

Johann Sebastian Bach

Joh. Seb. Bach

GOLDBERG VARIATIONS

Malcolm Archer
HARPSICHORD

TRACKLIST

Goldberg Variations 'Aria mit verschiedenen Veränderungen' BWV988

1	Aria	4:36	17	Variation 16 <i>Ouverture. a 1 Clav.</i>	3:09
2	Variation 1 <i>a 1 Clav.</i>	2:24	18	Variation 17 <i>a 2 Clav.</i>	1:23
3	Variation 2 <i>a 1 Clav.</i>	1:49	19	Variation 18 <i>Canone alla Sesta. a 1 Clav.</i>	1:39
4	Variation 3 <i>Canone all'Unisono. a 1 Clav.</i>	2:28	20	Variation 19 <i>a 1 Clav.</i>	1:35
5	Variation 4 <i>a 1 Clav.</i>	1:17	21	Variation 20 <i>a 2 Clav.</i>	1:25
6	Variation 5 <i>a 1 ô vero 2 Clav.</i>	2:05	22	Variation 21 <i>Canone alla Settima</i>	1:46
7	Variation 6 <i>Canone alla Seconda. a 1 Clav.</i>	1:44	23	Variation 22 <i>a 1 Clav. alla breve.</i>	1:36
8	Variation 7 <i>a 1 ô vero 2 Clav. al tempo di Giga</i>	2:07	24	Variation 23 <i>a 2 Clav.</i>	1:29
9	Variation 8 <i>a 2 Clav.</i>	1:18	25	Variation 24 <i>Canone all'Ottava. a 1 Clav.</i>	1:50
10	Variation 9 <i>Canone alla Terza. a 1 Clav.</i>	2:43	26	Variation 25 <i>a 2 Clav. Adagio</i>	4:27
11	Variation 10 <i>Fughetta. a 1 Clav.</i>	1:57	27	Variation 26 <i>a 2 Clav.</i>	1:27
12	Variation 11 <i>a 2 Clav.</i>	1:23	28	Variation 27 <i>Canone alla Nona. a 2 Clav.</i>	1:12
13	Variation 12 <i>a 1 Clav. Canone alla Quarta in moto contrario.</i> . .	1:51	29	Variation 28 <i>a 2 Clav.</i>	1:38
14	Variation 13 <i>a 2 Clav.</i>	2:45	30	Variation 29 <i>a 1 ô vero 2 Clav.</i>	1:24
15	Variation 14 <i>a 2 Clav.</i>	1:24	31	Variation 30 <i>a 1 Clav. Quodlibet</i>	2:20
16	Variation 15 <i>Canone alla Quinta. a 1 Clav. Andante.</i>	2:33	32	Aria da Capo	2:32

Total running time. 1.05:20

PROGRAMME NOTE

Johann Sebastian Bach's 'Aria with diverse variations', composed in 1742, and whose title page proclaims that it was 'Composed for Music Lovers, to Refresh their Spirits', quickly acquired the musical icon status which it enjoys today. Bach's son, Carl Philipp Emanuel, exclaimed: 'What

diversity! What perfection of the hands and of expression this art requires!' Forkel, Bach's first biographer, thought that 'the quodlibet might alone render its author immortal, though it is far from being the best part'. It was one of the first pieces of Bach to be published outside Germany,





extracts appearing in Sir John Hawkins's History of Music in 1776. Count Kaiserling, who commissioned the piece, was not content with paying a mere fee, but instead presented Bach with a golden goblet filled with a hundred golden coins. J.G. Goldberg, a pupil of Bach, was resident harpsichord virtuoso in Kaiserling's household. It fell to him to play the Count's variations whenever requested – as a solace for insomnia, on occasions – hence the popular nickname for the work: the Goldberg Variations.

Bach had copied the Aria into the Clavierbüchlein he compiled for his second wife, Anna Magdalena, in 1725. In the style of a French Sarabande, it might not be Bach's own composition. In any event, after its first appearance we hear no more of the melody until the very end of the work. What it leaves behind, like an elusive scent, is its harmonic structure, which permeates all thirty variations. Variations on a set of chords or a bass-line – chaconnes and passacaglias – were common enough, as were sets

of decorations of a melody. This hybrid, which starts as the latter, and carries on as the former, allowed Bach unprecedented freedom of invention.

