



Saturday, May 4, 2024, 2pm
Zellerbach Hall

Víkingur Ólafsson, piano
J.S. Bach's *Goldberg Variations*, BWV 988

Aria
Variation 1
Variation 2
Variation 3
Variation 4
Variation 5
Variation 6
Variation 7
Variation 8
Variation 9
Variation 10
Variation 11
Variation 12
Variation 13
Variation 14
Variation 15
Variation 16
Variation 17
Variation 18
Variation 19
Variation 20
Variation 21
Variation 22
Variation 23
Variation 24
Variation 25
Variation 26
Variation 27
Variation 28
Variation 29
Quodlibet
Aria da capo

*This program will be performed without intermission
and last approximately 80 minutes.*

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Goldberg Variations

Johann Sebastian Bach (1685–1750)

In the introduction to his remarkable CD of Bach's *Goldberg Variations*, Icelandic pianist Víkingur Ólafsson touches on the often-overlooked duality of this formidable work's appeal: it is designed not only to astound but to entertain the listener.

"In the *Goldberg Variations*, the one thing that rivals Bach's complete intellectual mastery of his craft is his inspired, creative playfulness. In 30 variations, built on the humble harmonic framework of a simple, graceful aria, Bach turns limited material into boundless variety like no one before or since. The *Goldberg Variations* contain some of the most virtuosic keyboard music ever written, some of the most astonishingly brilliant uses of counterpoint in the repertoire, and countless instances of exalted poetry, abstract contemplation, and deep pathos—all within immaculately shaped structures of formal perfection. In a paradox that only seems to make sense in the light of Bach's particular Baroque genius, the relentlessly strict formal premise he sets himself turns out to afford him sublime creative freedom—and he clearly revels in it. When we write and talk about the *Goldberg Variations*, we tend to focus on Bach the profound thinker, assiduous craftsman, and visionary musical architect. But when we play and listen to [them], we cannot but notice that we are also in the company of Bach the cheerful, at times ecstatic, master improviser; Bach the greatest keyboard virtuoso of his time." A man who could choose a mischievous "Quodlibet"—an improvisatory contrapuntal game based on popular-song riffs—to be his ultimate 30th variation.

THE WORK'S ORIGINS

Bach did not name this consummate example of the theme-and-variations form the "Goldberg Variations"; instead in his 1741 publication of the work, he gave it the more

straightforward title "Aria with diverse variations for a harpsichord with two manuals. Composed for Music Lovers to Refresh their Spirits." (translated from the German). In his pioneering biography of the composer written in 1802, Johann Forkel told a delightful story about the work's origins, which, though it has since been discredited, has clung to it and provided its popular name.

In Forkel's story, Count Hermann Carl von Keyserlingk asked Bach to give him some clavier pieces of "such a gentle and somewhat lively character that he might be a little cheered up by them in his sleepless nights." The insomniac nobleman kept his private musician—the young Johann Gottlieb Goldberg, a former pupil of Bach's—awake to play the harpsichord in his antechamber while he tossed and turned.

But even though Keyserlingk was indeed a patron of Bach's who had helped secure the post of *Hofkomponist* to the Saxon court in Dresden for him, would Bach create such a complex masterpiece for this mundane purpose? And if so, why didn't he dedicate the work to the Count as court etiquette demanded? And would he write these spectacularly difficult variations for the then 14-year-old Goldberg to play? Nevertheless, this story was embraced for nearly two centuries.

Though Bach may have presented his patron with a copy of the *Goldberg Variations*, its origins were much loftier. From 1731 to 1741, Bach had published a series of four keyboard volumes that demonstrated his profound knowledge of counterpoint and the technical possibilities of keyboard instruments. Each collection bore the modest title *Clavier-Übung* or "Keyboard Practice," but they contained musical wonders. The fourth and final volume contains only the *Goldberg Variations*, which indicates how important a summation of his art Bach considered them to be.

Aria.

1.

