GOLDBERG VARIATIONS

The ‘Goldberg Variations’ are regarded as a pinnacle of keyboard composition and a crowning jewel of Baroque variation technique. From the bassline of a graceful aria, Bach developed a rich cycle of thirty variations meticulously arranged within an elaborate overall structure. In it, he unfurled a kaleidoscope of the most diverse moods and musical ideas. Each variation has its own unique character. Intricate canons segue into virtuoso movements, such as suite dance movements and other familiar types, showcasing Bach’s ability to blend a wide array of musical styles, techniques and structural means.
For bouts of insomnia?

Did Count von Keyserlingk really commission Bach to compose keyboard music for him, to be played during his sleepless nights by his own personal harpsichordist, Johann Gottlieb Goldberg? This anecdote was reported by Johann Nikolaus Forkel in his 1802 biography of Bach.

Yet, there was no dedication to the count in the first edition. Instead, Bach wrote on the title page that the ‘Variations’ were intended for “enthusiasts, for the refreshment of their spirits”. Furthermore, could a 14-year-old Goldberg truly have mastered these intricate pieces? Back then, he was studying under Bach’s son, Wilhelm Friedemann. After the publication of the ‘Goldberg Variations’, Bach journeyed to Dresden, possibly presenting a copy to his esteemed patron.
Bach wrote a gallant aria as the opening movement with a “smooth and lively character” (Johann Nikolaus Forkel). However, he based his variations on the bass line instead of its lavishly ornamented melody. Each bar is underpinned by a fundamental note. The initial eight notes borrow a popular motif used by composers like George Frideric Handel. Bach expanded the bass to 32 bars, embedding it within a colourful harmonic framework that forms the foundation for the entire cycle.

With Bach exploring all the compositional and stylistic possibilities in an unprecedented way, his variations take us through a wide range of emotions and states of mind.

The bass theme consists of 32 fundamental notes. The first eight notes were taken from a motif also used by George Frideric Handel in his Chaconne with 62 Variations, HWV 442.
Bach based his cycle of variations on mathematical principles of order. The opening and closing aria contains 32 bars, mirroring the total number of movements in the composition. Thirty variations are divided into ten groups of three, in which two free variations are followed by a canon. With each canon, the interval between the two upper voices steadily widens from a perfect prime (unison) to a ninth (nine scale steps).

Exactly in the middle, Variation 16 opens the second half of the composition in the form of an overture. Instead of the final canon, Bach adapted two well-known folk songs (no. 30), resulting in a finale that blends artistry with popular appeal. The home key of G major is only interrupted by three minor variations.
Character variations

The Goldberg Variations offer a lively mix of virtuosic showpieces, intricate canons, and variations grounded in familiar movement types. Five variations draw inspiration from suite dance movements. For instance, the seventh variation is composed as a gigue, featuring a spirited character and bouncing, dotted rhythm in 6/8 time. Interspersed slides (ornaments that slide multiple scale steps up to the primary note) highlight the vibrant mood of this two-part variation. A copy of the first edition discovered in Strasbourg (France) in 1975 — bearing Bach’s handwritten note ‘al tempo di Giga’ — reveals additional ornaments by the composer himself.

Variation 7.

Bach’s written remark:
al tempo di Giga.
Bach was keenly aware of contemporary stylistic trends and performance innovations (such as the refined harpsichord mastery of François Couperin and Jean Philippe Rameau as well as Domenico Scarlatti’s virtuosic compositions), and adapted them in his music.

Variation 14 presents a spectacular display of virtuosity, demanding triadic semiquaver arpeggios, trill motifs, demisemiquaver motifs and complex hand-crossings. However, the real sophistication lies in its musical architecture. In the second part, Bach ingeniously swaps the voices: motifs originally in the right hand are transferred to the left and vice versa, primarily moving in contrary motion!

