

# SOUTHBANK CENTRE

## Fazil Say: Bach's Goldberg Variations

Friday 20 March 2026, 7pm | Queen Elizabeth Hall

We are proud to be a place where people come together to discover and connect with the wonder of classical music. Throughout the year, we provide unrivalled opportunities to encounter, live in person, the full range of music, and a variety of different ways for you to experience it.

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Toks Dada, Head of Classical Music, Southbank Centre

### Repertoire

Bach Goldberg Variations, BWV.998

*Interval*

### Fazil Say

Piano Sonata (Yeni Hayat) (New life), Op.99

Nazim, Op.12 No.1

Ses, Op.40b

Kara Toprak (Black earth), Op.8

Paganini Jazz (Variations on Caprice No.24 in the style of modern jazz), Op.5c

### Performer

Fazil Say *piano*

### Johann Sebastian Bach (1685-1750)

#### Goldberg Variations, BWV.998

55'

A torrent of justified superlatives have been lavished on the *Goldberg Variations*. It is a magnificent synthesis of precision engineering and seemingly limitless fantasy, one of Bach's most inspired achievements – and for that accolade there is considerable competition. But we are in danger of cricking our necks if we put it on too high a pedestal. Whether returning to it, or encountering it anew, how should we listen?

10'

3'

4'

6'

6'

Perhaps not as a puzzle to solve, or a challenge to overcome. Bach's original title describes the variations as 'Keyboard exercise, consisting of an Aria with diverse variations for harpsichord with two manuals, composed for music lovers to refresh their spirits.' He intended to instruct, dazzle and entertain. Each of the variations, though joined to its siblings and their parent aria, inhabits a world of its own. Whether or not we can orientate ourselves precisely in the piece or appreciate the nuances and complexity of its construction in real time, we can revel in the compositional (and performing) panache on display. There isn't space here for a detailed guide. For that, see musicologist Sir Donald Tovey's essay, Glenn Gould's typically personal liner note to his cult-classic 1955 recording, and a 'lecture concert' by Sir András Schiff. Here is a broad overview, with landmarks.

The variations are divided into ten sets of three. To start, a character piece, usually a dance form. Next, a fast, brilliant bout of keyboard dexterity in the style of that instrumental showpiece, the toccata. To conclude each subset, a canon, where the melodies imitate and chase each other. These canons progress from a canon in unison (Variation 3) to a 'canon at the second' (Variation 6) where the second voice enters one step in the scale away from the first, and so on right through to Variation 27, a canon at ninth, i.e. an octave and a step away from the original voice.

The three minor key variations are staging posts. The first of them comes at half-way – variation 15's anguished canon at the fifth. This and its immediate neighbours show Bach's sense

*This performance lasts approximately 2 hours.  
There is a 20-minute interval.*

of dramatic pacing. It's preceded by a high-spirited variation where you can almost hear giggling in the music. Variation 16, that follows, launches the second half of the piece in a grand manner with a two-part French overture: a rushing upward scale, stately dotted rhythms and the obligatory faster section with contrapuntal flourishes.

The other minor key variations are Variation 21, a richly chromatic canon at the seventh, and an extended, doleful Adagio (Variation 25). Revered as the emotional core of the work, it was dubbed the 'Black Pearl' by pioneering harpsichordist Wanda Landowska. She was hugely influential in re-establishing the piece as a work for two-manual harpsichord in the first half of the 20th century; it is actually more difficult to play on piano, with innumerable enforced hand-crossings, not to mention considerations of voicing, pedalling and balance when performed on a modern instrument.

Thereafter the variations ramp up the level of virtuosity; the wild written-out trills give a quivering energy to No.28 and the vigorous chords and dizzying triplets of No.29 relay a sense of mounting excitement. The final variation is not the expected strict canon, but a *quodlibet*, a brilliant, good-humoured combination of two well-known songs of the time. Bach completes the journey by repeating the aria, exactly as at the start. It is both greeting and adieu. The object has been lifted, scrutinised from every conceivable angle and in different lights, and simply replaced. Nothing has changed – except us, revitalised and refreshed by the experience.