The first system of the handwritten musical score consists of two staves. The upper staff is in treble clef and the lower staff is in bass clef. Both staves are marked with a key signature of one sharp (F#) and a time signature of 3/4. The music features a complex melodic line in the upper staff with many slurs and ornaments, and a more rhythmic accompaniment in the lower staff.

The second system continues the musical piece with two staves. It maintains the 3/4 time signature and one-sharp key signature. The notation is dense with various note values and rests, including some triplets indicated by a '3' over a group of notes.

The third system of the score shows two staves of music. The upper staff has a particularly active melodic line with many sixteenth and thirty-second notes. The lower staff provides a steady accompaniment with some longer note values.

The fourth system consists of two staves. The music continues with similar complexity in the upper staff. There are some dynamic markings and phrasing slurs throughout the system.

The fifth system of the score features two staves. The melodic line in the upper staff remains highly active and expressive. The lower staff continues to support the melody with a consistent rhythmic pattern.

The sixth system shows two staves of music. The upper staff has a very busy melodic line with many slurs and ornaments. The lower staff has a more relaxed accompaniment with some longer note values.

The seventh and final system of the score consists of two staves. The music concludes with a final cadence in both staves. A small red circular stamp is visible at the bottom center of the page, containing the number '211' and some illegible text.

Bach's competitive streak may also have played a role in the birth of the *Goldberg Variations*. In 1733, his rival Handel published an aria with 64 variations built over the aria's bass line, which Bach undoubtedly knew. So with his 30 variations created on a longer and more complex bass, Bach was able to produce a far greater and more comprehensive work than what Handel had attempted.

FORMAL STRUCTURE

The *Goldberg Variations* spring from a beautiful, pensive Aria in the style of the slow, triple-meter saraband dance; it is made up of two sections that are each 16 measures long and are repeated. Perhaps written years before the variations, this aria was a favorite of Bach's second wife, the soprano Anna Magdalena Bach, who copied it into one of the famous musical notebooks her husband created for her. But Bach did not create his variations on the Aria's lovely, richly ornamented melody, but on its bass. Like a Baroque chaconne or passacaglia, this bass line is repeated basically unaltered throughout the variations while musical wonders are woven above. All but three of the variations are in G major; the three exceptions move to G minor.

The 30 variations are grouped in sets of three, comprising a usually slower character or genre piece (often a dance); a technically demanding, quick-tempo piece in the brilliant style of a toccata; and a canon increasing in complexity as the chasing voices move progressively farther apart. After Variation 15, Bach marks the beginning of the second half with a lavish French overture variation. A return of the Aria closes the work.

As his original title indicates, Bach wrote the *Goldberg Variations* for a harpsichord with two manuals. Nevertheless, this virtuosic work attracts many ambitious pianists, who must be willing to tackle the added challenge of intricate hand crossings to perform the passages where one of the hands would have moved to the second manual.

A CLOSER LISTEN

Variations 1–3: Contrasting with the Aria, the first variation is a lively dance in three beats filled with intriguing rhythmic syn-copations. Also dancelike, the courtly Variation 2 poises two freely imitative upper voices atop a non-stop bass part. Variation 3 is the first canon, this a quite simple one in which the two upper voices chase each other in unison, supported by a bass voice that is equally active. The choice of 12/8 meter fills this elegant music with graceful triplet rhythms.

Variations 4–6: In the style of the three-beat *passepied* dance, Variation 4 is lively and sparkling, with crisp, short phrases instead of flowing lines. Imitative counterpoint flashes quickly between the voices. Using only two voices, Variation 5 is the first display of high-speed virtuosity in toccata style and requires frequent hand crossing. One hand plays blindingly fast sixteenth notes, while the other performs staccato leaps; frequently the two hands change roles. Variation 6 is the second of the canons, this time a canon in which the following voice enters one step higher than the first voice. Like the preceding variation, it is powered by fast sixteenth notes.

