

# Simone Dinnerstein

Saturday, July 19, 2008 7:30 pm

Portland International Piano Festival  
Miller Hall, World Forestry Center

## Program

- COPLAND** Variations
- WEBER** Variations, Op. 27  
Sehr mässig  
Sehr schnell  
Ruhig fließend
- BACH** French Suite No. 5 in G Major, BWV 816  
Allemande  
Courante  
Sarabande  
Gavotte  
Bourrée  
Loure  
Gigue

## Intermission

- LASSER** Twelve Variations on a Bach Chorale  
Sempre espressivo e molto legato  
Più vivo  
Più vivo—Sempre leggero e poco staccato  
Evenly, maintaining a strange disembodied expressivity  
Largo  
Allegro vivace  
Robusto  
Maestoso  
Largo  
Presto, quasi una Toccata  
Variation of Variations—Allegro Amabile  
Andante con moto
- BEETHOVEN** Sonata No. 32 in C minor, Op. 111  
Maestoso—Allegro con brio ed appassionato  
Arietta—Adagio molto semplice e cantabile

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Program subject to change

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# Program Notes

## Aaron Copland

(Born November 14, 1900, in Brooklyn, New York; died December 2, 1990, in North Tarrytown, New York)

### Variations

Many people consider Aaron Copland's Piano Variations a masterpiece of American piano music. Copland's first major piano piece did not have an easy birth. The piece (after revisions) was reduced from sixty-two pages of sketches to seventeen pages in the final score; nevertheless, the composer could not find anyone willing to perform its premiere. One pianist refused, writing, "A work of such severity of style is not possible among the normal type of concert-goers." Copland was undeterred, and since he was an able pianist, premiered the piece himself in January 1931, in New York. The critics were negative. "Mr. Copland, always a composer of radical tendencies, has thumbed his nose at all those aesthetic attributes which have hitherto been considered essential to the creation of music," wrote Jerome Bohm in the *New York Herald Tribune*. Others described it, at best, as "craggy, strange, stark, bare or granitic." Copland himself felt very positive toward the work: "From the start, my first major piano piece, the Piano Variations, had a 'rightness.' The piece flowed naturally and never seemed to get stuck." Later, Copland added: "The Variations filled a special niche as the first of my works where I felt very sure of myself.... The work has been called dissonant, moody, nervous, bare, stark, lonely, concise and austere. But I was utterly convinced about it, and I was not going to be upset by early unfavorable reactions."

The twenty Variations have an eleven-measure theme that builds on a four-note motive on which Copland bases the entire piece — with almost each note or chord relating back to these four notes in an adaptation of the twelve-tone method then current. Although this work has a style that is specifically Copland's, Copland himself attributed some of its characteristics to Schoenberg, "I have no doubt that the construction of the piece shows his influence. We were all at that time influenced by both Stravinsky and Schoenberg."

The rhythm of the Variations has its roots in jazz, but its harmonies are frequently dissonant, and the intervals of the seventh and the ninth are frequently used, in what was then a very original way. The young Leonard Bernstein was very impressed with the work and pronounced it "prophetic, harsh and wonderful." Copland dedicated the work to Canadian-born writer Gerald Sykes (1903–84), with whom he was living, as well as having a relationship, at the time.

The order of the variations seems inevitable, but Copland roundly denied that, saying, "It was not composed in the consecutive order of its finished state.... [While] each variation is meant to develop organically from the previous one and all contribute to a carefully constructed whole...it is also true that I worked on the variations individually, not knowing exactly where or how they would eventually fit together. I cannot explain this contradiction. One fine day when the time was right, the order of the variations fell into place." The Variations are not episodic either. They are to be continuously played through, displaying their undisrupted development and progress journeying through numerous different moods, textures, tonal centers, tempi, and rhythms. Copland described the result as producing a "very dry and bare grandiosity."

Copland also experimented with the physical qualities of the piano, having some notes held down silently while pitches selected from their overtone series are struck, producing ringing resonances.

The final variation brings the work to a climax, and is quite a bit longer than the others, exploring the extremes of the piano's range. After the twenty variations have been played, a coda brings the work to its conclusion, synthesizing material from many of the variations in a slow and majestic way, while also bringing back the original four-note motif.

## Anton Webern

(Born December 3, 1883, in Vienna; died September 15, 1945, in Mittersill)

### Variations, Op. 27

Webern is a composer whose worth cannot be measured by the small number of his brief compositions. His musical ideas were so pure,

his craft so precise, that his few works greatly affected the composers of America and Europe in the twenty-five years after World War II. The Variations, Op. 27, are not a classical series of melodic alterations of a melody, but rather a set of constantly changing, intricately interrelated contrapuntal reflections on a single musical idea. Everything is varied, one of his disciples has pointed out, and the theme is everywhere.

