

CAL PERFORMANCES
AT HOME

Streaming Premiere – Thursday, March 4, 2021, 7pm

Mahan Esfahani, *harpsichord*

Filmed exclusively for Cal Performances
at the Summer Hall of the Bach Archive in Leipzig, Germany
on January 21–22, 2021.

Johann Sebastian Bach (1695–1750)

Aria with 30 Variations for Double-Manual Harpsichord,
Goldberg Variations (1741), BWV 988 (*Clavier-Übung*, Part IV)

Aria

Variatio 1 a 1 Clav.

Variatio 2 a 1 Clav.

Variatio 3 a 1 Clav. Canone all'Unisono

Variatio 4 a 1 Clav.

Variatio 5 a 1 ovvero 2 Clav.

Variatio 6 a 1 Clav. Canone alla Seconda

Variatio 7 a 1 ovvero 2 Clav. Al tempo di Giga

Variatio 8 a 2 Clav.

Variatio 9 a 1 Clav. Canone alla Terza

Variatio 10 a 1 Clav. Fughetta

Variatio 11 a 2 Clav.

Variatio 12 a 1 Clav. Canone alla Quarta

Variatio 13 a 2 Clav.

Variatio 14 a 2 Clav.

Variatio 15 a 1 Clav. Canone alla Quinta. Andante

Variatio 16 a 1 Clav. Ouverture

Variatio 17 a 2 Clav.

Variatio 18 a 1 Clav. Canone alla Sesta

Variatio 19 a 1 Clav.

Variatio 20 a 2 Clav.

Variatio 21 a 1 Clav. Canone alla Settima

Variatio 22 a 1 Clav. Alla breve

Variatio 23 a 2 Clav.

Variatio 24 a 1 Clav. Canone all'Ottava

Variatio 25 a 2 Clav. Adagio

Variatio 26 a 2 Clav.

Variatio 27 a 2 Clav. Canone alla Nona

Variatio 28 a 2 Clav.

Variatio 29 a 1 ovvero 2 Clav.

Variatio 30 a 1 Clav. Quodlibet

Aria da capo

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is dedicated to Gail and Dan Rubinfeld, leading supporters of Cal Performances
and the well-being of our artists for almost 30 years.

This performance is made possible, in part, by an anonymous Patron Sponsor.

Mahan Esfahani can be heard on Hyperion Records, Ltd.,
and Deutsche Grammophon, where he has recorded the *Goldberg Variations*.

www.mahanesfahani.com

*Note: following its premiere, the video recording of this concert
will be available on demand through June 2, 2021.*



Count Kayserling, formerly Russian Ambassador at the Court of the Elector of Saxony, who frequently resided in Leipzig, once said to Bach that he should like to have some clavier pieces for his [court harpsichordist] Goldberg, which should be of such a soft and somewhat lively character that he might be a little cheered up by them in his sleepless nights. Bach thought he could best fulfil this wish by variations, which, on account of the constant sameness of the fundamental harmony, he had hitherto considered as an ungrateful task. But as at this time all his works were models of art, these variations also became such under his hand. Bach was, perhaps, never so well rewarded for any work as for this: the Count made him a present of a golden goblet, filled with a hundred Louis d'or. But their worth as a work of art would not have been paid if the present had been a thousand times as great.

So wrote J.N. Forkel, Sebastian Bach's first biographer, in his brief account of the master's life (1802). Whether a story with such fantastic overtones (the hundred gold coins, an insomniac Count) is true is, however, irrelevant when compared to the very legendary quality of this music itself. Even when compared to the whole of Bach's considerable and varied output, the *Goldberg Variations* stand out as an example of their creator's total compositional originality. In conceiving such a work, Bach had no discernible models as regards the *Goldbergs'* larger-scale architectonics or the exploitation of innovations in keyboard technique and figuration. Some say that he would have known of pirate publications of Scarlatti's *Essercizi* issued in Paris, but the evidence is at best speculative. Desirous as every listener and melomane is of surrendering oneself to the sheer aural beauty of this music—after all, Bach's own title page specifically states his work to be “prepared for the soul's delight”—any listener of Bach's music has a responsibility to familiarize himself with the constructs and aims that drove Bach to commit this music to posterity. We must not forget that while Bach was no academic, he was certainly a thinking man. He confronted his spiritual and intellectual questions, stated his vision of the universe, and perhaps even grappled

with the joys and disappointments of his life through the medium of the written note.

