Fugue in F Major *

Oswaldo GOLIJOV (b. 1960) | **Levante** (2004)

Johann Sebastian BACH | **Prelude and Fugue in a minor***

Uzbek traditional | **Galdir**†

Johann Sebastian BACH | **Prelude and Fugue in f minor***

Walter HAWKINS (b. 1949) | **“I’m Goin’ Up a Yonder”** (1975)†

Johann Sebastian BACH | **Prelude and Fugue in D-flat Major***

Rwandan traditional | **Analiza**†

Johann Sebastian BACH | **Prelude and Fugue in E Major***

Stephen Prutsman, piano

*from *Das wohltemperirte Clavier* (The Well-Tempered Clavier), Book II (ca. 1740)

†arranged by Stephen Prutsman

Johann Sebastian Bach (Born March 21, 1685, Eisenach, Germany; died July 28, 1750, Leipzig)

Selected Preludes and Fugues from *Das wohltemperirte Clavier* (The Well-Tempered Clavier), Book II, BWV 870–93

Composed: ca. 1740

Johann Sebastian Bach composed Book II of *The Well-Tempered Clavier* around 1740 as a sequel to the first book, composed in 1722. Each book comprises twenty-four preludes and fugues for solo keyboard, traversing every major and minor key. Bach designed *The Well-Tempered Clavier* “for the profit and use of musical youth desirous of learning, and especially for the pastime of those already skilled in this study.” Indeed, it has become one of the most significant and influential works in the Western musical literature and remains a vital component of the keyboard repertoire. *The Well-Tempered Clavier* also represents an important dimension of Bach’s oeuvre, as it reflects Bach’s staggering arsenal of compositional techniques, particularly in his fugal writing, as well as his wide range of expressive styles and devices.

The first half of “Bach and Forth” brings together preludes and fugues from Book II of *The Well-Tempered Clavier* and works by such composers of the Western Classical canon (or, in Stephen Prutsman’s words, “dead white guys from Western Europe”) as Beethoven, Wagner, Skryabin, Ravel, and Schoenberg. The program’s second half explores relationships between Bach and a wide multitude of other musical languages and traditions, ranging from Uzbek folk music to bebop to 1970s progressive art rock. The possibility of illuminating relationships between a work like *The Well-Tempered Clavier* and such diverse musical idioms from around the world and across centuries testifies to the timelessness and universal communicative power of Bach’s music.

Stephen Prutsman in Conversation

with Patrick Castillo

PC: Could you give us a general overview of the “Bach and Forth” idea and how you put this program together?

SP: The first half explores relationships between Bach’s music—particularly, his preludes and fugues from Book II of *The Well-Tempered Clavier*—and music that preceded him and followed him from dead white guys from Western Europe: basically, composers of concert music from Europe up through 1940 or so. The second half explores that same kind of relationship, but with music that’s maybe not so well-known on the concert stages: music from different cultures, very folk-oriented—the American jazz idiom, music from Latin America,

and so on. And it’s all with a curiosity about how we hear the music of Bach and how we hear just about everything else. ...

It’s a really fun game, a puzzle almost, of finding relationships between all of these different kinds of musical languages. Not only relationships in mood or in texture between a prelude and fugue and a piece by Ravel or a prelude and fugue and a tango by Ozzie [Osvaldo Golijov], but also, maybe there’s some kind of harmonic link there...Also, it’s like taking a journey: where are we going? [The pieces form] an arch throughout the program so that there’s a heavy intensity about it maybe in the middle or two-

thirds of the way through and then some kind of release at the end.

Relationships. That's all I was curious about, relationships. The interesting relationship that maybe you find with a particular prelude and fugue and the opening motive of Osvaldo's piece, which is just a single line in and of itself, and how similar they can start to sound.

And within those preludes and fugues, too, you've got some stuff that sounds Renaissance. You've got some stuff that really sounds like jazz. The a minor prelude is a real piece of jazz. You have other pieces that sound really whacked from a tonal standpoint! There's so much dissonance: minor sevenths and seconds and all this kind of dissonance.

PC: Anyone with Western Classical training is going to come upon Ravel and Skryabin. But on the second half, you have all of this folk music, jazz, and so forth. What's your own musical background that got this stuff into your fingers?

SP: Well, first, I think it starts from growing up playing by ear, rather than involving oneself, as a young person, with music through the printed page and through printed notes. I think that's where it began. From there, it went to being the house pianist for my dad, who was an amateur singer and wanted someone to play all the standards for him so he could croon away at home for fun on evenings and Saturdays. Lots of church music, the same kind of thing. Churches of all shapes and sizes. At sixteen, I was Music Director for a televangelist program. Lots of country and gospel. And, of course, I was interested also in church music of other cultures. In Baltimore, I worked with a black church for many years.

And then I discovered that, as a teenager, playing piano bar, you could do pretty well. That's how I supported myself through school,

playing jazz clubs and mostly piano bar work, which was Thursday through Saturday nights and Sundays for about four hours at a stretch. Man, you got your bills paid just doing that.

So there was that, and then the other aspect was my interest in popular music from the [late] 1970s, when I was really fascinated with the art-rock movement in the States, the music of Yes, Genesis, Emerson, Lake, and Palmer (ELP), King Crimson, and a few others. I'd say mostly Yes and Genesis with Peter Gabriel—I would want to take down all of those songs for the piano. In fact, one of them I'm playing on this program is a song by Yes called Sound Chaser, which is an amazing piece of music. This music has yet to be really fully appreciated by concert audiences. My dream is someday to transform a lot of these great suites of Yes and Genesis, these multimovement conceptual pieces that last for twenty to thirty minutes, and realize them for large ensembles—choir and so on—so that they will be recognized, appreciated, enjoyed, and loved by a host of others. It would also be kind of an interesting experiment. So that was the prog rock influence. (I had my keyboards back then. I still have my old single oscillators.)

