



KIRSHBAUM DEMLER & ASSOCIATES
711 WEST END AVENUE 5KN NEW YORK NY 10025
212 222 4843 TEL 212 222 7321 FAX WWW.KIRSHDEM.COM

ANDRÁS SCHIFF, Piano

Goldberg Variations – A guided tour

“Se non è vero, è ben trovato.” (If it isn’t true, it’s well invented.) Johann Nikolaus Forkel, in his 1802 biography of Johann Sebastian Bach described the history of the Goldberg Variations with the following anecdote: “Count Keyserlingk, formerly Russian ambassador to Saxony, often visited Leipzig. Among his servants there was a talented young man, Johann Gottlieb Goldberg – a harpsichordist (Cembalist) who was a pupil of Wilhelm Friedemann Bach and later of Johann Sebastian Bach himself. The count had been suffering from insomnia and ill-health and Goldberg, who also lived there, had to stay in the room next door to soothe his master’s suffering with music. Once the count asked Bach to compose some keyboard pieces for Goldberg, pieces of mellowness and gaiety that would enliven his sleepless nights. Bach decided to write a set of variations, a form that prior to this, hadn’t interested him much. Nevertheless, in his masterly hands, an exemplary work of art had been born. The count was so delighted with it, he called them ‘my variations’. He would often say: ‘My dear Goldberg, play me one of my variations.’ Bach had probably never been so generously rewarded for his music. The count gave him a golden goblet with a hundred Louis d’Or!”

Se non è vero, è ben trovato.

Like all legends, this one also suffers from dubious authenticity. It is difficult to comprehend why this work, published in 1741 by Balthasar Schmid in Nürnberg, does not bear any dedication to Count Keyserlingk or Goldberg. This excludes the possibility of a commission. It is also hardly believable that Goldberg (born in 1727) would have been sufficiently developed as a musician (at the ripe old age of 14!) to handle the extraordinary musical, technical and intellectual difficulties of this composition.

However, like all legends this one also contains some elements of truth. Bach’s works in variation form are few and far between. The rare examples are the *Aria variata alla maniera italiana* BWV 989 (1709), the Passacaglia in C minor for organ BWV 582 (1716/17), and the Chaconne of the D minor Partita for solo violin BWV 1004 (1720). The dates show that two decades separate the Chaconne from the Goldberg Variations. He subsequently returned to this neglected genre in 1746/47 with his canonic variations on a Christmas song for organ “Vom Himmel hoch, da komm’ ich her” BWV 769.

Bach was a composer with encyclopaedic ambitions. In all the genres of sacred and secular music that he worked with, he reached heights that even to equal – let alone surpass – would be unimaginable. Had the circumstances of his life been different, and had he been court composer in Dresden, then no doubt that Johann Sebastian Bach would have become the greatest opera composer, too. In 1731 our encyclopaedist embarked on a huge project: *Clavier-Übung* (Clavier exercise), a collection of pieces of various styles written for different keyboard instruments. The first part (1731) contains six partitas. It represents the highest art of Baroque dance suites. The second part (1735) juxtaposes the Italian Concerto with the French Overture (not bad for a

composer who had never been outside Germany). The third part is a collection of organ pieces: the Prelude and Fugue in E flat major, the Four Duets, and several chorale preludes. In the fourth and last part, Bach wanted to finish with a crowning achievement, and thus the variations provided him with a real challenge. He probably felt a certain prejudice against this form. Many of his illustrious contemporaries had produced brilliant examples that had received much applause. Bach was never interested in cheap success and his goal was to try to elevate the usually extroverted variations onto a hitherto unknown artistic and spiritual level.

The title page announces: “Clavier-Übung containing an aria with different variations for harpsichord with two manuals”. This is one of the three instances where Bach specifically calls for such an instrument (the others being the Italian Concerto and the French Overture). The theme is a beautiful aria written by Bach in 1725 for his wife in the famous *Clavierbüchlein für Anna Magdalena Bach*. It is symmetrically devised in two halves of sixteen bars each. Present day listeners must be careful not to be led astray by the beguiling quality of its melody, they should first concentrate on the bass line. Standing in front of a cathedral, we are overwhelmed by its size and grandeur. Our eyes are constantly diverted towards the splendour of the towers and the cupola at the top, while we tend to neglect the foundations on which the whole building rests.



This ground bass is like that of a passacaglia or a chaconne, it is the alpha and omega of the construction. There are thirty variations, after which the Aria returns in its initial shape, thus uniting the beginning with the end. Bach clearly asks the performer to repeat each section. Not doing so would destroy the perfect symmetry and its proportions. Great music is never too long. It is certain listeners' patience that is too short.