Such freedom needs structure. At a very basic level, the variations become faster and more difficult as the piece progresses. Then, Bach chooses to display his contrapuntal skills by making every third variation a two-part canon – a sophisticated 'round', using the same follow-on techniques as 'Three Blind Mice'. But, except in the very first canon, the second part doesn't start on the same note as the first. In Variation 6, the pursuing voice begins one note higher – 'Canone alla Seconda', writes Bach. Variation 9, two notes higher – 'alla Terza', and so on, until Variation 27 is a Canon at the Ninth. (This is the only canon without an independent bass part, which distinguishes it from the Canone alla Seconda, which would otherwise have been technically similar, as are Seconds and Ninths.) Malcolm Archer's performance emphasises the regular occurrence of the canons, diving the piece into little suites of three pieces, as it were, in his choice of tempi, and in the timing of the pauses between movements.

Variation 30 is the *quodlibet* ('as you

please') that Forkel so admired. Instead of inventing a line that would work as a Canon at the Tenth, Bach combines two comic songs (well-known to his audience at the time, which begs a number of aesthetic questions), still maintaining his Aria's harmonic structure: 'I've been away a long time', and 'Cabbage and turnips have driven me away'. Since the next thing we hear is the long-delayed return of the Aria to conclude the work, it has been suggested that Bach is hilariously telling us that all the musical riches of the piece so far have been mere cabbages and turnips. Ho ho! – and a further aesthetic contortion, if so. Perhaps we are fortunate not to know the folk-songs.

Most of the variations, like the Aria, are in G major, but Bach varies that elusive harmonic scent by putting Nos. 15, 21 & 25 into the minor key. Variation 15, the Canon at the Fifth, is further distinguished by being a canon by inversion – where the first voice rises, the second voice falls. (Variation 12 is a canon by inversion too, but Bach doesn't bother to mention this in the score.) Bach marks his half-way point by making Variation 16 what's called a 'French Overture', a big structure with a slow, jerky-rhythmed, first part, and a fast fugue to follow.

Every early mention of the Variations makes the point that they are for a harpsichord with two manuals. This was an important matter to Bach: for every item except the Aria and Nos. 12 & 21, he specifically mentions how many manuals the player may employ. Nos. 8, 11, 13, 14, 17, 20, 23, 25, 26 & 28 (a third of the total) are for two manuals. In Nos. 5, 7 & 29, the player can choose whether to use one or two manuals. The rest are to be played on one manual only.

One of the freedoms that two manuals deliver is the possibility of both hands playing the same note within two independent lines, without the lines losing their integrity. Pianos, which have only one keyboard, must resort to sleight of hand at such moments. The difficulties are not insuperable, as many famous piano recordings bear witness – indeed, Bach himself sometimes duplicates a note between parts on a single manual, though he takes care that the result is aurally clear. But the piano's necessary abandonment of one of Bach's structural strategies – the considered deployment of two manuals – prompts us to consider what else might be lost in a performance on the piano.

Pianists think very hard about the very first note of the tune, wanting to define the 'sublime' aspect of the piece in a single sound. It is this variety of sheer sound that is the piano's chief attribute. When people discuss playing Bach on the piano, they usually end up worrying about the sustaining pedal, a resource denied to the harpsichord. It would be more fruitful if they worried about the fact that at the piano, every single note can be given a different sound, simply by varying the finger-action. The harpsichord has a greater uniformity – I might say, integrity – of sound built in to the very way the instrument works. Pianists can get louder and softer by infinitesimal degrees. They can not only 'solo out' a single defined line (as can a harpsichord, by playing the tune on one manual and accompanying on the other), but also bring out a kaleidoscope of contrapuntal details, now in one voice, now in another. But as one contrapuntal detail is brought out, another must be suppressed. If Bach wished to favour one contrapuntal detail at the expense of another, he would emphasise it with an ornament: and an ornament is much more clearly bound into structure than is a kaleidoscope of changing touches.

