

B A C H

GOLDBERG VARIATIONS | ORIGINAL TRANSCRIPTIONS



C A M E R O N R O B E R T S | P I A N O



The Goldberg Variations

The **Goldberg** Variations of Johann Sebastian Bach (1685-1750) is Bach's grandest keyboard work – and probably, of the whole Baroque period. The title page of the first edition in 1742 reads (translated): “*Keyboard Practice, consisting in an ARIA with Divers Variations, for the Harpsichord with 2 Manuals, composed for Music Lovers, to Refresh their Spirits*”. The association of the name of Goldberg with the Variations is derived from an amusing story, probably only half-true, whereby Count Kaiserling, formerly the Russian Ambassador in Saxony asked Bach to write some keyboard pieces for his servant musician (Johann Gottlieb Goldberg) to play to him during his often-sleepless nights. Whether or not the Variations fulfilled this role is unknown and certainly irrelevant when considering their virtue as a work of art – the summit of Bach's keyboard writing.

The structure of the Variations is highly sophisticated (in keeping with High Baroque art) and requires some elucidation. The *Aria* provides the material for the variations, though it is the bass-line and harmony that serve as the common thread throughout the set, not the melody. The *Aria* is a *sarabande*, a noble dance with three beats per measure

with an agogic accent on the second beat. The variations are ordered in such a way that every third variation is a two-

voiced canon with bass accompaniment – thereby creating a 10 x 3 ordering of the thirty variations.

Interestingly, each canon has its echoed voice at an ever-increasing interval from the theme on which it is based i.e. the first canon's echoed voice enters at the interval of *unison*, the second canon at the *second*, the third at the *third* etc. Variation 30, which, logically, would have been the 10th Canon, is instead a *Quodlibet*, which is a rare musical form whereby several different melodies are played in various combinations against each other at the same time – two folk songs in this case. Variations 10, 20 and 30 all represent points of finality in the set, but so too does Variation 15, the half way point, which is followed by an Overture in the French manner in Variation 16, suggesting a new beginning.

From this we notice that the thirty variations are divided into 3 x 10 and also 2 x 15. Of conceptual beauty is the structural ‘three-on-two’ rhythm which this creates – perhaps the largest of its kind in all of music? Of particular note are the three variations in the minor mode (numbers 15, 21 and 25) which are imbued with a more intense pathos. A pictorial account of variation 25 has been proposed by Wanda Landowska, the famous harpsichord virtuoso, as

‘the crown of thorns’. (Variation 26 that follows could easily be labelled ‘the resurrection’.) Other features of the Variations are their diversity of style, their range of expression, their virtuosic demands (including frequent hand-crossing) and their symbolic references.

The dimensions of the work are unprecedentedly large and the emotional impact of the return of the *Aria* with its grace and nobility, after the exalted 30th variation, is profound in its simplicity and provides occasion for enraptured contemplation.

Aus Liebe will mein Heiland sterben

This aria comes from the St Matthew Passion, and appears in the unfolding drama of Jesus' Passion at the moment when Pontius Pilate is being driven by the restless crowd to sentence Jesus to the cross, and he asks them ‘what evil hath He done?’ The *Soprano* recites that Jesus has in fact done nothing, and then, in duet with a *Flauto traverso* (symbolic of peace and rest) accompanied by two *Oboes*, sings: *Aus Liebe will mein Heiland sterben, von einer Sünde weiß er nichts. Daß das ewige Verderben und die Strafe des Gerichts Nicht auf meiner Seele bliebe.* (For love my Saviour now is dying, of sin and guilt He knoweth nought. So eternal desolation and the sinner's righteous doom shall not rest upon my spirit.)

The sorrow shared in this aria is most intimate and its emotional gravity is

certainly heightened by its ironic timing in the Passion's sequence of events.

Es ist vollbracht!

This aria comes from the St John Passion, and is sung by the *Alto* at the minute of Jesus' death on the cross. Naturally, the moment is depicted as one of intense grief. In Bach's version, the *Alto* is in duet with a *viola da gamba* – an instrument used infrequently by Bach, but one whose plaintive sound is deeply expressive.

The music is set magically to the words: *Es ist vollbracht O Trost vor die gekränkten Seelen! Die Trauernacht läßt nun die letzte Stunde zählen. Es ist vollbracht!* (It is finished! O consolation for all afflicted souls! In the night of mourning I measure his last hour. It is finished!) In order to maintain the unity of mood in this aria, I have made an alteration to the original, and left out the brief, agitated middle section of the aria, whose musical content serves no role in this setting as a solo concert piece.

Brandenburg Concerto No 3

In 1721, Bach dedicated *Six Concerts avec plusieurs instruments* (Six Concertos for various instruments) to Prince Christian Ludwig of Brandenburg. The third concerto is perhaps the most well known of the set and is written, interestingly, for nine solo instruments (3 violins, 3 violas, 3 cellos) and a bass continuo. In keeping with the proper 'concerto' style - that is, a

work for a solo instrument, or a group of solo instruments, which is accompanied by an orchestra – Bach skilfully uses his nine instruments in a variety of combinations to create the feeling of soloist and orchestra – each instrument playing both roles. The string writing is certainly highly virtuosic and would have required excellent musicians for a good performance.

Of peculiar academic interest is the second movement in this concerto, which contains only two chords. Musicologists debate the reason for this, some interpreting it as an opportunity for improvisation, and others interpreting it as 'as he meant it', arguing that Bach would have written out his improvisation if that is what he wanted.