Variations 7–9: Variation 7 brings us a French-style gigue in bouncing 6/8 time. A sparkling variation for two voices, its French flourishes add to its playful charm. Variation 8 is another formidable piece of high-speed virtuosity for two voices. On a harpsichord with two manuals, it would not be so difficult, but the amount of hand crossing involved on the piano make it a considerable challenge of dexterity and coordination. The mood eases for Variation 9, a canon at the third, in which the following voice enters two steps below the first. This canon has a gracious quality since parts played together in third intervals are very consonant and pleasing to the ear.

Variations 10–12: The genre chosen for Variation 10 is the fugue, or in this case, a somewhat less rigorous *fughetta* in which not all four voices complete the subject. Nevertheless, with its subject launched by two bristling trills, this is a mighty impressive piece to hear. The fleet perpetual motion of the two voices in Variation 11 were designed to be played on two manuals, making this one of the work's major challenges for a pianist to execute. Variation 12 deploys another approach to the canon, which this time is at the fourth. The following voice plays an inversion of the first voice's melody—in other words, it's upside down. With its propulsive rhythms, this is one of the most attractive of the canons.

Variations 13–15: Returning to the Aria's three-beat saraband style, Variation 13 is one of the work's loveliest, with its gorgeously decorated soprano part bearing the gently spinning melody and a lower voice adding some subtle rhythmic conflict. Variation 14 shows us Bach displaying his virtuosity with joyous abandon. Launched with a three-octave leap from the bass to the treble registers, it requires elaborate hand crossing throughout its large range. A passage of giggling short figures adds jocular humor. By contrast, No. 15's canon at the fifth is one of the *Goldberg's* most solemn variations as it moves to G minor for the first time. The motive being imitated shifts back and forth between its original and inverted form; chromatically altered pitches poignantly destabilize the harmonies. In the words of Glenn Gould, a great champion of this work: "It's the most severe and rigorous and beautiful canon... It's a piece so moving, so anguished—and so uplifting at the same time—that it would not be in any way out of place in the *St. Matthew Passion*."

Variations 16–18: Bach divided his variations into two parts, and Variation 16 announces

the beginning of the second with a very grand French overture. Its first portion carries the overture's slow section with its dotted rhythms and abundant trills; the second section presents the overture's mandatory music of quick-tempo counterpoint in fugal style. Designed to be played on two manuals, Variation 17 is another racing toccata of scales and arpeggios, again more difficult on the piano than the harpsichord. Variation 18 is a brisk canon at the sixth, with the lead voice entering on the beat and the chasing voice entering off the beat in the same measure to produce playful rhythmic tension.

Variations 19–21: Variation 19 is a fast three-beat dance for three voices that is a rhythmic game of syncopations. Rhythmic games are intensified to the max in Variation 20, in which each hand is a fraction off from the other. All of this is accomplished at top speed and with much hand crossing on the piano. Aided by his two manuals, Bach here is reveling in his virtuosity. The second variation in G minor, No. 21 immediately clears away any frivolity. It is a slow, meditative canon at the seventh: an interval that tends to destabilize its key. This effect is strengthened by Bach's lavish use of chromatically altered notes, which beautifully color the scale patterns.

Variations 22–24: In case the elaborate bass parts we've been hearing make us forget how the Aria's ground bass goes, Variation 22 brings it back in clearly recognizable form. Above it is fugal writing for the other three voices. Variation 23 is another break-neck race with the two voices chasing each other just half a beat apart with descending scales followed by ascending scales. The scales then break apart into little bursts. In a pastoral 9/8 siciliano rhythm, Variation 24 is a relaxing canon at the octave with the lead voice followed by two other voices above and below. Long trills adorn the opening of the second section.



