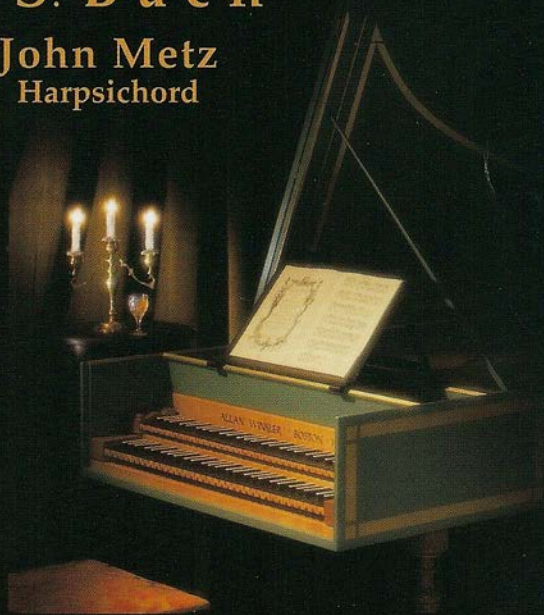


Goldberg Variations

J. S. B a c h

John Metz
Harpsichord



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Mystery surrounds the genesis of Bach's *Goldberg Variations*. Though they were published in 1741 as Book Four of the *Klavierübung*, Bach may have started composing the work years earlier. The dedication is simply to music lovers; the attribution "Goldberg" comes largely from Johann Nicolaus Forkel's biography of Bach, published in 1802. Forkel's long-accepted story is that these variations were written for Count Hermann Karl von Keyserlingk, a Russian ambassador to the court at Dresden, who had asked for music of "a soft and somewhat lively character" to soothe his insomnia; and that the Count's personal harpsichordist was one Johann Gottlieb Goldberg, a student of W. F. Bach and then of the great master himself. According to Forkel, the variations were commissioned by Keyserlingk for Goldberg to play during his sleepless nights, when the Count would call out; "Dear Goldberg, please come and play my Variations." Allegedly Bach was paid a very large sum for the work, a golden goblet containing 100 *Louis d'or*.

It is more likely that the variations were not commissioned by Keyserlingk, but that Bach presented the Count with a copy when he visited the Keyserlingk home in Dresden in 1741, and that in return the count gave Bach a monetary gift. We don't even know whether Goldberg actually studied with any of the Bachs, though he may have. We do know that he was a prodigious harpsichordist, only about fourteen years old at the time of the presentation of the Goldberg score, and that by all accounts he had achieved the technical mastery demanded by these variations.

The Aria around which Bach spins his variations appears by itself in Anna Magdalena's notebook of 1725, and was until recently thought to predate the variations, but scholarship has now shown that it was not written into the notebook until about 1741. Once considered "too French" or "too Italian" for the great German master, it is just the sort of Galant Sarabande that only Bach himself could have composed so perfectly.

The Aria is in binary form with repeats (AABB) and each variation naturally follows that structure. What further unifies the work is that the bass line of the Aria is present in each variation as a foundation. The overall architecture is such that every variation divisible by three is a canon, each one at an increasing interval (canon at the unison, the second, the third, etc.). Some of the canons work by inversion; the subject is stated in one voice, then answered by a second voice which presents the subject upside-down, starting at the pitch difference of the canon (the interval of a fourth, for example). Another variation in each group of three is a free piece of any sort (gigue, adagio, etc.), and the third is generally a playful or virtuoso movement. With the exception of the canon at the ninth, all the canons are accompanied; that is, the two upper voices state the newly-invented subject in canon over an embellished version of the original bass line. Furthermore, the work divides neatly into two halves, with a grand French Overture beginning the second portion. The Aria is thirty-two measures long; the thirty variations, plus the Aria stated at the opening and again at the conclusion of the work, make thirty-two movements.



