

# BACH

## Goldberg Variations

As our comprehension of Johann Sebastian Bach's music has accelerated, so our attitude to the man and his masterpieces has come full circle. It can still seem unfathomable that a single human being managed to wed mathematics and musicianship so fluently in the creation of art both exuberant and profound. Yet we have started to understand that Bach was an ordinary person who led an ordinary life. He was no stranger to professional rejection. He was often resentful and occasionally held grudges. Bach, it turns out, was so very human.

So is his music. Just as fascinating as its deep emotional and spiritual reservoirs are the apparently indestructible properties that mean Bach's music works on just about any instrument or combination of them. "His instruments often feel beside the point", writes Eric Soblin in his engaging but leftfield look at the composer, *The Cello Suites*; "it is as if Bach composed ideal music, music that transcends instruments, music that was invented to reinvent itself".

The liberation of the composer's works from instrumental orthodoxies has meant open season for the *Goldberg Variations*, one of Bach's most fertile and beloved creations. This set of thirty variations for keyboard, based on a single musical idea, is one of the composer's most robust works and at the same time one of his most shatteringly beautiful. It has resonated with increasing power the more its creator has receded into the distance of history. Its mathematical qualities make it an enduring puzzle: the music that springs from the number games traverses more states of mind than most operas.

The process of freeing the *Goldbergs* from their ideological straitjacket has been hastened by the shattering of their creation myth. Gossip tells us that that Bach wrote the variations for Johann Gottlieb Goldberg to play, in order that his boss Count Keyserlingk – Russian ambassador to the Saxon court – could be entertained during bouts of insomnia.

Nice story, but it's almost certainly untrue. It's more likely that Bach played the *Variations* for Keyserlingk when he visited the Count in Dresden in November 1741, having performed them for the first time as part of his own Collegium Musicum concert series in Leipzig some months before. Goldberg, who was only 14 years old at the time he was Keyserlingk's private harpsichordist, probably took the score to heart. Later on, his technique fully developed, it's likely he made his name playing the Variations and in turn, that name stuck to them.

The word “Goldberg” certainly doesn’t appear on the 1741 publication. It was presented simply as ‘Aria with diverse variations, for harpsichord with two manuals’. In fact, Bach’s variations are based not on the ‘Aria’ that sounds before and after them, but on the bass line with which he presents that Aria. (Some have said the melody itself is too ornate and gallant to be from Bach’s own hand, a theory that has been largely debunked.) The composer was always more keen on chord-sequence or bass-line variations than on melodic ones, as his great C minor Passacaglia for organ and D minor Chaconne for violin testify. Needless to say, both works have been transferred to other instruments and ensembles – and to magnificent effect.

The *Goldberg Variations* fall into two precise halves: “Variatio 15” ends conclusively in G minor, before No 16 launches in the manner of a French Overture, an unequivocal fresh start. The variations progress in miniature three-part cycles, each comprising a study, then a character piece, then a canon. That makes nine canons in all, equally spaced along the journey; each one increases the interval between the canonic voices by one scale step, from a unison to a ninth. There are two small fugues, No 10 and No 22, each one six variations away from the work’s mid-point. The aria itself is 32 bars long, divided into two halves of 16 bars each. The entire score is an exercise in perfect symmetry.

But the structure also reveals Bach’s generosity to his listeners. He understood that his interest in rigorous counterpoint – the braiding of two or more musical lines that maintain their individuality while creating a broader structure – could lead to overwhelming results. He therefore took care to vary the character of each of the canons, and to separate them with singing arias, springing dances and exhaling laments. There is an immense, encyclopedic range of moods and styles within the movements: from simple to complex, frivolous to profound. All are anchored by the aria’s bass line. As in the B minor Mass and *The Art of Fugue*, Bach sought to create something at once completely unified and utterly diverse.

Before deciding to perform the *Goldberg Variations* on two-manual accordion, Samuele Telari had played Bach’s *The Well-Tempered Clavier* and some arrangements of organ works by the composer. In his transfer of the *Goldbergs*, the horizontal structure of Bach’s music remains intact. “The notes stay exactly as they are”, Telari says: “there is just the occasional change in the distribution of voices”.

The accordion as we know it didn’t exist when Bach wrote the variations, but isn’t so far from the keyboard instruments – harpsichord and organ – that made the score famous. Nonetheless, says Telari, “my aim is not to reproduce the sounds of other instruments, but to dig deep into the score and discover new sounds and new interpretations”. He compares the bellows of his Bayan accordion to the bow of a violin, which affords him room for expression in the slower variations. Despite this, use of the bellows has to tread a careful line, Telari reports, in order to maintain a Baroque expression and avoid “waves” of dynamics.

Not so easy on an accordion is the rendering of multiple, concurrent voices with differing levels of intensity. “Sometimes, it’s necessary to redistribute strands in the polyphony to avoid overlapping and extreme distances”, Telari says. “Vitality, the accordion is a sustaining instrument while the harpsichord, whose strings are plucked, is not. So it’s crucial to use articulation to allow the melodiousness of different lines to emerge, and it goes without saying that in the sparkling, faster variations a lot of note values were cut in order to make the contrapuntal effect clearer”. Exploring Bach’s keyboard masterpiece has been a labour of love for the accordionist. “I love Bach, and the greatest thing happens to me every time I play this work: I feel different inside and change my interpretation as a result. The absolute abstraction of this piece is like a mirror I can look into, to see what’s going on inside me”. It’s an apt reflection of Bach’s music – the very definition of a gift that keeps on giving.

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