

Johann Sebastian Bach

(1685-1750)

Goldberg Variations, BWV 988

Takae Ohnishi, harpsichord

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| 1. | Aria | (4:24) |
| 2. | Variation 1 | (2:02) |
| 3. | Variation 2 | (1:42) |
| 4. | Variation 3 | Canone all'unisono (1:58) |
| 5. | Variation 4 | (1:05) |
| 6. | Variation 5 | (1:53) |
| 7. | Variation 6 | Canone alla Seconda (1:47) |
| 8. | Variation 7 | (1:49) |
| 9. | Variation 8 | (2:10) |
| 10. | Variation 9 | Canone alla Terza (2:01) |
| 11. | Variation 10 | Fughetta (1:41) |
| 12. | Variation 11 | (2:33) |
| 13. | Variation 12 | Canone alla Quarta (3:18) |
| 14. | Variation 13 | (2:48) |
| 15. | Variation 14 | (2:16) |
| 16. | Variation 15 | Canone alla Quinta (4:18) |

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| 17. | Variation 16 | Ouverture (2:52) |
| 18. | Variation 17 | (2:03) |
| 19. | Variation 18 | Canone alla Sesta (1:29) |
| 20. | Variation 19 | (1:27) |
| 21. | Variation 20 | (2:21) |
| 22. | Variation 21 | Canone alla Settima (3:18) |
| 23. | Variation 22 | Alla Breve (1:29) |
| 24. | Variation 23 | (2:28) |
| 25. | Variation 24 | Canone all'Ottava (2:47) |
| 26. | Variation 25 | (3:22) |
| 27. | Variation 26 | (2:23) |
| 28. | Variation 27 | Canone alla Nona (1:59) |
| 29. | Variation 28 | (2:37) |
| 30. | Variation 29 | (2:14) |
| 31. | Variation 30 | Quodlibet (2:04) |
| 32. | Aria da Capo | (2:26) |

**‘For the Refreshment of the Spirits:’
Thoughts on Bach’s “Goldberg Variations”**

*Morpheus, thou gentle god of soft repose,
The unruly tumults of my mind compose,
Allay the fury of my anxious care,
Drive hence black thoughts and chase away despair.*

*Here let indulgent fancy soothe my pain,
Here let me sleep and never wake again...¹*

¹ *Aire* by Daniel Purcell (1660-1717), unknown poet.

In Greek mythology, Morpheus is the winged God of Dreams. Offspring of Nyx, Goddess of the Night, and Hypnos, God of Sleep, Morpheus is the last hope for the character in Daniel Purcell’s song. In his text, the anonymous poet has the speaker – ill with insomnia – implore Morpheus to grant him ‘soft repose.’ For he hopes that the dreams Morpheus might grant would allay his anxiety and chase away the incessant black thoughts of despair that prevent the desperate sufferer from finding rest.

Johann Nikolaus Forkel, one of the early biographers of J. S. Bach, claims that the “Goldberg Variations” were written for the Russian ambassador to the electoral court of Saxony, a certain Count Kaiserling, when he – like the character in the poem – suffered from debilitating bouts of insomnia.² The harpsichordist Johann Gottlieb Goldberg (1725-1756), who had studied with Bach, was to play the “Variations” for the count. Forkel relates the following tale: “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 fulfill this wish by means of Variations, the writing of which he had until then considered an ungrateful task

² Johann Nikolaus Forkel, *Über Johann Sebastian Bachs Leben, Kunst, und Kunstwerke*, 1802; reprint Berlin: Henschel, 2000.

on account of the repeatedly similar harmonic foundation. ...The Count never tired of them, and for a long time sleepless nights meant: 'Dear Goldberg, do play me one of my variations.'" Forkel also relates that "Bach was perhaps never so rewarded for one of his works as for this. The Count presented him with a golden goblet filled with 100 *louis-d'or*."³

According to this story, which has been discredited by some but accepted by others (among them Christoph Wolff), Bach may initially have intended the "Goldberg Variations" as a work of consolation. There are many examples of both music and poetry throughout history that were created to bring solace or relief to people downed by trouble and trepidation. Daniel Purcell's *aire* for voice and continuo invoking the God Morpheus is a beautiful case in point from the Baroque period. Similarly, in the late medieval period, the *Book of the Duchess* by Geoffrey Chaucer,⁴ based in part on the composer Guillaume de Machaut's *Jugement dou Roy de Behaingne* and *Jugement dou Roy de Navarre*, was written for a person suffering from insomnia. Chaucer offers his poem whose centerpiece is an elaborate dream vision brought on by Morpheus, as consolation to his patron, John of Gaunt, who suffered from insomnia after his first wife, Blanche, died in September of 1368. Stricken with grief over this loss, John has fallen into lethargy and emotional paralysis. Only Morpheus can help:

