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Adam Birnbaum Explores the Timeless Music of J.S. Bach Via the Pianist's Own Fresh, Improvisatory Arrangements for Jazz Trio

With the album *Preludes* — be released by Chelsea Music Festival Records on Oct. 13, 2023 — Birnbaum personalizes the kinship between Baroque music and bebop

“‘Preludes’ is a masterful take on some of the most iconic works in the classical repertoire. Adam Birnbaum plays with command and reimagines Bach in a novel, creative way.” — FRED HERSCH

Baroque music, especially that of Johann Sebastian Bach, has long attracted jazz artists as a vehicle for improvisation, from the bebop era into the 21st century; in that spirit, New York-based pianist **Adam Birnbaum** presents his own fresh, improvisatory vision of Bach, having created jazz-trio arrangements of a dozen of the composer's preludes and recorded them with bassist **Matt Clohesy** and drummer **Keita Ogawa**. The resulting album, titled *Preludes*, will be released by **Chelsea Music Festival Records** on **October 13, 2023**. *Preludes* is Birnbaum's fifth album as a leader; his previous release, *Three of a Mind*, was praised as “an eloquent dispatch from the heart of the contemporary piano tradition” by Nate Chinen in *The New York Times*. Along with fronting his own groups, the pianist has long been in demand as a sideman, performing with vocal star Cécile McLorin Salvant, drum master Al Foster, composer Darcy James Argue's Secret Society and the venerable Vanguard Jazz Orchestra, among others. McLorin Salvant has become a big fan of Birnbaum, even painting the alluring cover image for *Preludes*. “This album provides a doorway to a new enjoyment of Bach's music, through **Adam's surprising rearrangements and the trio's beautiful playing**,” the singer says. “The music is dynamic, innovative and moving.”

Birnbaum drew the material for *Preludes* from the first half of *The Well-Tempered Clavier*, Bach's iconic, ever-inspiring collection of two books of preludes and fugues in all 24 major and minor keys. Bach compiled Book I of the *WTC* in 1722, at age 37. This music has been a signal influence on composers from Mozart to Shostakovich and beyond; the pieces of the *WTC* have been performed not only by keyboardists of every era but also by players, and groups of players, on every sort of instrument and in countless styles, all over the world. (Such notable jazzers as John Lewis, Uri Caine, Brad Mehldau and Dan Tepfer are among those who have recast Bach in their own, very different ways, putting Birnbaum in great company.) To a rare degree, Bach's compositions have proved to be virtually universal music. Birnbaum's new album helps underscore that fact with **interpretations that are lyrical, energized, delightful**.

“I performed a first draft of my Bach arrangements at the Chelsea Music Festival in 2018, and the audience’s response was so encouraging that it gave me the impetus to make this studio recording,” Birnbaum explains. “I aimed for the arrangements to be true to what Bach wrote while still allowing for some twists of my own.” Most Baroque musicians, particularly keyboardists, were expected to be able to improvise, with Bach prime among them; and the way players of that period improvised wasn’t so dissimilar to the method for jazz artists. **“When choosing which of Bach’s preludes to arrange, I picked those pieces that felt like they had originated as improvised ideas, with Bach at the keyboard,” Birnbaum says.** “The treatment I gave them varies from prelude to prelude, but sometimes we’re improvising over the chord changes, which is essentially bebop. For a stretch of the C Minor Prelude arrangement, I’m playing Bach’s left-hand part as originally written while improvising a counter-melody with my right hand. Then, for the D Major Prelude, I’m customizing the melody, although it has the same shape as that of the original.”

For his rhythm-section partners, Birnbaum chose players who prize subtlety. “I toured with Matt in Darcy James Argue’s ensemble, and I learned that he’s the sort of bassist who is really going to lay it down for you and never overplay. **Matt understands that the bassline is such an essential element in Baroque music,** and he has the sensitivity to know when to stick with the original line and when to add to it. As for the drums, they need to have real finesse on a record like this, and **I knew that sort of chamber-like playing was totally Keita’s bag.** As a percussionist, he reacts to what’s going on in a very conversational, colorful way that opens up possibilities.”

