



J.S. BACH
GOLDBERG VARIATIONS
GEOFFREY MADGE

Johann Sebastian Bach

The Goldberg Variations, BWV 988

The Goldberg Variations by J.S. Bach were first published in 1741. Bach wrote the work for the brilliant harpsichordist Johann Gottlieb Goldberg and it remains the great masterpiece of the variation form, indeed one of the major works ever written for the keyboard. Only the *Diabelli Variations op. 120* by Ludwig van Beethoven are of the same stature in the keyboard literature. It is one of the most challenging works, musically and technically very demanding as it was written for a keyboard with two manuals. We can assume that Johann Gottlieb Goldberg must have been an incredible musician to inspire Bach to write this work.

Count Kaiserling who suffered from insomnia, said, according to Forkel (the first biographer of Bach) "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 he could fulfill this wish by means of the *Goldberg Variations*."

Perhaps the Count did need to have Goldberg play for him so as to make the sleepless hours bearable, unfortunately the whole story may have no strong foundation. However, it is a nice anecdote!

In the 18th century the *Goldberg Variations* took keyboard music to a new, unheard-of level. Not only because of their technical excellence but especially because of their miraculous wealth of expressions, you hear during the aria and the 30 variations.

On listening to *The Goldberg Variations*

It may help the listener to know that the aria theme is in two parts, likewise the variations that follow. The first part proceeding harmonically to the dominant tonality (D), then, following a short break, the second part returning from the dominant to the tonic (G). The main harmonic development is often heard during the second part of each variation. This can perhaps best be heard in the minor key variations.

During the cycle we hear various dance forms and amazing canons in which the themes are imitated at different melodic intervals, showing not only Bach's technical wizardry, but also, during the variations in the minor key, some of his most personal expressions. Reaching their climax in variation 25, surely one of the great moments in musical literature and the highlight of the cycle.

In Bach's time it was not necessary, or even normal, to play the work complete as we hear it nowadays in

one performance. The variations could be played separately, with or without repeats. Bach sometimes indicates a repeat of each half of a variation with a written out musical text, in these cases we should listen to the master.

I started performing the *Goldberg Variations* approximately 40 years ago. From then on until this day I have experienced every performance as a new event. Each time is a re-discovery of the infinite possibilities that are contained in the score. Impossible to include all in one performance.

Because of this in each of my concerts I have concentrated on different aspects. Sometimes passages strictly in tempo, other moments introducing a little more freedom while trying to keep a sensible middle balance. This remains for every performer one of the most difficult achievements. For instance, how to retain a strictness and at the same time keep an emotional freedom that

reflects the meaning behind the notes. This in combination with the enormous contrasts that occur from one variation to another. One moment music that could be taken from one of the passions of Bach and the next moment a completely different expression! In this respect I am a great admirer of the old recordings from the 1930's by Edwin Fischer.

Another point to consider in a performance is the important preface that Bach wrote for his two- and three part inventions, where he speaks of the legato cantabile style, with a singing melodic line. Surely this is one of the essential principles of any serious performance of any keyboard work by Bach.

We should also consider his high regard for the intimacy of the clavichord with its subtle nuances within a low dynamic range, something we are not accustomed to today. This is an area

sometimes forgotten in present day Bach performances when hammered in a continuous forte or even louder. This in combination with fast tempos which sound completely out of place considering the keyboard instruments of Bach's time. We should not have to "tell" the music but let the music with its myriad of voices speak to us.

Concerning the question of tempo in the *Goldberg Variations* it is so easy to be influenced by several of the great interpreters of the past. The two opposites Wanda Landowska and Glenn Gould for instance. Glenn Gould, who has been very successful in bringing this masterpiece to the greater general public with his various recordings, variations that are sometimes very slow and sometimes very fast.

Then there is the question of articulation and the possibilities of different grades of staccato and legato. We know that Bach enjoyed playing



on the clavichord which, in many ways, is a predecessor of the present-day pianoforte. On the clavichord you could play louder or softer, the general dynamics being soft. In this respect we need to be careful not to go to the extreme with a steady *ff*, which is so much louder than the sound any clavichord could produce.

I believe that many of the variations should be played intimately, as if in a small room with just a few friends listening. The acoustics, the instrument, the listener and Bach must have their space in the dialogue. Many of Bach's keyboard works have been inspired not only by vocal virtuosity but also by different instruments, especially the string- and baroque wind instruments (variation 16), and of course the organ. Many passages and variations feel as if they are composed with another instrument in mind. Some of them feel and sound as if a violinist or cellist is playing. I believe that this should be

part of any interpretation, no matter on which instrument it is played.

Then finally the infinite possibilities of the independence of Bach's polyphonic lines. The performer needs to have a good control of voicing. And that often within a dynamic range that remains intimate. The wisdom of life speaks in every variation. The repeated aria as the finale of the whole series of variations is a totally different experience than the same aria as played at the beginning. In these moments Bach's time becomes also ours, timeless.

