

# SEAN KELLY

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Marina Abramovic and Igor Levit's Variation on 'Goldberg' Will Make the Audience Earn Its Bach



The performance artist Marina Abramovic and the pianist Igor Levit at the Park Avenue Armory. Michael Kirby Smith for The New York Times

"They want to listen to Bach, so they have to suffer," Marina Abramovic said with a laugh. Notorious for her severe and physically demanding performances, she was being interviewed in the midst of preparations for "Goldberg," her largest project in New York since "Marina Abramovic: The Artist Is Present," a 2010 retrospective at the Museum of Modern Art.

The new work is a characteristically rigorous version of the "Goldberg" Variations, Bach's intricate, ecstatic solo-piano epic. While they have been used in numerous dances, including a Jerome Robbins ballet, it's safe to say the "Goldbergs" have never provided the score for a production quite like this. It marks Ms. Abramovic's first foray into classical music, and she admitted to nerves. But this time, the nerves were not from stage fright.

Ms. Abramovic may be the grand master of public perseverance and self-control, but she has stepped out of the spotlight for "Goldberg," which runs from Monday, Dec. 7, to Dec. 19 in the Park Avenue Armory's soaring drill hall. (She was last seen there in 2013 as the ambiguous protagonist of Robert Wilson's dreamlike, semiautobiographical "The Life and Death of Marina Abramovic.")

Instead, another performer will be on display: the Russian-German pianist Igor Levit, who made an acclaimed American debut at the Armory last year. He will play on a stage of Ms. Abramovic's devising: a motorized platform that will slowly move from the far side of the drill hall to the center, then turn a single revolution as Mr. Levit goes through Bach's theme and 30 variations.

He will do so only after a new, improbable overture that could be described with a single musical term: tacet. As they arrive, audience members will be asked to surrender their mobile phones, watches and other electronic devices before entering the drill hall, where they will put on noise-cancelling headphones and sit in cloth deck chairs designed to Ms. Abramovic's specifications. The artist expects total concentration, so concertgoers will sit, and sit, and keep sitting, silently, until Mr. Levit's platform reaches its target and he begins to play.

“Most of the time I leave the public complete freedom,” Ms. Abramovic said. “With performances, you can come for one second, three minutes, or 10 hours, it’s up to you. But here, it’s so related to the 86 minutes of ‘Goldberg.’ We don’t have the choice, so the public doesn’t have the choice either.”

Ms. Abramovic, 69, and Mr. Levit, 28, have an easygoing relationship that belies the production’s austere intensity. During one of their few in-person collaborative sessions this summer, Ms. Abramovic was quick to praise her partner’s willingness to step beyond the calcified parameters of standard classical performance. “Nobody from classical music would ever accept this,” she said, “except someone who is as young and experimental and enthusiastic as Igor.”

Bach, Mr. Levit claimed, was the natural choice to complement Ms. Abramovic’s gospel of discipline and transformation. “To hear the Aria, and to make the journey through 80-ish minutes of music, and then to come back to the Aria as a changed person — that is something incomprehensible,” he said. “And that is what Marina and I share, that love for infinity. No limits, no borders.”

“Goldberg” may be of a piece with Ms. Abramovic’s recent practice, which has foregone the almost superhuman endurance of her early performances, instead encouraging New Age-style wakefulness. She came to prominence in the mid-1970s for unrehearsed actions that combined oblique symbolism with extreme physical risks. In the autobiographical performance “Lips of Thomas,” from 1975, she incised her stomach with a razor blade, flayed her back with a whip, and lay on a cross of ice. In other works she combed her hair until her scalp bled, or lay down in the midst of a fire until she passed out, or stood stockstill while her collaborator and romantic partner, the German artist Ulay, aimed an arrow at her heart. (Last month, Ulay lodged a breach-of-contract suit against Ms. Abramovic in a court in the Netherlands. He claims she has represented their jointly conceived work as hers alone; she strongly denies the accusations.)

But in the years since her 2010 retrospective, for which she sat in the Museum of Modern Art’s atrium for 750 hours, her work has shifted. She has turned to developing the “Marina Abramovic Method,” which aims to improve focus and attention through ostensibly gentler exercises — standing still on a platform, counting rice grains — that may remind some of the re-education punishments of China’s Cultural Revolution. (A video demonstration of the method by Lady Gaga was, to put it mildly, not well received in the art world.)

