



Time Traveler's Suite
Inon Barnatan



TIME TRAVELER'S SUITE

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|---|---|-------|
| | Johann Sebastian Bach (1685-1750) | |
| 1 | Toccatà in E Minor, BWV 914 | 7. 05 |
| | George Frideric Handel (1685-1759) | |
| 2 | Suite in E Major, HWV 430: II. Allemande | 3. 58 |
| | Jean-Philippe Rameau (1683-1764) | |
| 3 | Suite in A Minor, RCT 5: II. Courante | 4. 30 |
| | François Couperin (1668-1733) | |
| 4 | L'Atalante | 1. 41 |
| | Maurice Ravel (1875-1937) | |
| 5 | Le Tombeau de Couperin: IV. Rigaudon | 3. 13 |
| | Thomas Adès (b. 1971) | |
| 6 | Blanca Variations | 6. 00 |
| | Gyorgy Ligeti (1923-2006) | |
| | Musica Ricercata | |
| 7 | No. 11: Andante misurato e tranquillo | 3. 35 |
| 8 | No. 10: Vivace. Capriccioso | 1. 24 |
| | Samuel Barber (1910-1981) | |
| 9 | Piano Sonata in E-flat Minor, Op. 26: IV. Fuga. Allegro con spirito | 4. 53 |

Johannes Brahms (1833-1897)

Variations and Fugue on a Theme by Handel, Op. 24

10	Aria	0. 59
11	Variation 1	0. 54
12	Variation 2	0. 40
13	Variation 3, Dolce	0. 47
14	Variation 4, Risoluto	0. 49
15	Variation 5, Espressivo	1. 12
16	Variation 6	1. 01
17	Variation 7, Con vivacità	0. 37
18	Variation 8	0. 37
19	Variation 9, Poco sostenuto	1. 15
20	Variation 10, Energico	0. 37
21	Variation 11, Dolce	0. 57
22	Variation 12, Soave	0. 59
23	Variation 13, Largamente, ma non più	1. 24
24	Variation 14, Sciolto	0. 37
25	Variation 15	0. 43
26	Variation 16	0. 33
27	Variation 17, Più mosso	0. 29
28	Variation 18, Grazioso	0. 50
29	Variation 19, Leggiero e vivace	1. 13
30	Variation 20	1. 15
31	Variation 21, Dolce	0. 52
32	Variation 22	1. 02

33	Variation 23, Vivace	0. 38
34	Variation 24	0. 38
35	Variation 25	0. 40
36	Fuga	4. 48

Total playing time: 63. 25

Inon Barnatan, piano



This recital program was born out a mild obsession with making connections. I have always been fascinated by the conversation that composers have with one another across centuries, how they respect and build on the music they love and admire and find a way to make it their own. The Time Traveler's Suite is an attempt to take a journey through that continuous musical legacy.

Composers like Bach and Couperin took the humble dance movements and made them into exquisite pieces of music that were too engrossing and complex to dance to. Ravel and Thomas Adès studied and rewrote Couperin's music and used it among other influences as a departure point to their own unique language and sound. Ligeti and Barber used Baroque forms and idioms to channel their own 20th-century style. Each composer uses the past as a way to move forward.

For my assembled suite I used the form of the Baroque dance suite, a collection of dances that became a standardized way to write music in the 17th and 18th century, and one that composers kept on coming back to throughout the centuries. As the different movements of the suite I compiled pieces from composers spanning over 300 years, with the Toccata by Bach acting as the overture and each subsequent piece standing in for the different dances, until we get to the mighty Barber Fugue. The relationship of keys and moods, and the way the

composers were influenced by one another keeps the “suite”, at least to my mind, a unified whole – a musical journey that highlights both the similarities and the innovations of its stops.

The final work in this album is Brahms’ Handel Variations, another piece based on a Baroque suite. Even Wagner, Brahms’s supposed musical enemy, couldn’t deny the ingenuity of the piece, remarking that there is still life in the old forms if someone knows what to do with them. Brahms develops a theme from a suite by Handel into an intricately beautiful set of variations – culminating, like my assembled suite, in a virtuosic fugue.

I hope you enjoy this time-traveling adventure.