The genius of the harpsichord, I would suggest, lies in the way that it clarifies structures. The genius of the piano lies in its infinite variety of sound. The two are not mutually exclusive, but the distinction may serve to explain why the piano is quintessentially the instrument of the Romantic period, while the harpsichord had to wait until the twentieth century (and 'neo-Classicism') for its revival. Romantic composers were interested in structure too, of course. Verdi's remark that the quality of a performance he'd just heard was 'so good that it

distracted me from the actual composition' reminds us that sheer sound is emphatically not all there is to music.

We have seen how firmly Bach created the framework of the Goldberg Variations. Only a two-manual harpsichord can do full justice to that mighty structure. Subsequently, performances on the piano may focus our ears on different beauties, closer to the surface; but let us learn to know the work from its structural depths.

In the last decade of his life (he died in 1750 at the age of 65), Bach was concerned



with publicly establishing his mastery of the contrapuntal genres of music he had espoused throughout his life – genres which were now conspicuously old-fashioned, as some unkind commentators mentioned rather too frequently for his peace of mind.

Bach had published harpsichord suites and other pieces under the title 'Keyboard Practice 1 & 2' in the 1730s. In 1739, 'Clavierübung 3' appeared, a much more schematised and thorough volume, in effect a musical catechism for the organ, topped and tailed by a Prelude and Fugue in the Trinitarian key of E flat (3 flats). After the Goldberg Variations he published a set of wholly canonic variations for organ, composed in 1747 as a sort of entry fee to a prestigious musical society in Leipzig, where he had been the borough organist at the St. Thomaskirche since 1723. Amongst his municipal duties was the composition of church cantatas, of which well over two hundred survive. They remained in manuscript long after Bach's death, but around 1747 Bach published organ versions of some of the best movements from the cantatas, which would otherwise have been buried in a

church cupboard. Next to be published was *The Musical Offering*, a musical souvenir of the improvising challenge set him in 1747 by Frederick the Great, keen flautist and employer of Carl Philipp Emanuel. The King's theme acts as a basis for contrapuntal *tours de force* culminating in a six-part fugue for keyboard: it was Sir Donald Tovey who pointed out that not the least brilliant aspect of its counterpoint was that it could actually be played by just two hands! And Bach's final publication – the engraving tantalisingly breaking off before the piece ends – was *The Art of Fugue*, in which he explored every fugal possibility of a theme of his own: a compendium of the technique with which his name is inseparably linked.

Of all this great summing-up of a life's work, Malcolm Archer and I found in conversation that, while great explorations of themes in the minor key, like *The Musical Offering* and *The Art of Fugue*, command our astonished respect, we both agree it is the Goldberg Variations that have the strongest hold on our affection.

David Owen Norris
November 2020

HARPSICHORD

Alan Gotto harpsichord

The instrument I have used for this recording is a harpsichord built in 2000 by the Norwich harpsichord maker, Alan Gotto. It is a copy of an instrument built by Christian Zell in 1728 and now in the Museum für Kunst und Gewerbe in Hamburg. Christian Zell was a pupil of the harpsichord maker Michael Mietke, a maker well known to J.S.Bach who admired his instruments, and may have owned one. The sound of the Zell is similar in quality to the Mietke instruments and very suitable

for Bach's keyboard works, with its dry, bell-like tone quality of the treble and strong, resonant bass.

I commissioned Alan Gotto to build me this instrument in 2000, the year of the 250th anniversary of Bach's death, and it was first played in public that year by Gustav Leonhardt in a public concert in Framlingham Parish Church, Suffolk. Alan's instruments are widely respected and have been used by many leading harpsichordists, including Gustav Leonhardt, Maggie Cole and Mahan Esfahani.

