

A Lesson with the Master

Johann Sebastian Bach published his opus 1 surprisingly late, in 1731, while in his mid 40's. He had already held the coveted position as head of church music in the city of Leipzig for many years, and carved out his profile as a composer, and his uncanny fame as a keyboardist.

Printing and disseminating his music became increasingly important during the last two decades of his life. The nature and sequential order of his publications indicates that he didn't pursue financial interests (unlike his friend Telemann) but rather a pedagogical program. In terms of quantity, his printed compositions don't compete with the output of most of his colleagues (some now in oblivion). Bach's works shine and outclass through their extraordinary writing (something more apparent to posterity than to his contemporaries), and seem to follow a methodical plan: His focus is directed almost exclusively on keyboard music, and an overall objective is achieved progressively and by increments.

Bach called his opus 1 'Clavier-Übung' which can be translated either as 'keyboard exercise' or 'keyboard practice'. It consists of the Six Partitas, and the title's dual meaning allows for a double understanding of the compositions: they provide instructive material to learn and grow as a player and, equally, they serve as role-models for everyone with aspirations to compose. Bach may have adopted the term 'Clavier-Übung' from his predecessor in Leipzig, Johann Kuhnau. Bach's uncle Johann Christoph used it, as did Johann Philipp Krieger, Johann Caspar Ferdinand Fischer, and several others after Bach.

The Clavier-Übung II, released four years after the first volume, presents a juxtaposition of the Italian Concerto and the French Suite, the two leading genres and national idioms on the field, with their dissimilarity and dualism being expressed by maximal tonal distance (F-major and B-minor) and with a specifically orchestrated use of the double-manual harpsichord. The Clavier-Übung III, published four years later in 1739 and often called the 'Organ Mass', celebrates the art of motivic counterpoint in its most elaborate state and virtuosity. In 27 sacred movements, three to the power of three, the theological concept of trinity is explored and, more generally, so too the concept of unity within diversity and vice versa.

In 1741 Bach released the 'Aria with 30 Variations' as the next but un-numbered volume of the 'Clavier-Übung', today much better known as the Goldberg Variations.

With the aria and its repeat at the end, the 30 variations (otherwise a highly unusual number) add up to 32 movements, printed on 32 pages, with the aria and most variations counting 32 bars. (Bach earned his reputation as a numerologist.) We don't know if the lack of the label 'IV' goes back to the change of publishing houses, or if it is a reflection on Bach entering a new venture, a new series of a different scope, like the Musical Offering, The Canonic Variations on 'Vom Himmel hoch', and The Art of Fugue. This was music that when composed had already fallen out of time, a music that didn't even try to be in fashion, music that shifted-its outlook to timeless and otherworldly spheres.

For all of his life, but particularly after retreating from his official duties in the 1740's, Bach was concerned with encyclopedic and comprehensive answers to every compositional challenge. Throughout his work, he aimed toward the integration and synthesis of diverse idioms, styles and techniques, reconciled the old with the new, and came forward with an ingenuity that defies classification.

Prior to the Goldbergs, the two most prominent examples of Bach's take on variations are the legendary Chaconne from his second partita for solo violin, and the Passacaglia in C-minor for organ. Both move on the undercarriage of a ground bass, a repeated and quite short progression of harmonies rather than a tune.

Another precursor closely connected to Goldberg is the Aria Variata in A-minor, BWV 989. As in the case of the 30 Variations, the Aria doesn't provide a melodic theme to be varied. It is the bass, or rather the implied chords and their sequence constructing the model which does so.

At first glance, we see an inconspicuous sarabande. The piece strongly emits a 'galant' spirit. The very regular and symmetrical build of two equal halves at 16 bars each is rather uncommon. Usually, the second part of a movement would be longer than the first, often in a proportion close to the Golden Mean, which in the course of history gave place to the evolution of the sonata form with its desire for thematic development.

We also find this Aria, without any title, in Anna Magdalena Bach's 'Clavierbüchlein'. While the book was put together by 1725, this movement was later added on two pages that had been left empty (by mistake?), this most likely well before the composition of the 30 Variations. It must have been a piece dear to the Bach family, for we find it alongside 'Bist Du bei mir', and other favourites in this collection of works, some by Bach but many by contemporaries held in high esteem.

When Bach used the music as 'Aria' for the Goldberg project, he would have copied it exactly from the Anna-Magdalena book, something unheard of when it comes to his own compositions. Ordinarily, he would never recycle without changing, adapting and improving them nearly compulsively.

Until the end of the 18th century and beyond, sets of variations were usually composed on either a theme of another composer, or a piece of music in public domain, or in any case on some pre-existing prototype.

Is it possible that the famous Aria is not by Bach either? I find this most probable. Every time I play the piece, it feels to me that the last six bars are profoundly different, added as a collage by Bach's own hand, perhaps to complete the fragment of an anonymous French composer.

Apart from these considerations, the Aria further resembles a few other models, namely Buxtehude's 'La Capricciosa' (with 32 variations), Muffat's 'Componimenti Musicali', and a sarabande with 12 variations by Bach's uncle Johann Christoph.