The *Goldberg Variations* are among the mere handful of works written in any time or place that truly require a sort of road-map for the listener. Unlike, say, Brahms' *Variations and Fugue on a Theme by Handel* (Op. 24), the successive movements of Bach's work are not constructed solely in terms of “musical-emotional cause and effect” (e.g., textural variety for its own sake, meant to inspire solely visceral responses). Rather, Bach constructed these variations on a pre-conceived plan: most obviously, the 30 variations are made up of 10 groups of three, in which a movement of what the scholar Peter Williams has called a “clear-genre piece” (a dance, a fugue, an overture, an arioso, et al.) is followed by a virtuoso piece featuring the crossing of the hands and then by a canon. In turn, each successive canon is composed with reference to successively rising intervals: Therefore, Variation 3 is a canon at the unison, whereas Variation 6 is at the second, and so on and so forth until Variation 27, a canon at the ninth. As I will further argue below, Bach's plan may even have a narrative intent, which is perhaps why Variation 30 breaks the cycle of canons. Aesthetically speaking, some of the variations seem even to be used as dramatic foils to one another—hence, the bittersweet cantilena of Variation 13 is answered with the schizophrenic exuberance of Variation 14, and the question posed by the inconclusive ending of Variation 15 is followed by an overture in Variation 16 that effectively “announces” or opens the second half of the work.

After considering but a few structural aspects of Bach's work, we may ask one final question. What drove Bach to compose such a work? Even if the story of the insomniac Count is true, such legends can never really explain a composer's compulsion to actually say something as an artist and creator. Personally, I venture to guess that the answer may be found in Bach's own life. What was happening around and perhaps a few years before 1741?

Bach's letters from the late 1730s show a man who felt persecuted and misunderstood and who also suffered a great deal of personal pain.

In a series of letters from 1738, we see that Bach's troubled son Johann Gottfried Bernhard had skipped town from an important position as an organist in Muehlhausen due to having accrued considerable debts. For almost two years, J.S. Bach lost track of his son, who eventually died, away from home, in Jena (of what? and how?) at the age of 24. He wrote in one letter, desperate in trying to find his son: "I must bear my cross in patience, and leave my unruly son to God's patience alone." Equally significant, I think, is a letter from the Leipzig Town Council, dated March 17, 1739, pointing out to Bach that a performance of the *St. John Passion* is to be cancelled because of not having been officially approved by the Council. Bach's understated and obviously hurt reply as recorded by the council secretary cannot but inspire sadness: "he [Bach] answered: he did not care, for he got nothing out of it anyway, and it was only a burden."

The effect of these and other tribulations was considerable—recent scholarship on the Bach cantatas shows that by the late 1730s the composer stopped regularly writing new cantatas and mostly resigned himself to performances of works by other composers. Rather, in his last decade, he turned inward and wrote his finest music in genres that had mostly gone out of fashion or were musically and intellectually far above the heads of his contemporaries: the *Goldberg Variations* (1741), the *Musical Offering* (1747), and the *Art of Fugue* (1749–50). No one noticed—the *Art of Fugue*, for example, didn't even sell enough copies to pay for the copper plates used to engrave them—and he didn't care. As far as Bach was concerned, to paraphrase a remark made by Sir Thomas More in Robert Bolt's unforgettable *A Man for All Seasons*, his audience was himself and God—"a pretty good public, that."

The thirtieth variation—the "Quodlibet"—may have something to do with this. According to various 18th- and 19th-century writers, the quodlibet was a genre defined by the simultaneous singing of various popular tunes. According to Bach's sons, Bach family members would meet and sing quodlibets and "laugh heartily" (Forkel). Being Variation 30, however,

this piece should instead be a canon according to the pattern set out in the rest of the work. But Bach decides to conclude on a different note altogether, with the combination of these tunes:

(a) "Ich bin so lang nicht bei dir gewest"
("I have been so long away from you")

(b) "Kraut und Rüben haben mich vertrieben"
("Cabbage and beets have driven me away")

Perhaps these songs are allusion to jokes within the family. Or, in considering Bach's own life, could the first song in particular allude to something deeper? Again, back to Bach and where he was in life in the early 1740s: by this point, several of his children were dead, as were his first wife, his parents (who both had died by the time he was 10 years of age), and his brothers; he lived in a town in which a group of faceless councillors desultorily insulted or ignored his work, and in most of Germany the name "Bach" generally referred to one of his sons. He probably still felt the sting of his being hired as the Cantor of the Thomaskirche in 1723, when a councillor wrote that "since a first or second-rate candidate cannot be procured, we must settle for a mediocre one."

