

# Harpsichord & fortepiano

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# SOME THOUGHTS

## ON PLAYING THE GOLDBERG VARIATIONS, BWV 988

By Richard Leigh Harris

### Preliminaries

J.S. Bach's most famous variation set, *The Goldberg Variations* is usually viewed by harpsichordists as the summation of harpsichord writing in the Baroque era. Indeed, not until Beethoven's equally proportioned and demanding *Diabelli Variations* was there such a massive solo keyboard work that fused structural rigour and musical expressiveness with a sense of technical virtuosity that has probably seldom, if ever, been surpassed; particularly in regard to the successful fusing of these three elements. In terms of preparation, stamina and endurance, tackling Bach's daunting edifice must share certain similarities to undertaking an assault on a particularly perilous mountain. All the necessary skills need to be well in place before the summit can (may?) be conquered. I would recommend at the very least, a year or more of practice and contemplation before the actual performance(s).

Notice that my title uses the word "playing" rather than "performing". A seemingly small difference, but one, nonetheless, that presupposes (or at least, doesn't preclude) the other. Or does it? There must exist a certain number of players, after all, who have played – i.e. *prepared* – this work in private, rather than having actually *performed* it in public. There is certainly a difference between these two states which impinges on and affects matters such as tempi, fermatas and the timing of gaps between the variations, for example. The former state of preparation usually leads to the latter state of performance, but not necessarily, given the sheer scope and formidability of the ascent in question.

I don't propose to recount, yet again, the background to the composition of this piece. (See Peter Williams' authoritative and excellent companion. Whatever the truths or uncertainties *vis a vis* the Count's insomnia and the supposed virtuosity of the young Goldberg, this cycle of variations stands on its own, regardless of circumstantial

background conjecture. More important, surely, are questions with regard to how we might approach the musical text in clarifying Bach's intentions. These intentions are not necessarily obscure *per se*, but there will always remain a certain level of conjecture and dissent upon certain issues of performance (articulation, whether to observe all the repeats, etc.)

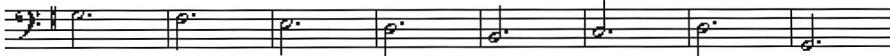
Not for nothing can the challenge of the Goldbergs be likened to the ascent of Mount Everest; for harpsichordists will find nothing so sustained and unremittingly demanding of all their abilities in the entire Baroque repertoire as this particular work. It and it alone, forms the summa of 18th-century keyboard writing.

Some of these practical issues are bound to remain within the choices and preferences of the individual performer. They might even change our perceptions and notions of how we might play this whole cycle, both at the local micro level (individual variations) as well as how we respond to the larger macro structure of the entire work.

### Structure

Here we encounter Bach in all his skill and glory, unfolding a sequence of variations which are multi or hyper structural; interlocking cycles which collide and intersect, yet work together in harmony at various rates simultaneously—the smaller cogs and mechanisms within the larger machine.

Ex. 1



The Aria, a beautifully ornamented sarabande, sets the template for the ensuing 30 variations and the *da capo* of the aria. However diverse the surface texture and astonishing variety of counterpoint encountered over this set of variations, the whole cycle is intrinsically linked and unified by the concept and property of binary, of "twoness" – most immediately, in the fact that the work was written specifically for a *two-manual harpsichord* and, thus, extending considerably the amount and type of different keyboard *figura* available. This sense of duality underpins the whole cycle and can be seen and heard throughout in the following ways:

- 1) Harmonically, by the establishment of an almost clichéd, but strong eight note ground bass theme (Ex.1) which symmetrically divides into two phrases of four notes each: See Ex. 1
- 2) Every variation is in binary form, each half of 16 bars being repeated: [: 16 :] [: 16 :] with the exception of Variations 3, 9, 21 and 30 (Canon at the Unison, Third and Seventh, respectively, plus the Quodlibet) which are [: 8 :] [: 8 :].

The exception in this respect is Variation 16 (Ouverture) whose bar structure is [: 16 :] [: 32 :]. The longer second half is accounted for by modulatory sequences which require an extension in the number of bars. At the normal cadence point (b.16), for example, the music is in A Minor and is obviously not ready to establish the home tonic of G.