Webern composed the Variations between October 1935 and September 1936, a relatively long period in which he cogitated (slowly and at great length) over what kind of piece he wanted this work to be. Webern expanded the first part of this music (what is now the second movement) into this short suite. This is one of his last works and the only one (other than some juvenilia) for piano solo. The music was published in May 1937, and dedicated to his old friend, the pianist Eduard Steuermann, who never played it because of his differences with the composer on the subject of Hitler and the Nazis. Webern repeatedly told his friends that the Nazis were not to be taken seriously, and when they banned the performance of his music, he forgave them for having misunderstood it.

The first public performances of these Variations, in Vienna, on October 26 and 30, 1937, were the last time that any of his works were played in that city during his lifetime. The pianist was Peter Stadlen, then twenty-seven years old; he soon left Austria for England (where he became a scholar and critic).

In articles published in the late 1950s, Stadlen remembered that Webern coached him for countless hours, singing and shouting, waving his arms and stamping his feet as though the few notes were cascades of sound. The melody, Webern said, must be as telling as speech: it was shaped by rubato and by redistribution of accents, with tempo changes, every few bars, that marked the beginnings of new sentences. His friends laughed, Stadler said, at a kind of *pianissimo* they called a *pensato*, music so soft that it really was just thought of, but not played at all. The phrasing was made difficult because it was the difficulties themselves that gave the music the quality that Webern wanted it to have. The sustaining pedal was heavily used to fill out the

thinly written texture. Through all those weeks of instruction, Stadlen said, Webern never once touched on the serial aspect of the Variations — because how it was played was important, but not how it was made. Indeed, Webern acted as if he were not aware of the serial aspects of the music (or never thought of them). Knowledge of the serial implications was not (and is not) required for full appreciation of the music.

For the composer, the first movement's five variations, *Sehr mässig* (very moderate), were something like a Brahms Intermezzo, and the scherzo-like second movement, *Sehr schnell* (very fast), was closely related in spirit to the *Badinerie* in Bach's Suite for Flute and Strings. The third movement is *Ruhig fliessend* (calmly flowing).

### **Johann Sebastian Bach**

(Born March 21, 1685, in Eisenach; died July 28, 1750, in Leipzig)

#### **French Suite No. 5 in G Major, BWV 816**

One of the most popular forms of extended instrumental composition in Bach's time was the suite: a set of stylized adaptations of dances that had moved from the ballroom to the concert room during the seventeenth century. The movements are contrasting in mood and character, but they are usually in the same key. Most of the dances have two sections, each of which is played twice, sometimes with improvised ornamentation or variation. When there are pairs of dances of the same type, the first dance is played again after the second one has been played, but without repeating the sections.

Bach wrote more than two dozen suites — for orchestra, violin, cello, lute, and keyboard. Some of them are called *partitas*, a term indicating that they are works in several parts. Bach wrote the word *Overture* at the head of each orchestral suite, probably intending it to do no more than describe the introductory movement, but the result was that, until relatively recently, the suites for orchestra were frequently called his Overtures.

In the 1720s, Bach began to work on three sets of keyboard suites that reached their final form over a period of several years. The grandest (and the last

completed) are the six Partitas. The others are the works we now call the six English Suites and the six French Suites. There are consistencies in the style and design of the suites in each of the three sets, but there is nothing particularly English or French about any of them, and how they acquired these designations remains a mystery.

The French Suites (unlike the others) have no introductory preludes, and Bach might have begun with brief improvisations when he performed them. They open directly with three of the four dances that were considered to be (more or less) obligatory. The first is an *Allemande*, a dance that originated in Germany and became popular throughout Europe. The second is a *Courante*, which came from France and Italy, where its name meant "running," for it was originally a lively dance performed in small, quick, running (or sometimes jumping) steps. The third was a *Sarabande*, which had originated as a wild, lascivious dance, but after its introduction in Spain (after first being suppressed), was converted into a dance of slow and stately measure.

Next come the *galanteries* (social dances that were still popular), chosen by the composer, and added here in a similar fashion to the practice in later generations of playing a minuet between a slow movement and a finale. In this long suite there are four *galanteries*, all of French origin: a *Gavotte*, a moderately quick but somewhat heavy-footed country dance; a *Bourrée*, originally a quick, vigorous dance popular in many parts of France; a *Loure*, which was an elegant theatrical dance rather like a slow jig; and finally, the brilliant jig itself, the *Gigue*.

