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BACH:
THE GOLDBERG VARIATIONS
GLENN GOULD, PIANO

PHOTOGRAPH BY DAN WEINER

Johann Sebastian Bach 1685–1750

Aria with 30 Variations "Goldberg Variations" BWV 988

Aria mit 30 Veränderungen »Goldberg-Variationen« · Air avec 30 variations « Variations Goldberg » · 1955 Recording

1	Aria	1:53
2	Variatio 1 a 1 Clav.	0:45
3	Variatio 2 a 1 Clav.	0:37
4	Variatio 3 a 1 Clav. Canone all'Unisono	0:55
5	Variatio 4 a 1 Clav.	0:29
6	Variatio 5 a 1 ovvero 2 Clav.	0:37
7	Variatio 6 a 1 Clav. Canone alla Seconda	0:34
8	Variatio 7 a 1 ovvero 2 Clav. Al tempo di Giga	1:08
9	Variatio 8 a 2 Clav.	0:45
10	Variatio 9 a 1 Clav. Canone alla Terza	0:38
11	Variatio 10 a 1 Clav. Fughetta	0:43
12	Variatio 11 a 2 Clav.	0:55
13	Variatio 12 Canone alla Quarta	0:56
14	Variatio 13 a 2 Clav.	2:11
15	Variatio 14 a 2 Clav.	0:59
16	Variatio 15 a 1 Clav. Canone alla Quinta in moto contrario. Andante	2:17
17	Variatio 16 a 1 Clav. Ouverture	1:17
18	Variatio 17 a 2 Clav.	0:53
19	Variatio 18 a 1 Clav. Canone alla Sesta	0:46
20	Variatio 19 a 1 Clav.	0:43
21	Variatio 20 a 2 Clav.	0:48
22	Variatio 21 Canone alla Settima	1:42
23	Variatio 22 a 1 Clav. Alla breve	0:42
24	Variatio 23 a 2 Clav.	0:54
25	Variatio 24 a 1 Clav. Canone all'Ottava	0:57
26	Variatio 25 a 2 Clav.	6:28
27	Variatio 26 a 2 Clav.	0:52
28	Variatio 27 a 2 Clav. Canone alla Nona	0:50
29	Variatio 28 a 2 Clav.	1:11
30	Variatio 29 a 1 ovvero 2 Clav.	1:00
31	Variatio 30 a 1 Clav. Quodlibet	0:48
32	Aria da capo	2:10

Glenn Gould piano

Recordings: Columbia 30th Street Studio, New York City, USA, June 10, 14-16, 1955
Producer: Howard H. Scott
Photos: Don Hunstein © Sony Music Entertainment
Artwork: [ec:ko] communications

The *Goldberg Variations*, one of the monuments of keyboard literature, was published in 1742 while Bach held the title of Polish Royal and Saxon electoral court-composer. That his apparent apathy toward the variation form (he produced only one other work of that cast – an unpretentious set in the "Italian manner") did not prevent his indulgence in an edifice of previously unequalled magnitude, provokes considerable curiosity as to the origin of this composition. Such curiosity, however, must remain unsatisfied for any data extant in Bach's time has long since been obscured by his romantic biographers, who succumbed to the allure of a legend which, despite its extravagant caprice, is difficult to disprove. Briefly, for those who may not be acquainted with this lore, the story concerns a commission which was tendered to Bach by a Count Kaiserling, the Russian ambassador to the Saxon court, who had as his musician-in-service Johann Gottlieb Goldberg, one of the master's most accomplished pupils. Kaiserling, it seems, was frequently troubled with insomnia, and requested Bach to write some reposeful keyboard pieces which Goldberg could perform as a soporific. If the treatment was a success we are left with some doubt as to the authenticity of Master Goldberg's rendition of this incisive and piquant score. And though we harbour no illusion as to Bach's workmanlike indifference to the restrictions imposed upon his artist's prerogative, it is difficult to imagine that even Kaiserling's 40 Louis d'or could induce his interest in an otherwise distasteful form.

