Counterpoint

Anna Enquist

translated from the dutch by
Jeannette Ringold

UWA PUBLISHING

First published in 2010 by
UWA Publishing
Crawley, Western Australia 6009
www.uwap.uwa.edu.au

UWAP is an imprint of UWA Publishing
a division of The University of Western Australia

The University of
Western Australia
Achieving International Excellence

Publication has been made possible with the financial support from the
Foundation for the Production and Translation of Dutch Literature.

A full CIP record for this book is available from
the National Library of Australia.

Cover photograph: Getty Images

Typeset in 12pt Bembo by Lasertype
Printed by McPherson's Printing Group

Aria

The woman with the pencil leaned over the table and read a pocket score of the Goldberg Variations. The pencil was made of a special black wood. It had a heavy silver cap that concealed a pencil sharpener. The pencil was poised above an empty notebook. Next to the score lay cigarettes and a lighter. A small metal ashtray, a shiny and compact present from a friend, was on the table.

The woman was simply called "woman," perhaps "mother." There were naming problems. There were many problems. In the woman's consciousness, memory problems lay at the surface. The aria that she was looking at, the theme on which Bach composed his Goldberg Variations, reminded her of those times when she had studied this music. When the children were small. Before. After. She was not searching for those memories. A child on each thigh and then, with her arms around the children's bodies, strive to play that theme; enter the Recital Hall of the Concertgebouw; watch the pianist walk onto the stage, wait

breathlessly for the unadorned octave of the first note—feel the daughter's elbow: 'Mummy, that's *our* song!' There was no need for that now. She wanted to think only of the daughter. The daughter as a baby, as a girl, as a young woman.

The memories withered into grey clichés that would not interest anyone. She would not be able to recount anything about the daughter; she didn't know the daughter. Write about that, she thought angrily. Even a flanking movement is a movement; a negative also shows an image. But she still didn't know whether silence is also sound.

Before she sat down at the table, she read an article about the concept of time in a South American Indian tribe. The people of that tribe see the past ahead of them and feel the future at their backs. Their faces are turned toward the past, and what is still to come will come as an unforeseen attack. This way of experiencing time, according to the author of the article, can still be found in language and in grammatical constructions. This remarkable, reverse perspective was discovered by a linguist.

The woman realised that she had once read this same account with the ancient Greeks as the main characters. Despite years of instruction in Greek language and literature, she had never noticed it. Perhaps she had still been too young then. Too much future, inconceivable not to keep your eyes focused on it.

The woman was not yet what you would call an old woman, but she certainly was well on her way. She had an extensive past.

The past. That which has passed. Imagine that you, as an Indian, looked at it as a matter of course, that you woke up with it, dragged it around all day long, that it presented itself as the landscape of dreams. Not so strange, thought the woman, actually that's how it was. She closed her eyes and

imagined the future in the figure of a man who was standing behind her, whom she didn't see.

The future had wrapped his sturdy arms around her, perhaps even rested his chin on her hair. He held her tight. The future was taller than she. Did she lean back against his chest? Did she feel his warm belly? She knew that he looked over her shoulder with her at her past. Surprised, interested, indifferent?

With enormous concern, that's what she assumed, always trusting. After all, he was her personal future. She breathed against his right arm that lay high against her chest. Actually, around her neck. If he eased that arm slightly, she would be able to get more air and speak.

The future pulled her against him, so forcefully that she had to take a small step backward, and another. She resisted. The past had to remain near, in full view. The pressure of his arm became unpleasant; it seemed as though the future wanted to drag her along forcibly, compelling her to step backward steadily, with small, almost elegant dance steps. She dug her heels in. The embrace became suffocating; she choked in the arms of the future. His name is Time. He will lead her away from what she loves; he will take her to places where she does not want to be.

The percussionists in the conservatory were a different kind of student. They carried on in a partially rebuilt church, rolled their own cigarettes, and started late. When they joined orchestra class, they didn't mix with the string players. They moved like construction workers at the back of the stage, setting up xylophones, hanging bells from scaffolds, tuning kettledrums the size of washtubs. They wore sneakers and yelled unintelligibly to one another.