Just before the calming return of the Aria Bach gives us a Quodlibet, or “What-you-will”. A Quodlibet is a hodgepodge of folk melodies chiming together for better or for worse. According to Forkel, members of the Bach family liked to improvise Quodlibets (beer no doubt flowing merrily) when they got together. In the Quodlibet from the *Goldberg Variations* we have two folk songs, the texts of which are:

“I have for so long a time been away from you,
Come here, come here,” and

“Cabbage and beets have driven me away.
Had my mother cooked meat I might have longer stayed.”

The first tune is also a Keraus, or final dance played at a wedding party. Perhaps that returns us to the story of the Count’s insomnia -- “Good night, time to sleep now”.

Even if we believe Forkel’s tale, we must concede that these fantastic variations make a poor drug for sleep. Quite to the contrary, generations of music lovers have found great refreshment in the variety and beauty of Bach’s *Goldberg Variations*, a magical distraction capable of occupying a restless mind and banishing tedium from the long watches of the night.

- John Metz



John Metz has an active career as harpsichord soloist and continuo player throughout the United States. He has appeared regularly at the Connecticut Early Music Festival since its inception in 1981, performing on harpsichord and fortepiano and directing several operas. He holds a DMA from The Juilliard School where he was a student of Albert Fuller. He is Professor of Harpsichord at Arizona State University, and director of the early-music group *Ensemble Versailles*. He has published an edition of early 18th Century French vocal music (Pendragon Press), and has recorded three of the harpsichord suites of Elizabeth-Claude Jacquet de la Guerre (Summit Records). Dr. Metz has contributed several articles to the forthcoming [Encyclopedia of Keyboard Instruments](#) to be published by Garland Press. He performed Bach's *Goldberg Variations* on tour during the fall of 1997. He and ASU colleague Barbara Bailey are now working on an edition of the *Six Sonatas for Cello and Fortepiano* of Rayner Taylor.



Harpsichord by Allan Winkler, after Pierre Donzelague.

J. S. Bach

Goldberg Variations

- 1 Aria 3:43
- 2 Var 1 2:03 for 1 manual
- 3 Var 2 1:30 for 1 manual
- 4 Var 3 1:09 Canon at the Unison - for 1 manual
- 5 Var 4 1:03 for 1 manual
- 6 Var 5 1:48 for 1 or 2 manuals
- 7 Var 6 1:18 Canon at the Second - for 1 manual
- 8 Var 7 1:45 "al Tempo di Giga" - for 1 or 2 manuals
- 9 Var 8 2:03 for 2 manuals
- 10 Var 9 1:42 Canon at the Third - for 1 manual
- 11 Var 10 1:36 "Fughetta" - for 1 manual
- 12 Var 11 2:05 for 2 manuals
- 13 Var 12 1:32 Canon at the Fourth - for 1 manual
- 14 Var 13 5:03 for 2 manuals
- 15 Var 14 2:06 for 2 manuals
- 16 Var 15 1:39 Canon at the Fifth - for 1 manual

- 17 Var 16 2:53 "Ouverture" - for 1 manual
- 18 Var 17 2:08 for 2 manuals
- 19 Var 18 1:24 Canon at the Sixth - for 1 manual
- 20 Var 19 1:09 for 1 manual
- 21 Var 20 2:12 for 1 manuals
- 22 Var 21 2:23 Canon at the Seventh - for 1 manual
- 23 Var 22 1:23 for 1 manual
- 24 Var 23 2:14 for 2 manuals
- 25 Var 24 1:19 Canon at the Octave - for 1 manual
- 26 Var 25 7:10 "Adagio" - for 2 manuals
- 27 Var 26 2:06 for 2 manuals
- 28 Var 27 2:04 for 2 manuals - Canon at the Ninth
- 29 Var 28 2:17 for 2 manuals
- 30 Var 29 2:05 for 1 or 2 manuals
- 31 Var 30 1:45 "Quodlibet" - for 1 manual
- 32 Aria 2:19 Aria da Capo

TOTAL TIME 69:02

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