

WIGMORE HALL

Sunday 18 May 2025
7.30pm

Roman Rabinovich 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



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The first significant biography of JS Bach was written by Johann Nikolaus Forkel (1749-1818). Though he drew heavily on a previously published obituary, Forkel was exceptionally diligent in seeking out people who remembered Bach or who might have access to significant documents. It is in Forkel's book that we encounter the first written mention of the memorable and charming story that has for so long been associated with the *Goldberg Variations* – indeed, without this anecdote, the work would never have acquired its name.

Johann Gottlieb Goldberg was a young keyboard player in the service of the diplomat Hermann Carl Reichsgraf von Keyserlingk; at the age of 10, Goldberg had been taken to Leipzig by his master in order that he should receive musical instruction from Bach. This is the story according to Forkel: '[For this work] we are indebted to Count Keyserlingk, one-time Russian envoy to the court of the Elector of Saxony... The Count was frequently poorly, which caused him sleepless nights. At these times Goldberg, who dwelt with him in the same house, had to play for him, through the night, in the next room. The Count once asked Bach for some clavier pieces for Goldberg, which should be of a gentle character but lively enough to cheer him through his sleepless nights. Bach thought he could best grant such a wish with some variations... From then on, the Count referred to them simply as his variations. They never lost their appeal for him; and for a long time, when troubled by insomnia, he would ask: 'Dear Goldberg, please play me one of my variations.'

It has to be admitted that there is no mention of Goldberg or Count Keyserlingk on the title pages of the earliest editions of Bach's *Variations*. Neither has it escaped the notice of modern musicologists that Goldberg would have been only fourteen in 1741, the year of publication. However, teenager or not, Goldberg was clearly accomplished enough to be a professional musician in an aristocratic house. And it would have been unlike Forkel to invent the story out of nothing. Perhaps it is untrue that the piece was commissioned as a cure for Keyserlingk's insomnia; it is perfectly likely, however, that Bach could have given Goldberg an early copy, which would no doubt have provided material with which to entertain the Count. And who is to say that this music was not deemed successful in soothing a sleepless night?

The *Goldberg Variations* have increasingly been regarded as a primary masterpiece in Western classical music. The exploration of the possibilities of

variation technique to produce an array of sublime flowers from a single stem has no equal other than Beethoven's *Diabelli Variations* of 1819-23.

Bach's work comprises a 32-bar aria, followed by 30 variations (every third one being a canon), followed by a literal reprise of the aria. Thus the total number of movements equals the number of bars in the aria. That said, each 16-bar half of the aria is marked to be repeated. The aria itself is a delicate sarabande. It is the bass line, or the harmony, that is used as the basis of the variations, rather than the melody.

The aria can be found in one of the notebooks of Bach's second wife, Anna Magdalena, in her handwriting. No composer's name is appended to it there. Scholars being scholars, they have argued bitterly among themselves that this is either decisive evidence that it is an original piece by JS Bach, or that it proves beyond doubt that it is by someone else. At the moment the champions of Bach's authorship appear to be winning. Nonetheless, the crucial bass line of the first 16 bars replicates a progression previously employed by Handel and several other composers. So there is another case put forward: that the aria is itself a form of variation on a stock theme.

Working against that interpretation is the last variation before the reprise. This time, instead of the expected canon, Bach supplies a 'quodlibet'. This Latin term means 'whatever you like', and designates a piece that combines several tunes in a humorous extravaganza of counterpoint. According to Forkel, Bach family gatherings regularly involved improvised quodlibets on incongruous and often ribald songs. We do not know the texts of all the tunes Bach weaves into the Goldberg quodlibet (with the aria harmony still somehow holding its own). However, two have been identified. One goes: 'We have been apart too long – come here, come here!'; the other: 'Cabbage and turnips have driven me out. If mother had cooked meat, I would have stayed.' If we take this to mean that the 'cabbages and turnips' of the variations have for too long prevented the 'meat' of the aria from being enjoyed, then we may have enjoyed the privilege of sharing a semi-private joke with Johann Sebastian Bach himself. By this token the aria must be regarded not as a 'first variation' but as something pure that has retained its integrity through all the transformations we have witnessed. And there is, indeed, a feeling of almost sacred reunion as we hear again its fragile, immaculate beauty.

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