Of all of us they are the most talented in organising time, thought the woman, then still young, sitting at the

back of the hall and looking at the orchestra getting ready. The percussionists don't fuss about time; they don't turn it into a philosophical problem. They hear the beat; they create the rhythms above it; they translate what they feel into movement. They are engaged in waiting and striking, waiting and striking, striking. The ability to hear patterns in a series of exactly the same beeps is innate. We can't do otherwise. Organising is a characteristic of our brain, of us, one of our traits, a survival strategy, a sickness. This is our way of making the chaotic, muddy soup around us into a recognisable and reassuring setting. We have forgotten that nothing makes sense at all, that we ourselves provide the distinctness and the trust. Someone should research the connection between organising patterns and character traits. Why does one person hear 4/4 time and another, 6/8?

Why did she have to think of all this—it was neither here nor there.

It was about Time tugging at her neck like an impatient lover, forcing her to walk backward, step by step, so that her view of what was past became less and less distinct.

With a great leap back in time, thought the woman. Or furtively, in a dark grey disguise, crawl back to an afternoon filled with songs, filled with music, a child at my right and a child at my left. Then see that scene as intensely as when it took place. Feeling, smelling, and hearing the same as then.

It doesn't work like that; you never feel the same. Of course you can look back ("look ahead"), but the time that has meanwhile elapsed, what has happened in that time span, colours your perception. A thing can never be the same during two moments in time; at any rate it can't be perceived as "the same" because the observer has changed.

Just look at the Goldberg Variations. You play the aria. Oh no, thought the woman, I'll never play that aria again. Fine, you played the aria, past tense, that quiet, tragic song. It's a sarabande, just listen, a stately tempo and accent on the second beat of every bar, a slow, perhaps static, dance. You played the aria with dedication, with passion, with the commitment to do it perfectly. Toward the end, the long notes became garlands of sixteenths, but the serious cadence was not lost. You didn't give in to the temptation to play more softly, in a whisper at the end, and to conclude with a barely audible sigh. No, even then you let those melancholy garlands of notes swell above the calmly ambling bass line, not hurrying, preferably slowing down unnoticeably—nice and loud, with force. Until the end.

After the aria, Bach composed thirty variations in which he held to the harmonic scheme and the chord sequence of the sarabande. That bass line was the constant against which he created original variations. Finally the aria was played again. The same sarabande, not one note more or less. But was it the same? Yes, those were the same notes. No, the player and the listener could not erase the thirty Variations between the first and the last appearance of the sarabande. Even though it was identical to the first one, you heard the second aria differently because something had happened in the meantime. You couldn't go back to the time when you had not yet heard the Variations.

Oh, she was so eager to study the Goldberg Variations; she was caught in the aria as in a net. 'Don't start on it,' said the teacher, 'such a fuss with those hands crossing, a lot of work and little to show for it.' Take a nice partita, a pleasant toccata, the Chromatic Fantasy! The woman agreed readily; the advice was correct and reasonable. But right after her final examination she had placed the score on her music rack.

When there is no performance or time pressure, all depends on discipline that you can feed only with passion. She worked out the music, as much as she was able to at the time. What do you have going for you after conservatory training? Virtuosity, control, too much of an ear for the impressive, for outward show. For these Variations a new humility is needed, except that you can never play them from a position of humility. The technique demands superiority.

Technique means dexterity, muscular strength, automatic movements, agility. It is easy to fill hours training in these matters. You feel your muscles, and that is satisfying. The body tells you that you have spent your time well and usefully. Doesn't it say "Klavierübung," keyboard practice, on the title page of the Goldberg Variations? That's what it is. Your physical technique is at its peak around the final examination. You'll never again be in such form.

It is misleading. Technique is not only control of muscle movement but also control of thought. You *have* to think: listen to the leading voice; anticipate placing hands and fingers; think ahead to give shape to tempo, dynamic and phrasing. A great part of the training takes place in your head. This demands even more discipline than studying at the keyboard. Sitting at the piano, the slowness of the body ensures that you don't get up, but thoughts are so light, so unexpectedly nimble, that it's almost impossible to keep them in line.

