

Richard  
Lester  
Harpsichord

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Nimbus Records

J S Bach  
Volume 1

Richard Lester, harpsichord

Disc 1

Goldberg Variations

'Aria mit verschiedenen Veränderungen', BWV 988

1	Aria - Variation 1 a 1 Clav.	6.45
2	Variation 2 a 1 Clav.	1.48
3	Variation 3 a 1 Clav. Canone all'Unisono	2.17
4	Variation 4 a 1 Clav.	1.11
5	Variation 5 a 1 ô vero 2 Clav.	2.07
6	Variation 6 a 1 Clav. Canone alla Seconda	1.37
7	Variation 7 a 1 ô vero 2 Clav. al tempo di Giga	2.03
8	Variation 8 a 2 Clav.	2.37
9	Variation 9 Canone alla Terza a 1 Clav.	1.03
10	Variation 10 Fughetta a 1 Clav.	1.44
11	Variation 11 a 2 Clav.	2.51
12	Variation 12 Canone alla Quarta a 1 Clav.	1.48
13	Variation 13 a 2 Clav.	2.49
14	Variation 14 a 2 Clav.	2.35
15	Variation 15 Canone alla Quinta a 1 Clav.	2.26
16	Variation 16 Ouverture a 1 Clav.	3.25
17	Variation 17 a 2 Clav.	2.33
18	Variation 18 Canone alla Sesta a 1 Clav.	1.38
19	Variation 19 a 1 Clav.	1.32
20	Variation 20 a 2 Clav.	2.45
21	Variation 21 Canone alla Settima a 1 Clav	1.48
22	Variation 22 a 1 Clav. alla breve	1.32

23	Variation 23 a 2 Clav.	2.54
24	Variation 24 Canone all'Ottava a 1 Clav.	1.46
25	Variation 25 a 2 Clav.	7.07
26	Variation 26 a 2 Clav.	2.52
27	Variation 27 Canone alla Nona a 2 Clav.	2.19
28	Variation 28 a 2 Clav.	2.55
29	Variation 29 a 1 ô vero 2 Clav.	2.47
30	Variation 30 Quodlibet a 1 Clav.	1.57
31	Aria da Capo	2.31

Total playing time 78.19

## Disc 2

### Concerto in the Italian Style BWV 971

1	I [Allegro]	4.05
2	II Andante	4.38
3	III Presto	4.09

4	Toccata in D major BWV 912	10.50
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### Capriccio on the departure of a beloved brother BWV 992

5	I Arioso His friends try to persuade him not to go	2.07
6	II Andante (Fugato) They describe the various accidents that might befall him	1.46
7	III Adagissimo They join in a lament	2.50
8	IV Seeing that there is no hope of persuading him, they say goodbye	0.46
9	V Aria di Postiglione. Adagio poco	1.37
10	VI Fuga. Imitating the posthorn	2.49

	Chromatic Fantasia and Fugue in D minor BWV 903	
11		6.45
12		5.47
	Six Little Preludes BWV 933-938	
13	I C major	2.05
14	II C minor	1.56
15	III D minor	2.02
16	IV D major	2.12
17	V E major	2.03
18	VI E minor	2.17
19	Toccata in E minor BWV 914	8.17
20	Fantasia in C minor BWV 906	5.31
		Total playing time 74.40

This recording released in 2017 is in memory of George Malcolm (1917-1997), a great friend and enlightening teacher, whose encouragement was a constant source of inspiration. Also to my friend and mentor, the great Spanish/American harpsichordist, Fernando Valenti (1926-1990)

Recording & Editing by Paul Arden-Taylor

Cover photo : Portrait of J S Bach, by Elias Gottlob Haussmann (c. 1745)

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## THE GOLDBERG VARIATIONS

The Goldberg variations, according to Bach's biographer, Johann Nikolaus Forkel, were written at the instigation of a certain Count von Keyserlingk, who suffered particularly from insomnia. In his biography, published in 1802, some sixty years after the work's publication in 1741, Forkel writes:

