

Sage
Chamber
Music
Society

75th Birthday Recital

Monica Jakuc Leverett,
piano and toy piano

November 18, 2018
3:00 PM
Sweeney Concert Hall, Sage Hall

SMITH COLLEGE

Program

A Week in the Life of a Toy Piano (2016)	Kaeza Fearn (b.1971)
Morningside (2007) (a musical portrait of Monica Jakuc)	Scott Wheeler (b. 1964)
<i>from</i> On an Overgrown Path, Book II (1911) 1. Andante 2. Allegretto 3. Vivo	Leoš Janáček (1854-1928)
A Hermit Thrush at Eve, Op. 92 No. 1 (1921)	Amy Beach (1867-1944)

Intermission

KEYBOARD PRACTICE

consisting
of an
ARIA
with Diverse Variations
for the Harpsichord
with 2 Manuals

Prepared for the Enjoyment
of Music-Lovers by

JOHANN SEBASTIAN BACH

Royal Polish and Electoral Saxon Composer,
Capellmeister, and
Director Chori Musici in Leipzig

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*The Goldberg Variations*  
*BWV 988, published in 1742*  
*J. S. Bach (1685-1750)*

ARIA (Sarabande)

G Major

- Var. 1 Duet (polonaise)
- 2 (Imitation in two parts over free bass)
- 3 *Canon at the unison*
- 4 (Imitation in four parts - passepied)
- 5 Duet (corrente)
- 6 *Canon at the second*
- 7 *al tempo di Giga* (French gigue in 6/8)
- 8 Duet
- 9 *Canon at the third*
- 10 *Fughetta*
- 11 Duet (Italian gigue in 12/16)
- 12 *Canon at the fourth in contrary motion*
- 13 (Florid arioso melody over two fundamental parts)
- 14 Duet
- 15 *Canon at the fifth in contrary motion - andante* (G minor)

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- 16 *Ouverture* (French)
- 17 Duet
- 18 *Canon at the sixth*
- 19 (Dance piece in three voices - menuet)
- 20 Duet
- 21 *Canon at the seventh* (G minor)
- 22 *alla breve* (imitation in four parts)
- 23 Duet
- 24 *Canon at the octave*
- 25 *adagio* (florid arioso melody over two fundamental parts) (G minor)
- 26 Duet (sarabande - chords in 2 voices vs. sextuplets)
- 27 *Canon at the ninth* (unaccompanied)
- 28 (Fantasia: trills and other figuration)
- 29 (In concertato style)
- 30 *Quodlibet*

*ARIA da Capo è Fine*

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Bach's titles are in italics.

All canons are in two parts over a free bass, except for the canon at the ninth.

All duets (except Var. 1) are virtuoso display pieces for two keyboards.

My interpretive descriptions are in parentheses.

NOTES ON THE GOLDBERG VARIATIONS

The Goldberg Variations constitute the fourth and final part of Bach's Keyboard Practice (*Clavierübung*), an eclectic compilation of keyboard suites and other large works in diverse forms and styles which he composed over a sixteen-year span. The work owes its nickname to an anecdote in the first detailed biography of Bach, written by J.N. Forkel in 1802, half a century after the composer's death. According to Forkel, the piece was commissioned by a Count Keyserlingk of Dresden, who retained in his service a harpsichordist by the name of Johann Gottlieb Goldberg. Keyserlingk, a sickly individual afflicted with insomnia, had requested some keyboard pieces that Goldberg could play for him during his *nuits blanches*. Although Bach was generously rewarded with one hundred louis d'or in a golden goblet, Forkel noted that the artistic value of the work would still not have been met had the gift been even a thousand times greater.

As appealing as this story is, its accuracy is open to doubt. Had the work indeed been written for Keyserlingk, why did not the original edition carry the customary formal dedication? It is possible instead that Bach dedicated a copy of the variations to Keyserlingk during one of his visits to Dresden; the Count may have had the eponymous harpsichordist play frequently from the work thereafter.

