


Johann Sebastian Bach

The Goldberg Variations*



 E. G. Haussmann's 1748 portrait of Bach depicts him holding the manuscript to BWV 1076, one of the canons based on the first eight bass notes from the aria of the Goldberg Variations.

The *Goldberg Variations*, BWV 988, are an aria and 30 variations for harpsichord. First published by Bach in 1741, the work is considered to be one of the most important examples of variation form. The *Variations* are named after Johann Gottlieb Goldberg, who may have been the first performer.

Composition

The tale of how the variations came to be composed comes from an early biography of Bach by Johann Nikolaus Forkel:

[For this work] we have to thank the instigation of the former Russian ambassador to the electoral court of Saxony, Count Kaiserling, who often stopped in Leipzig and brought there with him the aforementioned Goldberg, in order to have him given musical instruction by Bach. The Count was often ill and had sleepless nights. At such times, Goldberg, who lived in his house, had to spend the night in an antechamber, so as to play for him during his insomnia. ... Once the Count mentioned in Bach's presence that he would like to have some clavier pieces for Goldberg, which should be of such a smooth and somewhat lively character that he might be a little cheered up by them in his sleepless nights. Bach thought himself best able to fulfill this wish by means of Variations, the writing of which he had until then considered an ungrateful task on account of the repeatedly similar harmonic foundation. But since at this time all his works were already models of art, such also these variations became under his hand. Yet he produced only a single work of this kind. Thereafter the Count always called them *his* variations. He never tired of them, and for a long time sleepless nights meant: 'Dear Goldberg, do play me one of my variations.' Bach was perhaps never so rewarded for one of his works as for this. The Count presented him with a golden goblet filled with 100 *louis-d'or*. Nevertheless, even had the gift been a thousand times larger, their artistic value would not yet have been paid for.

* These notes are adapted from the Wikipedia article on the Goldberg Variations, which contains complete references for the quoted material.

Forkel wrote his biography in 1802, more than 60 years after the events related, and its accuracy has been questioned. The lack of dedication on the title page of the "Aria with Diverse Variations" also makes the tale of the commission unlikely. Goldberg's age at the time of publication (14 years) has also been cited as grounds for doubting Forkel's tale, although it must be said that he was known to be an accomplished keyboardist and sight-reader. In a recent book-length study, keyboardist and Bach scholar Peter Williams contends that the Forkel story is entirely spurious.

The aria on which the variations are based was suggested by Arnold Schering not to have been written by Bach. More recent scholarly literature (such as the edition by Christoph Wolff) suggests that there is no basis for such doubts.

Publication

Rather unusually for Bach's works, the *Goldberg Variations* were published in his own lifetime, in 1741. The publisher was Bach's friend Balthasar Schmid of Nuremberg. Schmid printed the work by making engraved copper plates (rather than using movable type); thus the notes of the first edition are in Schmid's own handwriting. The edition contains various printing errors.^[4]

The title page reads in German:

Clavier Übung / bestehend / in einer ARIA / mit verschiedenen Veraenderungen / vors Clavicimbal / mit 2 Manualen. / Denen Liebhabern zur Gemüths- / Ergetzung verfertigt von / Johann Sebastian Bach / Königl. Pohl. u. Churfl. Saechs. Hoff- / Compositeur, Capellmeister, u. Directore / Chori Musici in Leipzig. / Nürnberg in Verlegung / Balthasar Schmid.

"Keyboard exercise, consisting of an ARIA with diverse variations for harpsichord with two manuals. Composed for connoisseurs, for the refreshment of their spirits, by Johann Sebastian Bach, composer for the royal court of Poland and the Electoral court of Saxony, Kapellmeister and Director of Choral Music in Leipzig. Nuremberg, Balthasar Schmid, publisher."