‘[For this work] we have to thank the instigation of the former Russian ambassador to the electoral court of Saxony, Count Keyserlingk, who often stopped in Leipzig and brought there with him the aforementioned Goldberg, in order to have him given musical instruction by Bach. The Count was often ill and had sleepless nights. At such times, Goldberg, who lived in his house, had to spend the night in an antechamber, so as to play for him during his insomnia. ... Once the Count mentioned in Bach's presence that he would like to have some clavier pieces for Goldberg, which should be of such a smooth and somewhat lively character that he might be a little cheered up by them in his sleepless nights. Bach thought himself best able to fulfil this wish by means of Variations, the writing of which he had until then considered an ungrateful task on account of the repeatedly similar harmonic foundation. But since at this time all his works were already models of art, such also these variations became under his hand. Yet he produced only a single work of this kind. Thereafter the Count always called them *his* variations. He never tired of them, and for a long time sleepless nights meant: ‘Dear Goldberg, do play me one of my variations’. Bach was perhaps never so rewarded for one of his works as for this. The Count presented him with a golden goblet filled with one hundred *louis-d’or*. Nevertheless, even had the gift been a thousand times larger, their artistic value would not yet have been paid for.’

The title page of the 1741 manuscript reads in German as follows:

*Clavier Übung / bestehend / in einer ARIA / mit verschiedenen Veränderungen / vors Clavicimbal / mit 2 Manualen. / Denen Liebhabern zur Gemüths- / Ergeitzung verfertigt von / Johann Sebastian Bach / Königl. Pohl. u. Churfl. Sæchs. Hoff- / Compositeur, Capellmeister, u. Directore / Chori Musici in Leipzig. / Nürnberg in Verlegung / Balthasar Schmids*

*Keyboard exercise, consisting of an ARIA with diverse variations for harpsichord with two manuals. Composed for connoisseurs, for the refreshment of their spirits, by Johann Sebastian Bach, composer for the royal court of Poland and the Electoral court of Saxony, Kapellmeister and Director of Choral Music in Leipzig. Nuremberg, Balthasar Schmid, publisher.*

The absence of a dedication on the title page renders Forkel's account rather spurious. Another factor contributing to his unlikely anecdote is that Goldberg was only fourteen at the time of publication and would neither have possessed the technique nor the musical prowess to perform them competently.

The variations are founded on the opening Aria, not, however, the highly ornamented melodic treble line, but on the bass and chordal implications of the left. This, followed by a series of thirty contrasting variations, reiterates the harmonic associations of that bass, although never stated entirely in its most original form.

Every third variation is a canon based at various intervals successively from the unison through to the ninth; those at the fourth and fifth are in contrary motion. The final variation (30) however is not a canon at the tenth as one would expect, but a Quodlibet, a piece of music combining various popular German melodies. The remaining variations between the canons are also arranged in a particular pattern. Those after each canon comprise Baroque dance forms (4; 7 (al tempo do Giga); 10 Fughetta); 16 (Ouverture); 19 and two ornate 'arias' (13 and 25). Those variations located two after each canon (5, 8, 11, 14, 17, 20, 23, 26 and 29), are lively hand crossing 'inventions' in filigree/arabesque style. The work ends with a repeat of the opening Aria.

An amusing anecdote to Forkel's spurious story occurred recently. My wife's sister had come to stay and her first night in a strange bed gave her a sleepless night. The following morning whilst I was practising, she sat in the armchair yawning as she read the paper. 'They're lovely pieces,' she said, in yawning tones. 'What are they?' I then related Forkel's account of the Count's sleepless nights. 'Well, they're certainly working on me,' she replied.

## THE VARIATIONS

### Aria

The variations are based on a long thirty-two note ground bass and its implied harmony which stimulates the 30 variations that follow. Above this ground bass floats a delicate melodic line, palpable for its sheer simplistic beauty. It is termed by some as a *Sarabande*, a slow dance in triple time. Bach wrote many, scattered throughout his vast output, including the keyboard Partitas and Suites. Fernando Valenti, the great Spanish/American harpsichordist, once observed that in the first Partita in B flat major BWV 825, the Sarabande's 'gravity imposed on the second beats of measures, is a common characteristic of sarabandes.' This characteristic however is absent in the Goldberg 'sarabande' and Bach's 'liberties' with the genre prompted Valenti to quip amusingly that the sarabande of the VIth Partita 'was the ultimate pulverisation of a dance form in all of Bach's works.'

### Variatio 1. a 1 Clav.

The first variation in contrast to the contemplative Aria weaves syncopated contrapuntal ingenuity in dance-like rhythms and hand crossings.

