

# Mark Haim—The Goldberg Variations

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A pianist as well as a dancer and choreographer, Mark Haim sets out to distill all he knows into his 80 minute solo dance to Johann Sebastian Bach's sublime ruminations, *The Goldberg Variations*. Joined with Andre Gribou's gorgeously thoughtful piano playing, attuned both to Bach and Haim's movement, the duo, presented by Danspace Project, October 10-12, 1997, filled St. Mark's Church with an intense and satisfying interplay of dance and music. There was a moment in which I wondered whether I was there, Sunday evening, October 12, more for the music than the dance, but Haim quickly pulled me in, so that I realized with pleasure that I was very much there for both.

Wonderful as the famous 40 minute Glenn Gould version is, it always seems too short. Just as Bach amply fulfills the challenge of absorbing us in his thirty variations, with all the repeats, for 80 minutes, so too does Haim. In that way, he is at one with the spirit of the music, even when he is moving counter to its tempo. Haim involves us in an evolution as the piece progresses, showing off his theatrical variousness, his own moods and changes, his quirky, sometimes humorous vision.

These quirks often highlight the music, as when, early on, Haim assumes an Egyptian, flexed footed profile that captures something sharp in the structure of the variation. Somersaults work to a heavier section. And before intermission, when the music is measured and layered, Haim pulls up and steps out in beak-nosed profile, pointing with his hand, head, and feet. Slow moves in stages have a limpidity that matches what we hear from the piano, though he continues to move quietly after the piano stops. To begin Part II (which starts with variation 16), Haim flings out his arms in different ways and poses, echoing

the grandeur of the musical phrases. To quiet Bach he displays his very distinctive way of dipping and extending head and torso. Loose rippling music brings out loose turns around the floor, whereas quick fugal Bach engenders quick jumps, swoops, and extensions of various sorts, including flapping hands. He shakes in place to a quiet, slow variation and with bent-elbowed arms down, then up, and head thrust back, continues to shake.

Though what Haim does often coincides with the music, he varies things by continuing on in silence as above, or beginning in it, or letting Gribou play on alone. In the program Gribou writes interesting notes about the music, reminding us that the Goldbergs are a set of harmonic variations and that every third variation is a canon. Haim also repeats motifs and structures, though they're not necessarily in accord with Bach's repetitive structures. Clearly Haim has tried to reflect the spirit of the music in a quite adventurous way. He keeps periodically coinciding exactly with parts of Bach's structure—and when he's at one with the music that is deeply satisfying, but in many of the variations he asserts his independence while keeping the mood and structure in tension or alliance. Deliberate juxtaposition of mood of music and eccentricities of dance are used to humorous effect. Gribou's playing is rich and satisfying in the warmly reverberant church, various as Bach is various. Sometimes we catch him watching Haim, so that if Haim surprises us, and he does, his partner is always with him.

Haim's dancing is full of presence, of concentrated looks and projections of body. He can fling an arm or head out like a quickly unfolding snake. He has a very particular quality of sprung out movement which can be tense, or soft

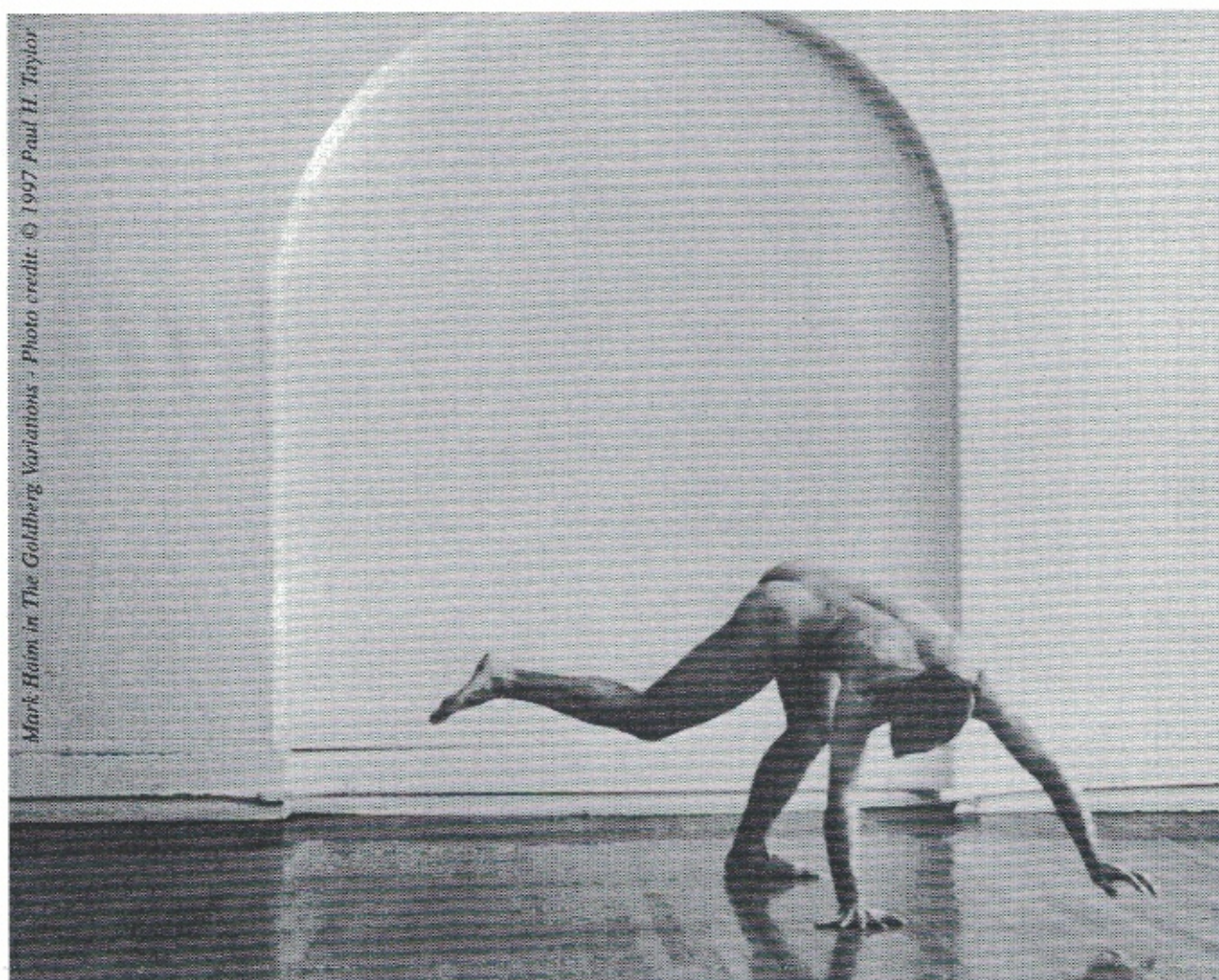
but controlled. He reaches out his head or arms or legs or parts of torso by pushing into the movement with a tensile strength. Often this is at odd angles so that moves have a twist of surprise. Near the end, for instance, Haim, in the center, turns slowly on one foot while the other keeps softly inching out. Quick feet and sharp turns are followed by head and body beginning to flow in various odd waves. But he has so many ploys—of both movement and structure—that our interest never flags.

