

PROGRAM NOTES

JOHANN SEBASTIAN BACH

(1685-1750)

“Goldberg” Variations

There’s an often-told backstory to the composition of the *“Goldberg” Variations*. Dresden courtier Hermann Carl, Reichsgraf (Count) von Keyserling had trouble sleeping at night. Apparently he mentioned in J.S. Bach’s presence just how nice it would be if his bouts of insomnia could be graced by “gentle and somewhat merry music” played by his resident harpsichordist, teen prodigy Johann Gottlieb Goldberg. Bach picked up the dropped hint, made a beeline for his writing desk, and a towering masterpiece of Western music was born.

Commentators never can resist that story, despite some glaring contradictions, not the least of which is the notion of the *“Goldberg” Variations* as “gentle and somewhat merry.” Nor did Bach (1685–1750) dedicate the work to the Count, nearly mandatory under the circumstances. Furthermore, the *Goldbergs* were printed before Bach’s 1741 Dresden visit when the alleged quasi-commission took place. The best evidence points to Bach beginning work on the variations in 1739, when J.G. Goldberg was all of 12 years old. None of it adds up. Sadly, the attractive anecdote turns out to be apocryphal. Bach probably brought copies of the newly-engraved variations with him on his 1741 visit to his son Wilhelm Friedemann in Dresden. It would have been a proper gesture to present the Count with a copy, which Goldberg would have played, and thus a story was born.

The work proceeds along a great arch-like plan, symmetrical, balanced, and humming with internal resonances. Thirty-two individual movements mirror the 32-bar length of the bass line itself. Thirty-two is a flexible number, capable of multiple groupings and divisions. The most pervasive division is by threes: the block of 30 variations is flanked by statements of the Aria, creating a tripartite cruciform shape. The 30 variations are grouped by threes—10 groups in all. Each trio of variations culminates in a canon—a piece in which each melodic line rigorously imitates the other. The canons progress sequentially: the first canon is in unison, meaning the imitating voice starts on the same pitch as the original while the second canon is on the second, placing the imitating voice a half step higher and so on through Variations 25–27. Variations 28–30 modify the pattern by ending with a *Quodlibet*, a whimsical mix of light tunes in a canonic style.

The numerical and numerological underpinnings of the *Goldbergs* have fascinated generations of analysts. For the present purpose we’ll limit ourselves to the work’s broadest divisions: the Aria and the trios of variations.

—Scott Foglesong[©]