### Variatio 2. a 1 Clav

The second variation in 2/4 time is conceived in three part counterpoint, the upper two parts constantly interacting with an undulant bass line.

### Variatio 3. Canone all'Unisono. a 1 Clav.

The mood of variation 3 for me, changes here to a livelier response to the meditative mood of the Aria, and is the first variation in canonic form; here, the thematic material of the treble is repeated exactly at the same pitch one bar later.

### Variatio 4. a 1 Clav.

Variation 4 is cheerful and balletic and conceived in imitative form with the musical motif often playfully inverted. There is really no basis for calling this a *Passepied* as some musicologists insist. It does not begin on an upbeat, a characteristic of the dance, and although mainly set in four bar phrases, another distinguishing feature, syncopation from bar 9 to 16 also rules out any comparison.

Variatio 5. a 1 ô vero 2 Clav.

Bach conceived this variation, together with eleven others for two manuals: Variations 8, 11, 13, 14, 17, 20, 23, 25, 26, 27 and 28; whilst variations 5, 7 and 29, are specified as playable on either one or two manuals. The leapfrog figurations cavort playfully with implied accents on the last beat of the bar. It is extremely difficult to execute on one keyboard those variations specifically marked for two. The two voices should be of equal strength and, or, contrasting in timbre, and whilst the skilful pianist may be able to achieve this, the upper and lower 8' registers of the harpsichord provide the essential tonal disparity.

Variatio 6. Canone alla Seconda. a 1 Clav.

The second variation in canonic form follows at the interval of a second with the principal theme repeated a major second higher. Figurations based on descending scale motifs tug at the heartstrings through a series of tied suspensions.

Variatio 7. a 1 ô vero 2 Clav. al tempo di giga

Although in his initial manuscript, Bach writes *al tempo di giga*, indicating the Italian type of the dance, it has been argued that this is in fact a French *gigue*. I don't actually believe that Bach was imitating any particular form of the dance. In marking 'al tempo di giga', one assumes that he was looking for a livelier tempo. However, played buoyantly and with rhythmic impetus, the momentum should be sufficient to provide exactly the right spirit for this dance. Joachim Quantz: (*Versuch einer Anweisung die Flöte traversiere zu spielen*, 1732) states 'The Gigue and the Canarie have the same movement. If written in 6/8 time, each bar one [human] pulse beat.' This is extremely fast, of course. According to Johann Mattheson: (*Critica musica. 2 vols. Hamburg 1722-25*), 'extreme speed, volatility.....frequently in a flowing, uninterrupted manner.'

Variatio 8. a 2 Clav.

A two part contrapuntal exercise, possibly imitating the *pièce croisée* of Couperin, the hands playing vertically above one another. Mostly written in semi-quavers, the opening consists of irregular phrases followed by a series of capricious answers that miraculously balance.

Variatio 9. Canone alla Terza. a 1 Clav.

Bach was generally fairly sparing with tempo indications and only two variations bear markings: (15) (Andante) and (25) (Adagio). I feel that a fairly fast tempo suits variation 9, the long melodic lines lending themselves to a swifter pulse.



Variatio 10. Fughetta. a 1 Clav.

The subject is announced in the bass, with the tonal answer appearing in the tenor. The binary form format of this variation (not normally part of fugal form), provides a short, but effective excursion into the genre.

Variatio 11. a 2 Clav.

More vocal in character than variation 8, the descending thematic material of the opening phrases are answered by inventive arpeggiated sequences accompanied, in part, by trills followed by balletic figurations.

Variatio 12. a 1 Clav. Canone alla Quarta in moto contrario

This is a canon at the fourth where the motif is answered in contrary motion in bar 2. To provide a steady tactus, the bass line repeats the Aria's theme in crotchets for the initial bars.

Variatio 13. a 2 Clav.

A single melodic voice weaves its spell slowly over a two part elementary accompaniment.

Variatio 14. a 2 Clav.

Hand crossings at extreme ends of the keyboard dominate, followed by a series of rapid burlesque style mordents that monopolize the central section, descending in the first half, only to re-appear inverted in the second half.

Variatio 15. Canone alla Quinta. a 1 Clav.: Andante

In the tonic minor (the first of three), the melancholic motif of this variation appears inverted in bar two. The variation ends on the interval of a fifth, four octaves apart.

