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J. S. BACH *The Goldberg Variations*
Diana Boyle, piano

Johann Sebastian Bach: *'Goldberg Variations'*, BWV 899

1	Aria	3:09	17	Variation 16	3:40
2	Variation 1	1:09	18	Variation 17	1:23
3	Variation 2	1:45	19	Variation 18	2:31
4	Variation 3	3:04	20	Variation 19	0:51
5	Variation 4	1:22	21	Variation 20	1:14
6	Variation 5	0:59	22	Variation 21	4:22
7	Variation 6	1:40	23	Variation 22	1:50
8	Variation 7	1:33	24	Variation 23	1:22
9	Variation 8	1:21	25	Variation 24	4:36
10	Variation 9	2:10	26	Variation 25	6:01
11	Variation 10	1:11	27	Variation 26	1:30
12	Variation 11	1:26	28	Variation 27	3:13
13	Variation 12	3:01	29	Variation 28	1:37
14	Variation 13	3:32	30	Variation 29	1:21
15	Variation 14	1:27	31	Variation 30	2:18
16	Variation 15	6:25	32	Aria da capo	3:11

total playing time:

76:27

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Like *Die Kunst der Fuge*, Bach’s *Goldberg Variations* have come to be seen as one of the pinnacles of keyboard writing, not only of the baroque era but of all time. Both works are full of intrigue and interest in terms of pure listening appeal, but also aim to push the boundaries, so to speak, of compositional technique, keyboard performance and virtuosity, and complex underlying structures.

Although a ‘stand-alone’ work, the *Aria with diverse variations for a harpsichord with two manuals* as it is formally named, the Goldberg set is the final piece, the capstone as it has been called by Bach scholar Christian Wolff, in the much larger publication project *Clavierübung*. The work was published in 1741 but is thought to have had a long gestation period, certainly back to the late 1730s, from which there is a copy of the Aria in the hand of Anna Magdalena, but probably was inspired by Bach’s desire to ‘improve’ on an Aria with 64 Variations published in 1733.

Unlike Handel’s short Aria of eight bars, Bach’s consists of 32, and it is itself highly ornamented, and it is the bass line which forms the basis of the variations, which are constructed in a symmetrical fashion, ending with the Aria, and of which each third variation is a Canon. As to the nickname, there is more than one theory, but it seems likely that the dedication was to Johann Gottlieb Goldberg, a 13-year old at the time, who took lessons from Bach in Leipzig.

No record survives of performances of the *Goldberg Variations* until the late 19th century and it remained a fairly esoteric work, as did much of Bach’s output, during the late Classical and Romantic eras. It was Rudolf Serkin who introduced the piece to his repertoire in the 1920s and it was first recorded (on a most unsuitable harpsichord) by Wanda Landowska in the early 1930s. Not until 1955 and the pioneering recording (on modern piano) by Glenn Gould did the work become the icon of genius that it is now known to be.

Personal Reflections on the Goldberg Variations by Diana Boyle

After recording Bach's *Well-Tempered Clavier, Book II*, in 1997-8, it seemed to me a reasonable step to move on to the Goldberg Variations, before attempting a recording of the Art of Fugue. I was intrigued by the contrapuntal opportunities offered by the sequence of canons within the set, and was attracted by several aspects of the work: the whole 'critical mass', the symmetrical balance, of the work. The G minor variations, and the challenge of keeping a key like G major fresh to my ear, (having spent several years immersed in the 24 cyclical key changes of the *WTC2*), sometimes felt disturbing, to feeling marooned, as it were, in the key of G.

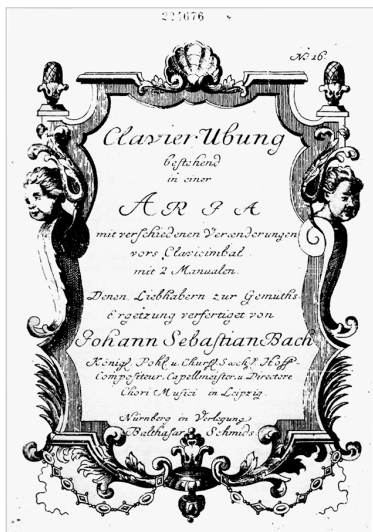
As is my usual custom, I avoided listening to any other performances, particularly Gould's; That, I felt, would be far too intimidating. I need to find my own voice when studying these masterpieces and then try to express those thoughts at the keyboard.