For Birnbaum, *Preludes* is about “putting a fresh spin on the familiar,” he says. “But, again, **the goal was to keep true to the spirit of Bach’s compositions, even as we improvise.** His music has meant so much to me, for as long as I can remember. My parents had classical records when I was growing up, and I would play them from a very young age. I also had a teacher in Boston, from age 9 until my late teens, and his bible was *The Well-Tempered Clavier*. He was right in that Bach is bedrock. Anyway, I wore out a Glenn Gould recording of Bach’s *Goldberg Variations*, like so many people — his rhythmic groove was so strong and infectious. More recently, I’ve come to adore Angela Hewitt’s more lyrical approach, which is pure poetry. I aimed to do a little bit of both on my album, **blending the groove and the song.** These arrangements should appeal as much to fans of straight-ahead jazz as they do listeners at chamber music festivals. To that end, I hope people hear my record as **a statement of universalities and reinvention,** underscoring the eternal truths of music but in a way that we think and feel today.”

More About Adam Birnbaum

Piano sage Kenny Barron has extolled Adam Birnbaum’s “rare combination of flawless technique, keen intuition, superb touch and an adventurous spirit.” Born in 1979 and raised in Boston, Birnbaum has made a mark on the New York jazz scene as both a leader and a sideman. He has released five albums as a leader in Japan and the U.S. His first, *Ballade Pour*

Adeline (Pony Canyon), received a Gold Disk award from *Swing Journal* as one of the top albums of 2006. *Travels* — the pianist's debut release in the States, released in 2009 via the house label of New York club Smalls — received enthusiastic reviews from *All Music Guide*, *All About Jazz* and *JazzTimes*. Birnbaum's 2015 release, *Three of a Mind* (Daedalus Records), featured the pianist alongside bassist Doug Weiss and drummer Al Foster; the album earned an Editor's Pick and a four-star review in *DownBeat* magazine.

Birnbaum's musicality and versatility have made him a first call contributor to a wide variety of ensembles, including bands led by artists from Al Foster and Cécile McLorin Salvant to Regina Carter and Greg Osby, as well as Jazz at Lincoln Center with Wynton Marsalis, the Vanguard Jazz Orchestra and Darcy James Argue's Secret Society. Birnbaum has appeared as a sideman on more than 25 albums. Along with playing regularly at such top New York venues as the Village Vanguard, Birdland, Blue Note, Jazz Standard and Dizzy's Club Coca-Cola, Birnbaum has performed on stages across the country and around the world: from the Kennedy Center, Gilmore International Keyboard Festival and Spoleto Festival to the Montreal Jazz Festival, Red Sea Jazz Festival and Capetown Jazz Festival. He has also been recognized as a composer and arranger, with *All Music Guide* declaring: "Birnbaum's compositions prove immediately infectious, each with a hook that draws the listener along for the ride." In 2009, he premiered *Dream Songs*, his trio suite based on poetry by John Berryman; the work was commissioned by Chamber Music America. For each year since 2012, Birnbaum has worked with New York's Chelsea Music Festival to arrange Bach, Debussy, Beethoven, Schumann and more for his own jazz trio, plus strings and other guest musicians.

Studying at the New England Conservatory of Music before moving to New York City in 2001, Birnbaum was one of two pianists selected for the Juilliard School's inaugural jazz studies program. He earned a graduate Artist's Diploma from Juilliard in 2003. The next year, he won the American Jazz Piano Competition and became the American Pianists Association's Cole Porter Fellow in Jazz. Also in 2004, he became the first jazz pianist to give a recital in the prestigious Gilmore Rising Stars Recital Series. He won the first "special mention" prize at the Martial Solal Jazz Piano Competition in Paris, in 2006. He has toured West Africa and Asia sponsored by Jazz at Lincoln Center and the U.S. State Department. A Steinway Artist, Birnbaum is also an assistant professor of jazz at the State University of New York's Purchase College.

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ChelseaMusicFestival.org

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