However one may dispute Forkel's story on points of authenticity, his assessment of the work is beyond question. This acknowledged masterpiece is nothing less than encyclopedic: comprising an aria, thirty variations and a reprise of the aria, the music ranges through different styles of the period, exploring a multitude of techniques and procedures. Canons are devised, direct and in contrary motion, at successively greater intervals; there are duets, elaborate two-keyboard arabesques of virtuosic character; we find fuguetas and freer imitative writing; stylized dances, such as the sarabande, corrente, gigue and passepied are represented, as is the French overture; there is even a quodlibet – "what you will" – in which several well-known tunes are introduced and woven into the musical texture.

All of this prodigious musical inventiveness is governed by the bass line of the opening aria, a gentle unassuming sarabande of 32 measures. It is divided into two sections of equal length, each of which is repeated; each section is punctuated by two cadences – on the tonic and the dominant in the first section, on the submediant and the tonic in the second. The series of variations itself is divided into two halves, the second of which opens with the French overture in Variation 16. The piece is further organized according to technique of composition; every third variation in a strict canon, which is preceded in most cases by a duet. As the program listing shows, the canons are ordered according to the interval of imitation; the first canon, Variation 3, is at the unison; the second, Variation 6, is at the second, and so on, up to the ninth canon, Variation 27 at the ninth. The canons point to the last variation, number 30, a quodlibet which combines the tunes to two folksongs:

I've not been with you for so long,
Come back, come back, come back.
and

Cabbages and turnips have driven me away
Had my mother had cooked some meat
Then I would have stayed longer.

It is the aria melody, of course, that has been separated from its bass line for so long; indeed, the variations – the musical “cabbages and turnips” – have driven them apart. As if in response to the plea of the first folksong, the modestly elegant aria returns to close the work -- but it has been transfigured in the course of the journey. One is reminded of T.S Eliot's *Four Quartets*:

We shall not cease from exploration
And the end of all our exploring
Will be to arrive where we started
And know the place for the first time.

Anonymous

NOTES ON THE PROGRAM

I usually celebrate the decade birthdays of my life, but in the 70s, it is probably better to hedge bets and go for the half-decade, or three quarters of a century. The program for this concert celebrates ageing in the first half, and the timelessness of my signature piece in the second half.

With age comes the opportunity to experience a second childhood, and that is expressed in the piece I commissioned from Kaeza Fearn, *A Week in the Life of a Toy Piano*. I acquired my Schoenhut concert grand toy piano in December 2015, and have been happily performing on it ever since. It has given me lots of fun, and a welcome freedom from perfection.

When I retired from Smith College in 2008, with the help of the Music Department, I commissioned my musical portrait from distinguished composer and former piano student of mine, Scott Wheeler. Virgil Thomson, one of Scott's teachers, was a friend of many visual artists. He envied their ability to draw sketches of friends, and he devised a protocol for a musical portrait. The person would come and sit quietly in a room, perhaps reading, and Thomson would write down the music that came to him. After 24 hours, he would make a few corrections, and then declare the portrait to be finished. Scott came to my house on Morningside Drive; I sat and read; and he wrote music. I think he took a little more trouble beyond the requisite 24 hours, and I am delighted with the result.

Is it me? When I asked that of Scott, he said, "Well, Monica, you know, you are a complex person." In preparing this program, I realized that Scott unwittingly pays tribute to the Goldberg Variations by using the mordent (starts on its main note, descends to the note a step below, and then returns) as one of his motives. That is the first ornament of Bach's piece, and is a continuing motive throughout the variations. Perhaps the Goldberg mordent is an enduring feature of who I am.

In recent years, Janáček has become a favorite composer of mine. *On an Overgrown Path* is a Czech expression for the wool-gathering that the old often engage in as they look back on earlier events in their lives. These selections from Book II include No. 2, Janáček's favorite piece.

Since these are the sunset years, I thought that *A Hermit Thrush at Eve* would be a complementary piece. It is by my favorite American woman composer, Amy Beach, and is a remarkable portrait, not just of the bird, but also of the layers of life that make up a forest. The birdsong in the piece was transcribed by the composer from an actual hermit thrush singing at the Mac Dowell Colony in 1921.

