UC SANTA BARBARA

THE Current

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Variations on a Theme

In his long career as a musician, concert pianist, and music scholar, Paul Berkowitz has seen Beethoven's richly complex "Diabelli Variations" performed live only twice. The composition is long, intricate, and rarely selected for a recital program.

When the professor in UC Santa Barbara's Department of Music next hears "33 Variations on a Waltz by Diabelli, Op. 120," as the piece is formally known, he will be the one at the piano. Berkowitz will perform the piece in full at 7:30 p.m. Friday, Oct. 23, in Lotte Lehmann Concert Hall at UCSB.

"It has been a true journey of discovery for me, and has at times felt like being a young student again," Berkowitz said. "Normally, even when I am preparing a new work to perform for the first time, I already know it fairly well from teaching it and hearing it many times. Not on this occasion. When I first began work on the 'Diabelli Variations,' I couldn't tell you which variation came after which."

The piece represents the peak of Beethoven's variation writing, a musical term describing a formal technique whereby material is repeated in an altered form. Considered by some to be Beethoven's greatest composition for piano, "Diabelli Variations" is just under an hour in length. It is the only piece on the Oct. 23 program and will be performed without intermission.

"Rather than perhaps try the patience of the audience by preceding them with a first half of other works that might make the concert too long, I am playing just this one, grand work," Berkowitz said.

Music department chair Jill Felber noted her enthusiasm for both the concert and the performer. “We are pleased to offer the Santa Barbara community this unique opportunity to hear Beethoven’s monumental ‘Diabelli Variations’ for piano,” she said.

Berkowitz has performed an annual concert on campus for nearly all of his 22 years as a professor at UCSB. A lifelong lover of musical performance, he noted the contrast between the dense composition and sometimes-sunny attitude of this particular Beethoven work. “It’s almost like 34 different pieces,” he said, “all in different tempos and moods, many of them overflowing with humor and good spirit.”

A graduate of McGill University and of the Curtis Institute, Berkowitz lived in Britain for 20 years, appearing frequently at the Queen Elizabeth and Wigmore Halls, and on the BBC. Before coming to UCSB in 1993, he was on the faculty at the Guildhall School of Music in London. Among his concert recordings are the complete piano sonatas of Schubert (a project he has been working on since 1984), as well as works by Brahms and Schumann.

The concert will be preceded by a reception at 7 p.m. in the UCSB Music Building courtyard. Tickets are $10 for adults and $5 for non-UCSB students. Admission is free for UCSB students and children under 12. Tickets may be purchased online at www.music.ucsb.edu or by phone at (805) 893-2064.

A complete listing of performances and lectures for the upcoming academic year is available at www.music.ucsb.edu.

About UC Santa Barbara

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