Then later, when I returned to my love of folk music—and I consider all of this folk music—it was about ten or twelve years ago, when I made the connection with the Kronos Quartet in San Francisco. They adopted me for a while as their in-house arranger of music from other cultures that they wanted for specific, targeted events and also for their collaborative events with non-Western musicians who maybe don't read Western notation (or notation at all) and to find a way of linking their music with the Kronos so they could perform together... What I'm so grateful to [the Kronos Quartet] for is not only the help they gave me as a composer and certainly for my quartet-writing chops—I look at some stuff that I did early on and what I do now and I'm surprised they actually gave me a

second and third shot at it, it's so badly done!—but also exposing me to [so many] musical languages. Unless you're inside a piece of microtonal music trying to find a way to bring it to the fore for four string players—like music from Turkey or Mali or wherever—unless you are involved with it to that extent, at least for me, it would not be possible to really develop an appreciation for it the way I have. They took me around the world, and that's reflected in this program, as well.

PC: I saw, too, from reading your bio that you've worked with a couple of my own heroes outside of classical music: Tom Waits and [Malian singer-songwriter] Rokia Traoré.

SP: Oh, you like Rokia!

PC: How did that come about?

SP: Oh, through the Kronos Quartet, both of those contacts. Actually I saw Tom last week...I also got to play on his latest CD, *Orphans*. On one of those songs, I play the piano; it's called "It's Over." He's a remarkable person and musician to work with. I'm finding more and more that the training that goes into—the non-conservatory—how should I put this? People who spend their lives with music and grappling with musical issues that we conservatory-trained guys do, but without those institutions behind them, often grapple with the same kinds of problems we do. How to make a phrase even more eloquent. What can we do? Tom will say something like, "That was nice, but, uh...there's too much tonic in that one." I'll say, what does that mean, there's "too much tonic"? But you understand the language behind it and the intention behind trying to make a beautiful artistic product and communicate something eloquently. It's the same thing.

With Rokia, again, she's not trained in the sense that we would think of as "proper" training. She

doesn't write stuff down. Every time she sings something, it's different. But she works at it in her own way, which is a very unique way, [but also] probably the same kind of way most of the planet works on and struggles with music.

PC: So with that being so much a part of your musical makeup, anything you can tell me about what you have up your sleeve on the second half of this program?

SP: Well, I'll play *Levante* of Osvaldo's, which has a really fun, fast tango feel to it. What else? I'm curious about this Yes piece, *Sound Chaser*, which is on their *Relayer* album. It's a real tour de force from a pianistic standpoint, just because I wanted to include as much of the original as possible in the transcription [laughing], and those guys were real virtuosos! It sounds like it's turning into a story of my life. A piece of church music, "I'm Goin' Up a Yonder," some gospel music from I guess 1968, 69, 70... There's a piece of Uzbek folk music: Sevara Nazarkhan is a singer who I really appreciate, and this is a piece of folk music that she's redone, and I'm taking her adaptation as a model. It's this piece that's hundreds of years old. I'm also including one strict transcription of jazz, of Charlie Parker.

PC: And all interspersed with Bach's WTC II.

SP: Yeah, with these preludes and fugues. It's a fun and wonderful challenge to find these connections and lay it out but not be too obvious about certain things. It's more fun, I think, if I hear a certain kind of connection, be it a motivic connection, there may be a harmonic connection. I'm talking about between a Bach prelude and fugue and a piece of Uzbek folk music! There may be a rhythmic connection. But also just how it's all music, it's all wonderful music.

Notes on some of this program's more obscure selections

Provided by Stephen Prutsman

Purandara Dasa (Born 1484, Kshemapura, Shivamogga, India; died 1564, Hampi, India)

Govinda

Govinda is a composition by the fifteenth-century South Indian money-lender-turned-saint Purandara Dasa. Purandara Dasa is widely accepted to be the grandfather of Carnatic music. In Govinda, he reflects on the greatness of the Almighty, the power of His very Name,

and the miracle of creation (among other things) that He is believed to be responsible for. The spiritual nature of the song is reflective of the Bhakti (devotional) tradition that is said to have been established all over India at that time.

Uzbek traditional

Galdir

Galdir was made known to Prutsman by way of performances by the great Uzbek singer Sevara Nazarkhan. The song tells an ancient story

about a white snake, which represents pain and the search for freedom.

Yes (formed 1968, London)

Sound Chaser

Written and recorded in the late 1970s by the progressive art-rock group Yes, Sound Chaser is a virtuosic tone poem complete with quintessential Yes elements: soaring melodies, frequent and innovative harmonic shifts, metric interplay, and a lyric of hope and fantasy which begins:

Faster moment spent spread tales of change within the sound
Counting form through rhythm electric freedom
Moves to counter-balance stars expound our conscience
All to know and see
The look in your eyes

Rwandan traditional

Analiza

In 1952, the great African musicologist Hugh Tracey documented, in recordings, music from the last Mwami court in remote Rwanda. These recordings include the traditional song Analiza, which tells of the greatness of Woman and sings the praises of the Female spirit.