-Inon Barnatan



TIME AND SPACE

This “Time Traveler’s Suite” slips effortlessly between centuries, but it leaps just as easily through space, bridging countries and even hemispheres in an instant. Bach wrote his *Toccatà in E Minor* while serving as organist in Mühlhausen in what is now central Germany, while Handel published his *Suite in E Major* in London. Rameau and Couperin came of age in the Paris of Louis XIV. In that same city two centuries later Ravel composed *Le tombeau de Couperin* in response to a devastating war but also to connect with the keyboard music and spirit of an earlier France. We return to England for Thomas Adès’ *Blanca Variations*, then go on to Budapest for György Ligeti’s *Musica Ricercata*. From there we cross the Atlantic to New York, where Samuel Barber wrote his *Piano Sonata*, which Vladimir Horowitz premiered in Havana in 1949. And we conclude by crossing the Atlantic once more, this time to Hamburg, where the young Brahms composed his *Variations and Fugue on a Theme by Handel*.

Bach in Thuringia. Handel in London.

Toccatà in E Minor, BWV914
JOHANN SEBASTIAN BACH

We understand a toccatà to be a piece designed to show off a keyboard player’s touch and skill, but Bach understood that term differently. For him, a toccatà was a multi-movement suite, often very free in form. His brief *Toccatà in E Minor*, composed about 1708, begins with a stately introductory passage that proceeds directly into the main body of the movement; while this is not a fugue, Bach specifies that it is “in four voices.” The following *Adagio* is so free in matters of texture, speed, and rhythmic patterns that it seems to proceed at many different tempos. The final movement is the expected fugue, in this case in three voices and harmonically quite free.

Allemande from the Suite No. 5 in E Major,
HWV 430
GEORG FRIDERIC HANDEL

In 1720 Handel published in London a collection of eight *Suites de pièces pour le clavecin*. The *Suite No. 5 in E Major* has become famous for its final movement, an Air with five variations that has acquired the nickname “The Harmonious Blacksmith.” This recording, however, offers the suite’s second movement. This *Allemande*, in binary form, features a stately melody built on a steady flow of sixteenth-notes that continues throughout, moving smoothly between the performer’s hands and enlivened by quick flashes of unexpected keys.

Paris.

Suite in A Minor from *Nouvelles Suites de Pièces de Clavecin*
JEAN-PHILIPPE RAMEAU

The next two works — by the two great French clavecinistes — are both concerned with running. Rameau wrote about fifty short pieces for harpsichord, published in three volumes. The last of these collections (1731), titled *Nouvelles Suites de Pièces de*

Clavecin, gathered sixteen pieces in two suites, and the first of these — in both A Major and A Minor — consists of seven movements. Its second movement is a brisk *Courante* in 6/4: *courante* means “running” in French.

L’Atalante (Book 2, 12th ordre)
FRANCOIS COUPERIN

Couperin published his *Second livre de pièces de clavecin* in Paris in 1717, and its final ordre consists of eight pieces inspired by women. The last of these, *L’Atalante*, is a portrait of a specific woman. In Greek mythology Atalanta was a swift-footed hunter. Unwilling to marry, Atalanta was so confident of her ability to outrace any challenger that she specified that she would marry only the man who could beat her in a footrace (all losers were killed). Hippomenes recognized that he could not beat her in a race, so he arranged with the goddess Aphrodite to provide him with three golden apples, which he

dropped at key moments in that race. Atalanta stopped to pick them up and so was defeated. Couperin’s *L’Atalante* does not depict any of these colorful events but simply focuses on her speed. He marks the piece *Très légèrement* (“very lightly”), and it is as if we are watching Atalanta sweep breathlessly past in some race through the forest.

Rigaudon from *Le tombeau de Couperin*
MAURICE RAVEL

Exactly two centuries after Couperin published *L’Atalante*, Ravel composed *Le tombeau de Couperin*. Ravel had enlisted in the French army during World War I and — at age 40 — drove ambulances carrying wounded back from the front, a devastating experience. In 1917 he composed a suite of six movements for piano, dedicating each to a different friend who had been killed in the war. He gave the piece a title that reflects both its homage to the past and the dark moment of its

creation: *Le tombeau de Couperin*, or “The Tomb of Couperin.”

Ravel creates a consciously antiquarian sound in this music: each of the six movements is in a baroque form, and Ravel sets out to make the modern piano mimic the jangling, plangent sound of the harpsichord. A *rigaudon* was a lively folk-dance in duple meter and short phrases, originally from Provence. Ravel’s *Rigaudon* — marked *Assez vif* (“Very fast”) — bursts to life on a bright flourish in C Major, followed instantly by the propulsive dance. Its central episode slips into C Minor, but the opening section returns in all its energy, and the movement races to its close on the opening flourish.

Back to London.