In the second half, there’s a remarkable role reversal: the right hand adopts the part originally in the left hand, but mostly in the opposite direction, while the left hand takes on the part that was previously in the right hand.
Bach's idea of making every third variation an ornate canon was unique. The two upper voices play exactly the same melody, offset in time, but the interval between them widens with each canon, reaching seven scale steps in the poignant Variation 21 in G minor.

The third voice, derived from the aria’s bass line, connects chromatically (i.e. semitone steps) to a descending lament motif, known in the theory of musical rhetoric as the passus duriusculus (difficult passage). Bach ingeniously intertwined the bass with the upper voice motifs, creating the illusion of a three-part canon.
Bach brings us back down to earth with a stroke of genius in his final variation. A quodlibet is a humorous amalgamation of multiple songs. Bach’s Quodlibet, as artistic as the other variations, draws upon two contemporary folk songs: ‘Ich bin so lang nicht bei dir g’west’ (‘I have so long been away from you’) and ‘Kraut und Rüben haben mich vertrieben’ (‘Cabbage and turnips have driven me away’). The allusion is to the long-absent aria which, after journeying through Bach’s contrapuntal variations, re-emerges in a new light.
In his own personal copy, Bach penned further 14 canons “on the first eight fundamental notes of the previous aria” on a blank page. One of them can also be seen in Elias Gottlob Haussmann’s famous portrait of Bach, the bass theme featured on the third line. This puzzle canon for six voices, even though only three voices are displayed, can be inverted to reveal the remaining three. The original portrait can be seen in the Treasury Room of the Bach Museum.

Solution to the puzzle canon by Bach’s student Johann Philipp Kirnberger

Johann Sebastian Bach
lithograph of Friedrich Gustav Schlick
after an oil painting by Elias Gottlob Haußmann, 1746
Bach’s personal copy of the Goldberg Variations
Although Bach wrote the ‘Goldberg Variations’ for a two-manual harpsichord, contemporary performances often take place on a modern grand piano.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th><strong>Wanda Landowska</strong></th>
<th>... recorded the then rarely played work on a harpsichord specially built for her by Pleyel, a piano manufacturer.</th>
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<tr>
<td>(1933)</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Glenn Gould</strong></td>
<td>His legendary piano recordings popularized the ‘Goldberg Variations’ and continue to set standards.</td>
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<td>(1955, 1981)</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Gustav Leonhardt</strong></td>
<td>A pioneer of the early music movement, he performed the cycle on a historically designed harpsichord, creating a reference recording. Recipient of the Bach Medal of the City of Leipzig 2003.</td>
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<td>(1978)</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>András Schiff</strong></td>
<td>These emotive piano interpretations highlight the polyphonic structures and melodic lines. Recipient of the Bach Medal of the City of Leipzig 2022.</td>
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<td>(1982, 2001)</td>
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<td><strong>Martin Stadtfeld</strong></td>
<td>Martin Stadtfeld, with youthful spontaneity, occasionally shifts the melody an octave higher. International Bach Competition Leipzig, 1st prize 2002.</td>
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<td>(2004)</td>
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<td><strong>Lang Lang</strong></td>
<td>Lang Lang’s nearly meditative performance of the Goldberg Variations showcases a broad emotional palette and elaborate ornamentation.</td>
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<td>(2020)</td>
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The Goldberg Variations have inspired various writers to weave them into their narratives and novels. In 1814, E.T.A. Hoffmann created the character of Johannes Kreisler — a conductor and a tortured artist despairing of his unrefined audience. Kreisler performs Bach’s Variations on the piano at a soirée.

However, to his chagrin, the attendees find his performance uninspiring and depart the room. Alone, Kreisler immerses himself in Bach’s music, spiralling into a state of ecstatic improvisation.

More recently, Thomas Bernhard (The Loser, 1983) and Anna Enquist (Counterpoint, 2008) refer to the Goldberg Variations in their novels.
Music to the exhibition on Spotify:
https://open.spotify.com/playlist/72BluaFOLKLpMGHLFherMF?si=93396020dc4943aa

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