3 Translation from Da Capo Press, 1970.

4 Geoffrey Chaucer. *The Book of the Duchess*.

Rather then that I shulde deye
Through defaute of sleping thus,
I wolde yive thilke Morpheus,
Or his goddesse, dame luno,
Or som wight elles, I ne roghte who –
To make me slepe and have som reste ...⁵

The poem is carefully constructed so as gradually to relieve this paralysis and ultimately reverse the effects of sorrow. By way of entering into the world of the imagination, as in a fantasy or dream, the sufferer becomes progressively free from his self-confessed loss of vitality and the weakened zeal that have so numbed his spirit. In a parallel manner perhaps, Bach's "Variations" invite the listener into a world broader than the mere rational conscious experience. Through a continual metamorphosis of a single Aria into thirty different 'disguises,' Bach gradually, over the course of the entire work, unfolds its musical facets and discloses its essential meaning. It invites the listener's total immersion in an absorbing and transformative artistic progression, an experience that can be quite mesmerizing. Similar in many ways to Chaucer's multi-layered story that takes the reader into the dream world and transforms him, Bach's "Goldberg Variations" grant an intensely absorbing musical journey that might set free a heart confined in trepidation and fear.

5. lines 240-245.

The “Goldberg Variations” were issued in 1741 as Part IV of the *Clavier Übung* (which Bach had begun in 1729) by the Nuremberg publisher Balthasar Schmid. In the printed title, Bach aims at a wider audience and a more general purpose than Forkel’s story suggests. He calls the set “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...” Nineteen copies of this first edition survive today.

“For the refreshment of their spirits...” No matter whether indeed conceived to alleviate Count Kaiserling’s insomnia, Bach may have carefully chosen the ground bass format for the soothing cumulative effect that this compositional device can achieve through the constant repetition of a chord progression that is at once simple and rich. With each of its 30 returns, this harmonic *ostinato* becomes more familiar and increasingly comforting to a listener who may well be lulled away blissfully in the process. Morpheus gently descending brings solace to a troubled soul. But far from inducing sleep through boredom, each return of the ground bass bestows an ever-sharper focus upon the theme. With every elaborate variation emanating anew from the familiar bass pattern, Bach seems to offer a further concentration of purpose. This music may indeed “the unruly tumults of my mind compose.”

But rather than aiming merely for a tranquil disposition, as in the Sarabande-like Aria, many of the thirty variations are technically incredibly demanding and compositionally intricate. Is Bach heeding the anonymous poet’s words in the Purcell song, “Here let indulgent fancy soothe my pain?” Does he want fully to occupy the restive mind, perhaps in order to distract from the sorrows and worries that foil repose? There is a staggering number of different genres in the set: three Baroque dances (Var 4, 7, 19), a fughetta (Var 10), a French overture (Var 16), two very ornamented arias for the right hand (Var 13, 25), as well as nine sprightly variations with much hand-crossing (Var 5, 8, 11, 14, 17, 20, 23, 26, and 29) that Ralph Kirkpatrick has described as “arabesques.”⁶ What holds the set together, however, is the methodical distribution of canons. Every third variation presents a canon, each at a different pitch interval, and thereby constructs order from the dazzling variety of pieces (the ‘indulgent fancy’?). The first canon is at the unison (Var 3), followed by one at the second (Var 6), then by a canon at the third (Var 9), and so forth, in ascending order, until in the last canon the imitation reaches the interval of a 9th (Var 27). But at the very end, instead of a final canon at the tenth, Bach mischievously serves up a humorous ‘quodlibet’ on a silly little folk tune about “Kraut und Rüben” (Var 30); a total departure from the rest of the work and a momentary escape from the serious mood of the whole.

6 Ralph Kirkpatrick, ed. *J. S. Bach. Goldberg Variations*. New York and London: G. Schirmer, 1938, preface.

The Aria in G-major is a two-part Sarabande, a slow Baroque dance with the characteristic emphasis on the second beat in every second measure (1-2-3 1-2-3). Its tone is lush but reflective. The first half of the long bass pattern (16 measures in each part) fills in the octave g-G, first descending g-f-e-d, then ascending b-c-d, and cadencing on low G. In the second statement, this melodic bass line is ornamented. As in most baroque dances, Part 1 leads to the dominant, and Part 2 returns to the tonic, describing a perfect arch. The Aria is further balanced with a song-like antecedent-consequent melodic layout over the steady and increasingly animated ground bass. All but three of the ensuing thirty variations are in G-major, with only variations 15, 21, and 25 cast in G-minor. At the end, the Aria returns as a *da capo*, imparting a sense of completion on the cycle as a whole.