She was a slave to her playing body during her first study of the Variations. That's why nothing came of it, at least no more than an exercise in dexterity. She studied from the Peters Edition and played the notes as they were presented to her. During her training she had been able to transform the most peculiar and most complicated scores into movement and ultimately, into sound; thus the strange situations on the keyboard, the ones that arose because Bach created

his Variations for an instrument with two manuals, should not be that problematic. Yet there were problems. Which hand high on the key, the hand that had the melody or the hand that played the second part? Besides, which was the melody and which the counterpoint? In polyphony all voices have equal value. The fingerings in the score were useless to her, since they had been made by an old harpsichordist with preconceptions and idiosyncrasies. She thought. She could see him in front of her, the imaginary harpsichord virtuoso. A paunch under a tightly buttoned cardigan, long hair carefully pasted across his bald head. A disapproving look on his fleshy face. Actually, it was lucky her fingers fitted between the black keys so that she could play high on the key with one hand, while the other one played lower on the same key. There were pianists who removed the open lid behind the keyboard when performing the Goldberg Variations. Then you looked directly into the unpainted interior of the instrument, then you saw the hammers fly up, strike the strings and come down. Because the eye registered this with a fractional delay, you were looking into the past; what you saw had just happened.

She finished the Variations in several months. In this case "finished" meant that she could play everything from the page. From this specific score where she herself had put in fingerings and sketched in hand positions. Another edition had immediately caused her to flounder and miss, had confused and disoriented her. A weakness. Did she really know the Goldberg Variations, or did she know its reflection in this image of notes—what was real, what was a copy, a replica? The question was how solidly the Variations were anchored in her thinking, in her head, in her cerebral cortex. At the spinal cord level everything went like clockwork—one look at the paper set in motion the imprinted movements of her arms, wrists and fingers. But

sometimes the Variation that appeared when the page was turned was a surprise. She didn't think carefully. Without the music, she could probably not name the Variations in the right order. Certainly, the beginning, the ending as well, and the last five or so. In between them it was a muddle, exactly as predicted by educational psychology. Was it because of the stage of her life? The children were small and captivating. At any moment she had to be able to jump from the piano bench to get something to drink, to read to them, to answer a question. The times when they slept were just long enough to study one difficult passage; there was never enough time to play everything through, to adjust tempi, to be able to discover larger units. Yes, blame the children. She hadn't made enough effort; she had let herself be led by the notes and had lost herself in them.

She didn't know much about Bach at the time, even though she had played tremendously difficult pieces by him, and not just a few. Early Bach, late Bach. Köthen, Leipzig, first wife, second wife? No idea. What interested her was how you could perform those fast little notes of Variation 17 non legato, softly and yet evenly. She had studied the left-hand arrangement that Brahms had made of the famous violin Chaconne, when she had been bothered for a while by her right hand, but the similarities between that piece and the Goldberg Variations had not struck her. She had been nice and busy with the leaps and the tremolos.

She had read somewhere that everything happens twice, the first time as a tragedy and the second time as a farce. She simply read too much. This remark was attributed to various sages. The woman at the table, the woman with the pencil, didn't care who had said it, only whether it was true. It was up to her to make the remark true, at least partly. Nothing stood in her way now, after thirty years, to practise the Goldberg Variations again. As a farce.

She hesitated. Slowly she leafed through the small pocket score. Groups of three, she thought, and each group consists of a "free" piece, a virtuoso piece and a canon. To her, those canons seemed the thread leading the player through the work. One voice literally imitates the other in the first canon, almost as if they were making fun of each other. Underneath the tug-of-war of these two voices hums a restless bass. She moved from one canon to the next. The two voices separate more and more; the second voice answers one tone higher, then in the third canon, at the third between them. The voices become increasingly separated. In some canons the answer is given in inversion, the whole melody is played upside-down. Further, further. Canon at the octave, the same notes, but separated by the perfect interval. At the ninth, for the first time without bass, only the voices that ornament each other with a poignant difference at the starting point. In the place where the last canon should be, the thirtieth Variation, she encountered the strange "quodlibet," a four-voice composition of song fragments. She snapped shut the score.

This time she wanted to see the whole. A farce is more difficult than a tragedy, say actors, who should know. She had to be thoroughly prepared if she was going to study this work again. You didn't prepare for a tragedy; it happened to you. But hadn't she been happy during that first period of study? What tragedy lurked in the image of a young mother with two children? Maybe the tragedy lay in the intensity of the experience. The feeling of exacting motherhood had completely absorbed her. She had disappeared into it; no, motherhood had disappeared into her; there had been nothing else beside it; that she used to play the Variations for her children had filled her to the tips of her fingers. Tragedy left no room for reflection and denied the distance needed to see the whole. Tragedy is a wave that drags you along, a stream of lava, a whirlwind. For a farce you take a seat in

the observation post. You observe, you compare, you ensure accurate timing. That's how it should be this time.