- 3) The 32 variations divide naturally into two halves of 16 movements each, the second part of which begins with a grand Ouverture in the French style. This Ouverture had to be placed at this point (the hinge of the entire edifice). The second (longer) half of this 16th variation, is in stylistic contrast to that of the first, being a flowing three-part Invention; an Italianate *Corrente* which serves to release the rhythmic tension accumulated in the first part of the Ouverture.

## D evelopment

The overall trajectory of the *Goldberg Variations* describes a progression, both in digital as well as textural terms, from relatively simple to complex (and back again,

with the final hearing of the Aria?). Just as the player is tiring, Bach pulls out all the stops, as it were, with Variations 26-29. There is beginning to emerge a huge sense of planning and imposed order, over which is laid a kaleidoscopic compendium of styles, dances and textures that appear fresh and spontaneous.

## M ajor and Minor

The Aria itself and the great majority of the variations are in the tonic major with three notable exceptions: Variation 15, Variation 21 and Variation 25. Structurally, these three variations in the tonic minor are strategically placed to provide maximum contrast to what has preceded and what will follow them. Perhaps as importantly, all three of them are highly wrought, seemingly emotive statements.

No.15, a canon at the fifth, employs sighing, predominately descending two note slurs (even though this is a canon by inversion) which Bach seemed to use as an *Affekt* eliciting melancholy. Whatever Bach's intentions, it is hard not to imagine a state of incompleteness that seems to emanate from the final bar of Variation 15 (Ex. 2) which can only be balanced and resolved by the opening and closing of the second part of the *Goldberg*s.

Ex. 2



Variation 21 (Canon at the Seventh) is similarly intense, largely due to the permeation of its chromatic *figura* stated in the bass part (bars1-2).

Of the variations in the minor mode, the most desolate and haunting of all is Variation 25. Whereas both Variations 15 and 21 are to be played on one manual, this long and anguished Aria (marked *Adagio* by Bach in his revisions) is expressly designed and designated to be

performed on two manuals. This is not only the longest single movement in the entire cycle, but is also one of the most draining for both player and listener alike. Seldom, even in some of the darker Cantatas and organ chorales (i.e. *O Mensch, bewein dein' Sünde gross*, BWV 622) can Bach have created a more bleakly beautiful and enigmatic, even purgatorial, vision. Structurally, this variation occurs three-quarters of the way through the cycle and is usually felt to be the emotional core of the *Goldberg Variations*.

This lengthy variation then has to be followed by the taxing demands of the 26th variation which is a hybrid of *toccata* (an unbroken line of flowing semiquavers in 18/16) and a more sedate *sarabande*. The former begins in the right hand in both halves, migrates to the left and, finally, in the last five bars achieves equality in both hands. Whichever hand it is placed in, this *toccata* line is in the foreground, whilst the *sarabande* chords provide a background. This variation is probably one of the hardest to play, not only because of its unceasing figuration, but also due to its emerging from such a sustained and intensely focused arioso.

**D**uple and Triple  
Of the 32 movements, 19 are in triple time, eight in duple or *alla breve* time (Vars. 2, 7, 10, 15, 16 [first half only], 18, 22 and 27) whilst the remainder are in (or perceived to be) quadruple: Vars. 3, 9, 11, 21 & 30. As we have seen, binary properties (both at a micro and macro level) seem to predominate in this epic work. Yet a secondary layer or level exists: the "tripleness" of the nine expanding canons, placed at every third piece. These canons themselves traverse an intervallic micro cycle, from the unison to the ninth.

If one adds up the numbers of the variations which are canons (3 + 6 + 9 + 12 + 15 + 18 + 21 + 24 + 27) the total equals 135; and 1+3+5=9. Nine muses? A mythological reference? Conjecture? Maybe, but with J.S. Bach you can never be certain or sure of possible enigmas, hidden cyphers and meanings. After all, it is now well established that Bach was well aware that the letters of his surname added up to 14, (as Bach also wrote *Fourteen Canons*, BWV 1087 as an addendum to the variations) and that, turned into pitches (Bb, A, C, B natural), they formed a useful, tight *figura* for contrapuntal combination in *The Art of Fugue*, BWV 1080.