“Aller guten Dinge sind drei” – All good things are three, thus the thirty variations are divided into ten groups of three. Each group contains a brilliant virtuoso toccata-like piece, a gentle and elegant character piece and a strictly polyphonic canon. The canons are presented in a sequence of increasing intervals, starting with the canon in unison up until the canon in ninths. In place of the canon in tenths we have a *quodlibet* (what pleases) which combines fragments of two folk songs with the ground bass. The tonality remains G major for the most part, with shadows of tonic minor in three variations (nos. 15, 21 & 25).

Let us go on a journey together, and let me be your guide. A guide should not talk too much, but it's essential that she or he has already been on this trip many times, and thus can draw the passengers' attention to the details that are relevant.

ARIA Our port of embarkation is in triple time (3/4), rhythmically similar to a sarabande, its gorgeous melody richly decorated with trills, mordents and appoggiaturas. Don't let them mislead you. Always follow the bass line.

VARIATION 1 For one keyboard, in 3/4 time. Our journey begins with a brilliant and sunny two-part invention. The dance of complementary dactyls and anapests recalls the spirit of the Italian concerto grosso.

VARIATION 2 For one keyboard, in 2/4 time. A gentle piece with three voices, reminding us of the trio sonatas for organ.

VARIATION 3 For one keyboard, in 12/8 time. Our first canon. This one is in unison. Of the three voices, the two upper ones present the canon. The second voice imitates the first at the same pitch, one bar later. Meanwhile, the lowest voice circumscribes the ground bass.

VARIATION 4 For one keyboard, in 3/8 time. Four imitative voices are joined together in this lively section reminiscent of a Passepied, a French dance that is like a quick minuet (note the frequency of dance types throughout the work).

VARIATION 5 For one or two keyboards, in 3/4 time. A rapid toccata requiring the special virtuosity of crossing hands may be an homage to Domenico Scarlatti.

VARIATION 6 For one keyboard, in 3/8 time. The second of the canons, this one is in seconds. There are three voices. The alto's subject is answered by the soprano a second higher and a bar later. Against this the bass moves independently in perpetual semi-quavers. Mozart used a similar device in the "Ricordare" of his *Requiem*.

VARIATION 7 For one or two keyboards, in 6/8 time. In his *Handexemplar* (personal copy) Bach wrote "al tempo di giga", the dotted dance rhythms of the gigue give this piece its inherent character.

VARIATION 8 For two keyboards, in 3/4 time. Another brilliant two-part invention or toccata with frequent hand crossing. Although there are only two voices, the ingenuity of the figurations makes us imagine four or more.

VARIATION 9 For one keyboard, in 4/4 time. Canon in thirds, with three voices. This time the soprano leads and the alto follows a bar later on the lower third. A lyrical movement of the utmost simplicity and serenity in Bach's preferred *cantabile* style.

VARIATION 10 For one keyboard, in *alla breve*. This is called *fugetta*, or little fugue. It has four voices, with the bass starting, followed by the tenor, the soprano and the alto at four-bar intervals. It marks the end of the first group (one third of the composition) with unquestionable finality. We may take a rest.

Having regained our strength, we continue with **VARIATION 11** for two keyboards in 12/16 time. This is an unobtrusive, mellow piece, of considerable virtuosity. The two voices (and hands) are constantly crossing over each other. As a result of this, the player often finds his left hand at the top, his right hand at the bottom of the keyboard, which is not exactly a customary position.

VARIATION 12 For one keyboard, in 3/4 time. Canon in fourths, in which the repeated crotchets of the lowest voice mark the ground bass, while the two upper ones intone the canon. The soprano begins and the alto answers a bar later on the lower fourth. However, for the first time in the work, the answer is given in contrary motion or inversion. In the second half (from bar 17), the two parts change places. Now the alto leads and the soprano follows. The extreme complexity of this texture is balanced by a rhythmic vitality and rustic character.

VARIATION 13 For two keyboards, in 3/4 time. The two lower voices, bass and tenor, are joined in polyphonic harmony, above which an endless melody of singular beauty unfolds. Bach had used this technique in the middle movement of his Italian Concerto. It pays homage to the Italian art of written-out embellishments. This variation is closely related to no. 25: they are like sister and brother, feminine and masculine, lyrical and tragic.

What a contrast it is to encounter VARIATION 14 for two keyboards, in 3/4 time. It wakes us up from our reverie with exhilarating explosions of trills, mordents, arpeggios and rapid sequences. Bach must have been very fond of crossing his hands, and rather good at it, too. His great contemporary Domenico Scarlatti, who had used this technique frequently, gave up his habit later, when – thanks to the wonders of Spanish cuisine – his belly became an insurmountable obstacle for his arms.

