WIGMORE HALL 125

Wednesday 12 November 2025
7.30pm

Variations I: Bach, Haydn and Schubert

Danny Driver piano

Joseph Haydn (1732-1809) — Variations in F minor HXVII/6 (1793)

Franz Schubert (1797-1828) — Impromptu in B flat D935 No. 3 (1827)

Interval

Johann Sebastian Bach (1685-1750) — Goldberg Variations BWV988 (1741)

Aria • Variation 1 • Variation 2 •
Variation 3. Canone all'Unisono • Variation 4 •
Variation 5 • Variation 6. Canone alla Seconda •
Variation 7 • Variation 8 •
Variation 9. Canone alla Terza • Variation 10. Fughetta •
Variation 11 • Variation 12. Canone alla Quarta •
Variation 13 • Variation 14 •
Variation 15. Canone alla Quinta •
Variation 16. Ouverture • Variation 17 •
Variation 18. Canone alla Sesta • Variation 19 •
Variation 20 • Variation 21. Canone alla Settima •
Variation 22 • Variation 23 •
Variation 24. Canone all'Ottava • Variation 25 •
Variation 26 • Variation 27. Canone alla Nona •
Variation 28 • Variation 29 •
Variation 30. Quodlibet • Aria da Capo

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This evening's programme highlights the importance of the variations genre in keyboard music of the 18th Century and beyond. By choosing a single theme and expounding on that idea by exploring different musical settings, a composer could focus the listener's attention on the shades of meaning or emotion all contained in a single theme. Furthermore, musicians performing sets of variations – which sometimes might be improvised – could prove their facility in a particular style and simultaneously delight and astonish the listening audience with the cleverness of the treatment of the theme.

First, Franz Josef Haydn's Variations in F minor, HXVII/6, is a somewhat unusual work. This 1793 set of double variations features two themes treated in alternation. The first theme features a meandering melody in F minor in dotted rhythms with a plodding accompaniment, while the second in F major, is more energetic with arpeggio flourishes that decorate its melody. Both themes are neatly structured with two complementary repeated halves. The variations embellish the themes while still leaving their melodies recognisable, by decorating with rhythmic changes or added trills. Yet, the variations retain the bipartite structure of the themes. What makes Haydn's Variations in F minor so unusual, however, is its ending. After two variations, Haydn returns to the first theme as it appeared in the beginning, suggesting the work is coming to a close, only to interrupt it suddenly with an extensive and technically challenging coda, ratcheting up the emotional intensity. Where before the alternation of character or mood between the minor and major themes seemed balanced and equal if contrasting, the coda leans heavily into F minor and a turbulence that some have suggested is a direct response to the death of the composer's friend, Maria Anna von Genzinger earlier that year. While we cannot know if some personal anguish prompted this unusual choice, it is also possible that Haydn intended this piece to be just one movement of a whole sonata, then abandoned that idea and tacked on the coda to provide a more satisfying conclusion and to give the work a means to stand on its own. Either way, the virtuosity and emotional intensity of the ending continues to delight audiences.

Franz Schubert's Impromptu in B flat D935 is the third in a set of four short piano pieces composed in 1827 but published posthumously in 1839. The name 'impromptu' implies something of the improvisatory, as if the pianist simply sat down at the piano and played on the spot. Yet, these are composed pieces; Schubert's choice of a theme and variations for this Impromptu connects it to the long history of improvised variations. There is only one theme here, which is quite Classical in its structure, similar to Haydn's themes but one where material from the first half reappears in the second to give a sense of return. Interestingly, composer and music journalist Robert Schumann published a review of this set in 1838 in his *Neue Zeitschrift für Musik* in which he praised all but the third Impromptu in B flat, which he described as 'a series of largely unremarkable variations on an equally unremarkable theme.' Perhaps Schumann was responding to the Haydnesque structure of the theme itself. Yet, it is what Schubert does in the variations that demonstrates the Romantic sensibility. Instead of small embellishments or decorations of the theme, each variation changes the character of the theme, presenting different emotional shades in each. Where Haydn's variations simply alternated between minor and major, Schubert moves through different harmonic vistas allowing the listener a new perspective on the theme.

The possibly apocryphal origin story of Johann Sebastian Bach's *Goldberg Variations* BWV988 comes to us from the 1802 biography written by Johann Nikolaus Forkel, who relates the tale of a visiting Russian ambassador who came to Leipzig, bringing with him the virtuoso harpischordist Johann Gottlieb Goldberg, who supposedly played for the ambassador at night when the latter suffered from insomnia. Hearing this, Bach took it upon himself to compose a set of variations for Goldberg to play for his employer, who was enthralled by them and gifted Bach an extremely valuable golden goblet in thanks. While Forkel did get some of his information from Bach's own sons, his biography is not always considered a reliable factual source. In any case, Bach did publish the *Goldberg Variations* in 1741. Notably, the title page specifies that they are intended for the harpsichord, unusual in the Baroque where keyboard music typically could be performed on any keyboard instrument. Despite this, the *Goldberg Variations* are frequently performed on pianos today.

The theme in this case is not a melody but a bass line with chords, an extremely common one used in variations throughout the Baroque, whose most notable feature is an initial stepwise descent. It is never heard by itself but rather creates underlying structure for each section of the work. The variations begin with an Aria that embellishes the bass line theme with a beautifully lyrical melody evoking a Baroque courtly dance: the Sarabande. Following this, there are no fewer than 30 distinct variations; some feature different dance types, while others construct elaborate canons, featuring a single melody played in multiple overlapping parts. Most interesting is the final variation which Bach marked 'Quodlibet', a compositional technique that combines multiple melodies in counterpoint often in a lighthearted mood. Bach chose to intertwine two folk tunes above his bass line theme.

Taken together, these three sets of variations present three different perspectives on a fundamental musical principle of the long 18th Century: variation and embellishment. Exploring the musical and emotional potential of a single theme is a demonstration of the composer's skill while at the same time being an affective device for the listener's enjoyment.

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