Variatio 16. Ouverture. a 1 Clav.

The variations divide neatly into two halves, clearly defined by this grand Overture in the French style commencing with declamatory opening and closing chords. This stately prelude, with its dotted rhythms and flourishes, precedes a brisk, fugue-like contrapuntal section. Bach favoured this so-called French style, originally introduced in the mid-seventeenth century by Jean-Baptiste Lully, and used it several times, most notably in the opening of each of his Orchestral Suites. There is also an Overture in the French style BWV 831 for keyboard.

Variatio 17. a 2 Clav.

Another hand crossing variation in 3/4 specified for two manuals, and an exercise in perpetual motion, the semi-quaver movement occasionally interrupted in one hand, whilst continuing in the other.

Variatio 18. Canone alla Sesta. a 1 Clav.

This is a canon at the sixth in 2/2 time. The interplay in the upper voices features numerous suspensions.

Variatio 19. a 1 Clav

Variation 19 is a three-part 'invention' in 3/8 featuring continuously exchanging voices. I play the whole movement on the harp or buff stop, a device where pieces of felt mute the strings.

Variatio 20. a 2 Clav.

Rapid hand-crossing in Scarlattian mode permeates this variation. Quavers accompanied by 'pizzicato' semi-quavers are relieved by triplet figurations that accompany cleverly camouflaged fragments of the Aria's bass line and harmonies.

Variatio 21. Canone alla Settima

Sombre in mood, this variation has all the elements of heartbreak in complete contrast to the variations on either side.

Variatio 22. a 1 Clav. alla breve

Bach reminds us of the simplistic ground bass in this lively four-part variation.

Variatio 23. a 2 Clav.

The hands pursue one another in cascading semi-quaver thirds that unfold in disparate jocular interplay. The opening is reminiscent of *La Joyeuse* from Rameau's Suite in D major.

Variatio 24. Canone all'Ottava. a 1 Clav.

This variation is a canon at the octave, in 9/8 time. The opening theme in the treble is answered an octave below in the tenor three bars later.

Variatio 25. a 2 Clav. Adagio

Variation 25 is one of the most beautiful movements of the whole work with a chromatic melodic line and harmonies of great invention, reminiscent of parts of the *St Matthew Passion*.

Peter Williams writes, that ‘the beauty and dark passion of this variation make it unquestionably the emotional high point of the work.’

Variatio 26. a 2 Clav.

Bach ingeniously ‘disguises’ a slow sarabande type dance in 3/4 against a virtuoso semi-quaver movement in 18/16. The dance finally yields to an outburst of semi-quavers in both hands that brilliantly concludes the movement.

Variatio 27. Canone alla Nona. a 2 Clav.

Variation 27 is a canon at the ninth and the only pure canon of the set, possessing no bass line. Although two manuals are specified, no hand-crossing difficulties are present and one assumes that the two contrasting colours help identify the two voices.

Variatio 28. a 2 Clav.

Playful, leapfrog interplay between the hands energizes written-out trills, which are answered by melodic contours in contrary motion. Mirrored trills conclude this singular variation.

Variatio 29. a 1 ô vero 2 Clav.

This variation, a brilliant toccata-like piece, alternates strong chordal sections with brilliantly arpeggiated figurations between the hands.

Variatio 30. a 1 Clav. Quodlibet

A Quodlibet is based on numerous German folk songs, usually of rather jocular mood, two of which, combined with the bass of the aria, are used for this variation: ‘Ich bin solang nicht bei dir g'west, ruck her, ruck her’ (*I have so long been away from you, come closer, come closer*), and ‘Kraut und Rüben haben mich vertrieben, hätt mein’ Mutter Fleisch gekocht, wär ich länger blieben’ (*Cabbage and turnips have driven me away, had my mother cooked meat, I'd have chosen to stay*). As Forkel points out, this custom was observed at Bach family reunions:

‘As soon as they were assembled a chorale was first struck up. From this devout beginning they proceeded to jokes, which were frequently in strong contrast. That is, they then sang popular songs partly of comic and also partly of indecent content, all mixed together on the spur of the moment. This kind of improvised harmonizing they called a Quodlibet.’

With that in mind I have taken the liberty of embellishing the repeats.

