

BACH GOLDBERG
VARIATIONS

Lori Sims

Despite being widely disputed, it is often stated that Bach wrote the *Goldberg Variations* in 1741 for his virtuoso student Johann Goldberg to play for his insomniac patron Count Kaiserling on sleepless nights. Regardless of how interesting this tidbit of apocryphal trivia may be, this work stands on its own for many other reasons. Its dizzying acrobatic pianism, its profound emotional scope, and its diverse compositional complexity grounded in unity all warrant prolific commentary and analysis; however, as its popularity suggests, it is also extremely accessible for those who are unaware of these details. Still, the ever-changing 80-minute journey of the Goldberg and the demands it makes on its listeners compels me to offer a road map of this work's ingenious structure along with some personal reflections as a means of increasing appreciation for the magnitude of Bach's contribution to humanity.

The *Goldberg Variations* is comprised of a main idea labeled "aria" (meaning a smooth air-like melody), followed by 30 variations, and ending with a note-for-note return of the aria as it was at the start of the work. This "aria" is in the style of a slow Sarabande in triple meter, with two repeated 16-measure sections that make an "AABB" binary form. Its readily recognized bass line and basic harmonic outline are the foundation

of every variation. You will not necessarily hear this, but even if you don't, it is subliminally communicating organization to you.

In some of my previous live performances, I have played the variations without repeats to make a condensed 40-minute work, yet it always feels like a "Twitter" version. In this recorded performance, I have opted for all the repeats except those in the final Aria. You will notice that I ornament the repeats (the second "A" and the second "B" sections)—this was expected in the Baroque era, for it offered the performer the opportunity to personalize the work while exploring additional possibilities of each variation.

In Variations 3 through 29, a more noticeable pattern unfolds in each group of three consecutive variations: a canon (var. 3, 6, 9, etc.), followed by a free "dance" variation (var. 4, 7, 10 etc.), and then a virtuosic variation that is either flashy, difficult, exciting, precarious or all of those things (var. 5, 8, 11 etc.). The entire work also divides itself into two distinct large-scale sections, with Variation 16 and its "French Overture" style marking the triumphant start of the second half.

The nine canons have a clever and increasingly challenging structure: The first (Variation 3) is a "canon

at the unison”—similar to “Row, Row, Row Your Boat,” with the follower exactly copying the leader one measure later. The remaining canons expand the harmonic distance between leader and follower one step at a time, so the second canon (Variation 6) is a “canon at the 2nd” (meaning the follower echoes a major 2nd higher than the leader), Variation 9 is a “canon at the 3rd,” and so on until Variation 27 is a “canon at the 9th.” In the course of these canons, the voices constantly shift in relation to each other, and the phrase contour changes depending on where the dominant voice matches up harmonically with the accompaniment. Again, you may only be subliminally aware of all of this complexity, but knowing it is going on and that it is harmonious, not cacophonous, should increase your appreciation. In Variations 12 and 15, the follower’s intervals are “inverted” or “mirrored” as compared to those of the leader. At times, it is even difficult for me to constantly hear both voices in Variation 12, but I embrace the noisy party and absorb the joyous atmosphere rather than the details. Variation 24 (“canon at the octave”) is one of my favorites, because the canonic leader switches halfway through—that is to say the upper voice initially leads and the lower voice picks up the lead at the midpoint.

Variation 30 is labeled “Quodlibet,” which is a contrapuntal and often humorous combination of popular tunes. This variation features quotes from some much less sacred songs than we normally relate to Bach, such as “I’ve been away from you for so long—come closer, closer, closer,” and “Beets and spinach have driven me away—had my mother cooked some meat I’d have stayed longer.” In this next-to-the-last movement, is Bach poking fun at himself—that the beets and spinach of his variations drove us away from the Aria for so long, while urging us to come closer because we’re almost back to it?

In regards to the “free variations,” my interpretations are based on Baroque dances that were stylized by early-17th century French and German composers, with each dance having a specific step, purpose, and character. For example, Variation 7 (“al tempo di Giga”) assumes the cheery, dotted-rhythm, heavily-ornamented character of the French gigue that typically ended a Baroque dance suite. The giga is the only dance explicitly named in the Goldberg; however, each of the other variations harbors enough characteristics of a particular dance for me to interpret it as such. As mentioned previously, the Aria is in the style of a Sarabande, which was a rather bawdy, lascivious 15th-century Spanish dance that by

Bach's time had metamorphosed into a slow, sometimes heavily-ornamented showcase for a performer's most personal expression. The Sarabande has a hallmark rhythmic lilt, swinging at important junctures to accent the second beat of a triple meter. Bach revisits the Sarabande at Variation 13—which is a light reminder of the initial Aria, then again at Variation 25 (dubbed “The Black Pearl”)—where the Sarabande rhythm is hobbled as the right hand struggles against a metrically-conflicting left hand. This variation uses chromaticism almost to the point of harmonic distortion in order to evoke utter despair. The return of the Aria at the end of the work brings the Sarabande full-circle and rounds out the Goldberg's overall structure, bringing us back home onto solid ground after this wild adventure. In regards to other Baroque dances, Variation 18 (“canon at the sixth”) has a strong resemblance to a Bourrée in its skipping left hand rhythm. I treat Variation 19 like a Menuet—a simple, yet formal courtly dance in three, with some rhythmic flirtations.

