

SEANKELLY

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Interview



ABOVE: IGOR LEVIT AND MARINA ABRAMOVIĆ.

No cell phones, no watches, no cameras. This is not the start of a Luddite how-to manual, but rather Marina Abramović's proposed requisite for listening to classical music. Put into practice in Goldberg, the Park Avenue Armory's latest cross-disciplinary commission, Abramović's collaborator, Russian-German pianist Igor Levit, is willingly entering her framework (also known as the Abramović Method for Music) to give a series of seven performances that began Monday and will continue through December 19. Each night an audience of 600 joins Levit after depositing all of their belongings into lockers and listen as he plays Johann Sebastian Bach's famed 1741 composition the Goldberg Variations. The experience is completely free of the digital world—unless you count the audiences' anxious fidgeting digits at the beginning, when nearly everyone is unsure of what to do without digital preoccupation.

After a few minutes in the Armory's Wade Thompson Drill Hall, apprehension dissipates and some attendees settle into conversation, while others enter individual, ostensibly near-meditative states, eyes closed or fixed upon the space's barrel vaulted ceiling. All are seated around a low stage in comfortable lounge chairs, which is undoubtedly Abramović's doing, as arguably no artist is as aware of the need for good seating as she. (For her 2010 Museum of Modern Art retrospective, "The Artist is Present," she sat across from museum goers during all open hours, silently looking into their eyes over the course of three months. The durational performance totaled 700 hours.)

With that, the room is poised, willing, and ready for Bach. Levit's playing, however, will not start just yet. Beginning with the signal of a gong, the audience undergoes 30 minutes of noise-canceling headphone-induced silence, while Levit and his piano, positioned on a platform, slowly glide to their final position in the center of the room. With the signal of another gong, the audience removes their headphones and then listens to Bach's aria and 30 variations, played by Levit with an air that makes the daunting task appear effortless.

When speaking with Levit and Abramović, one senses that they are not merely collaborators, but friends and co-conspirators, always in on each other's jokes, pushing dialogue further, Levit learning Abramović's Method, and Abramović learning Levit's medium. Levit is unsurprised by the expansion and reapplication of Abramović's Method. "What Marina does today, there is no choice," he says. "It had to come to this point over the last decade. This is the result; this is where it arrived." Abramović consistently strives to make herself present in her work, followed by other performers, so now, the audience seems like a fitting next step.

We sat down with the artists at the Armory ahead of Goldberg's premiere and spoke about the seemingly banal (cell phones), the existential (what is music?), and Bach's Goldberg Variations over a bowl of animal crackers.

HALEY WEISS: How did you two meet and how did this collaboration come about?

IGOR LEVIT: Last year, the Artistic Director of the Armory, Alex Poots, got the two of us together. He is this, what would you say, an oracle?

MARINA ABRAMOVIĆ: He has this antenna to put the impossible together.

LEVIT: He feels who fits together, and he feels what could work. So Alex, who I met [at the Armory] last year in March 2014 when I played here for the first time, had the idea to bring Marina and I together. We met in London—I had a concert there and Marina was giving a show at the Serpentine [Gallery]—and we met at Alex's house. There was a huge sushi platter.

ABRAMOVIĆ: The kids were sleeping.

LEVIT: The kids were sleeping, luckily, because the jokes we were telling the minute when we met were really not [pauses]...appropriate, let's put it that way. And no alcohol was involved; she doesn't drink it anyway. Then we just had this amazing day and we met again late evening, but there was no Goldberg. I don't think there was a goal to make a project. The goal was to get to know each other. The project happened very, very naturally.

ABRAMOVIĆ: One thing I had been told when he played here is that The New York Times said he is the best pianist of the century. He's a young baby [only 28 years-old], but he's the best pianist of the century.

LEVIT: She calls everyone baby.

ABRAMOVIĆ: No, you especially! That title is really something you have to carry on your shoulders. So, I was so curious to meet him. But the one thing that really was the most important was humor. When you have humor, you have a base for collaboration. It is very important. The thing which is really fascinating about Igor for me and why I was interested to create this method to listen to Bach in the best possible way is that when he plays piano, you don't see any effort. You think it just happens by itself—it looks so easy—but this is what is genius about it. There must be an unbelievable amount of work, I can't even imagine, because you don't even know where this music comes from. It's from his body, from his breath, from his hands. The piano becomes something completely magical and transformed, and that's incredible, effortless.

LEVIT: It's terribly hard work.

ABRAMOVIĆ: It's hell behind it! And not reading notes, not reading anything. Yesterday, a friend of mine who is a Greek businessman—I invited him because he's crazy about Goldberg—I called him after Igor finished the performance and he was sobbing on the phone, literally crying because of how emotional it was. That really matters, when you can move the public to such an extent that you open an emotional volcano spot in your heart and just go [imitates volcano exploding] out.

WEISS: I wonder how people will react to having their phones taken away. It seems like it would be a relief to store your belongings, but—

LEVIT: It's very easy. If they don't agree, there's the exit. [laughs]

ABRAMOVIĆ: We always want to do things the way we like, that's why we never change. He needs such discipline to master Goldberg in such a way, and we ask so little of the public, to give these stupid gadgets away for a while and just be with themselves. But also it was very interesting for me that Igor accepted; I don't know how many musicians of this stature that would ever accept for 30 minutes sitting at the piano before even starting, just moving toward the public. It's a lot to ask of him because after this he has to play for 80 minutes, and it's a hell of an energy to be expending.

[Speaking to Levit] The thing that you tell me, which to me is so incredible, is that when you play Goldberg, you lose yourself. The world just stops existing; it's just you and your music.

