



A MUSICAL ODYSSEY THE GOLDBERG VARIATIONS

Friday, November 18, 2022
Live! at 10th & G
945 G Street NW, Washington, DC

Saturday, November 19, 2022
St. Paul's Episcopal Church
228 S. Pitt Street, Alexandria, VA

**WASHINGTON BACH
CONSORT**
Dr. Dana T. Marsh, Artistic Director

A MUSICAL ODYSSEY THE GOLDBERG VARIATIONS

FRIDAY, NOVEMBER 18, 2022 AT 7:00 P.M. | Live! at 10th & G, Washington, DC
SATURDAY, NOVEMBER 19, 2022 AT 7:00 P.M. | St. Paul's Episcopal Church, Alexandria, VA

PROGRAM

Aria with diverse variations for the harpsichord with two manuals, "Goldberg Variations," BWV 988

Johann Sebastian Bach (1685–1750)

1. Aria
2. Variation 1
3. Variation 2
4. Variation 3: Canon at the unison
5. Variation 4
6. Variation 5
7. Variation 6: Canon at the second
8. Variation 7: *al tempo di giga*
9. Variation 8
10. Variation 9: Canon at the third
11. Variation 10: Fughetta
12. Variation 11
13. Variation 12: Canon at the fourth in contrary motion
14. Variation 13
15. Variation 14
16. Variation 15: Canon at the fifth, *Andante*
17. Variation 16: Overture
18. Variation 17
19. Variation 18: Canon at the sixth
20. Variation 19
21. Variation 20
22. Variation 21: Canon at the seventh
23. Variation 22: *Alla breve*
24. Variation 23
25. Variation 24: Canon at the octave
26. Variation 25: *Adagio*
27. Variation 26
28. Variation 27: Canon at the ninth
29. Variation 28
30. Variation 29
31. Variation 30: Quodlibet
32. Aria da capo

Leon Schelhase, harpsichord

Richard & Beth Ayres, underwriters



Improvisation meets composition in Bach's Goldberg Variations

By Daniel R. Melamed

It is difficult to imagine a more obvious musical task than taking a short, simple piece and embellishing it. This idea of “variation” is everywhere in Western music: in composed works from the seventeenth century to the twenty-first, in jazz improvisations based on standards, and in improvised dance music of many kinds. In all of these practices, a brief musical creation yields a much longer musical experience by repeated playings that are recognizably the same in some sense (all of them refer to the starting point), but that are also different from each other. And they are often arrayed in a way that offers a journey for the listener that moves from the plain to the more elaborate, and that explores the possibilities of the chosen material.

Some kinds of variation are the product of improvisation, made up on the spot by the performer. Others represent acts of composition—elaborations devised on paper and written down as musical works. Some of these written-out pieces are meant to demonstrate techniques of improvisation, as in Mozart's many sets of keyboard variations published for amateur players. But composers also began to write large sets of keyboard variations that went beyond written-out improvisation, including Frederic Rzewski's *The People United Will Never Be Defeated!* and Beethoven's *Diabelli Variations*.

The starting point for these ambitious collections, and for a new way of thinking about variations, was the work heard on this concert, J. S. Bach's *Aria with diverse Variations*, BWV 988, known as the *Goldberg Variations* because of a reported connection with Bach's student Johann Gottlieb Goldberg. Bach published the set in 1741 in his series of keyboard music for connoisseurs and talented amateur players, and in it the improvisatory and the compositional collide. In fact, one way to listen to a complete performance (which is probably not the only way Bach probably imagined the music being used) is to consider whether a given variation from among the 30 that make up the *Goldbergs* owes more to improvisation or to compositional craft.

The “aria” that is the subject of the variations—a little 32-measure melody cast as the dance known

as a *sarabande*—points in both directions. On the one hand, the aria is typical of the sort of tune that was used for improvising and for short sets of written-out variations that imitated improvisation, including Bach's own *Aria variata alla maniera italiana*, BWV 989, and the variation sets published by Johann Pachelbel a generation earlier. It has clear A and B sections, each repeated, which makes it easy for both improviser and listener to follow as it is varied. On the other hand, the aria is less a tune than a harmonic framework, and this feature makes it ideal for complex compositional elaboration. Harmonic outlines can be the basis of improvisation, to be sure—as, for example, when a jazz musician improvises on the chord changes of *I Got Rhythm*—but they can also serve as the foundation for movements of carefully constructed artifice.

Bach uses the aria both ways. Some of the variations clearly invoke improvisation, subjecting the tune to decoration or transformation. Variation 13, for example, presents a highly ornamented version of the original sarabande-like aria. Variation 25 does much the same thing, but in a minor key and a very slow tempo. Variation 7 rhythmically re-casts the tune as a *giga*, a lilting dance with a characteristic figure heard constantly either in the melody or the bass.

Several variations turn the aria into other kinds of instrumental pieces. Variation 16 reimagines it as a French overture, with a stately first half and quick second half; this borrowing of an orchestral type fittingly opens the second half of the 32-movement set (the aria, 30 variations, and the aria again). Variation 10, a fughetto, pretends to be a little instrumental fugue, with successive imitative entrances of a subject derived from the theme. Variation 22 does the same, but in a much more old-fashioned and learned style. Variations 1 and 8 might be heard as invoking the pattern prelude, a piece based on one rhythmic figure.

A number of variations are improvisatory by way of keyboard technique. Variation 5 puts a running line in one of the player's hands and introduces leaps

in the other that cross above and below. Several variations (nos. 20, 23, 28, and 29) resemble toccatas, introducing figuration designed around the possibilities of the keyboard.