We now come to VARIATION 15 for one keyboard, in 2/4 time and marked *andante*. This is the canon in fifths, and is the first variation written in the tonic minor. The diatonic ground bass is chromatically coloured. The alto initiates the canon with the soprano answering a bar later on the upper fifth. Like the canon in fourths (no. 12), this one is also in contrary motion. The slurred pairs of semi-quavers suggest *sospiri* (sighs). This is music of the deepest sorrow, of lamentation. Note the extremeness of the final interval, the lowest G in the bass holds hands with the highest D in the soprano, which is a fifth spread four-and-a-half octaves apart. This represents the desolate emptiness between earth and heaven. As this marks the middle of our journey, let us rest again and enjoy the silence.

The overture that so appropriately opens the second half – VARIATION 16 – for one keyboard, its first part in *alla breve*, its second in 3/8 time, celebrates the French style. At the court of Louis XIV and of his successors, this was the type of music for festive occasions, celebrated by the greatest masters, Lully, Couperin and Rameau. The first part, with dotted rhythms, is stately and grand. The second is contrastingly lively in character. Bach applies the French model with astonishing mastery – as he had demonstrated it in his orchestral suites and keyboard works such as the D major Partita and the French Overture in B minor. Here the jubilant first part gives way to a quick, light-footed fugato. The composition is so naturally artless, that we hardly recognise our beloved ground bass, so cleverly concealed is it.

VARIATION 17 For two keyboards, in 3/4 time. After such a *tour-de-force*, it is sensible to relax, and this piece is a two-part invention based on sequences of broken thirds and sixths ascending and descending stepwise.

VARIATION 18 For one manual, in *alla breve*. Canon in sixths, in which the two upper voices (alto and soprano) present the canon in *stretta*. That means that the second voice follows the first one half a bar later, anticipating its second note. The bass line leads an independent life, and it is indeed far removed from that of the

Aria. The merry dance rhythms (could it be an *Anglaise*?) assure us that enjoyment and intellectual mastery can very well coexist.

VARIATION 19 For one manual, in 3/8 time. This charming little minuet, with the illusion of new sonorities, as if we were listening to a musical box or musical clock.

This leads us straight into VARIATION 20 – for two keyboards in 3/4 time. Another “*pièce croisée*”, a splendid display of genuine virtuosity. The initial syncopations suggest a certain awkwardness, so that the following rolling triplets sound even more effective.

From glowing daylight, we fall into the pitch-dark abyss of VARIATION 21 for one manual, in 4/4 time. This is the canon in sevenths and it is in G minor, like the canon in fifths (no. 15) had been. In place of sorrow and grief, we hear music of intense despair, delivered with huge passion. The bass line’s wild chromaticism suggests a gigantic storm. If this was war, then what follows next must represent peace.

VARIATION 22 For one manual, in *alla breve*. This is strict four-part polyphony in the Medieval style (*stile antico*). Let’s imagine that after all this horror (of no. 21) we’ve come to a clearing and from a far-away chapel the distant sound of an *a cappella* choir purifies us. At long last, we can hear our forlorn ground bass in its original clarity. In a work of thirty variations, it would have been logical to make a pause after no. 20. It would have been mathematically correct, but dramatically wrong. It would be impossible to launch the canon in sevenths after a break: it has to grow out of the relentless energy and tension built up by the previous variation. Similarly the dramatic contrast between no. 21 and 22 can only be achieved by continuity, and here your guide begs you to enjoy the tranquillity and take another rest.

Let’s resume our voyage with VARIATION 23 which is for two manuals, in 3/4 time. This is a humorous, witty show piece that requires brilliant delivery. Try to sing “Ha-Ha-Ha” on the opening semi-quavers, as if the gods were laughing on Mount Olympus.

VARIATION 24 For one keyboard, in 9/8 time. Canon in octaves played by the two upper voices. The soprano begins and the alto joins her two bars later, an octave lower. At mid-point they change roles. The choice of the metre and the consistent use of trochees lend this marvellous piece its riding character.

VARIATION 25 For two manuals, in 3/4 time. The last of the three minor-key variations, marked *adagio* by the composer. It is not only the most profound moment of this work, it also represents Bach at his greatest. This is the music of the Passions, depicting man’s suffering. Wanda Landowska called it the “black pearl” but even these – or any other – words fall short of doing justice to this miracle of creation.