LEVIT: Well, it's a mixture. The world stops existing but then the world of course very much exists. When I play, what I see are people who mean something to me, both positively and negatively. It's my private life, in a way, what I see, and this is what I share. And you're there on the other side, and you have your private life, and you hear it and you share on a different level, of course. We share together; this is for me the most unique thing about music making, it's sharing, sharing, sharing. And you never know what you're going to share. I can play, I know what is written—the marks, the things the composer tells me to do—and I do it, but it will still sound different each day. You never know; that is why I think that this stuff [holding written music] is so alive.

WEISS: What's so significant about this particular piece of music? Why Goldberg?

LEVIT: There are probably a trillion reasons, I can't possibly give you just a fraction of them, but I can give you a fraction of the fraction of the idea of the fraction of them. Let me give you only one example. You hear this aria, which is a unique piece of music, and it's over, and then you take the journey over 80 minutes and 30 variations, experiencing all kinds of emotions. One step further, the emotions that I experience might be completely different from the emotions the audience experiences. One step further, there are 600 people in the hall and there will be 600 different experiences. The varieties are endless. So you take this journey together for a long time—it gives you time, it gives you space—and then after 80 minutes, after everything has been said, the aria comes back, but you are a different person. I think this incomparable experience of journey, this incomparable emotional experience, this being together... This piece is the quintessential idea of being together for me personally. This is the quintessential achievement of "we" rather than "me." It's "me" with "you all."

ABRAMOVIĆ: I always talk about the hierarchy of art, and I always put music on the top of everything, because it's so immaterial. That sound goes through your body; there is no resistance, it just fills the space, fills your heart, and fills every molecule of you inside. All of these motions accumulate, and accumulate, in this complete eruption of crescendo. And then I think after music is performance because it is also an immaterial form of art, and then there's everything else.

WEISS: How is it different for you now being behind the scenes, designing the set and collaborating, but not physically being the performer?

ABRAMOVIĆ: Wonderful! Oh my god, I am totally happy with it. My entire role now in my work is more and more to make the audience experience things and not to be in front of the audience. To me, now, the audience becomes the work in so many ways. I'm doing this with incredible pleasure, to actually deliver Igor the prepared audience on a plate, "This is your audience, and they are there with the spirit and the body, present, in space and time." That's really important to have happen. If I deliver this, and he delivers his magic, then we will create a unique experience for the audience to listen to Bach in this condition. I hope that people will accept this as the only way to listen to Bach, to remove their cell phones and watches, and lose time.

LEVIT: The next project is going to be "The iPhone Bach Experience," "iBach." [all laugh]... And all the cookies are gone!

ABRAMOVIĆ: Oh god, can you take them away? I didn't eat breakfast.

WEISS: I'm wondering what your relationships are with your phones and devices. Do you try to limit your screentime and find phones to be distractions? Or is it more that you want to elevate the performance space by removing that element?

ABRAMOVIĆ: I have one guy that I really have to talk to once a day, and if I don't talk to him once a day, I really feel like something is not completed. This is, like, an attraction story. Once we talk once during the day, I don't really look at my phone most of the time anymore. It's just that feeling that I'm satisfied. It's really personal, because he's in Europe and I'm here, and there's this time difference, and we need to talk once a day. It's very complicated because he's doing his things and I'm doing my things. He phoned during [an interview] and I had to pick up because otherwise we would not have the opportunity to talk that day and that is something I really want. And the rest, I try to use it the least as is possible. Once a day I look at everything and call my office with some emails and urgent things to do.

And I'm not good at texting because I'm an older generation, old school. And nobody ever listens to the answering machine anymore. It's terrible.

LEVIT: [whispers] I do.

ABRAMOVIĆ: You do? Then I will do that, because I'm much better at saying something on the answering machine than texting. People can text with two hands and are so fast and I am not... I just have that one person I want to talk to.

LEVIT: That's pathological. I don't go by any rules. Some days it's really a lot, and some days it's less.

ABRAMOVIĆ: [Haley], do you like classical music?

WEISS: I do, but my limited experience has been through my grandmother and my father's old vinyl records.

LEVIT: You should play!

WEISS: Oh, no. I have no musical talent.

LEVIT: There are no musically untalented people.

ABRAMOVIĆ: Wow, that's a big statement.

WEISS: I don't know about that. Do you think that's true?

LEVIT: Well, musical talent is maybe something, but there are no unmusical people. You're moved by music. It's total rubbish to say, "Oh, I'm unmusical." It doesn't exist; it's ridiculous.

ABRAMOVIĆ: Okay, this is from the master.

LEVIT: It isn't from the master, but explain to me, what is unmusical? First of all, explain to me what is music? There won't be an answer.

ABRAMOVIĆ: Yes, what is music? This I've never asked myself.

LEVIT: Let me ask you something—

ABRAMOVIĆ: What is art? [laughs]

LEVIT: You'll know what I mean. Just be silent for 10 seconds. [all pause] Is that what you hear, music?... That's the idea of John Cage's 4'33". This is the performance.

ABRAMOVIĆ: So it's the same as what is said about dance; everything is dance.

WEISS: And everything is performance, too.

ABRAMOVIĆ: Yes, and then there's the readymade object and Marcel Duchamp. Now, if you say this piano is an art piece, it is an art piece, because I'm saying it. To me, one of the great things is An Oak Tree by Michael Craig-Martin, the British artist. He made this piece with [a glass of water]...If under one glass is written "glass of water," okay, no big deal, it's a glass of water. But under the glass of water is written "an oak tree." This is the whole thing; if an artist tells you "this is an oak tree," then it better be an oak tree. It's how you proclaim things; if you say "the silence is the music," then it's the music.

GOLDBERG WILL BE PERFORMED AT THE PARK AVENUE ARMORY THROUGH DECEMBER 17.