



# Traversing Three Centuries of Music

By Brian Lauritzen

*“Inon Barnatan is a complete artist: a wonderful pianist, a probing intellect, passionately committed, and a capable contemporary-music pianist as well.”*

Those words of high praise come from none other than the former Music Director of the New York Philharmonic, Alan Gilbert, who thought so highly of the Israeli-born pianist that he created an artistic position for him at the New York Philharmonic. In 2014, Gilbert named Inon Barnatan the orchestra’s inaugural Artist-in-Association, a three-year position created to spotlight an emerging artist over the course of three seasons through both concerto and chamber music performances and by cultivating a relationship among the artist, the orchestra, and the audience.

Since then, Barnatan, who turns 40 this year, has been named the successor to the great Taiwanese violinist Cho-Liang Lin as Music Director of the La Jolla Music Society’s prestigious Summerfest. Barnatan’s first Summerfest season kicks off this August with a who’s who of early-to-mid career classical stars: pianist Conrad Tao, violinist Stefan Jackiw, clarinetist Anthony McGill, and cellist Alisa Weilerstein.

For his Wallis program, Barnatan is proving Alan Gilbert’s “probing intellect” designation correct. Blending music of the past and the present, Barnatan calls his “Variations on a Suite,” and begins with four short works by Baroque-era composers followed closely by four short works by 20th-century composers. Through this, Barnatan is playing with the idea of a typical Baroque-era Suite, which begins with a big, flashy opening movement followed by a series of stylized dance movements. His new Suite follows this form while also taking us across nearly three centuries of keyboard music.

Barnatan begins his new suite with J.S. Bach’s Toccata in e minor, BWV 914. From the Italian word *toccare*, meaning “to touch,” the toccata (this one and generally any other piece with this title) is a virtuoso piece which features fast-moving passages which emphasize the dexterity of the performer’s fingers. Bach’s BWV 914 is precisely this and, while toccatas

are often paired with fugues, this one isn’t. At least, not yet.

Following the Bach toccata comes what is typically the second movement of a Baroque suite: an allemande, which was an old German dance where couples would form a line, link arms, and walk the length of the room taking three steps and then balancing on one foot. (A livelier version of this dance used three quick steps, followed by a hop.) In each of Bach’s six Suites for Unaccompanied Cello, for example, the second movement is always an allemande. In Barnatan’s suite, the allemande comes from a famous Keyboard Suite by George Frideric Handel. The famous portion of the Handel Suite is its final movement: an air and variations that has come to be known as *The Harmonious Blacksmith*. Same suite; different movement here.

Often paired with the allemande, the courante picks up the tempo a bit, which makes sense given the word *courante* literally means, “running.” The dance steps were a

combination of running and jumping, as you can hear especially prominently in this courante from Jean-Philippe Rameau's Suite in e minor from his *Pièces de clavecin*.

A standard Baroque suite would often continue at this point with a slow movement (likely a sarabande). However, in Barnatan's suite, he uses this moment to pivot to the music of the 20th and 21st century. The oldest work on this program is Couperin's *L'Atalante*, from his second book of *Pièces de clavecin*, published in 1716-17. With this, and the "Rigaudon" from Ravel's *Le tombeau de Couperin*, we now find ourselves simultaneously in the 18th and 20th centuries. *Le tombeau de Couperin* was written during World War I as a memorial to some of Ravel's closest friends who were killed in the war. (Ravel had signed up to serve, but his poor health and slight stature prevented him from joining the infantry on the front lines – he instead served as an orderly in a military hospital.) Ravel based his composition on works by Couperin. The "Rigaudon" was written in memory of Pierre and Pascal Gaudin: two brothers and childhood friends of Ravel, killed by the same shell in November 1914.

Themes of war continue in the *Blanca Variations*, by Thomas Adès – a set of variations on the traditional Sephardic song *Lavaba la blanca niña*, which tells the story of a meeting between a

knight and a beautiful washerwoman by the water. The knight asks for water and the washerwoman fills seven jugs with her tears. When he asks her why she is crying, the washerwoman replies that everyone has returned from war but her husband. The washerwoman lists her husband's identifying marks, so that the knight can identify him. At the end of the romance, the knight is revealed to be the husband of the weeping washerwoman, returning after all the years of battle.

War, heartbreak, and romance all disappear in *Musica Ricercata*, by György Ligeti. In these pieces (of which he wrote 11), Ligeti set himself all kinds of compositional restrictions – pitch content, intervals, rhythms – in an attempt to, in his words, "build up a 'new music' from nothing."

A half-dozen pieces have now separated us from Bach's Toccata in e minor, BWV 914, but now finally to close the first half of Inon Barnatan's program "Variations on a Suite," we get our fugue. Rather than Bach, Barnatan has chosen the fugue from Samuel Barber's Piano Sonata in e-flat minor. Written in 1949 for the twenty-fifth anniversary of the League of Composers, the sonata was first performed by Vladimir Horowitz. The Fugue contains what might be described as ghosts of the Baroque era and is a technically-demanding showstopper.

For a famously self-conscious composer who said he "felt the footsteps of a giant" behind him while attempting to compose his first symphony, Brahms is remarkably confident and self-assured in his Variations and Fugue on a Theme by Handel. A set of 25 variations on a theme from Handel's Keyboard Suite No. 1 in B-flat major. It was written quickly in September 1861 and dedicated to his "beloved friend," Clara Schumann. This virtuosic bridge across the 18th and 19th centuries is a fitting way for Inon Barnatan to conclude a brilliantly-conceived theme and variations program.

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