Fazıl Say (b. 1970) studied the *Goldberg Variations* during Covid-19, but the enforced worldwide lockdown also inspired the first piece he presents. 'A work of hope that describes the process in which the traces of the coronavirus pandemic...are gradually erased and humanity returns to life'. *Yeni hayat sonati* (New Life Sonata), Op.99, is in four joined sections. A flourish of glissandi on bare strings melts into uncertain atonal fragments, muted by laying an arm across the strings to produce a pitch but deaden the resonance. The fragments coalesce into an amiable, broadly tonal dance. The ferocious second section focuses on the lower end of the keyboard, before a gentler interlude. The final section shows Say's love of jazz in a kind of Bartók boogie-woogie.

Nâzım Hikmet was a revolutionary and oft-imprisoned Turkish thinker and poet whose communist ideals saw him settle for a while in the vast central region of Anatolia in order to seek contact with 'simple people'; Say's ballad *Nazım*, Op.12 No.1, is, perhaps symbolically, composed entirely on the simplicity of the piano's white keys. Another writer is memorialised in *Ses*, Op.40b, which is based on the poem *Sivas Acısı* (The pain of Sivas) by Aziz Nesin, that commemorates a sectarian arson attack on a hotel in central Turkey that killed 37 people in 1993.

Nesin was one of the intended targets. The short piece, a ballad sweepingly Romantic in style, ends unresolved, vanishing into the upper registers of the keyboard.

Folk music is an enduring influence for Say. When we speak, he gives a short ethnomusicology pep talk explaining how difficult it is to pinpoint a single 'Turkish' folk music style. 'Western Turkey looks toward the Balkans, to Serbia, Greece and Romania and the irregular rhythms of gypsy music. Its central region has a tradition – thousands of years old – of sacred music based on melody. And the East of the country absorbs the modes [scales] from Georgia, Armenia, Azerbaijan and the Middle East, even Hindu traditions.' To Say, his inclusion of all these elements is as natural as Stravinsky's use of the modal harmonies and melodic shapes of central Asia in *The Rite of Spring*, or as Bartók at his most folkloric. *Kara Toprak* (Black earth), Op.8, was inspired by a song by one of the last great Turkish balladeers. The song is steeped in loneliness and loss, all that remains being the black earth, the colour of the landscape round the singer's native town of Sivas. In its outer sections Say has the pianist mimic the plucked sounds of the saz, a five-stringed Turkish lute, by resting one arm on the piano strings while playing the keys with the other hand. Marked 'quasi improvazione', these passages frame a lament that develops into a fiery fast section that owes as much to jazz as the folk tradition.

*Paganini Jazz* (Variations on Caprice No.24 in the style of modern jazz), Op.5c, is a whistlestop tour of 20th-century jazz styles, from ragtime to free jazz, Art Tatum to Bernstein and Gershwin, bandleaders and songwriters. Say allows the performer to display their own creativity in 'transitional improvisations.'

For Say, composing is as important as performing, and he schedules his creative life accordingly: 'when studying and preparing recital programmes, you cannot let other music in.' (although he also admits to writing down fragments and ideas during 'dead time' spent in hotel lobbies and airport lounges). Alongside Beethoven and Bach he lists Debussy, Ravel, Bartók and Prokofiev, as well as the more experimental Ligeti, Crumb and Cage, in his repertoire. 'I am not an abstract composer', he insists. Musing on the complexity of postwar modernism, and his desire to forge a strong emotional connection with his audiences, he says simply, 'I made my choice.' He writes in a broadly tonal, melodic idiom. By assimilating folk and jazz, drawing on other art forms and addressing historical events and current affairs, Say's music has a richness and character of its own.

**Programme notes © Dan Whitfield, 2026**

#### **Find out more**

- ▶ Fazıl Say
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