The term "Clavier Übung" (nowadays spelled "Klavierübung") had been assigned by Bach to some of his previous keyboard works. Klavierübung part 1 was the six partitas, part 2 the *Italian Concerto* and *French Overture*, and part 3 a series of chorale preludes for organ framed by a prelude and fugue in E♭ major). Although Bach also called his variations "Klavierübung", he did not specifically designate them as the fourth in this series.

Nineteen copies of the first edition survive today. Of these, the most valuable is the "handexemplar", kept in the Bibliothèque nationale de France, Paris, which includes corrections and additions made by the composer, including an appendix with fourteen canons based on the first eight bass notes of the aria, BWV 1087.

These copies provide virtually the only information available to modern editors trying to reconstruct Bach's intent; the autograph (hand-written) score has not survived. A handwritten copy of just the aria is found in the 1725 Notebook for Anna Magdalena Bach. Christoph Wolff suggests on the basis of handwriting evidence that Anna Magdalena copied the aria from the autograph score around 1740; it appears on two pages previously left blank.

Form

After a statement of the aria at the beginning of the piece, there are thirty variations. The variations do not follow the melody of the aria, but rather use its *bass line* and *chord progression*. Because of this the work is often said to be a *chaconne* — the difference being that the theme for a chaconne is usually just four bars long, whereas Bach's aria is in two sections of sixteen bars, each repeated.

The French style of ornamentation suggests that the ornaments are supposed to be parts of the melody, however some performers (for example Wilhelm Kempff on piano) omit some or all ornaments and present the aria unadorned. Peter Williams opines in *Bach: The Goldberg Variations* that the aria is not the theme at all, but actually the first variation (a view emphasizing the idea of the work as a chaconne rather than a piece in true variation form).

Variatio 1. a 1 Clav. This sprightly variation contrasts markedly with the slow, contemplative mood of the theme. The rhythm in the right hand forces the emphasis on the second beat, giving rise to syncopation. Williams sees this as a sort of polonaise.

Variatio 2. a 1 Clav. This is a simple three-part contrapuntal piece in 2/4 time, two voices engage in constant motivic interplay over an incessant bass line. The piece is almost a pure canon.

Variatio 3. a 1 Clav. Canone all'Unisono. The first of the regular canons, this is a canon at the unison: the follower begins on the same note as the leader, a bar later. As with all canons of the *Goldberg Variations* (except the 27th variation, canon at the ninth), there is a supporting bass line here. The time signature of 12/8 and the many sets of *triplets* suggest a kind of a simple dance.

Variatio 4. a 1 Clav. Like the *passepied*, a Baroque dance movement, this variation is in 3/8 time with a preponderance of quaver rhythms. Bach uses close but not exact imitation: the musical pattern in one part reappears a bar later in another (sometimes inverted).



Variatio 5. a 1 o vero 2 Clav. This is the first of the hand-crossing, two-part variations. It is in 3/4 time. A rapid melodic line written predominantly in sixteenth notes is accompanied by another melody with longer note values, which features very wide leaps:



The Italian type of hand-crossing is employed here, with one hand constantly moving back and forth between high and low registers while the other hand stays in the middle of the keyboard, playing the fast passages.

Variatio 6. a 1 Clav. Canone alla Seconda. The sixth variation is a canon at the second: the follower starts a major second higher than the leader. The piece is based on a descending scale and is in 3/8 time. The harpsichordist Ralph Kirkpatrick describes this piece as having "an almost nostalgic tenderness."

Variatio 7. a 1 o vero 2 Clav. al tempo di Giga. The variation is in 6/8 meter, suggesting several possible Baroque dances. In 1974, when scholars discovered Bach's own copy of the first printing of the *Goldberg Variations*, they noted that over this variation Bach had added the heading *al tempo di Giga*. But the implications of this discovery for modern performance have turned out to be less clear than was at first assumed. In his book *The Keyboard Music of J. S. Bach* the scholar and keyboardist David Schulenberg notes that the discovery "surprised twentieth-century commentators who supposed giges were always fast and fleeting." However, "despite the Italian terminology [*giga*], this is a [less fleet] French gigue." Indeed, he notes, the dotted rhythmic pattern of this variation (pictured) is very similar to that of the gigue from Bach's second French suite and the gigue of the *French Overture*.