Is there life after death? “Yes” – says Bach. Listen to VARIATION 26 for two keyboards, in 3/4 and 18/16 time. After the darkness there will be light. Two voices play a sarabande (in 3/4 time) while the other hand is busy with perpetual semi-quavers (18/16 time). Its movement is reminiscent of a gentle brook, not unlike the one in Schubert’s song “Wohin?” in his song-cycle *Die schöne Müllerin*. This may be an over-romantic association, but it’s difficult to understand those interpreters who attack this piece with machinegun-like aggression. After Variation 25, the

music is slowly, gradually, returning to life, and continues on this course without interruption towards its triumphant climax at Variation 30. But it is premature to give this away just yet.

We now come to the ingenious VARIATION 27 for two manuals in 6/8 time. It is the last one of the canons, in ninths, and unlike its siblings it only uses two voices. The bass not only fulfils its canonic duties, it also makes sure that the cornerstones of the ground bass are properly outlined.

We are now in the final stage, and Bach approaches the end with a colossal build-up. VARIATION 28 for two manuals, is in 3/4 time. Over the walking bass of quavers, the two upper voices play rapid figurations (or written-out trills), it sounds like a concert of birds. Beethoven must have thought of this as a model for his famous trills in the Sonatas opp. 53, 109 and 111.

In VARIATION 29 for one or two keyboards in 3/4 time, we are astonished by the richness of sonority. This is achieved by the novelty of alternating chords played by both hands.

This leads irresistibly into the Grand Finale VARIATION 30 for one manual in 4/4 time. At this point, a canon in tenths would be logically expected, but Bach wouldn't be Bach without surprises and so, instead of the canon, he gives us a *quodlibet*. As the title suggests, it is a humorous character piece, in which parts of two merry folk songs are incorporated. One is "Ich bin so lange nicht bei dir g'west" (It's so long I haven't been with you), the other "Kraut und Rüben haben mich vertrieben" (Cabbages and turnips have driven me away). It is exuberant, boisterous and very funny – yet profound (the clearly audible ground bass takes care of that). We can imagine the Bach family singing it together with a glass of wine (or was it beer?) in their hands. This is Dionysian music.

With the final cadence ringing in our ears, we stop for a moment of silence, and here Bach repeats the ARIA unaltered. But we are hearing it with different ears, because of the events of the last seventy-odd minutes. We have come back to our point of departure, a circle has been closed, beginning and end are united. At the moment of homecoming we feel deep gratitude. When in Forkel's story Count Keyserlingk asks Goldberg to play him one of his variations, we think he must be joking. Today nobody would dare to play bits and pieces of this work, it would be considered a sacrilege. There can be no doubt that Bach wrote it as a monumental whole, but not in his wildest dreams could he have seen complete performances of it. For about 150 years, the variations were condemned to virtual oblivion. Musicians knew of them, but nobody played them, least of all in public. In E.T.A. Hoffmann's *Kreisleriana*, Kapellmeister Kreisler plays it to the horror of his snobbish listeners who either escape or fall fast asleep.

Today we are experiencing the opposite extreme, the work is immensely popular and frequently played. As we've seen on our "tour", Bach wrote this composition for harpsichord with two manuals. There will always be those who maintain that to play it on a modern piano is an abominable sin. Let them believe so, it's just as useless trying to convince them as to make carnivores out of vegetarians. To many others the tone of the piano is preferable to that of the harpsichord and let's not forget we are talking about an hour and a quarter of music – hands on heart, can you listen to the harpsichord that long?

This length indicates that all the repeats must be observed, because with a design of such perfect symmetry there are only two options. One either plays all the repeats or none of them. The first solution is already preferable: given the complexity of the music, it gives the audience a second chance of better understanding (and the player to get it right). Of course a repeat should never be mechanical. Variety can be achieved not just by ornamentation but through careful application of different articulation, phrasing and dynamics. Observing certain repeats while omitting others is frankly incomprehensible.

Pianists can play this work without changing a single note. They only have to solve the problem of “traffic jams”, the frequent collision of hands caused by the absence of the second keyboard.

Transcriptions are another matter. There are modern versions for every conceivable instrument or ensemble from string trio to string orchestra to brass quintet. The canons work equally well on strings because of their strict polyphony and the special range of the individual voices. The virtuoso variations (nos. 5, 8, 14, 20 and 26) are so typically keyboard-inspired, transcribing them for another medium is useless and silly. It is a serious violation to alter Bach’s voice-leading.

Isn’t it understandable that every musician would want to play this wonderful work? Its deep humanity, spirituality, optimism and intellectual power speak to us directly in these “distracted times”. This is one of those few journeys that can be repeated again and again.

András Schiff. Firenze, 2003