Comparative textual research. That stupid Peters Edition—she couldn't cope with it. The annoying shifting of your hands over each other in order to satisfy the requirements of the notes on the page—she was no longer in the mood. It should be possible to change his voices around, to play with one hand what was noted down for the other hand. That became the first goal: to have a score that would be rather easy to play. No concessions, she wasn't here to imitate a harpsichord. Bach can always be played; he is universal and is performed on guitar, accordion, and on the grand piano as well.

In the music shop they didn't know what she was talking about. The man behind the counter produced a stack of Goldberg editions—an "Urtext" by Henle, the Peters, a Schirmer edition by Kirkpatrick. She took them home, even though Kirkpatrick was a harpsichordist, and probably dead. She remembered his Goldberg recording on two long-playing records. The sixties. Half of the thick book consisted of text, angry, accusing text. Why, the old harpsichordist shouted in despair, why does no one know that you ALWAYS start a pralltriller with the upper second? It was described in all the authoritative texts; he had said it himself for years, and yet people persisted in their errors. He also sounded serious warnings about the instrument. The pianist—in this context the term seemed a dirty word—had to realise that he was playing a TRANSCRIPTION. You should set aside pianistic expressive possibilities; they were inappropriate and would be a sign of bad taste. She was almost ashamed of her unwieldy, noisy and common grand piano.

Kirkpatrick also had an opinion about fingerings: in certain cases, thank God, the thumb was allowed on the black keys, but unfortunately he gave no practical examples.

In his edition there were no fingerings. Not one. The pianist had to find them himself, he wrote, because 'there is no better remedy for laziness than work.'

Hence, a totally masochistic purchase. The reason the book was in her bag anyway was because the alternative versions of the score had some fast variations printed in thin, grey ink. In those alternatives the fingerings had been shifted exactly as she wished. They were printed above the original lines so that you could easily follow the original part-writing. He, Kirkpatrick, had done it to make it possible to play at sight. As if anyone could ever sight-read these variations! It was a gift; it worked out extremely well. Copy, cut, throw away the original rules, and paste the alternatives on a blank piece of paper. Find fingerings. Work.

For the woman at the table, practising the piano was more a narcotic than anything else. She had to force herself to maintain her sense of the whole. If I've got everything down more or less, she thought, then I should start to practise the Variations in groups, for an overview. Ten groups of three, five of six, two of fifteen, and then…the whole. And read something, she thought, a musicological treatise about the work, a biography of the composer. Not Thomas Bernard's *The Loser* again, not all sorts of opinions and facts concerning Glenn Gould again—not the feelings evoked by the work, but the background of the work itself.

Who wrote it? The mature, adult Bach. The composer, the husband, the father. In Leipzig, where he supervised the wretchedly poor and undisciplined boys' choir. The woman had been in Bach's house opposite the Thomaskirche; she had sat and smoked in the courtyard; she had listened to harpsichord sounds that had vanished centuries ago.

For whom did he write it? For his first child, Wilhelm Friedemann, the oldest son from Bach's first marriage. His

favorite, his virtuoso. The one who would be able to shine with the Variations in his new position in Dresden. Bach visited his son there in 1741. Did they share a room; did they talk in the dark; did they sing themes and song fragments to each other? Friedemann was around ten years old when his mother died; he might have spoken with his father about her before they fell asleep. Were there any reproaches? A year after the death of his wife, Bach remarried a twenty-one-year old soprano, Maria Magdalena. They set out for Leipzig with the entire household, and every year they had another child. What had Friedemann thought of that?

The woman at the table thought about the violin Chaconne. It is said that Bach composed it in memory of his first wife. How could he, stricken by such enormous grief, fall in love with the young singer? Did his grief disappear into the Chaconne? Was he free after that? At any rate he was in love and wrote simple, charming keyboard music for his new spouse who wanted to learn to play the harpsichord from the small music book that her husband put together for her. How touching. The man who had written the Brandenburg Concertos and had created the Well-Tempered Clavier wrote small minuets and gavottes for his young wife.

