

BACH GOLDBERG VARIATIONS



ROBERT COSTIN
ORGAN

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Johann Sebastian Bach (1685-1750)

1	ARIA	4'20
2	VARIATIO 1 (a 1 Clav.)	2'17
3	VARIATIO 2 (a 1 Clav.)	1'51
4	VARIATIO 3 - CANONE ALL'UNISONO (a 1 Clav.)	2'23
5	VARIATIO 4 (a 1 Clav.)	1'15
6	VARIATIO 5 (a 1 o vero 2 Clav.)	1'54
7	VARIATIO 6 - CANONE ALLA SECONDA (a 1 Clav.)	1'56
8	VARIATIO 7 - AL TEMPO DI GIGA (a 1 o vero 2 Clav.)	2'08
9	VARIATIO 8 (a 2 Clav.)	2'10
10	VARIATIO 9 - CANONE ALLA TERZA (a 1 Clav.)	2'21
11	VARIATIO 10 - FUGHETTA (a 1 Clav.)	1'44
12	VARIATIO 11 (a 2 Clav.)	2'27
13	VARIATIO 12 - CANONE ALLA QUARTA	2'41
14	VARIATIO 13 (a 2 Clav.)	2'43
15	VARIATIO 14 (a 2 Clav.)	2'23
16	VARIATIO 15 - ANDANTE - CANONE ALLA QUINTA (a 1 Clav.)	2'45

17	VARIATIO 16 - OUVERTURE (a 1 Clav.)	3'14
18	VARIATIO 17 (a 2 Clav.)	2'29
19	VARIATIO 18 - CANONE ALLA SESTA (a 1 Clav.)	1'43
20	VARIATIO 19 (a 1 Clav.)	1'29
21	VARIATIO 20 (a 2 Clav.)	2'22
22	VARIATIO 21 - CANONE ALLA SETTIMA	3'11
23	VARIATIO 22 - ALLA BREVE (a 1 Clav.)	1'37
24	VARIATIO 23 (a 2 Clav.)	2'25
25	VARIATIO 24 - CANONE ALL'OTTAVA (a 1 Clav.)	2'56
26	VARIATIO 25 - ADAGIO (a 2 Clav.)	4'20
27	VARIATIO 26 (a 2 Clav.)	2'26
28	VARIATIO 27 - CANONE ALLA NONA (a 2 Clav.)	2'10
29	VARIATIO 28 (a 2 Clav.)	2'51
30	VARIATIO 29 (a 1 o vero 2 Clav.)	2'29
31	VARIATIO 30 - QUODLIBET (a 1 Clav.)	2'08
32	ARIA DA CAPO	2'25

77'39

ROBERT COSTIN
The Organ of Pembroke College, Cambridge



GOLDBERG VARIATIONS

For all their lyricism and tragic passion and exuberance, the Aria and Variations seem of a divine substance entirely refined and purified of anything personal or ignoble, so that in playing them one seems only the unworthy mouthpiece of a higher voice.

Ralph Kirkpatrick

The sheer scope and ambition of the *Goldberg Variations*, combined with their technical ingenuities and virtuosity, are unique in the keyboard repertoire up to Beethoven's *Diabelli Variations*. It is a work that thrives on diverse interpretations, posing irresistible musical, spiritual and physical challenges to performers on a multiplicity of instruments. In using the unique qualities of the organ for this interpretation, I hope to shed new light on this unassailable peak of Bach's output. Given Bach's mastery of the instrument, arguably he would have been much less surprised to hear it on an organ than on a modern piano.

The fourth part of Bach's *Klavierübung* has been known since the nineteenth century as the *Goldberg Variations*. A translation of the title page of the first edition (1741) reads as follows:

Keyboard practice, consisting of an aria with diverse variations for harpsichord with two manuals. Composed for connoisseurs, for the refreshment of their spirits, by Johann Sebastian Bach, composer for the royal court of Poland and the Electoral court of Saxony, Kapellmeister and Director of Choral Music in Leipzig.

The period of composition is unknown because an original manuscript does not survive, but it is thought to have been only shortly before its publication. At least 100 copies were printed, so it was circulating quite widely, but there is no specific record of any public performances of the work until the late nineteenth century.

