

SEAN KELLY

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Igor Levit participates in a ritualized rendition of the Goldberg Variations, at the Park Avenue Armory.
CREDIT ILLUSTRATION BY PING ZHU

"The modern world we live in is one of constant distraction, where taking the time to connect to ourselves and having the patience to do so is becoming more and more difficult." So writes the celebrated performance artist Marina Abramović, voicing sentiments that could have been expressed since the beginning of the urban industrialized era. Abramović, whose work explores, among other concepts, the metaphysical relationship between a performer and her audience, has spent her career taking simple ideas to daunting extremes—most famously in "The Artist Is Present," in which she spent more than seven hundred hours sitting at a table in MOMA, staring wordlessly at strangers, in the spring of 2010. Her next project takes place in the Wade Thompson Drill Hall of the Park Avenue Armory, where Abramović will team up with the acclaimed young pianist Igor Levit (along with the lighting designer Urs Schönebaum) to offer "Goldberg" (Dec. 7-19), an evening-length act of ritual devotion centered on J. S. Bach's Goldberg Variations.

Bach's masterpiece is hardly simple: it is a princely summation of the wondrous possibilities of Baroque counterpoint and keyboard practice, infused with the deepest emotion. To perform the Variations is itself a feat of endurance, one that Levit, in his new recording, on Sony Classical, accomplishes with dancing rhythms, gracious lyrical continuity, and a steely, formidable technique. For the Armory, Abramović has adapted the Abramović Method—a distillation of her decades of performance preparation—to classical music, which the artist calls "the most immaterial form of art." (Abramović does not participate in the performances.) Audience members will deposit their personal belongings (including cell phones) in a locker, put on a pair of noise-cancelling headphones, and then sit in lounge chairs for an extended time before removing the headphones and listening to the performance. The concept has the blitheness of a vision and the ingenuity of a gimmick. But if it helps people appreciate the majesty of Bach's music, fine.