We made the recording in St. Paul's



Church, Staverton, Wiltshire, which became redundant in 2010, and which I have now converted into my home. It houses my collection of keyboard instruments, which includes four harpsichords, three pianos and two pipe organs. The church was built in 1826 on the site of a former medieval church. The sympathetic conversion was done with a view to the church being used for small scale concerts and the acoustic, space and quiet environment make it very suitable for recordings of instrumental music and solo singers.





BIOGRAPHY

Malcolm Archer

Malcolm Archer has a distinguished career in church music which has taken him to the posts of Organist and Director of Music at three English Cathedrals: Bristol, Wells and St Paul's, and for eleven years, Director of Chapel Music at Winchester College. He has for many years directed the choir for the Jean Langlais Festival in France.

As an organist and harpsichordist he is in frequent demand and has given solo concerts all over the world, including concert tours in the USA, Canada, New Zealand and in Europe. His performances with orchestra have included Poulenc's *Organ Concerto* and his *Concert Champêtre*, Saint-Saens' *Symphony No. 3*, Bach's *Brandenburg Concerto No. 5* and his keyboard concertos. He has an extensive concert repertoire and has recorded a wide variety of works, from J.S. Bach to Olivier Messiaen's *La Nativité du Seigneur*.

His work as a choral and orchestral conductor has taken him all over the

globe and he has conducted much of the major choral repertory. He has recorded with Warner Classics, Hyperion, Convivium, Regent and Lammas, and his disc of Herbert Howells Choral Music with Wells Cathedral Choir and Hyperion has received wide critical acclaim. His recordings are frequently played on BBC Radio 3 and Classic FM, including his Convivium recording of Mozart's Requiem with Winchester College Chapel Choir and the London Mozart Players. He has worked with some of the world's finest singers and amongst other fine singers has recorded with James Bowman CBE, Dame Emma Kirkby, Sarah Fox, Neil Jenkins and John Mark Ainsley.

Malcolm Archer's own choral works are performed in many countries and are respected for their approachable singability, interesting harmonic character and understanding of the singing voice. He is often commissioned to compose works for special occasions, which have included the 80th birthday service of HM the Queen in St. Paul's Cathedral, the dedication of the Churchill Memorial Gates at St. Paul's

Cathedral, the Corporation of the Sons of the Clergy, the 800th anniversary of Magna Carta, and the Southern Cathedrals Festival. He has over 250 published works and publishes with Oxford University Press, with whom he has co-edited two very successful books: 'Advent for Choirs' and 'Epiphany to All Saints for Choirs'. He was the editor of 'Carols Ancient and Modern'. (published by Hymns Ancient and Modern) He also composes instrumental works, and choral works with orchestra and recent works have included a one act opera *George and the Dragon* which has become very popular as a community project, *Vespers, Sinfonietta for Orchestra, Trumpet Concerto* and *Sonata for Cello and Piano*.

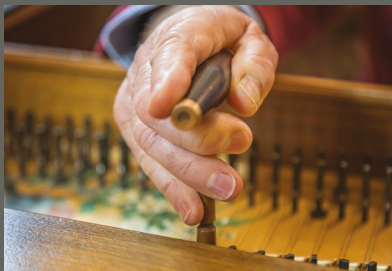
Malcolm Archer has worked extensively for the BBC, including directing choirs for TV and Radio broadcasts, and he has worked with the BBC Singers and the BBC Daily Service Singers. He has on several occasions been an adjudicator for BBC competitions including the Young Choristers of the Year, and Songs of Praise School Choirs' competition, where his co-adjudicators included Katherine Jenkins and Pete Waterman. He has also

been a judge for the liturgical section of the British Composer Awards.

He studied as an RCO scholar at the Royal College of Music and was Organ Scholar at Jesus College, Cambridge, where he read music. His organ teachers were Ralph Downes, Gillian Weir and Nicolas Kynaston, and he studied composition with Herbert Sumsion, Bernard Stevens and Alan Ridout.

He holds Fellowships from the Royal College of Organists, the Royal School of Church Music and the Guild of Church Musicians, the latter two awarded for his many years of service to the church as a choir trainer and composer.

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John Sebastian Bach

GOLDBERG VARIATIONS

Malcolm Archer
HARPSICHORD

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