The famous story recounted by Bach's first biographer Johann Nikolaus Forkel, and no doubt passed on by Forkel's sons, describes the *Goldberg Variations* as being composed in response to a commission by the Russian envoy to the Dresden court, Imperial Count

Hermann Carl von Keyserlingk, for his resident harpsichordist Johann Gottlieb Goldberg. The latter was a student of Bach's son Wilhelm Friedemann in Dresden, but he also took lessons with Bach senior in Leipzig. Forkel writes:

[The insomniac Keyserlingk] once said to Bach that he should like to have some clavier pieces for his Goldberg, which should be of such a soft and somewhat lively character that he might be a little cheered up by them in his sleepless nights. Bach thought he could best fulfil this wish by variations, which, on account of the constant sameness of the fundamental harmony, he had hitherto considered as an ungrateful task. But as at this time all his works were models of art, these variations also became such under his hand ... Bach was, perhaps, never so well rewarded for any work as for this: the Count made him a present of a golden goblet, filled with a hundred Louis d'or. But their worth as a work of art would not have been paid if the present had been a thousand times as great.

A wonderful story, but questionable. For a start, Goldberg would have been only twelve or thirteen at the time, and it was the custom for an aristocratic patron to receive an official dedication. However, there could be some truth in the tale since Bach stayed in Keyserlingk's house in Dresden in November 1741, so he may well have presented the Count with a copy of the published work bearing an autograph dedication. Perhaps the talented Goldberg played a selection of variations from such a copy?

The Bach scholar Christoph Wolff believes the origin of the work goes back to an idea Bach took from Handel. In 1733, Handel published an aria with 62 variations that are based on the same aria bass, but it is only eight bars long. Maybe Bach was impressed by the idea to write many variations on such a promising ground bass but considered it to be too short for him. So instead of eight bars, he composed 32. Bach turned his set of 30 variations into a deeper and considerably more sophisticated showpiece than Handel's, and there may even have been an element of competition on Bach's part.

The 30 variations each possess their own individual character, using an extensive range of different types of composition. Each one follows the *Aria's* harmonic structure, being in either 32 or 16 bars, depending on the time signature. A copy of just the *Aria* survives in

the hand of Anna Magdalena Bach, Johann Sebastian's second wife. She apparently wanted to play the piece, and it was probably not copied by her until the late 1730s.

The variations are divided into ten groups of three in a spiral-like structure, which (except for 1 to 3 and 28 to 30) can each be grouped as character piece, study (or virtuoso piece), and canon. Each third variation up to number 27 is a canon, all increasing progressively in interval from the unison to the ninth. The set is rounded off with a reprise of the *Aria*, producing an overall 32 movements matching the 32-bar structure of the *Aria* and most of the variations.

The **Aria** is a lyrical and tender *sarabande*, a stately dance in triple time emphasising the second beat of the bar. The textures get busier towards the end, creating a sense of anticipation. In answer to this expectation, **Variatio 1** is a joyous two-part invention that acts as a festive gateway into the work, possessing the rhythmic vitality of a *polonaise*. Bach introduces hand-crossing for the first time, a technical feature of which he makes considerable use as the work proceeds and which recalls the keyboard works of Domenico Scarlatti. The trio-sonata texture of **Variatio 2** possesses two imitative voices in the right hand plus a walking bass. I view it as a lyrical, intimate *andante* movement, foreshadowing the canons in the contrapuntal weavings in the second half. **Variatio 3** is the first of the nine canons, a lively two-part example at the unison with an independent bass. The two voices begin on the same note at a bar's distance resulting in the parts being extremely close, so the player is challenged to articulate the contrapuntal lines clearly.

Variatio 4 has the character of a *passepied*, a fast French courtly dance in compound time. Bach's subtle use of syncopation, creating unexpected accents, is particularly appealing. I use the 16' pedal stop to underline the solidity of the four-part texture. Next is the first of the virtuoso movements, **Variatio 5**, a two-part *toccata*-like texture, for one or two keyboards (two are used in this recording) and involving considerable use of hand-crossing. As in other similar variations, the organ allows for much subtlety of articulation and phrasing to help shape the individual lines. The joyous spirit of the variation is infectious. Objectively, **Variatio 6** is a two-part canon at the interval of a second with an independent bass. However, to me it also possesses a nostalgic tenderness and expressivity, which I have reinforced on this recording by the use of a tremulant. The gentle chromatic twists, suspensions and sequences are totally beguiling.

