

## PROGRAM NOTES

Sometime during the 1740s, Johann Sebastian Bach at Leipzig performed a church cantata for five voices and instruments for the Feast of St. John the Baptist. There was nothing unusual in this, as Bach had been composing and directing performances of church cantatas there since 1723. But those works normally called for four voices, and this one was not of his own composition. It was instead by Johann Gottlieb Goldberg, born at Danzig in 1727 and apparently a pupil of Bach, or possibly of Bach's son Wilhelm Friedemann.

This same Goldberg was a child prodigy at the keyboard (so was his sister Constantia Renata). In addition to two impressive vocal works, he is known to have composed keyboard music, including a set of twelve variations on a minuet, as well as a trio sonata that is good enough to have been mistakenly attributed to Bach. By the 1740s he was working for Bach's friend and patron Carl von Keyserlingk, Russian ambassador to Dresden in Saxony.

It is this Goldberg for whom Bach is often supposed to have composed the famous set of variations that go by his name. According to Bach's early biographer Forkel, Goldberg would play Bach's variations for Keyserlingk during the latter's sleepless nights. Presumably his doing so was not intended to put the diplomat to sleep, but rather to keep his mind occupied while he remained awake. For no attentive listener could have quickly grown tired of the endless variety and unparalleled inventiveness of Bach's composition.

Goldberg's name has become inextricably tied to Bach's set of variations. But their original title, as published in 1741, was simply "Aria With Thirty Variations For Two-Manual Harpsichord." The work was a continuation of Bach's modestly entitled "Keyboard Practice" (*Clavierübung*), a series of extraordinary publications for harpsichord and organ that he had been issuing since 1726.

Variations based on either new or existing themes were a favorite musical form in 18th-century Europe. Handel and Rameau, among others, had published sets of variations during the preceding decades. Bach is likely to have known these as well as earlier examples by such composers as Frescobaldi and Pachelbel (from whom he might have taken the term "aria" for the initial movement). But Bach seems to have had little interest in variations, having composed only a few examples early in his career. When, however, he returned to the form late in life, he evidently was determined to outdo every previous composer of such pieces.

Bach probably knew that certain predecessors had composed lengthy sets of variations as a way of demonstrating mastery of the compositional forms and performing techniques of their day. With the *Goldberg* set Bach did the same, creating a work which surpassed all previous variations in ingenuity, difficulty, and sheer length. By creating a transcendent set of variations for keyboard he provided a model for future composers, including Beethoven, Liszt, and, in our own day, Frederic Rzewski.

Like some earlier sets of variations, the *Goldbergs* are based not on a melodic theme but a bass line. The melody of the *Aria* with which the work opens and closes is never repeated within the thirty variations. The latter are instead built upon the underlying bass and the progression of chords or harmonies which it implies. Also common to the variations is the precise symmetry of the *Aria*, which comprises thirty-two measures. These are divided into two equal halves, both of which Bach asks to be repeated. This design recurs in all thirty-two movements (counting the variations as well as the restatement of the *Aria* at the end, as dictated by Bach).

Bach organizes the variations into groups of three. In general, every third variation is a duet in which the two hands play independent melodic lines. Bach directs the player to execute most of the duets on the two keyboards of a double-manual harpsichord, with one hand on each keyboard. This allows the two hands to cross continually over or under one another, producing a kaleidoscopic interweaving of the contrasting sounds of the two keyboards.

Each duet is followed by what can be called a "free" variation, an imaginative take on one of the conventional musical forms of the day. Thus *Variation 7* is a dance, *Variation 10* is a little fugue or fughetta, and so on. Each group of three concludes with a canon, the strictest of all contrapuntal forms. Here one melodic line exactly

repeats or imitates another, as in a round. But unlike a simple round, such as the children's song "Three Blind Mice," all but the last of the Goldberg canons also includes a bass line derived from that of the aria. And in each canon after the first, the imitating voice begins one note higher than in the previous one, producing what musicians call canons at the second, the third, and so forth. Thus the series of nine canons has a continually changing musical physiognomy.

This complicated plan might have produced something dry, of merely technical interest. But each canon and duet is one of a kind and virtually without precedent. Even the "free" variations, drawn from conventional types, sound very unlike their ostensive models. Although the idea of hand-crossing etudes could have been suggested by Domenico Scarlatti's *Essercizi*, published around 1738, no one had ever written keyboard duets that are at once so rigorous in design and so imaginative in execution. On the other hand, this was hardly Bach's first keyboard work inspired, in part, by considerations of "keyboard practice." His Inventions and many of his organ pieces also began with ideas suggested by keyboard fingering patterns, useful for exercising both the hand and the mind.

It is usually assumed that Bach wrote the *Goldbergs* shortly before their publication. But a set of variations composed in 1735 by his son Carl Philipp Emanuel seems to draw on them, suggesting a somewhat earlier date for the *Goldbergs*. Although Bach tended to write his vocal works quickly, he took more time on his instrumental compositions, returning to them repeatedly for revision. He might have worked on the *Goldbergs* during an extended period, gradually hitting upon their three-fold design, which emerges only after the first few variations. It has been suggested that he composed the canonic variations first, then inserted others around them—but one can imagine other scenarios.

