

Mr. Uri Caine

12 February 2003

Pianist/Composer Uri Caine was born in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania and started his career as a pianist there, taking piano and composition lessons and playing in the local jazz clubs. He attended the University of Pennsylvania, and in the late 1980s he moved to New York City, where he currently lives with his wife, sculptor Jan Galperin. He has recorded numerous times, both as a leader and sideman. Albums include: Urlicht/Primal Light, a collection featuring arrangements of the music of Gustav Mahler; Wagner in Venezia, the music of Richard Wagner arranged for a small ensemble recorded live in San Marco Square, Venice; The Goldberg Variations, a two-disc set of arranged and composed variations on Bach's Goldberg Variations, Rio, recorded live in Brazil with several local ensembles; and most recently The Diabelli Variations, an arrangement of Beethoven's Op. 120 recorded with the Concerto Köln. Mr. Caine's website can be found at www.uricaine.com

I initially contacted Mr. Caine to ask his permission to arrange one of his Goldberg Variations (The Introitus Variation) for tuba quartet. We stayed in contact via email, and Mr. Caine agreed to a phone interview, the main subject being his recording of the Goldberg Variations. The interview was conducted on Wednesday 12 February 2003, at 10 a.m.

I'd like to start by asking you to briefly describe what your musical background was, when you started playing piano. You grew up in Philadelphia, right?

Yes, I grew up in Philadelphia. I started playing piano when I was about 8, and I started taking it seriously when I was about 12 or 13. I met a pianist in Philadelphia, a French pianist named Bernard Peiffer, who was my teacher, and he was a very strong influence. Also in Philadelphia there's a lot of live music that you could sit in with people, so that's basically how I fell into it.

Were you initially classically-trained?

I started with that. I was always playing classical music, but I guess even before I met Bernard I was into jazz and improvising, although I didn't really know how to do it.

You started taking composition lessons in your teens.

Right, I did.

Was that your first real experience with Bach?

No, I had played him before, because I was actually playing him even as a beginning pianist, and with Bernard, that was a way to expand your technique. But once I started to take those composition lessons, then I was able to start listening and analyzing a lot of the music that I was already playing. I was trying to write in different styles and different forms. That's the way I was being taught at that point.

Was that how you found out about the Goldberg Variations?

That was from really listening to Glenn Gould's 1955 recording, which a lot of people told me about. When I got it, I was blown away by it. I think that was really the first way I did it, although I do remember working on theme and variations as a form, and studying a lot of different pieces, and then trying to write my own. It was sort of something I knew about, from both (being) a player and also from working with a composition teacher.

Did you find it difficult to write all the "extras" variations on Bach's Goldberg Variations? Or was it something that seemed to come naturally?

I think both. You always try to work as hard as you can to make things good, and then sometimes after you've done them you realize that you maybe could've done something different, or better. For me, it was the idea of finding the parallel between jazz improvisers using a fixed harmonic, repeating pattern; for instance, when they play on standards, it's similar to how a theme and variations could work. I wanted to make that parallel. So in the Bach piece, when he's basically writing at the end of his life, summing up a lot of his different styles of music that he was interested in – dance forms, very virtuosic – his piano writing or keyboard writing show a lot of virtuosity in it – his, of course, obsession with counterpoint, with the canons in there, and even in a way his – not parodying in a bad way – but parodying in the sense of imitating or paying tribute to other composers, even the humorous touch at the end where he's combining two drinking songs. I tried to parallel that, but in a more modest way of course, by, if he's dealing with a gigue – there's one in Variation 7 – then I can do it as a mambo or a tango or another style of dance form. And if he's putting his miniature history in there, I can even embed a miniature history of jazz in there by having a lot of different jazz styles. I did write variations in between his variations which, in a way, point to other composers, and also because I have a group of people who are improvising who know how to play over those chord changes, to deal with that aspect of it, of all the different ways to improvise over harmony. The variation is working, it's a form that's not developmental like the sonata form, but it's the greatest contrast between a lot of different things that are all unified by harmony. You can really exploit that fact by bringing in a lot of different things, juxtapose one to another and show the underlying unity.

Did any other arrangements of Bach's music, like the Swingle Singers or music by the Jacques Loussier Trio influence this recording at all?