His sense of timing and plotting is excellent. Haim uses every part of the church's beautiful wood floor and Carol Mullins, lighting the way with her usual imagination and skill, helps him define his variations so that we're made aware of all of this wonderful deep, high, handsome space. Whether we see a wash of yellow light or a lattice on the floor, *The Goldberg Variations* becomes a theater of light and space as well as of dance and music. And theater it very much is. Haim structures a series of diversions that punctuate the piece with surprise. They can be as simple as crossing the room, golden lit, in laps of walking up and down.

Near the end of the first half, Haim, who has told us in the beginning that there will be a section when he will be still and people in the audience have to come up and manipulate him (and who has asked a few people in advance to do so) takes a pose to signal the volunteers. At least 15 eager people surround him, and whether they poke and pull or move him gently, he submits equitably to all. In fact he smiles as they lift him and seems to have no will as they turn him in bizarre arabesques. He frees himself to place the others in shaped clusters and to our laughs goes around thrusting away frozen limbs or bending stiff bodies.



Mark Haim in *The Goldberg Variations* - Photo credit: © 1997 Paul H. Taylor



Not long into Part II, Haim plays with baroque or rococo conventions, gesturing and forming his face into grotesques like those of Domenico Tiepolo. His cheeks bulging like a cherub with water he has quickly sipped, Haim makes slow natural turns to quietly supple slow figures of Bach until he reaches the rear, near the front door, and climbs onto a box which begins to turn. As it revolves he spurts out water. He has turned himself into a fountain.

In a circle of light in the middle of the west side of the church, Haim takes off all his clothes. He places them on the floor and lies down on them and rolls slowly, with stops (the music, too is slow), out of the circle of light. In dignified nakedness, he slowly rises to his feet, then crouches and contemplates his clothes before lying on his side next to them. He picks up his underpants and throws

them away, then his shirt and pants. A new set of clothes falls from the balcony. He puts these on—we notice the magenta lining.

Haim pistons his fists and dips his body softly. He makes disco postures and steps and rolls his head. A microphone descends. He pulls it to him and after physically miming singing for a while, sings "baby—oh," to much laughter.

He sits near us as a spotlight bears down on him and we hear limpid, dulcet Bach. After a time, the white spot slowly moves up. Haim's head very slowly rises, too, until he's looking up at it and turns his body, all the while looking up. As the light rises, so does he, looking up as he gets to his feet, then slowly letting his head and face down.

When the light and the music for a late variation begin, Haim runs around until the light dissolves and he

runs out the door. Then we see him running in the balcony until he disappears through another door.

In this second half these dramatic surprises have increased in frequency. Haim's final structural punctuation is a section in which he repeats many of the motifs from previous variations, a kind of review or recapitulation, abbreviated so that he runs only a couple of laps, for instance, instead of lapping his way across the whole floor. This is an effective summing up, a reminder of the variety of the inventions he has offered. With rich tone and pliant phrasing, Andre Gribou has treated us to Bach's luxuriant stream of inventive variation, and while we absorbed the music's beauty, Mark Haim in his own good-humored, idiosyncratic, and theatrical dancer's way, has also deeply honored Johann Sebastian Bach. ♪