

# Dr. Rosalyn Tureck

March 2003

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*Rosalyn Tureck is known as one of the foremost J.S. Bach scholars and performers in the world. Born in Chicago in 1914, she first performed the Goldberg Variations from memory at the age of 23. In addition to performing Bach, Dr. Tureck has focused on pieces by 20<sup>th</sup>-century composers, although her repertoire has covered every major composer. Additionally, she studied with Léon Thérémín in her teens, made her Carnegie Hall debut, at the age of 17, on a Thérémín instrument, and has performed on various electronic instruments. She has recorded and performed the complete Goldberg Variations numerous times. Dr. Tureck founded the Tureck Bach Institute in New York City in 1967, and in 1993 she founded the Tureck Bach Research Foundation, based in Oxford, England. She currently resides in New York.*<sup>1</sup>

*This interview was conducted through the mail in early March 2003.*

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*Knowing that you have performed Bach since a youth, has your interest in Bach ever waned?*

No.

*Can you explain what new technique you developed in studying and performing Bach's music? Do you feel that the focus on structure, although hindering the time it took to learn a piece, ever hindered your performance abilities, or have you always seen it as a positive thing?*<sup>2</sup>

It helped and never hindered me; I'd learn a new fugue by memory in 20 minutes.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> John Ardoin, *Great Pianists of the Twentieth Century: Rosalyn Tureck II*, Philips Compact Disc 456 979-2; Jeremy Siepmann, *Goldberg Variations*, Deutsche Grammophon Compact Disc 289 456 599-2.

<sup>2</sup> In her response, Dr. Tureck underlined this section and the section in a later question. It is assumed that she did this to save her the time of rewriting those sentences, and that the underlined section is her answer to that question.

<sup>3</sup> "Just before my 17<sup>th</sup> birthday I had an experience which changed my life. I ... was continuing to learn three (Bach preludes and fugues from the *Well-Tempered Clavier*) each week ... when I suddenly lost consciousness .... When I came to, I had a whole new insight into Bach's music. I suddenly understood that the realization of Bach's structures in performance required a whole new way of thinking musical form and structure. I realized at that very same moment ... that a totally new performance technique had to be created" (as quoted by Siepmann, p. 10).

*You've recorded the Goldberg Variations numerous times. Have you approached them differently each time, applying new scholarly information? What approach do you take with the Goldberg Variations when you record or perform them – do you try for something different than you've done in the past?*

I don't try – I study and I grow.

*Many artists, including Leonard Bernstein and Glenn Gould, are known for rerecording pieces at slower tempi and with different interpretations as they age, saying that they are searching to bring more of the music out. Have you experienced this phenomenon as well? Do you listen to your previous recordings and think of things that you would have changed if you had the chance, or do you see them as an image of who you were at that time?*

I do not search for new interpretations. They grow and grow in scholarship and artistic insight.

*The last fifty years or so has seen an increase in scholarly output concerning performance practices of all music periods. You have been a part of this, becoming an expert on period instruments and practices. What do you feel about the debate concerning Bach and his keyboard music: if it's meant for the harpsichord or piano, what ornamentations are proper, what tempi and dynamics to use, etc.?<sup>4</sup>*

*András Schiff and Vladimir Feltsman are known for their attempts to emulate the harpsichord in their performances and recordings of the Goldberg Variations by changing octaves on the repeats in the variations. Have you considered this? Do you see it as an accurate representation of what a harpsichordist would do in a performance?*

No, it is not. The idea is naïve. It is not appropriate to try to imitate the harpsichord on the piano. This subject is deeper than they are perceiving.

*You are known as the “high priestess of Bach,” but you also have performed and recorded a wide array of 20<sup>th</sup> century pieces, including recitals on the Thérémín. Do you see a connection between J.S. Bach's music and the more modern music you've performed?*

YES, this will be explained in detail in my forthcoming publications.

*You've said that the Goldberg Variations are central to your life, and also that, to quote, you “don't play this work as a tour de force, as a dazzling display of technique – I play it as a life experience.” What is it about the Goldberg Variations that initially attracted*

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<sup>4</sup> Dr. Tureck did not answer this question. Much has been written by and about Dr. Tureck and this debate. She has said “In respect to Bach and the performance media, Bach's own practice was so often to recast the settings of his music for entirely different media .... I aim to embrace a more holistic Bach ....” (as quoted by Siepmann, p. 11).

*you to them, and why do you perceive this as one of the most important pieces you've performed?*

Like Mt. Everest: it is there!<sup>5</sup>

*Glenn Gould cited you as an influence for his 1955 recording of the Goldberg Variations. Do you see any similarities between his first recording of this work and your performances of the same time period? What was your initial reaction to Gould's infamous recording?*

Only a good deal of my influence and of imitating literally what I do, without knowledge of why I do, or adequate attention to what Bach is doing in the structure of his music.

*There has been scholarship on Bach's music concerning symbolism, including Lutheran and Christian symbolism and numerology. Have you discovered a lot of symbolism in the Goldberg Variations? If so, have these discoveries influenced your performances of the Goldberg Variations?*

Many can be found, but this practice should not be overdone or become dogma.

*You are well-known not only as a performer, but as a philosopher. Your essay, "A Philosophy of Performance: Performance as an Art" concisely outlines your beliefs on performance and interpretation. What you say in there seems to be implied material: "The composer comes first, the performer second. The performer does not create a composition anew." Have you had many encounters with people that disagree with this statement?*

Some people can always be found who disagree with anything.

*Also, what does this idea do to the notion of transcriptions or arrangements – do you feel that people are "damaging," to use perhaps too strong of a word, the composer's original ideas?*

Some damage: a few don't. This is like the work of translation.

*Or do you see them as a way to spread music beyond the sphere it maintains?*

Yes – sometimes necessary in the 19<sup>th</sup> century – NOT today.

*What do you feel of treatments of Bach by Busoni and others?<sup>6</sup> Have you heard contemporary arrangements of the Goldberg Variations by pianists Jacques Loussier and Uri Caine? If so, what are your thoughts on them?*

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<sup>5</sup> This is similar to the remark that Mrs. Nanette Lunde made (see .....)

<sup>6</sup> While studying with Jan Chiapusso at the age of 14, Dr. Tureck studied and compared the transcriptions of Busoni, Cortot and Liszt with Bach's originals, although "neither Chiapusso nor I was interested in the virtuoso arrangements by Liszt" (as quoted by Siepmann, p. 10).

He (Jacques Loussier) is very clever and amusing – but these are not representative of great art.

*Have you found it difficult to combine the individual variations into a complete whole? Has it been difficult to perfect the gestalt of the piece?*

Never – this is the whole point of integrating a composition.

*Are there any recordings or editions of the Goldberg Variations that you prefer?*

Bach-Gesellschaft and Neue Bach-Ausgabe but I study Bach's autographs or where they are lost, the best copies by the most reliable copyists of his time.

*Many artists don't like to listen to their recordings once they are finished with the process. Do you feel the same way, or do you review prior recordings before rerecording a piece?*

It depends. I rely mostly on J.S. Bach! and not on opinions.