And the sarabande that would become the aria of the Goldberg Variations, the seed from which all thirty variations would grow, Anna Magdalena copied these notes into her little lesson book. Did she not hear the sorrow of this simple melody? Was she deaf to those last eight measures in which the composer fights off his despair, trying his utmost to keep his footing?

There must have been an unbridgeable difference between Bach and his second wife. She, at first losing herself in a life full of the most wonderful music, moving through the house between harpsichords, violas, overflowing music cupboards. He, determined to start anew, but wading through the sticky

past, probably filled with gratitude—and with a grief that he couldn't share with anyone and only hinted at in the music he wrote. He knew the perverse unreliability of life, understood that nothing and no one offered protection against loss. You walked down familiar roads and suddenly an abyss opened in which everything disappeared, without a sound.

Perhaps he thought of that, lying next to his son in Dresden, listening to his breathing, staring into the dark with eyes wide open. Possibly his head was spinning; he could no longer recall the dimensions of the unfamiliar room; who knows if he was perhaps resting on the edge of an abyss and would fall into the silent void as soon as he turned? Sweating, Bach lay in his guest bed in the city of Dresden, without anything to hold onto and without a view of the whole.

The woman with the pencil imagined how Bach forced himself to think about the Variations. A beautifully bound, gold-embossed copy lay in his luggage, wrapped in a piece of linen. Tomorrow he would hand it to the Prince or the Elector or whatever the man who employed Friedemann wished to be called. For Friedemann himself he had brought a less elaborate copy. The Variations! In the ominous silence Bach reconstructed them anew. In his mind he played them in the correct tempo. He strung them one to the other; the voices spread out in his head, pushing aside despair and fear. He told himself a story without words and fell asleep before Variation 16.

The woman sighed longingly. She wasn't that far yet. The Variations like beads on a string, in the correct and logical order; clicking the two identical arias together as a conclusion—the beginning into the end. Or: the ending audible in the beginning.

Practice was the only way. Search for the moment when the work started to shrink, when the chaos of details, the overwhelming abundance, yielded to structure. For that you

had to immerse yourself stubbornly in the smallest fragments. There was no other way. Not until everything, every note, was thought out at the most detailed level, overpowered, and had become part of the motor system. Only then could her attention climb one step higher and her perspective expand.

Patience. Persistence. Some day, at an unexpected moment, the vista would open up and the Variations would lie there in a configuration that was so obvious that you wouldn't understand how you could ever have been confused about it.

You could describe a life in this way, thought the woman. With her pencil she drew circles on the paper, connected by a line. This same harmony in ever-changing fans of forms and sounds, that in the end gave a complete picture of what had happened. Of the past that lay in front of her.

She had to get in. She had to dare, like when she was a child and in nonchalant despair, jumped off the high diving board for the first time. Jump in.

The television showed a programme about Glenn Gould. He recorded the Goldberg Variations twice, at the beginning and at the end of his career as a pianist. It was night. The woman sat in front of the screen with her legs crossed and looked at the bloated, unhealthy-looking pianist. He would die before very long. Death was already hidden under his skin, but now, but still, he bent intently over the keyboard. His thick glasses with the black frames almost touched the ivory keys. He sat on the edge of a worn, wooden chair with a worn-out seat. During the first recording of the piece, in 1955, the chair was still intact. He had been a boy then, with a shock of curls and a checked shirt. Of course the record company had advised him to choose a more accessible piece for this—his first—record, something that the public would recognise and appreciate immediately, something that

was easier to listen to. That had been out of the question; the tragedy was going to occur, and young Glenn Gould recorded the Goldberg Variations in the Columbia studio in New York.

While listening to the recorded fragments, he danced with closed eyes through the room, singing, conducting, accompanying the melody line with grand gestures. The woman had seen photos of this. Innocence, naïveté, complete seriousness. You could shrug your shoulders; you could scream with laughter; you could shake your head pityingly at someone who took himself so seriously. But you didn't, for what you saw was youth itself, the tragedy of being young. Respectful silence was the proper response.

The film she was looking at dated from twenty-seven years ago. Twenty-seven years. A whole life, definitely too short, which the pianist had obviously exhausted completely. Sometimes his hands trembled; he had steeled his will to control his hands, to keep them in line with the correct tempo. He groaned. He moved his lips.