—Geoffrey Mudge

Geoffrey Madge

Geoffrey Douglas Madge, born in Adelaide (Australia) in 1941. He studied piano and composition at the Elder Conservatorium in Adelaide. After winning first prize in the ABC piano competition in Sydney, he went to Europe where he studied with Geza Anda and Eduardo del Pueyo.

He gave successful debut concerts in London, Cologne, Budapest and Amsterdam. In 1972 he moved to The Netherlands following his appointment as professor of piano at the Royal Conservatorium in The Hague, a position he held until his retirement in 2006.

Following a meeting in London in 1970 with the celebrated composer Iannis Xenakis, he gave many performances of his complete piano works. One of the highlights in Geoffrey Madge's cooperation with Xenakis was his very successful contribution to the Xenakis Festival in 1975 in Athens with *Herma*, *Evrjali* and *Synaphai*. In that year the new Greek government, replacing the

facist regime of the colonels, decided to celebrate the new freedom by honouring Iannis Xenakis with three major concerts in a Xenakis Festival at the Herodus Atticus Theatre in Athens.

In 1975 Decca recorded his first piano concerto *Synaphai* with Geoffrey Madge as soloist and the New Philharmonia Orchestra. This recording was awarded the Dutch Edison award.

In 1988 Philips issued Madge's anthology of Ferruccio Busoni's solo piano works on six CD's. This production was an international success and received many prizes, including another Dutch Edison award and the Belgian Caecilia Prize. His performances of the monumental Busoni Piano Concerto in a number of international festivals have received rave critical response.

In the 1980's he became well-known worldwide through his integral performances of the monumental *Opus*



Clavicembalisticum by K. Sorabji. He was the first and only to get permission from the composer to perform this mammoth 3½ hour work. Since his first complete performance of O.C. in the Holland Festival (Utrecht) on June 11 1982, more performances followed in Chicago, London, Bonn, Montreal, Paris and Berlin. The release of the five CD production by BIS of his Chicago performance, recorded and filmed by WFMT Chicago, received high critical acclaim.

Madge has meanwhile composed a considerable amount of music, including string quartets, songs, works for piano solo, a ballet *Monkeys in a cage*, premiered in the Sydney Opera House in 1977 followed by 30 performances and a piano concerto, premiered in Amsterdam in 1985.

Through his connection with the Greek musical world he came into contact with the Nikos Skalkottas Society in



Athens and was asked by the president of the Society to give the first complete performance of the cycle of Skalkottas' *32 Piano Pieces* during the 1979 ISCM Festival. In 1998 the Swedish label BIS invited him to record the piano concertos as part of their Skalkottas project.

Geoffrey Madge's repertoire is extensive with unique programmes that are a combination of baroque, classical, 19th century and many contemporary works. More recently he has been performing Bach's *Goldberg Variations*, the *Well-tempered Clavier*, Beethoven's *Diabelli Variations* and *Hammerklavier Sonata*, the late sonatas by Schubert, Reger's *Bach Variations* and the *Debussy Etudes*.

Amongst his many CD releases, which include the Bach/Busoni transcriptions, nine CD's of works by Leopold Godowsky including his complete *Chopin Etudes*, Dimitri Mitropoulos, Julius Reubke, Ernst Krenek, Stefan

Wolpe, Iannis Xenakis, Russian music from the 1920's, Medtner's three piano concertos, George Gershwin's *Piano Concerto* and his *Rhapsody in Blue*.

Geoffrey Madge has given masterclasses in Russia, India, Poland, France, England, Germany, Australia and Holland.

In September 2005 he was awarded the prestigious Polish Silver Medal "For Merits to Culture Gloria Artis" for his very prominent artistic creations and great contribution to culture.

The Goldberg Variations

BWV 988

1	5'32	Aria	
2	2'08	Variatio 1	
3	1'39	Variatio 2	
4	1'10	Variatio 3	Canone all'Unisono
5	1'13	Variatio 4	
6	1'37	Variatio 5	
7	1'26	Variatio 6	Canone alla Seconda
8	2'14	Variatio 7	Al tempo di Giga
9	2'06	Variatio 8	
10	2'05	Variatio 9	Canone alla Terza
11	1'52	Variatio 10	Fughetta
12	1'05	Variatio 11	
13	1'59	Variatio 12	Canone alla Quarta
14	7'14	Variatio 13	
15	1'24	Variatio 14	
16	2'25	Variatio 15	Canone alla Quinta. Andante

17	3'35	Variatio 16	Ouverture
18	1'09	Variatio 17	
19	1'05	Variatio 18	Canone alla Sesta
20	2'27	Variatio 19	
21	1'14	Variatio 20	
22	2'21	Variatio 21	Canone alla Settima
23	1'08	Variatio 22	Alla breve
24	2'29	Variatio 23	
25	1'28	Variatio 24	Canone all'Ottava
26	10'04	Variatio 25	Adagio
27	1'09	Variatio 26	
28	1'01	Variatio 27	Canone alla Nona
29	1'24	Variatio 28	
30	1'17	Variatio 29	
31	2'02	Variatio 30	Quodlibet
32	5'48	Aria da capo	

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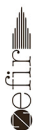


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Geoffrey Madge
piano

total time: 76'53

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