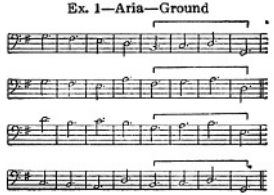
The most casual acquaintance with this work – a first hearing, or a brief glance at the score – will manifest the baffling incongruity between the imposing dimensions of the variations and the unassuming Sarabande which conceived them. Indeed, one hears so frequently of the bewilderment which the formal outline of this piece engenders among the uninitiated who become entangled in the luxuriant vegetation of the Aria's family tree that it might be expedient to examine more closely the generative root in order to determine, with all delicacy, of course, its apitude for parental responsibility.

We are accustomed to consider at least one of two prerequisites indispensable to an Air for variations, a theme with a melodic curve which veritably entreats ornamentation, or an harmonic basis, stripped to its fundamentals, pregnant with promise and capacity for exhaustive exploitation. Though there are abundant exampies of the former procedure from the Renaissance to the present day, it flourishes through the theme – and elaborative – variation concept of the rococo. The latter method, which, by stimulating linear inventiveness, suggests a certain analogy with the passacaille style of reiterated bass progression, is strikingly portrayed by Beethoven's 32 Variations in C minor.

However, the vast majority of significant contributions to this form cannot be accurately allotted to either of these general classifications, which, to be sure, rather describe the extremities of the working premise of the variation idea, wherein the coalescence of these qualities constitutes the real challenge to the composer's inventive power. A definitive textbook example could be found in Beethoven's "Eroica" Variations, where each of these formulative elements is treated separately, their ultimate merger being consummated in a fugue in which the melodic motive acts as counter-subject to the "tema del basso" of the variations.

The present work utilizes the Sarabande from Anna Magdalena Bach's notebook as a passacaille – that is, only its bass progression is duplicated in the variations, where indeed it is treated with sufficient rhythmic flexibility to meet the harmonic contingencies of such diverse contrapuntal structures as a canon upon every degree of the diatonic scale, two fughettas, and even a quodlibet (the superposition of street-songs popular in Bach's times). Such alterations as are necessary do not in any way impair the gravitational compulsion which this masterfully proportioned ground exerts upon the wealth of melodic figurations which subsequently adorn it. Indeed, this noble bass binds each variation with the inexorable assurance of its own inevitability. This structure possesses

Ex. 1—Aria—Ground



in its own right a completeness, a solidarity, which largely by virtue of the repetitive cadential motive, make it unsatisfactory for the role of a chaconne ground. It suggests nothing of the urgent longing for fulfillment which is implicit in the traditionally terse entry of a chaconne statement; rather, it volubly covers so much harmonic territory that, with the exception of the three minor-key variations (15, 21, 25) where it is made subservient to the chromatic wont of the minor tonality, there is no necessity for its offspring to explore, to realize and intensify its constructive elements.

One might justifiably expect that in view of the constancy of the harmonic foundation the principal pursuit of the variations would be the illumination of the motivic facets within the melodic complex of the Aria theme. However, such is not the case, for the thematic substance, a docile but richly embellished soprano line, possesses an intrinsic homogeneity which bequeathes nothing to posterity and which, so far as motivic representation is concerned, is totally forgotten during the 30 variations. In short, it is a singularly self-sufficient little air which seems to shun the patriarchal demeanour, to exhibit a bland unconcern about its issue, to remain totally uninquisitive as to its raison d'être.

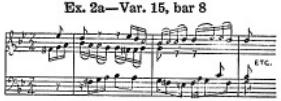
Nothing could better demonstrate the aloof carriage of the Aria, than the precipitous outburst of variation 1 which abruptly curtails the preceding tranquility. Such aggression is scarcely the attitude we associate with prefatory variations, which customarily embark with unfledged dependance upon the theme, simulating the pose of their precursor, and functioning with a modest opinion of their present capacity but a thorough optimism for future prospects. With variation 2 we have the first instance of the confluence of these

juxtaposed qualities – that curious hybrid of clement composure and cogent command which typifies the virile ego of the *Goldberg*.

