

WIGMORE HALL

Saturday 16 March 2024
7.30pm

Janine Jansen violin
Timothy Ridout viola
Daniel Blendulf cello

Johann Sebastian Bach (1685-1750) Goldberg Variations BWV988 (pub. 1741) arrangement after Sitkovetsky

Aria • Variation 1 • Variation 2 •
Variation 3. Canone all'Unisono • Variation 4 •
Variation 5 • Variation 6. Canone alla Seconda •
Variation 7. Al tempo di giga • 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 (in moto contrario) • Variation 16. Ouverture •
Variation 17 • Variation 18. Canone alla Sesta •
Variation 19 • Variation 20 • Variation 21. Canone alla
Settima • Variation 22. Alla breve • Variation 23 •
Variation 24. Canone all'Ottava • Variation 25. Adagio •
Variation 26 • Variation 27. Canone alla Nona •
Variation 28 • Variation 29 • Variation 30. Quodlibet. •
Aria da Capo



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The *Goldberg Variations* is one of Bach's very few keyboard works specifically designed for performance on a harpsichord with two manuals. In the Italian Concerto BWV971 and the concluding 'echo' movement of the French Overture BWV831, only the double-manual instrument could produce the dynamic contrasts the music called for; in the *Goldberg Variations*, on the other hand, it was the frequent crossing over of the player's hands in some of the variations that made it more practicable if they had separate keyboards. Perhaps it was this aspect of the work that inspired Josef Rheinberger to make a two-piano arrangement of it in the 1880s. His is a highly imaginative transcription, but one that effectively orchestrates the largely transparently-scored original.

It was Glenn Gould's famous 1955 recording that led to the widespread popularity of the *Goldberg Variations*, and to a proliferation of transcriptions of the work for such instrumental groups as recorder consort, brass ensemble, guitar ensemble and clarinet quartet. More satisfying than any of these is the string trio arrangement made by the violinist Dmitry Sitkovetsky in 1985, to mark the tercentenary of Bach's birth. Not by chance, his arrangement was dedicated to the memory of Glenn Gould.

The string trio is an ideal medium for conveying the textures of Bach's variations. With the exception of the last of the series, which forgoes a supporting bass line, all the canons which punctuate the work are written strictly in the three voices; while no fewer than nine of the remaining variations are effectively two-part inventions. Using Sitkovetsky's version as a springboard, tonight's musicians have created their own collaborative arrangement. Only a small handful of Bach's variations, including the first half of the *Overture* which effectively divides the work into two parts, and the last two variations, are written in a more full-blooded style, calling for some double-stopping in the transcription.

The story behind the origin of Bach's masterpiece is famous, though almost certainly apocryphal. The composer is supposed to have written it so that his pupil Johann Gottlieb Goldberg could play the variations piecemeal to the insomniac Russian ambassador to the court of Saxony, Count Keyserlingk, of whom Goldberg was a protégé. The legend was recounted by Bach's early 19th-century biographer Johann Nikolaus Forkel:

The Count was often sickly, and then had sleepless nights. At these times Goldberg, who lived in the house with him, had to pass the night in an adjoining room to play something to him when he could not sleep. The Count once said to Bach that he should like to have some clavier pieces for his Goldberg, which should be of such a soft and somewhat lively character that he might be a little cheered up by them in his sleepless

nights.... The Count thereafter called them nothing but *his* variations. He was never weary of hearing them; and for a long time, when the sleepless nights came, he used to say: 'Dear Goldberg, do play me one of my variations.'

Whether or not Forkel's account contains a grain of truth, Bach probably did not expect his work to be played through in its entirety at a single sitting. This, however, did not prevent him from devising a symmetrical large-scale scheme for it. With apparently effortless contrapuntal mastery he casts every third variation as a canon which at the same time preserves the harmonic outline of the original theme. Moreover, the melodic interval separating the two canonic voices increases progressively by a whole-tone with each piece of the kind, from a unison in Variation 3, to a ninth in Variation 27. Two of these pieces (Variations 12 and 15) are mirror canons – i.e. the answering voice inverts the melodic line of the first voice – and the second of the pair, like the canon at the seventh (Variation 21) is in the minor. The fact that Variation 30, instead of being a 'learned' canon at the tenth, as Bach's scheme would have led us to expect, is a pot-pourri of popular songs only serves to increase its humour. One of the sources of this final *Quodlibet* is a song sung by a lovelorn young man who has been separated from his sweetheart for too long, and another is a lament by a son whose mother's vegetarian cooking has driven him from home.

The aria on which the variations are based is in the style of a sarabande, and the stepwise descending bass line in long notes of its opening bars brings into play the additional background of a passacaglia. In line with such a background, the variations themselves are derived not from the melodic content of the theme, but from its harmony. The variety Bach draws out of it is astonishing, encompassing as it does, in addition to the already-mentioned *Overture*, a gigue (Variation 7), a four-part *Fughetta* (Variation 10), a further sarabande (Variation 13), a *passepied* (Variation 19), a tragic arioso (Variation 25), and a veritable cornucopia of toccatas and two-part inventions. As far as the toccatas are concerned, Bach's virtuoso writing reaches a peak with Variations 28 and 29 – the first of the pair a glistening study in trills (the famously awkward trills in Beethoven's late piano sonatas seems to draw inspiration from their example), and the second featuring rapidly alternating triads interspersed with rushing semiquaver triplets. At the end, Bach appends a reprise of the original *Aria* – a *da capo* that comes as though from afar, and which in its context provides a touching conclusion. Here again, we may detect the influence Bach's work had on the piano music of Beethoven's late years: the variations that form the finale of his sonata Op. 109 end with a similar reprise of their sarabande-like theme.

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