He adds that the "numerous short trills" and other ornaments preclude too fast a tempo. What, then, was Bach trying to convey by adding the *al tempo di giga* notation to his Handexemplar? Pianist Angela Hewitt argues that he was trying to caution against taking too slow a tempo.

Variatio 8. a 2 Clav. This is another two-part hand-crossing variation, in 3/4 time. The French style of hand-crossing is employed, with both hands playing at the same part of the keyboard, one above the other. This is relatively easy to perform on a two-manual harpsichord, but quite hard to do on a piano. Most bars feature either a distinctive pattern of sixteenth notes and there are large leaps. Both sections end with descending passages in thirty-second notes.

Variatio 9. Canone alla Terza. a 1 Clav. This is a canon at the third, in 4/4 time. The supporting bass line is slightly more active than in the previous canons. This short variation (16 bars) is usually played at a slow tempo.

Variatio 10. Fughetta a 1 Clav. Variation 10 is a four-voice fughetta (a little fugue), with a four-bar subject heavily decorated with ornaments and somewhat reminiscent of the opening aria's melody.

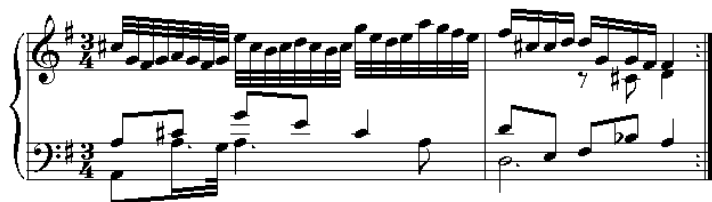


The exposition takes up the whole first section of this variation. First the subject is stated in the bass "voice" beginning of G, followed, at intervals of four measures, by the tenor (on D), soprano (on G), and finally, the alto (on D). There is no regular counter-subject in this fugue. The second section develops using the same thematic material with slight changes. It resembles a counter-exposition: the voices enter one by one, and all begin by stating the subject.

Variatio 11. a 2 Clav. This is a virtuosic two-part toccata in 12/16 time. Specified for two manuals, it is largely made up of various scale passages, arpeggios and trills, and features much hand-crossing of different kinds.

Variatio 12. Canone alla Quarta. a 1 Clav. This is a canon at the fourth in 3/4 time, of the inverted variety: the follower enters in the second bar in contrary motion to the leader. In the first section, the left hand accompanies with a bass line written out in repeated quarter notes. In the second section, Bach changes the mood slightly by introducing a few ornaments—*appoggiaturas* and trills.

Variatio 13. a 2 Clav. This variation is a slow, gentle and richly decorated sarabande in 3/4 time. Most of the melody is written out using thirty-second notes, and ornamented with a few appoggiaturas and a few mordents. Throughout the piece, the melody is in one voice, and in bars 16 and 24 an interesting effect is produced by the use of an additional voice. Here are bars 15 and 16, the ending of the first section:



Variatio 14. a 2 Clav. This is a rapid two-part hand-crossing toccata in 3/4 time, with many trills and other ornamentation. It is specified for two manuals and features large jumps between registers. Contrasting it with Variation 15, Glenn Gould described this variation as "certainly one of the giddiest bits of neo-Scarlatti-ism imaginable."

Variatio 15. Canone alla Quinta. a 1 Clav. This is a canon at the fifth in 2/4 time. Like Variation 12, it is in contrary motion with the leader appearing inverted in the second bar. This is the first of the three variations in G minor, and its melancholic mood contrasts sharply with the playfulness of the previous variation. Pianist Angela Hewitt notes that there is "a wonderful effect at the very end: the hands move away from each other, with the right suspended in mid-air on an open fifth. This gradual fade, leaving us in awe but ready for more, is a fitting end to the first half of the piece." Glenn Gould said of this variation, "It's the most severe and rigorous and beautiful canon...the most severe and beautiful that I know, the canon in inversion at the fifth. It's a piece so moving, so anguished – and so uplifting at the same time – that it would not be in any way out of place in the St. Matthew's Passion; matter of fact, I've always thought of Variation 15 as the perfect Good Friday spell."