Blanca Variations, for solo piano
THOMAS ADÈS
In 2015 English composer Thomas Adès was asked by the Clara Haskill International Piano Competition to compose a test-piece. Adès

wrote a short piece with a mysterious title — *Blanca Variations* — and the music came with the admonition that its title would be explained later. That explanation came the following summer when the Salzburg Festival premiered Adès' opera *The Exterminating Angel*. In that opera Blanca Delgado, wife of a conductor, entertains guests at a social gathering by playing a set of variations said to be by the eighteenth-century composer Paradis, but in fact this music by the mythical Paradis is the set of variations Adès had composed for the Haskill Competition. The theme for these variations was the ancient Judaeo-Spanish song "Lavaba la blanca niña," a song which Adès has described as having "an unassuageable harmonic structure very typical of Jewish music of longing and bereavement."

Though quite brief — the theme and five variations span only five minutes — the *Blanca Variations* are extremely difficult for the performer. Adès states his theme — marked *Moderato espressivo, rubato* — at the very

beginning, and his rubato instruction is central to this music: meters often change by the measure, phrases extend across barlines, the pianist's two hands sometimes seem to inhabit different worlds rhythmically.

Budapest.

Musica Ricercata, Nos. 11 and 10
GYÖRGY LIGETI

Musica Ricercata means "music to seek out," and the title *ricercar* has come to denote music that tries to demonstrate a particular compositional approach. In his *Musica Ricercata* (1951-53) Ligeti set himself a formidable musical challenge: the first piece is built on just two pitches (A and D), the second on three pitches, and so on — each subsequent movement adds one more pitch until the eleventh and final piece employs all twelve notes of the chromatic scale.

Ligeti builds *No. 11* on all twelve tones, but he also conceives the movement as an act

of homage to the seventeenth-century Italian composer Girolamo Frescobaldi, famed for his contrapuntal imagination. This movement takes the form of a fugue, sometimes written on as many as four staves.

Ligeti titles the tenth piece *Vivace. Capriccioso*, and this brief movement drives to a climax that Ligeti stresses should be played *Wie verrückt*: "As if insane." A revealing aside: when Ligeti arranged this movement as the finale of his *Six Bagatelles for Wind Quintet*, the Hungarian government blocked its performance at the premiere in September 1956, claiming that it was "too dangerous."

New York.

Fugue from Piano Sonata, Opus 26
SAMUEL BARBER

Barber's *Piano Sonata* (1947-49) is one of his most audacious scores: its harmonic language is based on a dizzying

chromaticism, it features one of Barber's rare uses of twelve tone sequences, and the thorny writing for piano requires a virtuoso of the first order. Vladimir Horowitz called Barber's *Sonata* "the first truly great native work in the form."

Barber had originally intended to conclude the sonata with a slow movement, but Horowitz convinced him that it needed a brilliant finale. This *Allegro con spirito* is a spiky four voice fugue of almost incandescent difficulty. Barber treats the original fugue theme ingeniously, sometimes presenting it slowly behind the dizzying pianistic foreground. At the coda, Barber switches from the original 4/4 to 3/8, and the fugue subject assumes yet another form as it rushes to the breathtaking close.

Hamburg.

Variations and Fugue in B flat Major on a Theme by Handel, Opus 24
JOHANNES BRAHMS

Brahms composed his *Variations and Fugue on a Theme of Handel*, in Hamburg in 1861, when he was 28. Brahms chose the theme from the last movement of the *Suite No. 1 in B-flat Major* from Handel's *Suites de pièces de clavecin*, published in London in 1733. Handel's theme falls symmetrically into two four bar phrases and naturally presents great opportunities for variation: Handel himself wrote five variations on it. In his version, Brahms first states Handel's theme (like Handel, Brahms titles it "Aria"), creates twenty five variations, then concludes with a tremendous fugue derived from Handel's original theme. The variations themselves are extremely ingenious, and Brahms complicates his task by composing some of them not just as variations on Handel's themes but also to conform simultaneously with other music forms: Variation 6 is a baroque canon, No. 19 a siciliana.

On February 6, 1864, three years after this music was written, Brahms and Wagner spent an evening together at the villa

Wagner had rented outside Vienna. Wagner would later have derisive things to say about Brahms, but this evening at least proved cordial, and on that occasion Brahms played his *Handel Variations* for Wagner. One would expect the proponent of *Zukunftsmusik* — "the music of the future" — to have no use for so ancient a form as the theme-and-variations, but Wagner recognized what Brahms had accomplished. "It shows what can still be done with the old forms by somebody who knows how to handle them," he said.

Eric Bromberger

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