“I have the method how to drink the water,” she said. “How to walk in nature. How to hug the trees. The idea is how to get into this different state of mind. We are constantly interrupted by information, the city, our own relationship to technology, and this is just taking a different approach.”

“Goldberg” applies Ms. Abramovic’s method to the already quite disciplined practice of classical piano, and to spectatorship itself. Being forced to sit in silence — for an unspecified period — may be arduous, but being forced to surrender one’s cellphone is an almost unthinkable demand in today’s art world, in which museums have reluctantly ended prohibitions on photographs and performers now accept that their improvisations or endurances will be mediated through the lenses of a hundred camera phones. (One working definition of performance art, as distinguished from theater or dance or music, might be that audiences are permitted to take pictures.)

But even in the more regimented space of the concert hall, the phone has found a way of asserting itself. It is increasingly common of late to see fellow concertgoers checking Twitter between the movements of a concerto, or switching on flashlights to fish for candies.

Turning the phone to vibrate is not enough. As the Massachusetts Institute of Technology professor Sherry Turkle writes in her new book, “Reclaiming Conversation,” the mere presence of a cellphone, even when not in use, is enough to derail concentration and depth of thought. Ms. Abramovic’s confiscation is meant to force listeners to confront their dependence and find, if only for a little while, a new sensation of focus.

“I think the problem is the first 15 minutes,” Ms. Abramovic said. “After that, you let it go. And then it’s just wonderful. But those first 15 minutes are a crisis moment.”

Over the summer, Ms. Abramovic and Mr. Levit took a break from preparations to teach a master class in one of the Armory's Tiffany-decorated anterooms. The students, mostly high schoolers, immediately understood the appeal of phone-free performance. They were seated on low-slung chairs similar to those that await "Goldberg" listeners, while Mr. Levit sat at a baby grand piano and told the students he once dreamed of being a guitarist. (He owns two guitars, as well as a banjo.) Ms. Abramovic observed from a rocking chair and invited questions.

"How do you deal with fame?" one student asked.

"Fame is a side effect of a lot of hard work, but it's not the goal," she responded. "The most important is to be humble. Such attachment to your ego, which is so wrong. You're here to stage your art. He has the gift," she said, pointing at the genial Mr. Levit, "but it's useless if you don't share it."

There was a silence. Another student lobbed her a softball: "What's your favorite color?"

"Black," she answered instantly, pointing at the baggy floor-length shift she wore. "Look at me! I look like a cockroach!"

That loosened the room up. The students' questions grew more pointed. "How do you think the audience will react when you take their phones away?" one asked.

"I love to torture audience!" Ms. Abramovic exclaimed. The students giggled. But, she went on, she was uneasy about how listeners would respond to such a requirement. It could be seen as hostile.

She instructed the students to close their eyes for five minutes and to do their best to think of nothing. Everyone obeyed. When the pause was over, Mr. Levit played the Aria and the first 10 variations of "Goldberg," with precise yet sometimes puckish phrasing. He permitted himself a few vocalizations: a "chukka-chukka-chukka" over some runs in the middle of the third variation, a "da!" at the end of the spirited fifth.

In the more imposing space of the drill hall, Mr. Levit will play for an audience that will have been sitting silently, expectantly, for much longer than five minutes. (How long, exactly, the artists would not disclose.) Asked if he worried about the heightened expectations that may come with "Goldberg," Mr. Levit brushed aside any concern. "I'm never nervous about an audience," he said. "Whatever I've done so far, when you're honest with the audience, when you don't act like someone you're not, if you share with the audience, then the whole thing is going to work out. In the end, it's about the piece, and 'Goldberg' speaks for itself."

In the master class, as Mr. Levit wended his way through Bach's variations, almost all of the students saw that honesty. One fell asleep, but the rest listened closely. Asked whether the preparation helped them focus, they all said yes. "The music actually carried my thinking, in some way," one said. "Like, it made me think, and changed me."

Another student had a more physical reaction, one that made Ms. Abramovic smile: "I was listening so intently," he said, "that I forgot to breathe."



Lockers and headphones from a previous Abramovic project that are similar to those for "Goldberg."  
Credit Via the Marina Abramovic Archives



Ms. Abramovic and Mr. Levit discussing their project with students at the Armory.