Aria da Capo: The work closes as sleepily as it began with identical ornamentation, although I hope listeners will find my additional ornamentation to their taste.

## DISC 2

The Italian Concerto, or *Concerto in the Italian Style* was written in 1735, and with the French Overture, forms the Clavier-Übung II. Bach's decision to write in those styles was quite probably prompted by the popularity in Germany of the two genres. The Italian Concerto is arguably his most popular work for keyboard, and he imitates the effect of contrasting groups of instrumental ensemble with 'Piano' and 'Forte' markings in the concertino sections; a hallmark of the Italian Concerto Grosso. The outer movements are in ritornello form, whilst the contrasting Andante is in florid *Arioso* style.

The Toccata in D major and E minor, thought to be early works, are two of seven imitating the 16th and 17th century Italian improvisatory style exemplified by Claudio Merulo and Girolamo Frescobaldi. It is a fact that Bach had studied the works of the Italian and French masters and their styles were often reflected in his writing. Bach, along with Buxtehude refreshed the Italian medium to suit German taste, and the two examples in this programme are classic examples. The free style introductory opening of the D major Toccata gives way to a fugal section followed by an Adagio. The piece ends with a brilliant fugue in gigue character. The E minor Toccata follows a similar pattern beginning with a short prelude followed by a four voice double fugue. After an elaborate Adagio, the work ends with a joyous three voice fugue.

The *Capriccio on the departure of a beloved brother* is thought to have been written in 1704 as a tribute to his elder brother, Johann Jacob who was leaving to take up a music post at the court of the Swedish King. The six movements outline the brother's departure: In the first, friends gather to plead with him not to leave. In the second they warn of dangers. The sadness of his friends is movingly conveyed in the third movement through sighing motifs and a beautifully crafted melodic line over a figured bass in the minor key. The friends, realising that he cannot be dissuaded from going, bid him a fond farewell in the fourth and more joyous movement. The distant post horn can be heard in the fifth movement as the carriage arrives. The final movement is a fugue on the post horn theme.

The Chromatic Fantasia and Fugue follows the improvisatory style of the toccatas, but on a much grander and more expressive scale, although it stands on its own as a one off, thought to have been written during his time in Köthen from 1717 to 1723. The whole of the Fantasia is in extemporaneous mood swinging between joy and pathos with runs and arpeggiated sections that merge into recitative mode, characterised with ornaments and expressive motifs of incredible beauty. The movement ends with falling diminished seventh chords which to my mind suggests a more tranquil conclusion. The peaceful opening of the fugue gains both momentum and grandeur towards an exultant ending.

The six Little Preludes, possibly written around 1717 form a delightful group of short instructional pieces that perhaps capture the spirit of Bach's Inventions written a little later. All are in binary form.

The Fantasia in C minor survives in an autograph manuscript with an incomplete fugue. The Fantasia, usually performed on its own is in binary form. The opening descending figuration is mimicked throughout between the two hands with episodes that frequently see the left hand crossing the right. The second half imitates the opening in the dominant key and the work concludes with reflections of the opening the home key.