The so-called “virtuoso variations” need no introduction: they are fast, complicated, and you will hear constant back-and-forth register changes that require pianistic acrobatics. These variations are likely derived from the spectacular one-movement sonatas

of Domenico Scarlatti, in particular his *30 Essercizi* (“Exercises”) published in 1738, which feature lots of hand crossing, repeated notes, and speedy passage work. These pyrotechnic exercises certainly could have been known to Bach by the time he wrote the Goldberg. Considering that the *Goldberg Variations* exploit an almost shameless virtuosity in a way really none of Bach's other pieces do, this conjecture has some merit.

On the title page, Bach says these are “diverse variations for harpsichord with two manuals [keyboards].” On such an instrument, the player's hands have a little more space to maneuver; however, when playing a transcription for a piano, the hands have to negotiate all this on one set of keys, which means there is a certain amount of skill and pre-planning required to avoid collisions and tangles when both hands are vying for the same notes or register. So, in many ways, the greatest initial challenge of Goldberg for a pianist is rehearsing the “finger choreography.”

Bach was an avid transcriber of works written by himself and others, so I approached my performance of his Goldberg with the same curiosity and enthusiasm. Since the piano is the acoustic instrument most capable of imitating other instruments, I have tried to take full advantage of its complete expressive, coloristic,

and dynamic resources to mimic a wide range of sounds associated with Bach: the relentlessness of the harpsichord, the rubato employed by harpsichordists and organists, the sound of an organ in a large church, the Baroque trio sonata (with recorder, cello, and harpsichord continuo), a chorale setting, and the trumpet of *Brandenburg Concerto No. 2*—to name a few.

As Sir Thomas Browne said in his *Religio Medici* (1643) regarding the special power of well-ordered things in the universe:

“There is something in it of Divinity more than the ear discovers: it is an Hieroglyphical and shadowed lesson of the whole World, and creatures of God... In brief, it is a sensible fit of that harmony which intellectually sounds in the ear of God.”

This quote also graces the scholarly preface to the modern-clef edition of the *Goldberg Variations* published in 1938 by the renowned harpsichordist Ralph Kirkpatrick, which extensively details the many musical and interpretative considerations that make this work a prime example of such “Divinity.”

In today’s modern digital era, I could have tried to craft the “perfect” performance by going into a professional studio and recording each variation one-at-a-time with multiple chances, yet I believe that there is something

very special in doing the Goldberg in its entirety without pause. It was in the spirit of Browne’s quote that I decided to record the Goldberg Variations live. This recording embodies the combined “harmony” of Bach’s incredible musical sound and structure, my personal interpretation, the acoustics of the performance hall, and the real-time human connection with an audience experiencing all these things simultaneously with me—each in our own way but together. A magical emotional atmosphere develops as I and my audience make our way through the 80 minutes... there is that slight apprehension that I might not make it, the euphoria when I do, our both knowing that I could never do it this way again.

The significant body of Goldberg recordings includes some of the greatest keyboardists of the last 120 years: I humbly hope to add to it with this live collaboration of pianist and audience.

Lori Sims



JOHANN SEBASTIAN BACH (1685–1750)

TP1039244

Goldberg Variations, BWV 988 | Lori Sims (PIANO)

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|-----|------|--|-----|------|---|
| 1. | 3:55 | Aria | 18. | 1:50 | Variatio 17. a 2 Clav. |
| 2. | 1:46 | Variatio 1. a 1 Clav. | 19. | 1:34 | Variatio 18. Canone alla Sexta. a 1 Clav. |
| 3. | 1:36 | Variatio 2. a 1 Clav. | 20. | 1:13 | Variatio 19. a 1 Clav. |
| 4. | 2:04 | Variatio 3. Canone all'Unisuono a 1 Clav. | 21. | 1:56 | Variatio 20. a 2 Clav. |
| 5. | 1:01 | Variatio 4. a 1 Clav. | 22. | 2:43 | Variatio 21. Canone alla Settima. a 1 Clav. |
| 6. | 1:27 | Variatio 5. a 1 o vero 2 Clav. | 23. | 1:39 | Variatio 22. a 1 Clav. |
| 7. | 1:13 | Variatio 6. Canone alla Seconda. a 1 Clav. | 24. | 1:57 | Variatio 23. a 2 Clav. |
| 8. | 1:50 | Variatio 7. a 1 o vero 2 Clav. | 25. | 2:37 | Variatio 24. Canone all' Ottava. a 1 Clav. |
| 9. | 1:58 | Variatio 8. a 2 Clav. | 26. | 8:54 | Variatio 25. a 2 Clav. |
| 10. | 1:57 | Variatio 9. Canzone alla Terza. a 1 Clav. | 27. | 1:55 | Variatio 26. a 2 Clav. |
| 11. | 1:37 | Variatio 10. Fughetta. a 1 Clav. | 28. | 1:43 | Variatio 27. Canone alla Nona. a 2 Clav. |
| 12. | 1:51 | Variatio 11. a Clav. | 29. | 2:17 | Variatio 28. a 2 Clav. |
| 13. | 1:53 | Variatio 12. Canone alla Quarta. a 1 Clav. | 30. | 2:04 | Variatio 29. a 1 o vero 2 Clav. |
| 14. | 4:31 | Variatio 13. a 2 Clav. | 31. | 1:41 | Variatio 30. Quodlibet. a 1 Clav. |
| 15. | 2:04 | Variatio 14. a 2 Clav. | 32. | 2:32 | Aria da capo |
| 16. | 3:31 | Variatio 15. Canone alla Quinta. a 1 Clav. | | | |
| 17. | 3:05 | Variatio 16. Ouverture. a 1 Clav. | | | |

Total Time: 73:54:00

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