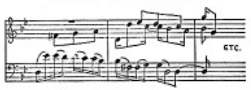
I suspect I may have unwittingly engaged in a dangerous game, ascribing to musical composition attributes which reflect only the analytical approach of the performer. This is an especially vulnerable practice in the music of Bach which concedes neither tempo nor dynamic intention, and I caution myself to restrain the enthusiasm of an interpretative conviction from identifying itself with the unalterable absolute of the composer's will. Besides, as Bernard Shaw so aptly remarked, parsing is not the business of criticism.

With variation 3 begin the canons which subsequently occupy every third segment of the work. Ralph Kirkpatrick has imaginatively represented the variations by an architectural analogy. "Framed as if between two terminal pylons, one formed by the aria and the first two variations, the other by the two penultimate variations and the Quodlibet, the variations are grouped like the members of an elaborate colonnade. The groups are composed of a canon and an elaborate two-manual arabesque, enclosing in each case another variation of independent character."

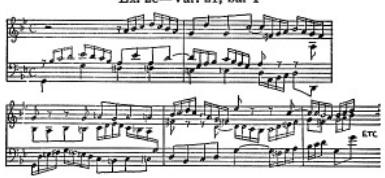
Ex. 2a—Var. 15, bar 8



Ex. 2b—Var. 15, bar 17



Ex. 2c—Var. 21, bar 1



In the canons, the literal imitation is confined to the two upper voices, while the accompanying part, which is present in all but the final canon at the ninth, is left free to convert the tema del basso, in most cases

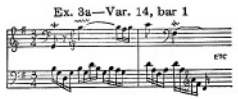
at least, to a suitably acquiescent complement. At times this leads to a deliberate duality of motivic emphasis, the extreme example being variation 18 where the canonic voices are called upon to sustain the passacaille role which is capriciously abandoned by the bass. Less extraneous counterpoint is the resolve of the two G minor canons (15 and 21). In these the third voice partakes of the thematic complex of the canon, figuratively reproducing its segment in a dialogue of surpassing beauty.

Nor is such intense contrapuntal preoccupation solely the property of the canonic variations. Many of those numbers of "independent character" expand minute thematic cells into an elaborate linear texture. One thinks especially of the fugal conclusion to the French overture (16), the *alla breve* (22) and of variation 4 in which a blunt rusticity disguises an urbane maze of stretti. Indeed, this husbandly exploitation of intentionally limited means is Bach's substitute for thematic identification among the variations. Since the aria melody, as aforementioned, evades intercourse with the rest of the work the individual variation voraciously consumes the potential of a motivic germ peculiar to it, thus exercising an entirely subjective aspect of the variation concept. As a consequence of this integration there exists, with the dubious exceptions of variations 28 and 29, not one instance of motivic collaboration or extension between successive variations.

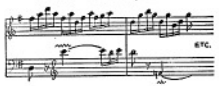
In the two-part texture of the "arabesques" the emphasis on virtuosic display restricts the contrapuntal endeavour to less ingenious pursuits such as that of inverting the consequent rejoinder.

The third G minor variation occupies a strategic locale. Having already been regaled with a kaleidoscopic tableau comprised of 24 signettes depicting, in meticulously calibrated degrees, the irrepressible elasticity of what was termed the "Goldberg ego", we are now granted dispensation to collect and crystallize the accumulative experience of depth, delicacy and display, while musing upon the languorous atmosphere of an

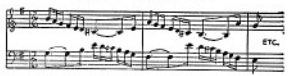
Ex. 3a—Var. 14, bar 1



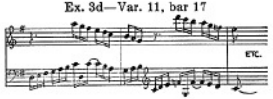
Ex. 3b—Var. 14, bar 17



Ex. 3c—Var. 11, bar 1



Ex. 3d—Var. 11, bar 17



almost Chopinesque mood-piece. The appearance of this wistful, weary cantilena is a masterstroke of psychology.