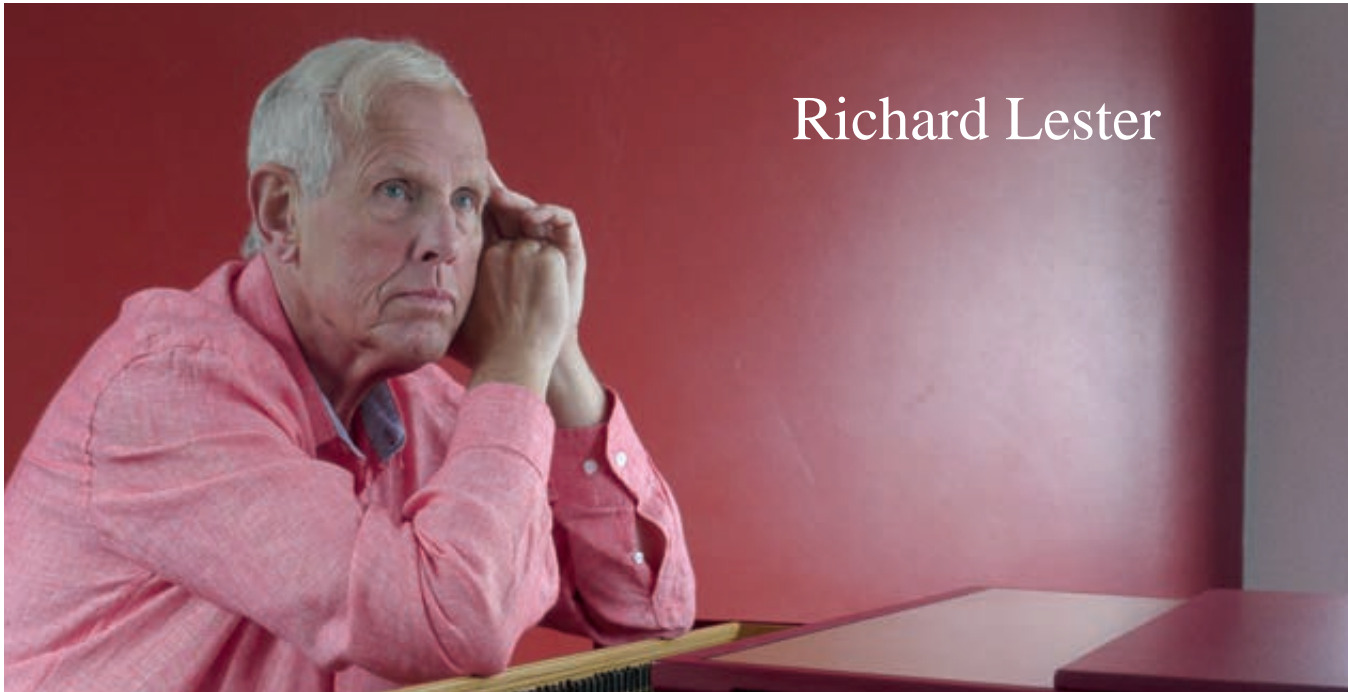
## THE HARPSICHORDS

The main instrument on this recording, a double manual harpsichord built in 2011 by Colin Booth, is derived from a single manual instrument by the Hamburg builder, Johann Christoph Fleischer and is dated 1710. The original is housed in the Musikinstrumenten-Museum in Berlin. There are two eight-foot registers strung in iron and red brass, a four-foot stop and a harp or buff stop. The temperament is my own modification of Neidhardt and the pitch is 415hz. The painting, also by Colin Booth is a copy of John William Waterhouse's Eco and Narcissus from Ovid's Metamorphosis, in the Walker Art Gallery in Liverpool, Merseyside. On the smaller lid is the Latin inscription MVSICA SICUT AMOR DONVM DEI (Music, like love is a gift from God)

The instrument used for the Toccata in D major, also by Colin Booth, is a copy of a 17th century single manual Italian harpsichord with two eight foot registers. Pitch A=440hz, tuned to Werkmeister III

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Richard Lester

Richard Lester has been at the centre of early keyboard music for fifty years with a professional career that began in 1966. His teacher, George Malcolm generously promoted his debut recital at the Wigmore Hall, and from that followed concerts including the Royal Festival Hall Purcell Room, master-classes and recitals at Dartington International Summer School, Bruges Festival and the Bath International Festival. As a Fellow of the London College of Music, he has given many organ recitals in King's College, Cambridge, St Paul's Cathedral, Westminster Cathedral, Ely Cathedral, Coventry, and in 2013 he was invited to perform in St Mark's, Venice, and Bergamo Cathedral. His vast discography for Nimbus Records is acclaimed world-wide and includes: the complete keyboard sonatas of Domenico Scarlatti; the majority of Girolamo Frescobaldi's keyboard works on original instruments, organ masses by Girolamo Cavazzoni, Andrea Gabrieli and Claudio Merulo; and sonatas by Carlos Seixas, Antonio Soler, Joseph Haydn and Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart. He has also compiled and edited a volume of Italian Renaissance keyboard works which includes a DVD on early fingering and ornamentation plus a CD demonstrating works by composers associated with St Mark's in Venice (also published and available from Nimbus). A review on MusicWeb International commented: 'A master-class and entertainment in one.'



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# J S Bach - Volume 1

## Richard Lester, harpsichord

J S BACH VOL 1 : GOLDBERG VAR / ITALIAN CONCERTO ETC  
RICHARD LESTER, HARPSICHORD

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RICHARD LESTER, HARPSICHORD

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Total playing time 153 minutes



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