It is not difficult to imagine any of these movements (though probably fewer of them) as part of an ordinary early eighteenth-century improvisatory variation set. But mixed in with them is a group of variations of a different sort. Variations 3, 6, 9, 12, 15, 18, 21, 24, and 27 are constructed with an element of compositional artifice known as a canon—a melody that can be combined with itself in the manner of a round.

In each of these movements in the *Goldberg Variations*, Bach devises a melody that both works in canon with itself and fits over the aria's bass line. That is, instead of offering variations that resemble free improvisations, Bach works out canons that function as variations; these represent compositional craft rather than written-out ornamentation.

The texture of these movements is consistent: Bach presents an ornamented bass line built on the aria, and two high-range parts in canon over it. (This texture resembles the familiar trio sonata characteristic of Italian music of the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries). Some of the canons add further contrapuntal artifice by imitating each other upside down—so-called canons in inversion. Many of the movements have distinct characters, like the quasi-improvised variations: Variation 18 is in learned counterpoint, Variation 24 is a *gigue*, and so on.

And the canonic movements help lend structure to entire set, surely a concern for a composer assembling an extraordinary number of variations into an hour-long collection. The canons appear every third variation, and they are arrayed progressively with respect to their construction. In the first canon, the answering voice enters at the same pitch level as the one that starts. In the second canon, the answer begins one step higher, producing a so-called canon at the second. The interval of imitation of the third canon is the third

(one step higher still), and so on through Variation 27, at the distance of a ninth.

A listener without a score might not even realize that the canonic movements are constructed this way, or that they appear in every third variation, or that the distance of canonic imitation increases throughout the set. These features are more for the composer and performer than the listener, and represent a different sort of thinking about writing a set of variations. Rather than being related to improvisation, they stem from thoughtful composing and the systematic working out of the possibilities of given material. (The final variation, no. 30, is not canonic but also reflects compositional craft. It's a so-called *quodlibet*, a piece that incorporates several existing tunes. Here Bach shows that the opening of two familiar melodies can be made to fit the aria's bass line: one is a vernacular tune and the other—as the the Bach Consort's own Michael Marissen has argued recently—would have been recognized as a famous hymn.)

Performers would continue to improvise variations, and composers continued to publish variation sets modeled on extemporaneous playing. But Bach's *Goldberg Variations* expanded the possibilities of what a set of variations could be, and the challenges it could offer composer, performer, and listener alike.

Daniel R. Melamed

Dr. Daniel R. Melamed is professor of musicology at the Indiana University Jacobs School of Music. His book *Hearing Bach's Passions* (Oxford University Press), now in an updated paperback edition, is designed for general readers and discusses Bach's passions today against the background of their presentations in the eighteenth century. His most recent book, *Listening to Bach: the Mass in B Minor and the Christmas Oratorio* (Oxford), also for general readers, takes up issues of listening and is illustrated with many recorded examples.

ABOUT THE ARTIST



Leon Schelhase, a native of Cape Town, South Africa, found himself resonating with baroque music from an early age. He moved to the United States in 2006 to undertake advanced musical studies, and since graduating from Boston University with a Master in Music, he has been sought after as soloist and chamber musician.

Schelhase has established a distinctive reputation for his compelling interpretations of Bach's keyboard music. *Early Music America Magazine* has praised Leon's solo performances as "exquisite... and filled with virtuosity." As well as being a recipient of the American Bach Soloists' prestigious Goldberg Prize, he was a finalist in the Jurov International Harpsichord Competition. He has played in countries across the globe including Canada, the United Kingdom, Japan, and Australia. With a repertoire spanning the gamut from the sixteenth-century virginalists to contemporary harpsichord music, he has been a featured artist on the international harpsichord-focused series, *Clavecin en Concert* in Montreal, *Harpsichord Heaven* at the Flint Collection

in Delaware, *Emmanuel Music* in Boston, and touring concerts with *New York State Baroque*. His first solo album, *Phantasticus*, represents his versatility in a program of music in the *stylus fantasticus* by diverse composers of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries.

Highly in demand as collaborative musician, Leon has performed and recorded with notable leaders in the early music field. He can be heard on the *Nimbus* label with violinist *Libby Walfisch*, a collaboration that resulted in an invitation to perform at *King's Place* in London. In 2009, he toured Japan with famed conductor *Joshua Rifkin* in performances of Bach's *St. Matthew Passion* that were described as "epoch-making" in the Japanese press. He has also recorded on the *Centaur* label with *Julianne Baird*, and his most recent release on *Acis Records* is with the virtuoso wind ensemble *Kleine Kammermusik*, of which he is a founding member. As freelance continuo artist, he has played with both major orchestras and opera companies including the *Phoenix Symphony*, *Chicago Opera Theatre*, *American Bach Soloists*, and *Tempesta di Mare*, and with chamber ensembles *House of Time* (New York), *Pegasus Early Music* (Rochester), *Chatham Baroque* (Pittsburgh), the Boston-based, conductorless string orchestra *A Far Cry*, and the *Philadelphia Bach Festival Orchestra*.

In 2012, Leon joined the faculty of the *Curtis Institute of Music* as harpsichord instructor. He has taught masterclasses at *George Mason University* and for *Aberfoyle Baroque* (DC), and has served as faculty at the *Amherst Early Music Festival* and accompaniment fellow at the *Baroque Performance Institute* at *Oberlin College*.

His Philadelphia-based concert series, *Ravensong*, presents international specialists of historic stringed keyboard instruments in uniquely curated intimate spaces.

Leon holds a *BMus (Hons)* from the *University of Cape Town*, and a master's degree in historical performance from *Boston University*, where he studied with *Peter Sykes*.



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