### **Philip Lasser**

*(Born in 1963)*

#### **Twelve Variations on a Bach Chorale**

Philip Lasser began his musical training as a pianist at the age of five. Lasser also studied composition, counterpoint, harmony, and analysis with Catalan composer Narcis Bonet (Nadia Boulanger's colleague and disciple), and piano with Gaby Casadesus in Paris. He received his B.A. from Harvard College, an M.A. from Columbia University, and a D.M.A. in composition from The Juilliard School, where he studied with David Diamond. Lasser has been on

the faculty of The Juilliard School since 1994. He has been composer in residence at the Camargo Foundation in Cassis, France, and at the Yaddo Colony.

Twelve Variations on a Bach Chorale, composed in 2001, was commissioned by the Bach Festival of Philadelphia. The chorale Lasser chose for his theme is "Nimm von uns, Herr, du treuer Gott," from Bach's Cantata 101. In it, Lasser incorporates stately, chordal sources, with a Prokofiev-inspired toccata, as well as gracious and mild ostinatos that have been said to resemble New Age music, although they have more intensity.

### **Ludwig van Beethoven**

*(Born December 16, 1770, in Bonn; died March 26, 1827, in Vienna)*

#### **Sonata No. 32, in C minor, Op. 111**

Between 1816 and 1826 (a decade of originality, idiosyncrasy, invention, and expressivity unparalleled in the career of any other composer), Beethoven wrote a series of unmatched masterpieces: five piano sonatas, five string quartets, the *Missa Solemnis*, and the Symphony No. 9. During the period just before these compositions began to appear, his output had been slim, for the works of his middle years had exhausted all the possibilities of the forms he had inherited from Haydn and Mozart. Withdrawn and separated from much of the rest of the musical world by his deafness, Beethoven then conceived and composed a body of exemplary music.

Vienna's musical community had been speculating that Beethoven had written himself out, that he was reduced to making folk song arrangements because he was incapable of doing anything else. When he heard about these rumors from a disciple, Beethoven said, "Wait awhile. They'll soon learn differently." His Op. 108 was a collection of twenty-five Scottish songs, arranged in 1815 and 1816 for a British music publisher; the Piano Sonatas, Opp. 109, 110, and 111, are three of his greatest compositions. They were written between 1820 and 1822 (not exactly in a "single breath," as Beethoven claimed in a letter), while he was also working on the *Missa Solemnis*.

The Sonata Op. 111, his last, is only one of several

sonatas that Beethoven wrote in two movements rather than three, but this one, perhaps because it ends with a long, slow movement, was thought to be more puzzling than the others. The publisher preparing the first edition for the press wrote to the composer that the copyist seemed to have lost the finale, and an apocryphal story has it that when a friend asked Beethoven why he did not write a third movement, he answered that he was too busy with the Symphony No. 9, and that the length of the slow movement made up for it anyway. It is now unthinkable that anything should follow this transcendental *Adagio* movement. This response and many other apocrypha are the interesting subject of a celebrated lecture given by Wendell Kretschmar, a character in Thomas Mann's *Doktor Faustus*.

The Sonata's first movement is a modernized prelude and fugue, or perhaps even a huge expansion of the old French-style overture that Beethoven knew from the works of Handel. It consists of a grand introduction, *Maestoso* (in the dotted rhythm that had characterized the overture since the seventeenth century), and then a huge, harsh, and dramatic, freely fugal movement, *Allegro con brio ed appassionato*, in sonata form. The development contains a double fugue in which the second theme is an expansion of the first. As Charles Rosen notes in his book, *The Classical Style*, the movement is based on a series of diminished-seventh chords first evident in the introduction, and constituting the basis of the principal melodic material of the movement. Eventually, these chords provide a basis for the development, coloring most of the work, and appearing at every important climax. Rosen says, "It is this concentration upon the simplest and most fundamental relationships of tonality that characterizes Beethoven's late style most profoundly. His art, with all its dramatic force, and its conception in terms of dramatic action, became more and more an essentially meditative one."

The second movement is a transcendent set of variations in complex and unusual meters on an *Arietta* theme, *Adagio molto semplice e cantabile*. Each successive variation is faster than the last, yet paradoxically, the music becomes increasingly

ethereal, otherworldly, until it almost seems to come to a stop in a trilling cadenza-variation preceding the recapitulation implicit in the fifth variation. After the cadenza, the music moves on slowly again, revealing the *Arietta* theme with increasing clarity, but at a greater distance. The musical texture created by the subdivision in rhythm reapproaches the suspended, almost static, character of the original slow theme. As Rosen says, "the movement reaches the extremes of rapidity and of immobility." Rosen feels that this power to suspend motion "seeming to stop the movement of time which is measured only by action," became one of Beethoven's "most personal traits." What this effect achieves is to build intensity "more terrifying and moving than any less inward motion could induce." These effects are meditative in character, and underline the introspection of Beethoven's last works. The effect is uplifting, affirmative, and visionary.

— Program notes by Susan Halpern, © 2008



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