None of the above conveys the special character of the *Goldberg Variations*, which are unique even within Bach's extraordinary output. Most Baroque music, including Bach's, follows what were, at the time, well-established stylistic guidelines. French dance rhythms, Italian ornamental formulas, and other conventional devices made most Baroque compositions easy for players—and listeners—to interpret, at least at a superficial level. Earlier composers, such as Froberger and Bach himself, had included readily recognizable dances in their variation sets. But in the *Goldbergs* even seemingly traditional variations, such as the *Fughetta no. 10* and the *Overture no. 16*, differ from regular examples of these genres, which, for example, hardly ever fall into two equal halves. Players who have toiled long hours to learn this work, or listeners who hear it regularly, may forget that even the initial *Aria* is unlike anything else. It resembles a French sarabande, yet its variegated style is not that of Couperin, Rameau, or even Bach himself in other sarabandes. It changes toward the end, becoming more flowing. But otherwise it is a singular combination of French Baroque gestures with ideas taken from the new *galant* style of Bach's younger contemporaries, such as Quantz and his own sons.

The three-fold cycling of the variations begins with *No. 3*, the first canon. This is preceded by *Variation 1*, a boisterous hand-crossing duet played on a single keyboard, and *Variation 2*, which imitates the type of trio sonata that Bach might have written for two violins and continuo (cello and harpsichord). With *Variation 3*, the listener is confronted with the problem that counterpoint can be difficult to follow when played on a single keyboard instrument. This is especially true in a "canon at the unison," as Bach calls this variation, for the two criss-crossing melodic lines are both played by the right hand while the left adds a running bass. Yet although this music is too complex to understand every detail at first hearing, the flowing lines of this first canon readily convey the idea of exquisite, ever-varied melodic writing.

Here and in the subsequent canons, Bach's use of a special contrapuntal device did not necessarily have implications for the musical style. Yet the angular lines of the canonic melodies twist and turn in ways that go against the conventions of 18th-century music. This is particularly true in the two canons by inversion—*Variations 12* and *15*, in which the melodic line is turned upside down when it is imitated, so that each upward step becomes a downward one, and vice versa. *Variation 15* is also the first of three variations in the minor mode, standing out darkly against the bright G Major of the other movements.

The duets are sometimes called "arabesques," using a term that might describe the delicate filigree of *Variations 8, 11, or 17*. But even these are composed with a strong-minded logic that derives every moment of each variation

from one or two simple musical ideas—a scale, an arpeggio—which may be exchanged between the two hands and inverted in the second half. The duets grow more rambunctious as the series progresses, incorporating athletic leaps of one hand over the other in *Variations 14* and *20*. They reach a climax with what Rameau called “batteries” in *Variations 23* and *29*, where the two hands alternate rapidly to produce a single line of chords. Most remarkable is *Variation 26*, where one hand plays a halting French sarabande, the other running Italianate figuration. The combination of two lines in distinct styles, even different meters or tempos, would be rediscovered by Mozart in the first-act finale of *Don Giovanni* and in the 20th century by Elliott Carter.

The free variations naturally form the most diverse group, and several of them can serve as landmarks as one traverses the set. At the center is *Variation 16*, which opens the second half of the work and marks a new beginning after the dark *Variation 15*. Modeled on the overtures of French Baroque opera, *Variation 16* opens in the grand “dotted” style; its second half is a fugue. Two earlier variations constitute guideposts within the first half of the set. The skipping rhythm of *Variation 7* marks it as a French gigue of the type known as a *canarie*. *Variation 10*, the fughetta, is a four-part working-out of a lively theme (marked by a trill) which the left hand states all alone at the beginning.

In the second half, Bach alludes to another type of fugue with *Variation 22*, marked “Alla breve.” This refers to a type of vocal motet that went back to the Renaissance. What makes this variation stand out, however, is the luminous quality of its G-Major tonality after the jagged chromaticism of the preceding canonic *Variation 21*, in G Minor. The series achieves its most profound expression in the last of the minor-mode variations, *No. 25*. Here Bach wrote the tempo mark “adagio” into his own copy of the printed edition. The Italian word signified less a slow speed than the need for expressive freedom in executing the highly ornate melodic line. Equally crucial for the effect of this movement is the chromatic harmony, which moves inexorably to keys as remote as B-flat and E-flat Minor just before a miraculous recapitulation of the opening phrase.

From that point onward the variations grow freer, Bach’s imagination even more unbridled. The three-fold design evaporates, and *Variation 28*, ostensibly the last of the duets, dissolves into trills. The title of the final variation, “Quodlibet” (literally “What you will”), connects it to a composition for four voices that Bach had written as a young man. That quasi-dramatic early piece is very different from this one, but both quote popular tunes, echoing what Forkel described as improvised quodlibets sung at Bach family gatherings. Thus the variations end with the strains of simple folk melodies like *Kraut und Rüben* (“Cabbage and Beets”). But Bach directs the player to repeat the *Aria* before ending, and this serves as a reminder that everything heard during the last hour has grown out of the same bass line. The abstract idea represented by the latter has been embodied in each variation through a mysterious combination of clear logic and unfettered fantasy.

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