So what is the last variation, the "Quodlibet" (literally, "as you like"), about, then? In nine canons, we have climbed the steps to perfection ($9 = 3 \times 3$, three being the "perfect" number of the Trinity—though this is just me having a bit of speculative fun), and what is our reward in Heaven? We get to see our family. Maybe Bach remembered a song from his childhood, or a joke told by his brothers, or imagined—as adults—his children who died in infancy. And the repetition of the aria at the end? Briefly allowed to see his family in Paradise, our Bach wakes up. It was all a dream after all. In this variation, I am forever reminded of the refrain from a memorable song by the great Johnny Cash:

*Daddy sang bass (Mama sang tenor)
Me and little brother would join right in there
Singin' seems to help a troubled soul*

*One of these days and it won't be long
I'll rejoin them in a song
I'm gonna join the family circle at the throne...*

Academically speaking, there is obviously no proof of this narrative intent, but in my mind, Bach's music itself leaves no doubt of something deeper. There is a point at which empirical proof fails and the artist's privilege at engaging in speculation allows for new horizons to open themselves to our perception.

Or maybe not. Maybe it's just a case of Bach playing about with a few numbers. Maybe it's about cabbages and beets, and great Bach,

above, is laughing at our disputes and our volumes and volumes of speculation about what is his music "is." Of course, Bach's music is on a plane that demands the best of our efforts as humans while simultaneously eluding them. In other words: you can't kill it, but it will always exist beyond our pitiful efforts. We can explain his music with all the charts and tables and numbers we want, but that only explains *how*. If we are going to listen to Bach, play his music, and love the human who more than any other gives us all that we know of the dignity of life, then we have to answer this: *Why?*

—Mahan Esfahani

ABOUT THE ARTIST

Since making his London debut in 2009, **Mahan Esfahani** has established himself as the first harpsichordist in a generation whose work spans all areas of classical music-making, from critically acclaimed performances and recordings of the standard repertoire to working with the leading composers of the day to pioneering concerto appearances with major symphony orchestras on four continents. He was the first and only harpsichordist to be a BBC New Generation Artist (2008–10), a Borletti-Buitoni prize winner (2009), a nominee for *Gramophone's* Artist of the Year (2014, 2015, 2017), and on the shortlist as Instrumentalist of the Year for the Royal Philharmonic Society Awards (2013, 2019).

Esfahani's work with new and modern music is particularly acclaimed, with high-profile solo and concertante commissions forming the backbone of his repertoire for his 2020 Hyperion release *Musique?*—a compilation of electronic and acoustic works that includes the modern revival of Luc Ferrari's 1974 *Programme commun* for harpsichord and tape.

His discography for Hyperion and Deutsche Grammophon—including the ongoing series of the complete works of Bach for the former—has

been acclaimed in the press while garnering a *Gramophone* Award, two *BBC Music Magazine* Awards, a Diapason d'Or and "Choc de Classica" in France, and an International Classical Music Award, as well as numerous "Editor's Choice" selections in a variety of publications and including compilations of essential classical music performances and recordings from the *Telegraph* and the *New York Times*.

Esfahani is a frequent commentator on BBC Radio 3 and Radio 4 for the *Record Review*, *Building a Library*, and *Sunday Feature*; for the BBC's *Sunday Feature* he is currently at work on his fourth radio documentary, following popular programs on such subjects as the early history of African-American composers in the classical sphere and the development of orchestral music in Azerbaijan.

Born in Tehran in 1984, Esfahani grew up in the Maryland, studied musicology and history at Stanford University, and worked as a répétiteur and studied in Boston with Peter Watchorn before completing his studies in Prague with the celebrated Czech harpsichordist Zuzana Růžičková. Following several years spent in Milan, Oxford, and London, he now makes his home in Prague.

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