With renewed vigour, variations 26 to 29 break upon us and are followed by that boisterous exhibition of Deutsche Freundlichkeit – the Quodlibet. Then, as though it could no longer suppress a smug smile at the progress of its progeny, the original Sarabande, anything but a dutiful parent, returns to us to bask in the reflected glory of an Aria da capo.

It is no accident that the great cycle should conclude thus. Nor does the Aria's return simply constitute a gesture of benign benediction. Rather is its suggestion of perpetuity indicative of the essential incorporeality of the *Goldberg*, symbolic of its rejection of embryonic inducement. And it is precisely by recognizing its disdain of the organic relevance of the part to the whole that we first suspect the real nature of this unique alliance.

We have observed, by means of technical dissection, that the Aria is incompatible with its offspring, that the crucial bass by its very perfection of outline and harmonic implication stunts its own growth, and prohibits the accustomed passacaille evolution toward a culminant point. We have observed, also by analysis, that the Aria's thematic content reveals an equally exclusive disposition, that the motivic elaboration in each variation is law unto itself and that, by consequence, there are no plateaux of successive variations utilizing similar principles of design such as lend architectural coherence to the variations of Beethoven and Brahms. Yet, without analysis, we have sensed that there

exists a fundamental co-ordinating intelligence which we labelled "ego". Thus we are forced to revise our criteria which were scarcely designed to arbitrate that union of music and metaphysics – the realm of technical transcendence.

I do not think it fanciful to speculate upon supra-musical considerations, even though we are dealing with possibly the most brilliant substantiation of a ground bass in history, for in my opinion, the fundamental variative ambition of this work is not to be found in organic fabrication but in a community of sentiment. Therein the theme is not terminal but radial, the variations circumferential not rectilinear, while the recurrent passacaille supplies the concentric focus for the orbit.

It is, in short, music which observes neither end nor beginning, music with neither real climax nor real resolution, music which, like Beaudelaire's lovers, "rests lightly on the wings of the unchecked wind." It has, then, unity through intuitive perception, unity born of craft and scrutiny, mellowed by mastery achieved, and revealed to us here, as so rarely in art, in the vision of subconscious design exulting upon a pinnacle of potency.

GLENN GOULD

The world where fame and fortune were frequently made overnight seems, today, an anachronism, a piece of the last century. It just doesn't happen any more. And yet even today, at least in the world of art, it is possible for a single star to rise visibly and quickly. The arrival on the musical scene of the young pianist Glenn Gould is the latest proof. From the moment of the twenty-two year-old pianist's American debut, in January, 1955, the heavens were his.

It is possible to quote a dozen rave reviews of this young man's few concerts, but the January 3rd review of Paul Hume in the *Washington Post* offers the most comprehensive comment.

Said Mr. Hume: "January 2 is early for predictions, but it is unlikely that the year 1955 will bring us a finer piano recital than that played yesterday afternoon in the Phillips Gallery. We shall be lucky if it brings others of equal beauty and significance.

"Glenn Gould of Toronto, Canada, and barely into his twenties, was the pianist. Few pianists play the instrument so beautifully, so lovingly, so musicianly in manner, and with such regard for its real nature and its enormous literature … it is one of Gould's hallmarks at this time that he prefers to play music of marked design. That these designs are not always as clear to other pianists as they are to him is only another indication of his keen intelligence and understanding of the art he pursues … In every note … form was clear, buttressed by a rhythmic incisiveness more often thought of in connection with the world's few greatest harpsichord players.

"And yet for once we have no inclination to comment that this music is better on the older instrument. Let Gould play it and it becomes a thing of superb power and pride on the modern piano … Glenn Gould is a pianist with rare gifts for the world. It must not long delay hearing and according him the honor and audience he deserves. We know of no pianist anything like him of any age."

(Original liner notes for ML-5060)

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