The work was composed for a two-manual harpsichord, and as Bach indicates in the score, most of the variations demand two manuals (Var 8, 11, 13, 14, 17, 20, 23, 25, 26, 27 and 28), while three (Var 5, 7 and 29) can be played effectively on a single manual instrument. Several variations call for hand-crossings, in some cases in the Italian manner, in others following the French style.⁷ In the former, a central melodic line of mostly 1/16th notes played in the right hand is flanked by another line in 1/8th notes that alternates high and low pitches. Var 5 is a good example: the right hand has the fast melody while the left leaps across, adding alternating punctuations in bass and treble.

⁷ David Schulenberg, *The Keyboard Music of J.S. Bach*. Routledge, 2006.

Var 14 is another elaborate virtuoso movement with much hand crossing in the Italian manner. In Var 20, in addition to the hand-crossing, there is also a “hocket” effect: each note in a rising 1/8th note arpeggio in the left hand is interlaced with “pizzicato” descending 1/16th notes in the right hand. In the next measure, this pattern repeats, some times in the opposite direction, with hands reversed.

In contrast to the Italian manner of hand crossing, French keyboard music used a technique where both hands perform in the same register, with one placed above the other. Var 8 is a beautiful example.

The three minor variations provide a special quality of tranquility in the context of the many robust and virtuoso movements. Var 21 seems especially reflective: the nearly constant 16th-note motion distributed over all of its three voices acts like a delicate veil spread over the musical texture, creating a gentle sound carpet that seems somewhat suspended in time. There is a temporary relief from the percussive presence of the surrounding variations. Var 25, also in minor, recalls the affect of the Aria, although it is much more complex and darker. There are moments in this slow movement of pre-classical *Empfindsamkeit*, foreshadowing the music of C.P.E. Bach, especially in the chromatically meandering, highly ornamented passages. The effect is most poignant.

Entering as a listener into the world of the “Goldberg Variations” is like being taken on an astonishing journey of discovery, dazzling in its variety and seemingly infinite musical possibilities and compositional techniques. It is a wholly captivating experience, encompassing and enthralling. The sleep it might induce is of the healing kind, as in the medieval dream vision, allowing an exhausted spirit to find rest at last, and afterward to arise refreshed and changed.

—Marianne R. Pfau, April 15 2012

Marianne Richert Pfau, Ph. D., Professor of Music at the University of San Diego, teaches interdisciplinary courses in music history and directs the “Angelus” early music concert series. She has a book on Hildegard of Bingen, is active as baroque oboist, and records newly discovered Baroque music with her ensemble “toutes suites” in Germany on the “genuine” label.



Harpsichordist **Takae Ohnishi** has performed extensively as a soloist, chamber musician and continuo player. She has been the principal harpsichordist at Atlantic Symphony Orchestra, as well as a soloist with the Berlin Philharmonic

Scharoun Ensemble, Gardner Chamber Orchestra, and continuo player with Pro Arte Chamber Orchestra, and Bach Collegium San Diego. She has performed at the Boston Early Music Festival, the American Academy in Rome, and took part in the complete Brandenburg Concertos at the Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum directed by Paula Robison. As a performer of contemporary music, Ms. Ohnishi appeared as a guest artist at the Summer Institute for Contemporary Piano Performance held at the New England Conservatory of Music, and with the Harvard Group for New Music and the Callithumpian Consort.

Ms. Ohnishi is a prizewinner at the International Early Music Harpsichord Competition in Japan. Her debut CD *A Harpsichord Recital* was selected as an

International Special Recommended CD by the leading Japanese music magazine *Record Gei-jyu-tsu*. Her recording of contemporary music is released on Mode and New World Records.

As a lecturer, Ms. Ohnishi has been invited to lecture and give master classes in Yantai, China, Toho Gakuen School of Music in Tokyo, as well as the Early Music Festival in Fukuoka, Japan. Her recent recital tour in Japan was broadcast nationally on NHK TV program "Classic Ku-ra-bu."

Ms. Ohnishi graduated from Toho Gakuen School of Music, and holds a Master of Music degree from the New England Conservatory of Music and a Doctor of Musical Arts degree from Stony Brook University. Her teachers include Arthur Haas, Peter Sykes, John

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For our son Albert
—Takae Ohnishi

Producer: Lei Liang
Recording: Josef Kucera, engineer, Warren Lecture Hall Studio A,
University of California, San Diego, May 18-20, 2011
Editing and Mixing: Josef Kucera
Graphic Design: Douglas Holly
Cover Image: EASTON+COMBS
Photo of Takae Ohnishi: Patrick Kelley
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Harpsichord: Atelier Marc Ducornet based on a Ruckers model with a French "grand ravalement" – à Paris – 2010. This instrument was built for the Department of Music, University of California, San Diego.

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