Fifty-four years ago I studied at Juilliard with an 80-year-old Scotsman named James Friskin, the first pianist to perform Bach's Goldberg Variations in the

United States (in 1925). In 1934, as another first, he performed both books of Bach's Well-

Tempered Clavier by memory in two recitals in New York. At the time, I wanted a musical challenge, a kind of personal Mount Everest, and I hit upon the Goldberg Variations as my answer. I walked into my lesson with Friskin and asked with trepidation, "Do you think I could learn and play the Goldberg Variations?" "Of course you can," he said, "they are no big deal – I learned them at age 15 and played them for Joachim." (He meant Joseph Joachim, Brahms' close friend and favorite violinist.) "Why, I'll even give you my fingerings." And he did.

The issue of fingerings is crucial if you want to play a piece written for two keyboards on only one keyboard. The hands constantly cross each other, and quite a tangle can ensue if you don't have your choreography carefully worked out. Pianists over time have come up with different solutions, though most do what Friskin worked out: we follow the hand disposition as Bach wrote them, and wrangle our way around the roadblocks. To this day, most of my fingerings are from Friskin. I learned the piece with Friskin, but I didn't perform the variations then. In 1971, the second year I taught at Smith, I finally gave them their first spin. I played all the repeats, and took an intermission between the 15th and 16th variations, allowing the French Overture to begin the second half after a break. It was wonderful, but daunting: I felt a palpable relief at the return of the Aria at the end.

My Goldbergs rested for 15 years, and then I decided to take them to New York for a Merkin Hall debut recital in June 1986. Still playing all the repeats, and taking an intermission, I had an hour and 20 minutes' playing time. Gary Niswonger, now Professor Emeritus in the Smith College Art Department, designed a poster for the Smith preview performance in October 1985. (It is displayed in the lobby this afternoon.) After many other concerts all over New England, I made it to NY, and was lucky enough to be heard by NY Times critic Tim Page, who wrote: "She...fashioned a distinctly individual interpretation, characterized by a combination of grace, propulsion and Platonic detachment...One will observe Miss Jakuc's career with more than usual interest."

In the fall of 1987, I played the piece in Kyoto and Tokyo, Japan, and in the spring of 1988, I played it, omitting some repeats, at the Purcell Room of Queen Elizabeth Hall in London. Now and then I would play selected variations in concerts, but it has been 30 years since I performed the whole work.

After 54 years, the piece is an old friend, and it is much easier to appreciate the fun and games in it during my second childhood, as well as the sensuousness of its counterpoint. This time around, I pick and choose the repeats. Life on the "golden mountain" is pure joy. In the words of James Friskin, "There is perhaps no other work which displays so many aspects of Bach's broad humanity, or such a varied emotional range."

---MJL

ABOUT THE ARTIST

Monica Jakuc Leverett is Elsie Irwin Sweeney Professor Emerita of Music at Smith College, where she taught from 1969-2008. She has performed on three continents, and is a frequent solo and chamber pianist in Western Massachusetts. She also presents lecture-recitals on women composers, and has been a toy piano artist since 2015.

Inspired by Malcol Bilson, Ms. Jakuc Leverett has performed on early pianos since 1986. A former board member of Arcadia Players, she has frequently appeared with them on her two Paul McNulty fortepianos. As guest artist in a series of Historical Piano concerts, she has played instruments from The Frederick Historic Piano Collection in Ashburnham, MA. She was a performer/participant in the Westfield Center's *Forte/Piano Festival* at Cornell University in Ithaca, NY in August 2015.

She has recorded three CDs. Her latest, "Fantasies for Fortepiano," is available at cdbaby.com. In 2006, she married Bob Leverett, and together they explore forests and give presentations on nature and music. They have recently established the *Monica and Bob Leverett Forever-Wild Conservation Fund* at Kestrel Land Trust. Please visit www.monicajakucleverett.com.