When I was growing up I heard the Swingle Singers and I liked it. Jacques Loussier, you know, it's not ... well, I was influenced a lot of different ways. I would say also things like *Switched On Bach*, which was the electronic version, and in a certain sense the way Bach has been used by other previous musicians/composers as a springboard for their own thing. But in the general way, not so much in the specific way, unless there's certain variations, obviously, or nods or tributes to certain types of music that I'm into.

Do you find it difficult to promote this type of music, and your other albums of Mahler's music and Wagner's music? Do you find you're getting a lot of critical attacks from the classical realm, or even from the jazz world?

I've had my share of that. It depends. I just came out with another record of Beethoven's *Diabelli Variations*, for piano and chamber orchestra. Some people really like it, some people don't like it, some people probably don't even care. It's just one of those things. For me, it's fun to do it, in terms of a way of testing myself as an improviser, but also getting closer to the music, in a weird way. I realize that certain people aren't going like it, but I have to say that, especially in a public performance of some of these pieces, even the people don't all like it. I've had a chance to play them a lot, all over the world. I'm seeing it as sort of an experimental thing, and you have to be able to take that type of criticism.

Have you found the Goldberg CD you recorded more difficult than any of the other "classical" CDs that you recorded?

Well, they all have their own difficulties with (recording). The thing with this project that was the most difficult was getting everybody together at various points and trying to figure out what to actually put on the CD, because we actually had a lot more material that didn't get put on the CD – it would've been much too long. Actually, when I listen to it now I wonder if it's too long, but when we were doing it, it seemed like we were cutting out a lot of stuff and said "No, this has to be in it." It was one of those things that really went out of control, in a certain way, but it was a lot of fun to do it. A lot of people seem like they like it, but I've had some harsh attacks on it, too.

The couple of reviews I've read seemed pretty favorable.

Yes, I would say in general they are. People that are expecting – this has happened to us a couple of times in concerts – where it'll be advertised and people will say, "This is not the *Goldberg Variations*," they're not going like it. Other people, in various parts of the classical community or even in the jazz community, they're just like it's neither fish nor fowl, so we're not into it.

Was it difficult to decide on what order to put the variations in, and how to intersperse them with Bach's variations?

Well, I knew that I wanted to have the Bach variations unfold in order, pretty much – it's not exactly all the time – but then with that as the skeleton, there were a lot of different ways of ordering it, which we tried. That's something that when we were putting it together, you think you have it, and then you listen to it another time and you think, "Oh I should've done this and that." That is difficult.

Did you have any specific people in mind when you did your arrangements of Bach's variations?

It worked out different ways. Some of the variations I actually did in a couple ways, just to see which one would be "the one." In other ones, I had a more specific idea, like this one would be a choir and I'd have David Moss improvising. Then other ones I knew we should have Baroque instruments playing, but if a recorder player said "I'm sick, I can't come today," and then you have a violinist playing it, you have to deal with that type of contingency. I think I was just trying to get the biggest variety possible.

Stereotypically you have the idea of a musicologist or a period instrument group being pretty strict in their ideas of interpretations. Did you find the Baroque musicians hesitant to record this with you?

I think that there was, among all the musicians, some initial suspicion. I actually called them and told everybody that if there's anything in this you don't feel comfortable with, then ... That really came to doubt much more, for instance, when there would be Baroque musicians and jazz musicians improvising together, and obviously it's a clash of cultures, but it's an interesting clash. I don't think that they – the classical musicians – were used to it necessarily, but after some initial skepticism, when they heard the way the album came out, what the whole idea of it was, they seemed okay with it.

This new album you recorded, that group recorded with you on the Goldberg album.

It's a lot of the same people. That's how I got the commission, basically. They said, "Why don't you write a piece specifically for our group?" That became another problem, because I saw that their improvisational thing wasn't in the same vein ... so I thought, in this piece I'll do the idea of theme and variations, but the orchestra will be the straight man playing an arrangement of Beethoven, while I'll be the improviser. For that theme and variations, you know the story of how Beethoven initially, when he received the suggestion to write the theme on Diabelli's waltz, he was very insulted. Diabelli asked 50 other composers, and so Beethoven wrote a sarcastic response, parodying the theme. In a way that might lend itself a lot more to the idea of having the soloist being the protagonist, the parodist on top of the parody here, the initiator. It's a different dynamic, where in the *Goldberg* you have basically groups interacting, that's fairly coming more from a jazz head.

Have you thought about recording a straight-ahead classical album, like Keith Jarrett's done in the past?

