

WIGMORE HALL

Sunday 9 March 2025
7.30pm

Nevermind

Anna Besson flute
Louis Creac'h violin
Robin Pharo viola da gamba
Jean Rondeau harpsichord, organ

Johann Sebastian Bach (1685-1750)

Goldberg Variations BWV988

*transcribed by Anna Besson, Louis Creac'h,
Robin Pharo & Jean Rondeau (pub. 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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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 Bach biography of 1802, the composer-cantor 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. Some musicological digging shows the tale to be improbable – Goldberg was only 13 or 14 years old when Bach published his work in 1741 for the Leipzig Christmas Fair – and more likely to do with promotional spin (the Bureau de Musique was a publishing company established in 1800 that specialised in Bach's music). Nevertheless, the myth has become charmingly bound up in 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, therefore marking a cross-symmetrical structure.

The opening Aria is a highly ornamented sarabande. Melodic contour is wonderfully crafted as Bach explores 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 in the 1730s.

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!).

After each canon variation, Bach presents different Baroque types. Rhythmic features, melodic turns and contrapuntal devices evoke the different characters and generic profiles. After each character variation, we are treated to an 'arabesque'. Even when transcribed for different instruments such as in tonight's concert, these lively movements teem with the physicality of the keyboard. Bach explores devilish finger patterns within *moto perpetuo* sections, and you can hear what would have been virtuosic 'hand-crossing' on the keyboard as motives scattered across the ensemble in whiplash brilliance.

After this cycle is completed nine times, we would expect Variation 30 to be a canon at the tenth. But Bach cannot continue into infinity (as much as we wish it were so). So at this point that seems to dive into the future with boundless energy and optimism, Bach pulls us back into the present of 18th-century Lutheran Germany. The final variation is a 'quodlibet', a combination of German folk songs. This assemblage evokes the Bach family's custom of improvised singing at their family reunions and celebrations. Forkel described the quodlibet singing at such occasions to arouse 'hearty and irresistible laughter in all who heard them'. The movement is thus stunningly rooted in this sense of present as past, a living nostalgia that Nicholas Kenyon describes as 'one of the most humane, moving and wistful movements Bach ever wrote'.

As Bach brings us back from brave new worlds into that of the local and intimate, where to go now? The recapitulation of the Aria, the Aria da Capo, is a stroke of genius. Of course, the return can be coloured all sorts of ways – in melancholy, contemplation, nostalgia, sadness or renewal. It's an excellent case in point, too, for what a listener brings to an interpretation: after this journey, what do we want to hear? Or 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.

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