

Bach
The Goldberg
Variations
Glenn Gould



ML 5060

BACH:
THE GOLDBERG VARIATIONS
GLENN GOULD, PIANO

COLUMBIA MASTERWORKS



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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	[20] Variatio 19 a 1 Clav.	0:43
[2] Variatio 1 a 1 Clav.	0:45	[21] Variatio 20 a 2 Clav.	0:48
[3] Variatio 2 a 1 Clav.	0:37	[22] Variatio 21	
[4] Variatio 3 a 1 Clav.		Canone alla Settima	1:42
Canone all'Unisono	0:55	[23] Variatio 22 a 1 Clav. Alla breve	0:42
[5] Variatio 4 a 1 Clav.	0:29	[24] Variatio 23 a 2 Clav.	0:54
[6] Variatio 5 a 1 ovvero 2 Clav.	0:37	[25] Variatio 24 a 1 Clav.	
[7] Variatio 6 a 1 Clav.		Canone all'Ottava	0:57
Canone alla Seconda	0:34	[26] Variatio 25 a 2 Clav.	6:28
[8] Variatio 7 a 1 ovvero 2 Clav.		[27] Variatio 26 a 2 Clav.	0:52
Al tempo di Giga	1:08	[28] Variatio 27 a 2 Clav.	
[9] Variatio 8 a 2 Clav.	0:45	Canone alla Nona	0:50
[10] Variatio 9 a 1 Clav.		[29] Variatio 28 a 2 Clav.	1:11
Canone alla Terza	0:38	[30] Variatio 29 a 1 ovvero 2 Clav.	1:00
[11] Variatio 10 a 1 Clav. Fughetta	0:43	[31] Variatio 30 a 1 Clav. Quodlibet	0:48
[12] Variatio 11 a 2 Clav.	0:55	[32] Aria da capo	2:10
[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		

Aria with 30 Variations “Goldberg Variations” BWV 988

Aria mit 30 Veränderungen »Goldberg-Variationen« · Air avec 30 variations « Variations Goldberg » · 1981 Digital Recording

[33] Aria	3:05	[52] Variatio 19 a 1 Clav.	1:03
[34] Variatio 1 a 1 Clav.	1:10	[53] Variatio 20 a 2 Clav.	0:50
[35] Variatio 2 a 1 Clav.	0:49	[54] Variatio 21	
[36] Variatio 3 a 1 Clav.		Canone alla Settima	2:13
Canone all'Unisono	1:31	[55] Variatio 22 a 1 Clav. Alla breve	1:03
[37] Variatio 4 a 1 Clav.	0:50	[56] Variatio 23 a 2 Clav.	0:58
[38] Variatio 5 a 1 ovvero 2 Clav.	0:37	[57] Variatio 24 a 1 Clav.	
[39] Variatio 6 a 1 Clav.		Canone all'Ottava	1:42
Canone alla Seconda	0:40	[58] Variatio 25 a 2 Clav.	6:03
[40] Variatio 7 a 1 ovvero 2 Clav.		[59] Variatio 26 a 2 Clav.	0:52
Al tempo di Giga	1:16	[60] Variatio 27 a 2 Clav.	
[41] Variatio 8 a 2 Clav.	0:54	Canone alla Nona	1:21
[42] Variatio 9 a 1 Clav.		[61] Variatio 28 a 2 Clav.	1:03
Canone alla Terza	0:59	[62] Variatio 29 a 1 ovvero 2 Clav.	1:02
[43] Variatio 10 a 1 Clav. Fughetta	1:04	[63] Variatio 30 a 1 Clav. Quodlibet	1:28
[44] Variatio 11 a 2 Clav.	0:54	[64] Aria da capo	3:45
[45] Variatio 12			
Canone alla Quarta	1:38		
[46] Variatio 13 a 2 Clav.	2:38		
[47] Variatio 14 a 2 Clav.	1:04		
[48] Variatio 15 a 1 Clav.			
Canone alla Quinta in moto contrario.			
Andante	5:00		
[49] Variatio 16 a 1 Clav. Ouverture	1:38		
[50] Variatio 17 a 2 Clav.	0:54		
[51] Variatio 18 a 1 Clav.			
Canone alla Sesta	1:03		

Glenn Gould piano

Recordings: Columbia 30th Street Studio, New York City, USA, June 10, 14-16, 1955 (tracks 1-32), April 22-25 & May 15, 19 & 29, 1981 (tracks 33-64)