Marked *al tempo di giga*, the *scherzo*-like **Variatio 7** has an engaging charm, and I have used the Vox Humana reed stop in the left hand to highlight its rustic character. **Variatio 8** is the second of the virtuoso studies, demanding considerable dexterity from the performer. The treacherous hand-crossing is taken to a new level, making full use of the two keyboards stipulated. The next movement, **Variatio 9**, is a gentle two-part canon at the consonant third that shares the lyrical quality of *Variatio 2*, lending the movement a serene harmonic stability.

For **Variatio 10**, Bach changes the first four bars of the *Aria's* bass line into a puckish subject for this energetic four-part *fughetta*. **Variatio 11** is a flowing two-part study in a rather unusual 12/16 time, with Bach again requesting the use of two keyboards, no doubt to allow freedom of hand-crossing and phrasing. The triple-time canon of **Variatio 12** is at the interval of the fourth but in contrary motion, so in other words the answer is the mirror of the subject. I play it at an *allegretto* pace to retain the rhythmic energy in the long contrapuntal lines.

Variatio 13 is a graceful ornamented aria for soprano with two-part accompaniment. The exquisite embellishment of the solo line reminds me of some of Bach's organ chorale preludes and cantata movements. Only he could have composed this. In extreme contrast, **Variatio 14** projects high spirits and *joie de vivre*. The 'cat and mouse' scurrying between the parts lends the piece great exuberance and energy right through to the cadences. After 14 variations in a major key, Bach turns to the minor mode to mark the halfway point of the work at **Variatio 15**. A canon at the fifth and marked *andante*, it has an austere, melancholy mood that is alleviated only by a magical move to E flat major in the second half. At the end the texture seems to evaporate, with the right hand rising to a high D and stopping.

Bach starts the second half with a majestic French overture for **Variatio 16**, echoing those in his *Orchestral Suites*. The repeat of the dotted opening section is followed by a triple time fugal section. **Variatio 17** is a *moto perpetuo* study that makes much use of thirds, sixths and scurrying semiquaver passages. I use two flutes to create lightness in the weaving textures. The canon at the sixth of **Variatio 18** reminds me of some of the earlier lyrical variations. If one were looking for a musical example of Bach's balance of intellect and expressivity then this would be an ideal choice.

I play **Variatio 19** as a calm *minuet* rather than as anything more energetic as some have suggested, not least so the flowing semiquavers do not get blurred. I have used a piquant combination of stops to underline the pastoral character of the piece. Bach steps up the virtuosic demands in **Variatio 20**, with some fearsome hand-crossing and intricate rising and falling runs. **Variatio 21** returns to the minor mode for a highly expressive canon at the seventh. I keep the tempo flowing so as not to lose momentum before the *adagio* **Variatio 25**; however there is still some wonderful chromatic counterpoint to savour.

Variatio 22 is the second fugal movement and, like its counterpart *Variatio 10*, is six variations away from the centre. It is marked *alla breve* and develops in a confident, logical manner. **Variatio 23** is another virtuoso study, based on the initial idea of descending bell-like scales. The excitement of the writing is infectious and one gets completely caught up in the witty imitative dialogues. Cast as a two-part canon at the interval of an octave, **Variatio 24** reminds me of the the organ Prelude from BWV 547, with its lilting pastoral rhythms. The long themes are projected well by using the sustaining qualities of the organ.

Variatio 25 is the third and final minor key variation and is particularly unusual and profound, featuring a proliferation of chromatic decorations that almost threaten its tonal stability. It has the resonance of a lost Passion aria, such is its depth and poignancy. Words fail to describe such a piece. After this pathos and gravity, **Variatio 26** launches a sequence of variations that can be interpreted as the finale of the work. The simultaneous use of two different time signatures $3/4$ (in the form of a *sarabande* again) and $18/16$ provides the performer with some exhilarating rhythmical challenges. **Variatio 27**, the final canon (at the ninth) does away with the bass and is completely in two-part counterpoint. Again, the performer can revel in the imitative voicing, the two voices playing catch-up.