Variatio 16. Overture. a 1 Clav. The set of variations can be seen as being divided into two halves, clearly marked by this grand French overture, commencing with a particularly emphatic opening and closing chords. It consists of a slow prelude with dotted rhythms with a following fugue-like contrapuntal section.

Variatio 17. a 2 Clav. This variation is another two-part virtuosic toccata. Peter Williams sees echoes of Antonio Vivaldi and Domenico Scarlatti here. Specified for 2 manuals, the piece features hand-crossing. It is in 3/4 time and usually played at a moderately fast tempo. Rosalyn Tureck is one of the very few performers who recorded slow interpretations of the piece. Glenn Gould, rejecting a slow tempo, commented: "Variation 17 is one of those rather skittish, slightly empty-headed collections of scales and arpeggios which Bach indulged when he wasn't writing sober and proper things like fugues and canons, and it just seemed to me that there wasn't enough substance to it to warrant such a methodical, deliberate, Germanic tempo."

Variatio 18. Canone alla Sexta. a 1 Clav. This is a canon at the sixth in 2/2 time. The canonic interplay in the upper voices features many suspensions. *Glenn Gould* cited this variation as the extreme example of "deliberate duality of motivic emphasis [...] the canonic voices are called upon to sustain the *passacaille* role which is capriciously abandoned by the bass." Gould spoke very fondly of this canon in a radio conversation: "The canon at the sixth – I adore it, it's a gem. Well, I adore all the canons, really, but it's one of my favorite variations, certainly."

Variatio 19. a 1 Clav. This is a dance-like three-part variation in 3/8 time. The same sixteenth note figuration is continuously employed and variously exchanged between each of the three voices.

Variatio 20. a 2 Clav. This variation, a virtuosic two-part toccata in 3/4 time for two manuals, involves rapid hand-crossing. The piece consists mostly of variations on the texture introduced at the beginning, where one hand plays a string of eighth notes and the other accompanies by plucking sixteenth notes after each eighth note. Here are the first two bars:



Variatio 21. Canone alla Settima. a 1 Clav. The second of the minor key variations, variation 21 is a canon at the seventh in 4/4 time; Kenneth Gilbert sees it as an allemande. The bass line begins the piece with a low note, proceeds to a slow Lament bass and only picks up the pace of the canonic voices in bar 3:



A similar pattern, only a bit more lively, occurs in the bass line in the beginning of the second section, which begins with the opening motif inverted.

Variatio 22. a 1 Clav. alla breve. This variation features four-part writing with many imitative passages and its development in all voices but the bass is much like that of a fugue. The ground bass on which the entire set of variations is built is heard perhaps most explicitly in this variation (as well as in the Quodlibet) due to the simplicity of the bass voice.

Variatio 23. a 2 Clav. Another lively two-part virtuosic variation for two manuals, in 3/4 time. It begins with the hands chasing one another, as it were: the melodic line, initiated in the left hand with a sharp striking of the G above middle C, and then sliding down from the B one octave above to the F, is offset by the right hand, imitating the left at the same pitch, but a quaver late, for the first three bars, ending with a small flourish in the fourth:



This pattern is immediately repeated, but with the left hand imitating the right one, and the scales are ascending, not descending. We then alternate between hands in short bursts written out in short note values until the last three bars of the first section. The second section starts with this similar alternation in short bursts again, then leads to a dramatic section of alternating thirds between hands.

Variatio 24. Canone all'Ottava. a 1 Clav. This variation is a canon at the octave, in 9/8 time. The leader is answered both an octave below and an octave above.