I've thought about it, but there are so many other people that do that, so much better. To me, that's not really one of my priorities. I'm more interested in, I guess if I continue doing projects like this, I want it to be different, I don't want it to be repetitious of each other. But also in other types of music. I'm playing straight-ahead jazz, or a freer type of jazz, or with bigger groups, trio, solo – I'm trying to pursue that as well.

I read that a Penn. Ballet company did your Goldberg Variations to ballet. Was that difficult? Was it interesting?

It was beautiful. They're doing it again this spring, next month. It's only going be in Pennsylvania, though, Philadelphia, maybe some other places. But the choreographer picked, maybe, about 20 of the pieces from the first CD and then used the end. I think that he was trying to parallel some of the music, in the sense that there was classical style of dancing with a lot of different things happened around it. I thought it was really beautiful.

Did you work at all with him, or did you just say, "Here's my music"?

I worked with them to the extent that he wanted me to help him pick, to try to make it a 25 minute piece, which involved going to the studio. We made some minor changes, but it was basically editing, which was good, because in a way, some of the suggestions, it was good we heard how it sounded first in order to really ... but then once that happened, they basically just called me when they were working on it, and I saw what they were doing, and I said it looks great to me. I didn't want to get involved in that, telling them what to do, telling the dancers what to do, that's their thing.

What techniques did you use to write the variations?

That one and a lot of other ones are dealing with the four-part harmonic structure of the piece, which sort of starts in the tonic and ends in the tonic, the second goes in the dominant, the third's in the submediant, the fourth back to the tonic, so in a way, in that one there's substitutions of harmony. The way I'm dealing with the harmony when it's not totally straight, it ranges from, with something like the "Minimal Variation," where I'm basically saying, okay, play this ending, play in the four tonal areas, just go until ... so just play G or e minor or D, to a piece like "Contrapuncto," which is taking the form of a salsa piece, which will stereotypically have these things where the singer comes put and sings in the tonic, then sings in the dominant, and there's a repeating thing, which I put in the relative minor, where Bach's thing goes, and at the end the solos and then the vamp of the last eight chords that repeat over and over. A lot of the times I would sort of take the main four sections and repeat them internally in order to give the piece a certain ... so it really would change up. But in most of the pieces there's a pretty strong relationship to it. A lot of the times, for instance, there'll be the eight chords, let's say, and then an open section, and then the next eight chords, and then an open section. I never really tried to go through everyone to try to explain the justification. It's more or less following the theme.

How much freedom of creativity did you give to the performers?

In general ways I did. I mean, the gospel singer's going to sing words that she feels comfortable with, because she knows the direction she's going with it, because in a way I'm trying to deal with the religious uplift of Bach, but I deal with it in another way. But musicians that I played with before that are improvisers, like David Moss, it's more of "Do that there, but not there. Whatever you're doing, do that." I think with the other instrumental soloists, we, I guess don't try to direct as much as possible, but sometimes there are directions, like in a piece, when I do this, everyone play here, and when I do this, everyone play here, have a solo here, repeat this four times. But I find it's better to leave a lot of that open, and then, especially when you're recording, try it different ways, then listen back to it later and you can decide how you want to deal with it.

Did you have to do a lot of takes?

No, not really, because in a way the recording sessions were madness. A lot of stuff had to be crammed into a couple days, so it was more like a circus. Four guys would show up, okay, play on this variation, no, wait, don't leave yet! Guys would come in, oh, I have to leave, I'll come back tomorrow. It was a lot of hair scratching at the beginning, can you stay for two hours? But in general, no we weren't taking hundreds of takes for anything, but we sort of knew when we had it, let's move on and get the next ones, though that in a way ... but that's with a lot of records I make, there's not a big budget ... I always feel we could have more rehearsal and recording time, but that's life.

Do you think any other record companies besides the Winter and Winter label would have gone for this album or any of your other "crossover" albums?

Well, I can see that it would be difficult for a lot of them, because just to sit down and explain what's going on, they would be maybe dubious or ... but there's a lot of record labels out there that are trying to do things, and it's more a question of ... I guess, for me, I feel lucky that I've been able to do a lot of different things that I'm interested in, so it's good to have a good relationship with my record company.

Do you have anything else you'd like to add?

Yes, just that I'm not doing it to reconstruct these pieces. I think about what's going on in the music and add my own ideas and style to the works.