Producer: Howard H. Scott (tracks 1-32); Glenn Gould & Samuel H. Carter (tracks 33-64)

Photos: Don Hunstein © Sony Music Entertainment

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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 aptitude 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 entreates ornamentation, or an harmonic basis, stripped to its fundamentals, pregnant with promise and capacity for exhaustive exploitation. Though there are abundant examples 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 fuguetas, 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



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



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)





In 1955, a young Canadian pianist made his first recording for what was then Columbia Masterworks. At that time he was not well-known to concert audiences and was completely unknown to the record market. But after the recording sessions of June of that year, in Columbia's famous 30th Street Studios in New York City, and after the release of his first album, Bach's *Goldberg Variations*, Glenn Gould became world-famous. His performance of Bach's 1742 collection of "keyboard exercises" created an international recording sensation and achieved the unique distinction of becoming an album that, from its original release date to the present, was never absent from the active catalog of Masterworks recordings.

In 1970, Glenn Gould completed a recording session at the 30th Street Studios and decided that in future he would record exclusively in Toronto, where his television and film activities were centered. He did not again return to this musically historical building until 1980, when he began making his first digital recordings for CBS Masterworks – the Six Last Sonatas of Haydn and the *Goldberg Variations*.

Why did Glenn Gould, who seldom records a piece twice, choose to re-record a work that had received a definitive performance at his hands 27 years ago? Gould has offered only the explanation that new technology plus his own desire to reexamine the work in terms of its "arithmetical correspondence between theme and variation" led him back into the studio for this recording. Any more complete explanation of this new approach would, according to Gould, entail a complete written analysis, in an almost book-length essay, of the "thirty very interesting but independent-minded pieces" that make up the Variations – a fascinating prospect, to be sure.

Samuel H. Carter, who co-produced the Last Six Sonatas of Haydn, also worked on the new Goldberg Variations. Following are some of his observations of the last recording sessions:

Sometime past midnight on Saturday, May 27, 1981, the doors of CBS's famous 30th Street Recording Studios in New York closed on the last official recording session to be held there by CBS Masterworks. Out of those doors walked a man – assuredly only after a “cool down” period and change of shirt – a man whose illustrious recording career began there a little over a quarter century before. With an appropriateness that is usually found only in fiction, the last notes played by Glenn Gould that night were from the same work of Bach – the *Goldberg Variations* – with which he had first transfixed the music world in the summer of 1955.

Now the Studio, once a kind of mecca for some of the world's greatest musicians, was to be sold, victim of the changed fortunes of an industry that has become as multi-national as any other and as competitive. For Glenn Gould and for those of us whose association with “Columbia” covers a long span of years, the old church is a place where many ghosts walk in an atmosphere so laden as to be almost claustrophobic, in spite of the soaring reaches of the ceilings.

Glenn Gould may have quietly come out by the same door wherein he entered but while he had been inside he stirred things up more than a little. Pablo Casals once said that Bach is “a volcano,” speaking of course of the emotional content of the music that traditionalists tried so hard for so long to deny. Gould, too, is something of a volcanic force. He is the embodiment of musical sophistication in that he seems always to know what he intends the music to do. He almost never lets the music happen to him – *he* happens to *it*. That is what made many musicians who nominally “knew” the *Goldberg*

Variations feel that they had just discovered them when the 1955 album appeared. May I suggest that, with this new recording, many additional “discoveries” will be made. The nature of these will doubtless be as many and various as the number of listeners.

I think of Glenn Gould as an artist of strong intentionality. He shapes and molds a musical line in its breadth and in its detail with breathtaking awareness. As he has often told interviewers, he will try to make each performance different, yet this firm intention is always present so that however different the “take” there is never any tentativeness or absence of character.

This new digital recording of the *Goldberg Variations* was made, in the main, simultaneously with a video-taping. Makeup sessions were held on April 25 and May 29 for the purposes of the recording. Having worked extensively in both mediums as performer and producer, Glenn was almost instantly aware, in seeing and hearing a playback, of what takes or portions of takes were suitable for the film *and* recording and which for the film only. I often felt that he was being excessively nit-picking, only to discover in the intensive listening and editing sessions that followed that he had known precisely the difference he wanted in every case. He is a man who is very reluctant to accept anything short of the absolute attainment of his artistic goal.

(Original liner notes for IM-37779)



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