

Program Notes on Bach's *Goldberg Variations*
by Jory Vinikour

"For this model, we are indebted to Count Keyserlingk, formerly Russian envoy to the court of the Elector of Saxony, who frequently resided in Leipzig, and brought with him Goldberg, who has been mentioned above, to have him instructed by Bach in music. The Count was often sickly, and then had sleepless nights. At these times Goldberg, who lived in the house with him, had to pass the night in an adjoining room to play something to him when he could not sleep. The Count 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 fulfill 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. This is, indeed, the only model of the kind that he has left us. The Count thereafter called them nothing but his variations. He was never weary of hearing them; and for a long time, when the sleepless nights came, he used to say: "Dear Goldberg, do play me one of my variations." 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'ors*. But their worth as a work of art would not have been paid if the present had been a thousand times as great."

Or so relates Forkel in 1802, about the "Goldberg" variations. At the time of their publication, well over a half-century prior to Forkel's biography, they were published as follows:

Clavier 86bung
consisting of
an Aria
with Diverse Variations
for the Harpsichord
with Two Manuals
Composed for Music Lovers,
to Refresh their Spirits, by
Johann Sebastian Bach:
Royal Polish and Electoral Saxon Composer,
Capellmeister, and Director Chori Musici in Leipzig.

Nuremberg: Published by Balthasar Schmid.

What can be said about Johann Sebastian Bach's Aria and 30 variations that has not been said and resaid many times over? Forkel's charming, if at least partly spurious fairy-tale (based, we hope, like most fairy tales on an element of truth) of the insomniac Count and the child-prodigy has embedded itself forever in the collective musical imagination, rendering nearly impossible any attempt to disassociate them from the name of Johann Gottlieb (Theophil) Goldberg (1727-1756) whom we can not be absolutely certain ever played them. It is impossible that Bach wrote the variations merely as a sort of incidental music to the Count's sleepless nights, so that he might be entertained by the playing of the phenomenally gifted young (15 years old) keyboard virtuoso he employed. Rather, this work forming, as it does, the fourth book of the Clavier 86bung, they have something of a didactic purpose at their core — the Art of the Variation, much as the intent of the Italian Concerto and the Ouverture in the French style (from Vol II of the Clavier 86bung) was to distill and refine to the highest degrees these two national styles into Bach's own distinct language.

As regards the form of this altogether unique work, some brief reminders are useful: firstly, we are not dealing with standard theme-and-variation, such as is generally the case with Bach's predecessors (Byrd, Sweelinck and the other Virginalists) or his followers. The melody of the Aria (which, beautiful though it is, is not certain to be composed by Bach) will not be heard again for the duration of the work. Instead, it is the figured-bass (harmony) which is the subject of variation, lending the work as a whole more than a passing resemblance to the passacaglia (the first eight measures of the aria's bass-line only heighten this impression).

As to how and why the individual pieces are ordered, all manner of hypotheses have been proposed, mystical and mathematical, some convincing, others less so. If we are to content ourselves only with what is on the surface of the printed page, we immediately notice that each third variation is in the form of a canon. The first canon (thus Variatio 3) is at the unison, the second canon (Var. 6) is at the second, and so forth, until we reach the canon at the ninth (Var. 27). Each of these variations (excepting for the canon at the ninth) contains two canonic upper-voices and an accompanying lower voice (which itself always has a strong character). The canonic writing is relatively straightforward — only the canons at the fourth and at the fifth are in contrary motion. The 30th variation, to which Bach gives the unusual title of "Quodlibet" is a contrapuntal piece in four (and sometimes five) voices, bringing together two folk tunes: "I long have been away from you, Come here, come here, come here" and "turnips have driven me away, Had my mother cooked meat, I'd have chosen to stay." Bach's playful wit is in evidence here, as the first of these tunes refers to the aria's

absence, and in the second, the aria “speaks” in the first person, referring to the precedingly heard variations as cabbages and turnips.

If the Goldberg Variations are divisible by three, they are delineated at the halfway point, as well. The canon at the fifth (Var. 15, one of three variations in the minor mode) ends with the upper voice heard alone, ascending to the top note of the harpsichord (d''' in the case of most German instruments of Bach's time), leaving a question-mark hanging in the air. The vigorous French Overture which ensues affirmatively brings up the curtain on the second half of the work.

Throughout, Bach's ingenuity and invention are astounding. The pieces written for two keyboards (pi8Fces crois8Ees) are of the most complete originality, exploiting most of the known difficulties of the keyboard, which hardly prevents Bach from inventing others — the alternating thirds and sixths of No. 23, or the battery of chords interchanged between the hands in No. 29. Even the seemingly simple dance-like pieces conceal surprises, like the second variation, something of an *allemande gaie*, which upon examination, reveals two dialoguing, imitative upper voices accompanied by a free bass-line (followed, of course, by the first canon, which is also a piece containing two dialoguing imitative voices, etcC9).

This work appeals to us today on every possible level. Each individual movement, joyous, meditative, even tragic by turns expresses distinctly its own character, yet there is a thread that unifies these 32 movements into one story, similar in scope to a Mass or Passion (one writer even sees the magnificently tortured 25th Variation as a “crucifixion” followed by a “resurrection” — certainly, this variation is the dramatic culmination of the work, the tragic climax, followed by five rather cheerful movements). Though musical purists (of which I am one, more-or-less) and extremists (this I am not, I hope) remind us that this is a work most specifically written for a two-keyboard harpsichord, this has not in any way hindered marauding hordes of pianists, organists, orchestras, even accordionists, from appropriating the piece for their diverse instruments. Musicians will never tire of searching for their own meaning in the Variations and neither, we may well hope, will music-lovers.

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