Variations 25–27: If one were asked to choose which variation is the greatest of the 30, many musicians would select No. 25, which harpsichordist Wanda Landowska called “the black pearl.” By far the longest, this is the final G-minor variation: a beautiful, contemplative aria for soprano set in a very slow Adagio tempo. Bach’s searching chromaticism here points ahead to the harmonic language of the 19th century. Peter Williams, author of a recent book analyzing the *Goldbergs*, writes that “the beauty and dark passion of this variation make it unquestionably the emotional high point of the work.” Brightening the mood, the finger exercises of Variation 26 pair nonstop sixteenth notes against a stately dotted-rhythm theme, both transferred seamlessly from one hand to the other. This launches a rush to the finish line immediately picked up by Variation 27, a canon at the ninth. All the previous canons have included an accompanying bass part; this one is a pure canon just between the two voices.

Variations 28–30: The last three variations open with the extraordinarily challenging No. 28, in which trills are played by one hand or the other in almost every measure. Alongside this, an angular, wide-ranging melody is etched out in tiny stabs. Written for two manuals, this is the ultimate hand-crossing test. Somewhat related thematically, Variation 29 is a whirlwind toccata made up of harshly hammered chords and gossamer triplets, all requiring virtuosic

agility. If it followed the pattern Bach has established, No. 30 should be a canon. Instead, he gives us a variation that is much less rigorous: a “Quodlibet” or “what you like.” Such entertainments were extremely popular in Bach’s day and especially in a Bach household crowded with talent. They featured popular songs mashed together in a game of musical improvisation created by the whole company. Two songs featured in this “Quodlibet” are “Ich bin solang bei dir g’west” (“I’ve been so long away from you”) and “Kraut und Rüben haben mich vertrieben” (“Cabbage and turnips have driven me away”). This sturdy, tuneful variation provides a chance to take a relaxing breath before the Aria returns.

Aria: Listening to the *Goldberg Variations* is like embarking on an epic journey. But now the journey is over, and we’re coming home again. In Ólafsson’s summation: “The return of the Aria is a final surprise, inevitable only in retrospect. Like meeting an old and dear friend after a long separation, it somehow feels like it never left at all. And of course, at least harmonically, it never did. Not a note has been altered, but it has changed—or, more accurately, we have.”

—Janet E. Bedell © 2024

Janet E. Bedell is a program annotator and feature writer who writes for Carnegie Hall, the Metropolitan Opera, Los Angeles Opera, Caramoor Festival of the Arts, and other musical organizations.



Markus Jans

Icelandic pianist Víkingur Ólafsson has made a profound impact with his remarkable combination of highest-level musicianship and visionary programs. His recordings for Deutsche Grammophon—*Philip Glass Piano Works* (2017); *Johann Sebastian Bach* (2018); *Debussy, Rameau* (2020), *Mozart & Contemporaries* (2021); and *From Afar* (2022)—captured the public and critical imagination and have led to career streams of over 600 million.

In October 2023, Ólafsson released his highly anticipated new album on Deutsche Grammophon of J.S. Bach's *Goldberg Variations*. Ólafsson has dedicated his entire 2023–24 season to a *Goldberg Variations* world tour, performing the work across six continents throughout the year. He brings Bach's masterpiece to major concert halls, including London's Southbank Centre, New York's Carnegie Hall, the Wiener Konzerthaus, the Philharmonie de Paris, Tokyo's Suntory Hall, Harpa Concert Hall, Walt

Disney Hall, Sala São Paulo, Shanghai Symphony Hall, Tonhalle Zürich, Philharmonie Berlin, Mupa Budapest, KKL Luzern, and Alte Oper Frankfurt, to name a few.

One of today's most sought-after artists, Ólafsson has earned multiple awards including Opus Klassik Instrumentalist of the Year (2023), Opus Klassik Solo Recording Instrumental (twice), CoScan's International Nordic Person of the Year (2023), the Rolf Schock Prize for Music (2022), *Gramophone's* Artist of the Year (2019), and Album of the Year at the *BBC Music Magazine Awards* (2019).

A captivating communicator both on and off stage, Ólafsson's significant talent extends to broadcast, having presented several of his own series for television and radio. He was Artist in Residence for three months on BBC Radio 4's flagship arts program, *Front Row*—broadcasting live during lockdown from an empty Harpa concert hall in Reykjavík and reaching millions of listeners around the world.