

Choreographer
Mark Haim sets
the Goldberg Variations
to dance in Durham

SOLO BACH

By Gordon Sparber
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One of history's most famous musical works, Johann Sebastian Bach's "Goldberg" Variations, provides the subject for choreographer Mark Haim's new solo dance. Haim's complete *Goldberg Variations* will have its official premiere this week at the American Dance Festival in Durham.

Haim has been working on his *Goldberg Variations* for three years. During that time, he has danced parts of the work at Ohio University, Cornell University, the University of Illinois, Hollins College in Virginia, Dancespace and St. Mark's Church in New York, the Festival of European Dance and Theater in Prague, and even here in Winston-Salem, when he was in residence for a few weeks at the N.C. School of the Arts last spring.

So not all of the variations will be new when the American Dance Festival audiences see them. Some, however, will be brand new.

"Twenty-nine and 30 are still waiting to get done," Haim said on July 2, pointing up the immediacy with which many dance works make it to the stage these days.

If those variations have been finished, Haim will be dancing to Bach's touching aria and all 30 of the variations Bach wrote to follow it. The dance makes use of each variation's sectional repeats.

"I grew up with the 80-minute version, not the 40-minute version," he said, citing his adherence to those repeats. By the way, his choreography, which sometimes resorts to theatrical effects completely disassociated with the music's progress, never repeats along with the music.

So Haim's dance is about 80 minutes long. He will make a logical break between the two groups of 15 variations. A good representative recording of the 80-minute version is pianist Charles Rosen's from the 1970s. The classic standard for the 40-minute performance is Glenn Gould's first, repeatless romp through the piece from the 1950s.

PAGE E2 WINSTON-SALEM JOURNAL Sunday, July 13, 1997

ARTS

HAIM'S DANCE

Continued From Page E1

Among the structural threads that run through the "Goldberg" Variations are strict canons (in which two "voices" play the same tune but starting at different times) that mark each group of three variations; a refusal to refer to the opening aria's tune in any of the variations, basing the variations instead on the aria's harmonic scheme; and a fairly comprehensive collection of the compositional techniques of the day, including fugue, quodlibet and French overture.

Haim's choreography, which runs the gamut from pure movement to pure theater, is a varied assortment of pieces and does not build through the 30 variations as the music does. Therefore, the choreography leans more toward the pick-and-choose, insomniac's-pastime side of the music.

It also often ignores such formal musical characteristics as textural changes, rhythmic pace or specific compositional technique. Haim is all too aware of those characteristics, because he knows the "Goldbergs," with a pianist's insight: As a boy, he studied piano in

Bach's set of variations was published in 1742 as one of the four volumes of his *Clavierübung*, that comprehensive overview of baroque keyboard style and practice that also includes such other important works as the *Orgelbüchlein*, the *French Overtures*, the six keyboard Partitas and the "Italian" Concerto. Written on commission from Count Kayserling, the Russian emissary to the Dresden court, the variations were played by Kayserling's house harpsichordist, Theophilus Goldberg, to ease Kayserling's insomniac nights. Or so the story goes.

Bach certainly would have known about the variations' intended lightweight use. Goldberg was to play a sampling of them each night, one pre-sunrise, until his count fell asleep. But Bach, being the supreme structuralist he was, couldn't help himself. He built the set of 30 variations into an impressively integrated and progressively complex monument that makes another statement entirely when played from beginning to end.

See HAIM'S DANCE, Page E2

the Manhattan School of Music's preparatory school, and were it not for his sudden, late high-school conversion to dance, he probably would have gone to a conservatory as a piano student.

"I tried not to deal with the literal musical content so much," Haim said. "Like the fugue (Variation) No. 10: I'm not fuguing."

"Because of my piano training, however, I can't ignore the music. But I have had to be careful not to become a slave to it. Their structure is so strong that it would have been easy to mimic it."

Haim grew up in New York, studying tap as a boy, but soon focusing on the piano. When he signed up for high-school musicals, it became known that he knew his left foot from his right. Naturally, he was given the dancing roles.

"By then I was hooked," he said of dancing. Crash formal training in three months led to an audition for the Juilliard School's dance division. He won an honorary scholarship.

After Juilliard, he created his own company, directed Portugal's Companhia de Danca de Lisboa, and choreographed works for such companies as Nederlands Dans Theater, the Joffrey II Dancers and Ballet Frankfurt.

He has been a teacher at the American Dance Festival since 1993. As for the inspiration to set the "Goldbergs" to dance, Haim said he always has been "attracted to the magnitude of the piece."

One day, while walking on Eighth Street in New York, he said, he vividly imagined himself the casualty of a gang street fight. "I saw myself lying there in a pool of blood and tried to imagine what would be my last thought. I swear, the first thing that came into my head was that I never did the *Goldberg Variations*," he said.

That imaginary experience spurred him to realize his "Goldbergs" dream. At the same time, Haim also created his first solo dance for himself. And what a solo. Eighty minutes onstage by himself, with only his pianist (festival colleague Andre Gribou) for company. How does he like the feeling?

"It depends on my body. One day it can be a champagne celebration and the next can be like a root canal," he said.

Mark Haim will dance his "Goldberg Variations" at 8 p.m. Tuesday and Wednesday in the Reynolds Industries Theater at Duke University. For ticket information, call (919) 689-6402.