

WIGMORE HALL

Monday 25 April 2022 7.30pm

Jean Rondeau harpsichord

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Johann Sebastian Bach (1685-1750)

Goldberg Variations BWV988 (pub. 1741)

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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Johann Sebastian Bach's 'Aria with diverse variations', published in 1741, whose title page proclaims that it was 'Composed for Music Lovers, to Refresh their Spirits', quickly acquired the status of musical icon that it enjoys today. Bach's son, Carl Philipp Emanuel, exclaimed: 'What diversity! What perfection of the hands and of expression this art requires!' Johann Nikolaus Forkel, Bach's first biographer, thought that 'the *Quodlibet* might alone render its author immortal, though it is far from being the best part'. It was one of the first pieces of Bach to be published outside Germany, extracts appearing in John Hawkins's *History of Music* in 1776. Count Keyserling, who commissioned the piece, was not content with paying a mere fee, but instead presented Bach with a golden goblet filled with a hundred golden coins. JT Goldberg, a pupil of Bach, was resident harpsichord virtuoso in Keyserling's household. It fell to him to play the Count's variations whenever requested – as a solace for insomnia, on occasions – hence the popular nickname for the work: the *Goldberg Variations*.

Bach had copied the *Aria* into the *Klavierbüchlein* he compiled for his second wife, Anna Magdalena, in 1725. In the style of a French sarabande, it might not be Bach's own composition. In any event, after its first appearance we hear no more of the melody until the very end of the work. What it leaves behind, like an elusive scent, is its harmonic structure, which permeates all 30 variations. Variations on a set of chords or a bass-line – chaconnes and passacaglias – were common enough, as were sets of decorations of a melody. This hybrid, which starts as the latter, and carries on as the former, allowed Bach unprecedented freedom of invention.

Such freedom needs structure. At a very basic level, the variations become faster and more difficult as the piece progresses. Bach marks his half-way point by making Variation 16 what's called a 'French Overture', a big structure with a slow, jerky-rhythmed first part, and a fast fugue to follow. He uses his contrapuntal skills to impose structure by making every third variation a two-part canon. Apart from the very first canon, the second part doesn't start on the same note as the first. In Variation 6, the pursuing voice begins one note higher – *Canone alla Seconda*, writes Bach. Variation 9, two notes higher – *alla Terza*, and so on, until Variation 27 is a 'Canon at the Ninth'.

Variation 30 is the *Quodlibet* ('as you please') that Forkel so admired. Instead of inventing a line that would work as a Canon at the Tenth, Bach combines two comic songs (well-known to his audience at the time, which begs a number of aesthetic questions), still maintaining his *Aria's* harmonic structure: 'I've been away a long time' (*Ich bin so lang nicht bey dir g'west*), and 'Cabbage and turnips have driven me away' (*Kraut und*

Rüben haben mich vertrieben). Since the next thing we hear is the long-delayed return of the *Aria* to conclude the work, it has been suggested that Bach is hilariously telling us that all the musical riches of the piece so far have been mere cabbages and turnips. Ho ho! – and a further aesthetic contortion, if so. Perhaps we are fortunate not to know the folksongs.

Most of the variations, like the *Aria*, are in G major, but Bach varies that elusive harmonic scent by putting Nos. 15, 21 & 25 into the minor key. Variation 15, the 'Canon at the Fifth', is further distinguished by being a canon by inversion – where the first voice rises, the second voice falls. (Variation 12 is a canon by inversion too, but Bach doesn't bother to mention this in the score.)

Every early mention of the Variations makes the point that they are for a harpsichord with two manuals. This was an important matter to Bach: for every item except the *Aria* and Nos. 12 & 21, he specifically mentions how many manuals the player may employ. Nos. 8, 11, 13, 14, 17, 20, 23, 25, 26 & 28 (a third of the total) are for two manuals. In Nos. 5, 7 & 29, the player can choose whether to use one or two manuals. The rest are to be played on one manual only.

In the last decade of his life (he died in 1750 at the age of 65), Bach was concerned with publicly establishing his mastery of the contrapuntal genres of music he had espoused throughout his life – genres which were now conspicuously old-fashioned, as some unkind commentators mentioned rather too frequently for his peace of mind. He had published (in his own copper engravings) harpsichord suites and other pieces under the title 'Keyboard Practice 1 & 2' in the 1730s. In 1739, *Klavierübung 3* appeared, a much more schematised and thorough volume, in effect a musical catechism for the organ, topped and tailed by a Prelude and Fugue in the Trinitarian key of E flat (three flats). After the *Goldberg Variations*, he issued a set of wholly canonic variations for organ, organ versions of some of the best movements from his cantatas (which would otherwise have been buried in a church cupboard), *The Musical Offering* (a musical souvenir of the improvising challenge set him in 1747 by Frederick the Great, keen flautist and employer of Carl Philipp Emanuel), and *Art of Fugue*, in which he explored every fugal possibility of a theme of his own: a compendium of the technique with which his name is inseparably linked. Mighty works, all of them, but the Goldbergs wear their learning more lightly than most, and add that note of charm that makes them many people's favourite.

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