Variatio 25. a 2 Clav. Variation 25 is the third and last variation in G minor; a three-part piece, it is marked *adagio* in Bach's own copy and is in 3/4 time. The melody is written out predominantly in 16th and 32nd notes, with many striking chromaticisms. This variation generally lasts longer than any other piece of the set. Wanda Landowska famously described this variation as "the black pearl" of the *Goldberg Variations*. Peter Williams writes that "the beauty and dark passion of this

variation make it unquestionably the emotional high point of the work", and Glenn Gould said that "the appearance of this wistful, weary cantilena is a master-stroke of psychology."

Variatio 26. a 2 Clav. In sharp contrast with the introspective and passionate nature of the previous variation, this piece is another virtuosic two-part toccata, joyous and fast-paced. Underneath the rapid arabesques, this variation is basically a sarabande. Two time signatures are used, 18/16 for the incessant melody written in 16th notes and 3/4 for the accompaniment in quarter and eighth notes; during the last 5 bars, both hands play in 18/16.

Variatio 27. Canone alla Nona. a 2 Clav. Variation 27 is the last canon of the piece, at the ninth and in 6/8 time. This is the only canon where two manuals are specified (not due to hand-crossing difficulties), and the only pure canon of the work, because it does not have a bass line.

Variatio 28. a 2 Clav. This variation is a two-part toccata in 3/4 time that employs a great deal of hand crossing. Trills are written out using 32nd notes and are present in most of the bars. The piece begins with a pattern in which each hand successively picks out a melodic line while also playing trills. Following this is a section with both hands playing in contrary motion in a melodic contour marked by 16th notes (bars 9-12). The end of the first section features trills again, in both hands now and mirroring one another, as seen in the last 4 bars :



The second section starts and closes with the contrary motion idea seen in bars 9-12. Most of the closing bars feature trills in one or both hands.

Variatio 29. a 1 o vero 2 Clav. This variation consists mostly of heavy chords alternating with sections of brilliant arpeggios shared between the hands. It is in 3/4 time. A rather grand variation, it adds an air of resolution after the lofty brilliance of the previous variation. Glenn Gould states that variations 28 and 29 present the only case of "motivic collaboration or extension between successive variations."

Variatio 30. Quodlibet. a 1 Clav. This quodlibet is based on multiple German folk songs, two of which are *Ich bin solang nicht bei dir g'west, ruck her, ruck her* ("I have so long been away from you, come closer, come closer") and *Kraut und Rüben haben mich vertrieben, hätt mein' Mutter Fleisch gekocht, wär ich länger geblieben* ("Cabbage and turnips have driven me away, had my mother cooked meat, I'd have opted to stay"). The others have been forgotten. The *Kraut und Rüben* theme, under the title of *La Capricciosa*, had previously been used by Dietrich Buxtehude for his thirty-two partite in G major, BuxWV 250.^[11] Bach's biographer Forkel explains the Quodlibet by invoking a custom observed at Bach family reunions (Bach's relatives were almost all musicians):

As soon as they were assembled a chorale was first struck up. From this devout beginning they proceeded to jokes which were frequently in strong contrast. That is, they then sang popular songs partly of comic and also partly of indecent content, all mixed together on the spur of the moment. ... This kind of improvised harmonizing they called a Quodlibet, and not only could laugh over it quite whole-heartedly themselves, but also aroused just as hearty and irresistible laughter in all who heard them.

Forkel's anecdote (which is likely to be true, given that he was able to interview Bach's sons), suggests fairly clearly that Bach meant the Quodlibet to be a joke.

Aria da Capo. A note for note repeat of the aria at the beginning. Williams writes that the work's "elusive beauty ... is reinforced by this return to the Aria. ... no such return can have a neutral *Affekt* [dominant emotional tone]. Its melody is made to stand out by what has gone on in the last five variations, and it is likely to appear wistful or nostalgic or subdued or resigned or sad, heard on its repeat as something coming to an end, the same notes but now final."