## Pulse and Tempo

Not unrelated to the issues outlined above, is the central one of pulse and tempo. Even beyond the first few tentative play throughs of both single variations and the work as a whole, it is bound to dawn on the player gradually that these facets are intertwined and, indeed, inseparable.

The danger with the *Goldbergs* is that, on turning the pages, so much of this music *looks as if it is meant to be played quickly*. This is erroneous, misleading and very detrimental to the effectiveness, digital security and audience's perception of this cycle as a logical and balanced whole. In part, this has been caused, I believe, by generations of misguided pianists (even harpsichordists!) turning these small miracles of ingenuity into virtual displays of quasi-virtuoso dexterity. One major consequence of this is that there is little room for *thoughtful* articulation and phrasing; qualities that are absolutely vital to any effective playing of J.S. Bach and, not least, for a clearer understanding of this work. Excessively fast or hurried *tempi* not only hinder and obscure contrapuntal clarity – they also negate the affects/effects of chromaticism and the expressiveness of the *cantabile* lines. Even in the *toccata*-like, two part invention type variations, the twists and turns of the lines should be savoured, rather than devoured.

Although there may be small deviations, as a player I am finding that there is a relatively small range of possible *tempi*. A fairly slow reading of the opening Aria at crotchet = 54 may, initially, seem slightly too measured; but this does allow for the ornamented right hand line to sing out above the left hand harmony without hurrying. This tempo is also beneficial to the articulation of demi-semi-quavers and ornaments in bars 4, 7, 20-21 *et al.*, as well as making the later left hand quavers move to a purpose in b. 27-32. Other variations that might benefit from this broad pulse are: nos. 7 & 27 (per dotted crotchet), 12 (a thick 3 part texture in the alto and tenor *tessiture*), no.25 (quaver = 54) and 30 (if you prefer a rather more solemn reading than is usually given).

Virtually all the other movements feel comfortable, yet flexible at crotchet = c.72. This also applies to those *alla breve* variations (10, 18 & 22) where the minim beat = 72. Within a few beats either way (66 - 80), I find that anything above crotchet = 80 starts to feel rushed and uncomfortable, both musically and technically.

Cross hand leaps and clarity of ornamentation are two practical reasons for the choice of these *tempi*; more importantly, they correspond to an overall conception of pulse and tempo that works for, and relates to, the whole cycle.

With a slow pulse, many of the variations retain a lyrical majesty that is evident in the initial Aria itself. And vitally, perhaps, this allows the player to breathe and "sing" the counterpoint, even in the most seemingly hectic variations. We may not be wind or brass players, but our playing (and our bodies) still need time to breathe.

### Observing Repeats

To repeat or not to repeat? Some, all or none at all? I once heard a performance of this work that omitted every single repeat. The result: a mere hasty play through that was squeezed into the first half of an overcrowded piano recital. Some players advocate omitting the repeats in the toccata style movements such as Vars.4, 8, 14, etc. That is a possibility; but this procedure only serves to put out of kilter the remaining variations. My feeling is that if Bach's proportions are respected and observed, then the longer variations such as 13 and 25 assume

their rightful place as structural "pillars" within the overall scheme. For the variations requiring one manual, there is obviously the option of changing manuals for the repeats.

When we return to the Aria, we are likely to be in a state of both mental and physical tiredness after a performance of some 75 to 80 minutes. It is understandably tempting to omit the repeats from this second and final playing of the Aria. And yet this sarabande provides a framing device for the entire work. Logically, (and necessarily?) we ought not to cheat, but retain that sense of symmetry by observing those last repeats.

*Clavierubung IV, The Goldberg Variations*, is, perhaps, Bach's *summa*. In this fourth "gospel" we encounter an encyclopedic array of counterpoint and keyboard figuration whose richness and profundity probably remains unsurpassed. Their legacy remains invigorating, humbling and thought-provoking in equal measure.

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