The woman stared with horror at the images on the screen. She had taken the score on her lap to be able to read along. Did the pianist know that he was going to die? His contortions seemed to reflect this knowledge. He wormed himself into the music with his bloated body; he hunched his back in order to shut out all other reality—the lamps, the technicians, the clock. Against his better judgment he formed a shield against the world, an eggshell inside which he was alone with Bach. Meanwhile that intimate relationship was shot and recorded in image and sound so that the woman could watch it years later. An obscene spectacle from which you distance yourself by means of the viewing itself. A farce.

He started the twenty-fifth Variation, the dramatic climax of the entire work. An adagio. Gould took the tempo

as slowly as possible; he could just about hold the lines in his head, all the misery was almost at a standstill.

This is despair, thought the woman, what I see is someone who knows and doesn't know at the same time, who is distraught with knowing, who tries to hide in the skimpily cut cloak of despair that Bach holds up for him. Here, stick your arms into it—I'll pull up the collar so that the coat fits perfectly around your shoulders. Now *play*.

He played. He had forgotten the spectators, the viewers, for as long as it lasted, and it seemed to last forever. The melody was lost, the foot had slipped from the pedal, and there was no longer any connection between the notes that, in Glenn Gould's head, were firmly connected. He floated high above the bottomless tragedy of this adagio; he built up nothing, demonstrated nothing, interpreted nothing. He was careful. With skinny fingers he pointed at the keyboard; fast, too fast, as if it were forbidden, he touched the keys, quick strokes like a bird's beak. No dynamic. No line. He worked deliberately at fragmentation until it was unrecognisable.

With small finger movements he tapped the keys one by one at a ten-centimetre distance from his face. No one should be allowed to see this. Gould, desperate, was screwing Bach.

She opened the lid of the grand piano and did not place it at the highest position—she didn't want a wide-open maw with all that sound tumbling out—but put it at the lowest, so that the strings could breathe freely and the sound was not locked in a closed box. Piano lamp on. Book open. The aria. G major. 'This is our song.' The woman placed her hands, the muscled hands with visible veins, in her lap, and looked at the notes.

Years ago she had once been the principal guest on a popular television programme. She was allowed to invite a few other guests and had asked a pianist friend who had

just started to record the complete keyboard works of Bach on CD. The first CD had come out a short time before: the Goldberg Variations. Together they had discussed what he would play from it during the programme—something virtuoso, something difficult, something surprising? No. The aria. Something that appeals to everyone.

The daughter had come along and sat in the audience in the stands. She wore an orange velour top that had belonged to the woman. The daughter had contacted the technicians, the director, and the host of the programme because the following week the singer of her favourite songs would be a guest, and she wanted to be invited to that. The woman, the mother, sat at the side of the podium and watched how the pianist sat down, concentrated, and struck the first notes of the aria. An intent silence hung in the large factory hall that had been converted to a studio. She looked into the audience and saw the face of her daughter, warmly illuminated by the colour of her top. The small hands, the solid breasts, the narrow shoulders. The face.

A glimpse of shiny teeth behind slightly parted lips, wide-open eyes focused on the grand piano in the distance, hair thrown back. The light brushed against the delicate hairs at her temples. She sat still and listened as if she wanted to eat the music. She has a healthy appetite, thought the woman. Whether they are the special songs of the singer who will be standing here next week, or a masterpiece by Bach—the daughter experiences it without preconceptions and keeps what moves her without asking herself too many questions. She also had no need to be too critical—for that she was too young, or too kind, or not sufficiently embittered. In a bad performance she could still hear the beauty of the music; she generously overlooked all sorts of flaws. She certainly heard them—she knew exactly when someone sang off-key and why an interpretation was boring or affected. Good ears.

They were partially hidden by the smooth hair, the small, perfect ears of the daughter.

After the final measures she bent her upper body down to her thighs—the shoulder-length hair fell forward—then straightened up and, with a radiant smile, began to applaud.

Slowly, with difficulty, the woman lifted her arms. For a moment she leaned with both hands against the music rack as if she had to stop herself from crashing into the keys with her head. Then she straightened her back and moved the music so that Variation 1 stood exactly in the middle of the music rack. G major. The first dance.