WIGMORE HALL

Sunday 13 April 2025
7.30pm

This concert is supported by David and Clare Kershaw

Víkingur Ólafsson piano

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

I live with a lutenist. Sometimes on insomniac nights, I can hear him practising, his gentle plucking floating up the stairs, and I feel like a prince – not least because swirling round my head is also the myth of Bach's *Goldberg Variations*. As Johann Nikolaus Forkel claimed in his biography of 1802, Bach composed the *Variations* for Johann Gottlieb Goldberg and his employer, the Dresden diplomat Hermann Carl von Keyserlingk. On his visits to Leipzig, the Count suffered from insomnia, and Goldberg was called to play clavier pieces of a 'soft and somewhat lively character' to lift the Count's spirits. Bach's *Variations* were supposedly written to soothe on those sleepless nights.

It's an unlikely tale: Goldberg was only 13 or 14 years old when Bach published his work in 1741 for the Leipzig Christmas Fair, and the story is more likely to have been bound up in promotional spin (the Bureau de Musique was a publishing company established in 1800 that specialised in Bach's music). Nevertheless, the myth has become part of the work's identity – so much so that they are often simply called 'The Goldbergs'.

Bach's set consists of an *Aria*, 30 variations, and closes with a repeat of the opening *Aria* (the 'Aria da Capo'). And once you've seen that '32', it's difficult not to see numbers and symmetries everywhere. The *Aria* is 32 bars long, comprising two 16-bar halves. The bassline of the *Aria*'s first section has precisely 32 notes. The mid-way point of the *Variations* is a French overture style movement, thereby marking a cross-symmetrical structure.

The opening *Aria* is a highly ornamented sarabande. Melodic contour is wonderfully crafted as Bach feels out a descending five-note pattern in a typically French style. However, from the first *Variation* it becomes clear that the melody is not the theme. Instead, Bach produces variations on the bassline and its chord progression. This bass theme, at least its first eight bars, is similar to Handel's *Chaconne* with 62 variations, a piece that Bach might have known through its Amsterdam editions printed in the 1730s.

An Everest of G major, then, the *Goldbergs* explore what can be done with the same sequence of harmonies. Or as the pianist Jeremy Denk wrote, ostensibly with tongue firmly placed in cheek: 'All of which is to say that the Goldbergs are genetically predisposed to be boring, and they cannot totally elude the trap set for them by their premise. To be fair, Bach charges at this fact with full foreknowledge, even brazenly. He says, in effect, yes this is bound to be boring but I am going to be so masterful that you will be in awe and not care even if you will be bored.'

The 30 variations are generally divided into three groups types: dance, canon, and what the pioneering harpsichordist and musicologist Ralph Kirkpatrick called 'arabesque'. Every third variation in the set is a canon that increases by its intervallic answer, beginning at the unison until *Variation 27* which is a canon at the ninth. This final canon is particularly impressive as Bach leaves out the bass line, leaving a 'pure' canon between the upper voices.

Such a feat is in itself a contrapuntal exercise in excellence; more so as these variations are not heavy with cerebral skill, but instead, dance with dazzling lightness (it's the same with 'Bach's numbers' – if he indeed did consciously 'put' them there, you certainly can't hear all the counting!).

Variation 25, what the harpsichordist Wanda Landowska called the 'Black Pearl', is the last and the longest of the three minor-mode variations. Víkingur Ólafsson agrees with this interpretation, reading it as 'profound loss … something on a fundamental human level, like losing your mother'. Yet the *Variations* continue, flourishing, with boundless energy and optimism. But Bach cannot continue into infinity, and at *Variation 30* – where we would expect a canon at the tenth – he pulls us back into the present day of 18th-century Lutheran Germany. The final variation is a 'quodlibet', a combination of German folk songs, an assemblage which evokes the Bach family's custom of improvised singing at their gatherings. Forkel described such *quodlibet* singing to arouse 'hearty and irresistible laughter in all who heard them'.

As Bach brings us back from brave new worlds into that of the local and intimate, where to go now? Through the *quodlibet*, Bach gives us a musical present that is rooted in past traditions – time is pulled forwards into a dazzling future of virtuosic fingers flying about on keyboard machines, as well as backwards into familiarity and nostalgia. The recapitulation of the *Aria*, the *Aria da Capo*, then, can be coloured all sorts of ways – in melancholy, contemplation, sadness or renewal. It's an excellent case in point, too, for what a listener brings to an interpretation: after this epic journey, what do we want to hear? As Glenn Gould suggests, this is 'music which observes neither end nor beginning, music with neither real climax nor real resolution'. Perhaps we must simply accept that the *Goldbergs* have said farewell simply as they said hello, and hope that they will return again soon.