

# SOUTHBANK CENTRE

## Víkingur Ólafsson: Bach's Goldberg Variations

Friday 22 September 2023, 7pm

Royal Festival Hall

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Toks Dada, Head of Classical Music, Southbank Centre

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### Repertoire

Bach Goldberg Variations, BWV.988

85'

### Performer

Víkingur Ólafsson *piano*

*This performance lasts approximately 1 hour 25 minutes with no interval.*

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### Johann Sebastian Bach (1685-1750)

**Goldberg Variations, BWV.988 (1741)**

The story behind the composition of Bach's *Goldberg Variations* was first told by his earliest biographer, Johann Nikolaus Forkel. Forkel wrote in 1802 about Count Keyserling – former Russian ambassador to the electoral court of Saxony – and his young resident harpsichordist Johann Gottlieb Goldberg, a pupil of both Johann Sebastian Bach and his son, Wilhelm Friedemann.

'The Count was often sickly, and then had sleepless nights. At these times Goldberg, who lived in the house with him, had to pass the night in an adjoining room to play something to him when he could not sleep. The Count once said to Bach that he should like to have some clavier pieces for his 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... The Count thereafter called them nothing but "his" variations. He was never weary of hearing them; and for a long time, when

the sleepless nights came, he used to say: "Dear Goldberg, do play me one of my variations." 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'ors. But their worth as a work of art would not have been paid if the present had been a thousand times as great.'

The veracity of this account is still debated today. When the work was first published in 1741, Bach gave it a straightforward title with no dedication: 'Keyboard Practice, consisting of an Aria with Diverse Variations, for the Harpsichord with 2 Manuals. Composed for Music Lovers, to Refresh their Spirits'. It is possible that the Count received a copy after publication, with the intention that it be presented to Goldberg – who died aged 29, taking to the grave any clarification he might have offered. The autograph manuscript of the *Goldberg Variations* is lost, but in the 1970s a copy of the original edition notated by Bach and published by Balthasar Schmidt, known as the 'Handexemplar', was discovered. It includes an additional 14 canons by Bach, based on the Aria's bassline: the *Canons on the Goldberg Ground*, BWV.1087.

The serene Aria that forms the basis of the *Goldberg Variations* was written in a notebook, in what may be the handwriting of Bach's second wife, Anna Magdalena Bach. It is possible that the melody dates from that time (c.1725), or that it was jotted down at a later date. The Aria is in the style of a sarabande, a stately triple-time dance, in this case embellished with elaborate ornamentation; rather than varying the Aria's melody, Bach varies its bassline. The structure of the Aria is symmetrical, in two halves of 16 bars.

There are 10 sets of three variations, of which every third variation is a canon. Each triptych usually begins with a dance in free counterpoint, followed by an intricate toccata and ending with a canon. The nine canons consist of the upper two 'voices' intertwining in imitation, the relationship between the two arranged in ascending order of pitch. Canons at the unison, fourth, fifth or octave (conventional intervals) were common, but in using more unusual intervals Bach set himself a unique challenge.

The First Variation, a two-part invention, answers the tranquillity of the Aria with energetic leaping figures. This variation has the quality of a polonaise which, if Bach was writing with the Count in mind, may have been a nod to Keyserling's Polish heritage. The Second Variation features conversational two-part writing over a running bassline. We then hear a genial canon 'at the unison': both voices begin on the same note, a bar apart.

Variation 4 combines a rustic temperament with sophisticated counterpoint, including a three-note idea passed swiftly between different voices. The hand-crossing first toccata is an exuberant outburst of jumping lines, followed by a gentler canon (starting 'at the second') based on a descending scale. Variation 7 is a French gigue of dotted rhythms and ornaments, followed by a complex toccata and elegant canon ('at the third' – the second voice starting a third below the first), with an animated bassline.

The Tenth Variation is a movement of good-natured four-part fugal writing. The toccata, a virtuoso but flowing pastorello, seems to evaporate at the end, before a canon (at the fourth) in which the voices unfold in inversion – the second moving in contrary motion to the first. Variation 13 is pivotal, related both to Variation 25 and to the Aria itself in its sarabande-like nature. Its delicate melody floats above the other voices, peppered with chromatic twinges. This is contrasted with the energetic Variation 14, and a mournful minor-key canon (at the fifth), moving in contrary motion, using the extremes of the keyboard and punctuated by sighing motifs.

Variation 16 is a fresh start, functioning as the overture to the 'second act' of the whole work. It is in the style of a French overture, full of stately ornamentation and dotted rhythms, with a fugal second half; it is the only variation to step outside the 32-bar or 16-bar structure. Then comes a lively toccata and imposing canon (at the sixth) full of suspensions with an agile bassline. Variation 19 is in the *passepiéd* style; a lilting triple-meter dance that precedes a virtuoso, witty toccata. This contrasts with the deeply expressive minor-key canon at the seventh – a notoriously tricky interval with which to work, resulting in music laced with sliding chromaticism.

With Variation 22 comes robust four-part writing followed by a playful and ferociously challenging toccata. The next canon, at the octave, exudes pastoral tranquillity, in contrast with Variation 25, the longest of the set and a gem of heartfelt intensity. Variation 26 features two time-signatures: 18/16 for the continuous semiquavers and 3/4 for the sarabande accompaniment. For the first and only time in this work, Bach eschews the bass for the conversational Variation 27 at the ninth – outside the octave, in dangerous territory – before unleashing the trill-laden Variation 28 and sumptuous final toccata. The bassline recedes into the background during these variations, making its return in Variation 30 the more pronounced.

Variation 30 is not the expected canon. Instead, Bach inserts a 'quodlibet', meaning 'as you please': a collage based on folk songs. Forkel recorded that Bach family reunions included the performance of chorales juxtaposed with renditions of popular songs, reducing all present to helpless laughter. This quodlibet seems to serve the same purpose, its levity puncturing the preceding gravity with good humour. Two of the folk songs used were originally to these texts:

'I've not been with you for so long.  
Come closer, closer, closer.'

'Cabbage and turnips drove me away.  
Had my mother cooked some meat then I'd have  
stayed much longer.'

After this high-spirited interlude, the final return of the Aria is a deeply moving moment. The preceding journey is recalled. The work has come full circle.

**Programme notes © Joanna Wyld, 2023**

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