The transcriptions

The practice of transcribing for the piano has a long tradition. Bach himself was a prolific transcriber of his own music and others, and certainly enjoyed exploring the hidden potential of particular musical themes by reusing them and re-scoring them for different musical settings. There is much recycling of musical material in his Cantatas, and his Harpsichord Concerto in G minor is almost a literal transcription of his Violin Concerto in A minor.

For several generations after Bach, the piano served well as a medium for the expression of musical ideas in general. In this respect one might say

that much of what was written for the piano, was probably *transcribed* for the piano, in that the discourse of the music alludes to alternative musical settings. Much of Mozart's (1756-1791) piano writing alludes to opera, and certainly much of Beethoven's (1770-1827) and Brahms' (1833-1897) piano writing is symphonic in nature. The art of transcribing took on a new form in the mid 19th Century as a direct result of the piano transcriptions of Franz Liszt (1811-1886). Liszt's transcriptions served an important role in helping to promote a variety of musical works to a greater audience whilst providing an opportunity for him to exhibit his improvisatory and technical wizardry. A long list of accomplished pianist-composers followed him, and continued what was to become a fashionable tradition well into the 20th Century; Busoni, Godowsky, Grainger and Rachmaninoff are noteworthy examples of this tradition.

Not surprisingly, the piano works both well and poorly as a medium for transcribing – the strengths and weaknesses of the instrument itself accounting for this fact. One immediately acknowledges the vast pitch and dynamic range of the instrument as a feature allowing it to directly translate a large body of notes and sound both vertically and horizontally in time. Literal translations of the notes of one instrument onto another are nearly certain to fail, however, given the fact that they fail to translate the many other 'qualities' of the

sound of the particular instrument from which they are derived, ie. nuances of tone, articulation, dynamic, timbre and pitch that might inflect any given note.

The limited varieties of attack available to initiate a note on the piano, and the plain inability to alter the note's quality during its held length, is obviously the instrument's greatest limitation. This is, however, where the great art of transcribing and playing lie, for it is in the use of the instrument's other resources that the solution is found, and ideally surpassed. And so, in transcribing well, one must forgo the idea of being literally correct, and instead create the 'illusion' of being correct – or at least correct unto the original sentiment.

To allow a transcription to 'sound' well on the piano requires further adaptations, particularly those involving the specifics of chordal voicing, registration, pedalling, and occasionally, inconspicuously, the introduction of 'wrong' notes, dynamics and tempi, in order to satisfy a greater purpose. Understandably, listeners to whom the original version is known may react against such adaptations, seeing them as wayward 'liberties'. They are, however, the outcome of much labour and consideration! Technicalities aside, it is my wish to have translated and shared the richness of the experience of Bach's great music.

CAMERON ROBERTS 2006



Cameron Roberts

In recent years Cameron Roberts has enjoyed growing success as one of Australia's finest young artists. He has already performed in Australia, Europe, Asia, and the USA, as soloist and chamber musician, and maintains a diverse range of interests which include jazz, contemporary music and composition.

Although originally a violinist, which lead him to participate in the Tanglewood Festival, USA, Roberts' career is now developing as a piano soloist in Australia, performing concertos

by Mozart, Beethoven, Grieg, Brahms and Rachmaninoff, and working with conductors such as Lawrence Foster, John Hopkins and Dobbs Franks. As chamber musician, he has performed in recital series' at Melbourne's Federation Square and Castlemaine Festival, and has also toured Singapore and Thailand as a representative of The University of Melbourne. His solo recital performances have been broadcast on Australian Radio (ABC-Classic FM, 3MBS).

Roberts' teachers have included the late Mack Jost, Professor Ronald Farren-Price and more recently Michael Kieran Harvey, whilst completing his Masters Degree at Melbourne University. He also studied with Nikolai Demidenko, John O'Connor and Yonty Solomon whilst on scholarship at the Australian National Academy of Music. Through private study abroad he has worked with professors at the Moscow Conservatory, Guildhall School of Music, London, and the Manhattan School of Music.

When not involved in music Cameron Roberts practises part time as a doctor.

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Bach | **Goldberg Variations** BWV 988

- 1** Aria 2'51"
- 2** Var.1 3'20"
Var.2
Var.3 Canone all' Unisuono
- 3** Var.4 2'09"
Var.5
Var.6 Canone alla Seconda
- 4** Var.7 *al tempo di Giga* 2'51"
Var.8
Var.9 Canone alla Terza
- 5** Var.10 *Fughetta* 3'14"
Var.11
Var.12 Canone alla Quarta
- 6** Var.13 7'16"
Var.14
Var.15 Canone alla Quinta, *Andante*
- 7** Var.16 *Ouverture* 3'26"
Var.17
Var.18 Canone alla Sesta
- 8** Var.19 3'21"
Var.20
Var.21 Canone alla Settima
- 9** Var.22 *Alla breve* 3'24"
Var.23
Var.24 Canone all'Ottava
- 10** Var.25 *Adagio* 7'21"
Var.26
Var.27 Canone alla Nona
- 11** Var.28 3'24"
Var.29
Var.30 Quodlibet
- 12** Aria *da capo* 2'53"
- 13** Bach/Roberts | **Aus Liebe will mein Heiland Sterben**
from St. Matthew Passion BWV 244 7'11"
- 14** Bach/Roberts | **Es is Vollbracht!** from St. John Passion BWV 245 5'15"
Bach/Roberts | **Brandenburg Concerto No.3** BWV 1048
- 15** i. (Allegro) 6'35"
- 16** ii. Adagio, iii. Allegro 3'11"

TOTAL PLAYING TIME

68 MINUTES

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