I started to study the work through the canons, then the lyrical slow variations 13, 21 and 25. As far as the Aria was concerned, I gave thought first to the closing version rather than the opener, and let the music sink gradually into my mind rather than playing it very much. This is not an easy piece to play but it does lend itself to the keyboard far more readily than the Art of Fugue, (which I was already beginning to study at the time despite its reputation for being almost unplayable in places). The AOF eventually became the most treasured work in my repertoire.

In the Goldberg Variations, every third variation is a Canon: thus Variation 3 is a canon at the unison, variation 6 a canon at the second, where the second entry is a major second above the first; variation 9 is a canon at the third and so on until we reach variation 27, a canon at the ninth. The final variation, instead of being the expected canon at the tenth, is a *quodlibet* based on several German folk tunes. The *Art of Fugue* even with its optional canons, is a far tougher proposition, the fugues being complex, thickly textured and often mirrored; voices and intervals are precisely preserved but also switched and inverted. Studying the Goldberg Variations served as a stepping stone towards an understanding of the *Art of Fugue*.

Variations are not easy to record. While there are landmark moments in which one can pause for breath, I felt it important to not simply start at the beginning and play until the end. While I had a mental image of the whole piece in my mind, I tried to play freely, with abandon, and to enjoy choosing which variations to record each day. As the recording began to take shape I played variations 26-30 sequentially and then gave my full emotional strength to the closing Aria, coming full circle, as the work intends. Perhaps strangely I felt that I now had the mental energy to play it all over again.

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Title page of the first published score

The Pianist

Diana Boyle was born in London and educated at St Paul's Girls School. She won a Foundation Scholarship to the Royal College of Music at the age of 15, and continued her studies under Enrique Barenboim in Tel Aviv. In 1973 she was awarded a Fulbright Scholarship to study with Artur Balsam in New York. Balsam's profound musical insight into the classical and chamber music repertoire, together with his friendship and encouragement until his death in 1994, proved to be the pivotal influence on Diana's musical life.

After making her London recital debut in 1979, Diana gave concerts in the USA, Canada, Spain, Portugal and England. She also taught piano and chamber music in London and at summer chamber music courses in the USA.

In 1987, she was invited to make a series of recordings for National Public Radio in Boston. This included the Bach Partitas, late Schubert Sonatas and Beethoven's *Diabelli Variations*. The Beethoven recording was originally released on CD by Centaur Records USA in 1989 and is now on Divine Art as a digital only release.

In 1990 Diana returned to the Bach Partitas, recording this time at Forde Abbey, England. A programme of late Brahms piano works followed in 1994 and in 1997-8 Diana recorded Book 2 of Bach's *Well Tempered Clavier* (released by Métier, in 2000). This recording of Bach's *Goldberg Variations* was made in 2003, and in 2007 Diana recorded the *Art of Fugue*

(issued by Divine Art in 2011). This was followed by a double album of Mozart Piano Sonatas (Divine Art, 2016).

Diana has a fascination for the recording process: The years of preparation, followed by intense recording sessions and many months of score marking and making all editorial decisions. She has been able to think about music with deep concentration and in privacy for twenty five years.

Enormous thanks must go to Brad Michel, her sound engineer for all the recordings. Brad has been the most loyal and patient of colleagues, contributing hugely with his exceptional technical skills and acute ear for the tiniest differentials during recording and editing.

In 2001 Diana moved from London to a quiet hilltop in the south of Portugal, where the quality of light, astonishing sunsets and silence have enabled her to think about music in peace and solitude.

She is currently working on another Bach project.



**Diana
Boyle**

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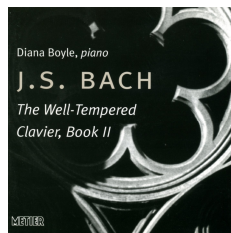
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Johann Sebastian Bach



Diana Boyle

Recorded at Forde Abbey, Dorset, England, June 10-16, 2003

Sound engineer: Brad Michel

Producer: Diana Boyle

Piano: Grotrian-Steinweg 225

Booklet design: Stephen Sutton (Divine Art)

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