Bach marks the virtuosic climax of the set by composing two successive studies, **Variatio 28** and *Variatio 29*. The predominant feature of this first remarkable piece is the use of extended written-out trills. Bach seems to foreshadowing the nineteenth century, such as the use of trills in Beethoven's last two piano sonatas. The battering, alternating chords and *toccata*-like triplets of **Variatio 29** create a huge sense of climax and excitement. In the running passagework one can hear the influence of the *stylus phantasticus* or *fantasia* style. **Variatio 30** is a *Quodlibet*, a distinctive choice of piece and constructed from fragments from two well-known German songs, *Ich bin so lang nicht bei dir gewest* (I have been so long away from you) and *Kraut und Rüben haben mich vertrieben* (Cabbage and beets have driven

me away), and used instead of the canon at the tenth as might have been expected. I use the full organ for the only time to highlight the climactic end of the journey. The return of the **Aria** not only seems inevitable and poignant but also cathartic. Are we really back at the beginning or at the start of another voyage...?

The *Goldberg Variations* marked a defining point in Bach's career, and some commentators have speculated that this was precipitated by personal and professional tribulations, including the disgrace and death of his son Johann Gottfried Bernhard and ongoing disagreements with his employers, the Leipzig Town Council. Recent scholarship shows that by the late 1730s the composer stopped regularly writing new cantatas and mostly resigned himself to performances of works by other composers. So, in his last decade he turned inward and wrote his finest music in genres that had mostly gone out of fashion or were musically and intellectually far above the heads of his contemporaries. These intensely concentrated compositions would see him focus entirely on two of the most distinctive features of the *Goldberg Variations* – the systematic use of canon and the building of a large structure from a single theme. In pursuing this, he would write three more masterpieces, *The Art of Fugue*, the *Chorale Variations on 'Vom Himmel hoch'* and *The Musical Offering*, some of the most visionary music ever composed. As the Bach scholar Malcolm Boyd writes:

They are above all works in which Bach, the composer-philosopher, is alone with the impenetrable mysteries of his art.

The Organ of Pembroke College, Cambridge

The Pembroke College organ contains pipes made by Bernard 'Father' Smith, who along with his rival Renuart Harris was one of the two most prominent organ builders of the late seventeenth century. Harris spent his early years in France, and Smith is believed to have worked in Holland before settling in England. Both brought with them innovations such as reeds, mixtures and the cornet stop, which they combined with indigenous characteristics, particularly wooden stopped diapasons (an English preference) and the lack of any pedalboard. The basic design of English organs became relatively standardized by 1700, and it remained so, with minor changes, for most of the subsequent century.

Charles Quarles built the original Pembroke instrument in 1708, and over the years it was enlarged and rebuilt many times, the casework being altered to accommodate it. Most recently, in 1980 N.P. Mander Ltd reconstructed the organ in an attempt to recreate a late seventeenth- or early eighteenth-century English organ. The instrument that survives consists of three complete ranks of Father Smith pipes, brought in by Quarles, and his own casework with its original facade pipes. This, combined with the clear acoustics of Sir Christopher Wren's 1665 chapel, makes the organ suitable for a diverse range of repertoire.

Great Organ		Chaire Organ		Pedal Organ	
Open Diapason †	8	Stopped Diapason †	8	Bourdon	16
Stopped Diapason †	8	Principal †	4	Principal	8
Principal	4	Nason †	4	Fifteenth	8
Twelfth	2 2/3	Fifteenth	2	Mixture	IV
Recorder	2	Cymbal	III	Bass Shawm	16
Tierce	1 3/5	Vox Humana	8	Trumpet	8
Furniture	IV			Great to Pedal	
Cornet (c')	V			Chaire to Pedal	
Trumpet	8				
Chaire to Great					

Tremulant to manuals

Manuals AA, C-g'

Pedals C-f'

† Stops partly 1708 (may be earlier)

Produced by Paul Bryan for Chantry Sound and Robert Costin.
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