

## Great Lakes Chamber Music Festival celebrates genius, relevance of Bach

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Pianist and festival artistic director James Tocco and cellist and artistic director designate Paul Watkins will perform together at the 2014 Great Lakes Chamber Music Festival. / Michelle Andonian

### 2014 Great Lakes Chamber Music Festival

Saturday through June 29

Most concerts at Seligman Performing Arts Center (Beverly Hills) and Temple Beth El, St. Hugo's of the Hills and Kirk in the Hills (all in Bloomfield Hills). Other venues in Detroit, Grosse Pointe, Ann Arbor, Brighton and Windsor.

Subscriptions: \$90-\$170, single tickets \$35-\$40, \$10 student

248-559-2097

[www.greatlakeschambermusic.org](http://www.greatlakeschambermusic.org)

It is not easy to articulate the unique and sweeping genius of Johann Sebastian Bach — after all, how do you describe the awesome vastness of the universe? But Frederic Chiu, a pianist of keen intelligence and a key player at the upcoming Great Lakes Chamber Music Festival, had a go at it during a recent interview.

“For me the most compelling thing about Bach is that feeling of being out of time and out of space,” he said. “The music stands alone, and it’s self-sufficient. It achieves that through the manipulation of abstract materials. It’s not about Bach himself but about taking a group of notes and what can happen. He stretches it. He inverts it. He combines it with different layers, and it’s this multidimensional aspect that Bach took to such an incredible level. He puts you in multiple places at once — which should be impossible. You can see everything happening at once. It’s a God-like place of being omniscient.”

Metro Detroiters will have ample opportunity to mediate on the power, influence and ever-modern relevance of Bach during the Great Lakes festival opening Saturday. The 2014 edition, which carries the subtitle “In the Shadow of Bach,” unfolds in more than 20 concerts over two weeks filled not only with a healthy dose of masterpieces by Bach but also reflections, refractions, homages and even parodies by composers through the centuries. These include pieces by Beethoven, Brahms, Ferruccio Busoni and contemporary voices Joel Hoffman and Kurt Sturzenegger, as well as the inimitable P.D.Q. Bach, whose alter-ego, Peter Schickele, is this year’s festival composer-in-residence.

Bach was proficient in a dizzying array of genres, styles and forms, and the festival will touch on many of them. Among the works that artistic director James Tocco has programmed are several “Brandenburg Concertos” for chamber orchestra, various solo keyboard works, a vocal cantata and the monumental and mysterious “The Art of the Fugue,” whose instrumentation wasn’t specified by Bach. (Roberta Gary will play it on organ.) Tocco also has selected several arrangements, including Dmitry Sitkovetsky’s wild string trio version of Bach’s “Goldberg Variations.” The docket also includes P.D.Q. Bach’s “Goldbrick Variations.” On another front, Chiu will present the premiere of a recital he calls a “Classical Smackdown” pitting Bach against Philip Glass.

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“Bach really is the father of the Western classical music tradition,” said Tocco. “He was, as Beethoven said, the father of harmony, but everything sort of starts and is grounded with Bach.”

### **A prolific producer**

Bach was born in 1685 into a prodigiously musical family in the German town of Eisenach. He made his living primarily as a church organist, an industrious court composer and as a “kapellmeister” (music director) in a series of positions in Germany. He wrote timeless music as easily as other composers wrote their names, turning out a masterpiece by midnight for decades. A devout Lutheran, he wrote hundreds of cantatas for Sunday services, and his total catalog numbers more than 1,000 sacred and secular works.

Bach assimilated all that came before him and influenced all that came after in terms of harmony, rhythm, melodic invention, text setting and counterpoint. He didn't so much invent new forms and techniques as push the old ones to such a pinnacle that, as with Shakespeare, his approach to the fundamentals became everyone's first principles. Bach was essentially a conservative, working in baroque forms already considered old-fashioned at the time of his death. There's a lesson there for today's composers, said Hoffman, who teaches at the College-Conservatory of Music in Cincinnati.

“Bach was someone who thought of his work as service,” said Hoffman. “There was humility in his approach to being an artist. His voice is unique, but he's not trying to hit you over the head with it. His music sounds like it's flowing from somewhere else. We place such a premium on being original, but Bach wasn't trying to be the latest thing. He just tried to write honest music that felt true from beginning to end.”

If there is a single key to appreciating Bach, it's the idea of counterpoint — the combination of two or more overlapping melodic lines. Two, three and even four voices create web-like densities and textures and define harmonic structure. Each melody retains its own integrity, but together they create a whole greater than the sum of the parts. Counterpoint comes in various forms, among them the “fugue” and “canon.” Each has its own rules, but all involve varying degrees of imitation. (“Row, Row, Row Your Boat,” for example, is a canon.)

Sound complicated? You bet it is. But Bach made it sound as natural as breathing. His craft level was off-the-charts, but so was his imagination. “There's an integrity of the voices in Bach,” said Schickele. “Even the inner parts are melodic.”

Bach also pushed the limits of virtuosity. Hundreds of years later his music is *still* hard to play, especially works like the “Solo Cello Suites” and the “Sonatas and Partitas for Solo Violin,” where Bach magically gives the illusion of more than one line of music. Pianists pull their hair out trying to untangle the crisscrossing lines in a work like “The Well-Tempered Clavier” and decide which melody to bring to the foreground at any particular point.

But the biggest challenges have to do with liberating the emotional expression embedded in the music. Some performers make Bach sound as dry as academic exercises; others fall into mannered emoting that

destroys the composer's delicate balance of head and heart. Chiu said the trick is that the music is not about how Bach *feels* in the way that 19th and early 20th Century music by romantics like Chopin, Schumann, Wagner, Tchaikovsky and Mahler is about channeling the composer's inner emotional state.

"Bach is about bringing to the listener the sense of the multidimensional aspect of life," said Chiu.

Tocco said there are moods represented in Bach's scores — joy, sorrow, anger, anguish, elation — but the meaning is not as specific as a detailed picture. "The emotional elements are present in Bach, but they must not overwhelm the structural elements," said Tocco.

"We have it on record that Bach always insisted on the vocal quality of the music he played or taught, and that the effect — the emotional impact — was of paramount importance. When I play Bach's 'Italian Concerto' or the 'First Partita' I don't feel as if I'm just building a house; I feel as if I'm making a statement about the human condition."