Here, the 30 variations are grouped in 10 sets of three: the first in each is a genre- or character-piece (like a dance form, a fugue or a motet), the second a keyboard toccata or sonata movement (with extensive use of the two manuals and every conceivable hand crossing), and the third is presented in more obvious polyphony as a canon, first in unison, then at the second, the third and so on until reaching the ninth.

To give one small example of Bach's enormous talent to combine diversity and contrast with structure and cohesion: in those 9 canons, he uses different meters in a way that all 9 pairings of the numbers 2, 3 and 4 are deployed: duple, triple and quadruple meter with 2, 3 or 4 subdivisions each, 3 to the power of 2!

In lieu of the logical canon at the 10th, Bach offers as the last variation a 'Quodlibet' (Latin 'whatever you wish') -- a musical combination of two or more popular tunes. Two melodies can clearly be identified, the second of which is a folk tune known as 'Bergamasca', itself used by composers like Frescobaldi or Sweelinck, both very important to Bach, and also widely disseminated with the German words 'Kraut und Rüben haben mich vertrieben' -- 'Cabbage and turnips have driven me away'. The irony lies in idiomatic use of the expression 'Kraut und Rüben' to describe a mess of all sorts which in our case may stand for all the variations that have kept the Aria away, now about to return.

The first of these two melodies has often been connected to a German folk song 'Ich bin so lange nicht bei Dir gewesen' -- 'I haven't been around you for so long', the lyrics full of profanity. While the association does make sense, I still wonder if there is more to it.

There are two other examples of quodlibets from Bach's hand: BWV 127 and 524, one sacred and the other secular, one with simultaneous and the other with successive use of the melodies, one serious, the other one funny and merry. As in variation 30, we have a simultaneous quodlibet. Could it be (at least somewhat) serious in nature, and could the words to the tune come from the chorale 'Was Gott tut das ist wohlgetan' -- 'What God does is done well'?

Overall, what does it mean to arrange this intrinsically keyboardist piece? And why would I try to arrange it in the first place?

The second question is quickly answered: accessibility. So many of Bach's compositions are lost -- not only sacred music, but also orchestral and chamber pieces. During his lifetime, he published very little, and essentially only keyboard music. Think of a world where the only way to listen to the Art of the Fugue is to hear it on the organ. And while I am convinced that it is meant primarily for that instrument, I enjoy all the renditions out there, and feel they contribute to its beauty, or at least to the perception thereof. Among all composers I know, Bach's music appears to be the most independent of instrumentation, thus lending itself openly to our imagination.

The first question leads to another question: Which instruments would I pick for the Goldberg Variations, and why?

While the majority of the variations don't exceed three-part writing, some movements are woven in a rather dense and consistent four-part fabric. Therefore, I settled on the idea of a consort of four instruments. Given the binary structure of the theme and every variation, as well as the context of a double-manual harpsichord and the changes and shifts of colours implied, I decided to go for two consorts à four, one for strings (pretty much in form of a classical quartet), and one for woodwinds with Baroque flute, oboe d'amore, oboe da caccia, and bassoon. This allows for antiphonal use, a coupling of the two sound sources, and all sorts of 'broken consort' between the two bodies.

To 'translate' the canons turned out to be relatively simple, more like transcribing than arranging. Also the character pieces, such as dance movements or the little fugue, didn't require too much time to find equivalents within the complement of 8 players.

However, some of the more virtuosic and keyboard-idiomatic variations felt at first insurmountable to me. Thus, I started the project with the intention of leaving them for the harpsichord. But in the process, I grew more and more compelled to find an answer for every variation. I would look at those defiant candidates, almost stare at them (in the nicest way) until they revealed a key to unlock their secret. Particularly difficult proved to be the huge difference between the range of the harpsichord (which Bach exhausted in his work) and any other given instrument with a much narrower compass. I have tried to abide by the 18th century nature and use of our instruments and by the role-models as to polyphonic texture available to us in Bach's rich orchestral writing.

A last question: which role does Goldberg play in all this?

Johann Gottlieb Goldberg was born in Gdansk (Poland) in 1727. His prodigy was recognized around 1737 by the Russian ambassador to Saxony, von Keyserling, whose connection led to studies and further exchange with Bach and with Bach's son Wilhelm Friedemann. Sadly, the story told by Bach's biographer Forkel in 1802 -- that Keyserling commissioned the piece in order to help him through his sleepless nights by listening to Goldberg playing 'his' variations -- is beautiful but probably not true.

There is no mention of such a commission on the dedication page. But father Bach could have brought a copy of the brand-new print during a visit with his son Wilhelm Friedemann in Dresden, where young Goldberg could get hold of it. So, it is still entirely possible that Goldberg would have delighted, educated and moved, in short comforted his patron during periods of insomnia, and that we may well think of him as one of its first performers, alongside Wilhelm Friedemann.

To honour Goldberg, a true genius of a composer who passed far too young, and to pay tribute to his role in the Variations, I dared include one of his trio sonatas (which was long attributed to Johann Sebastian as BWV 1037) in our performance. To not break the perfect and intricate

balance Bach provided while transitioning from one variation to the next, I took the only chance of quiet Bach offers, right after variation 15 which ends very openly and inconclusively. It's a good point to insert the sonata in its entirety, take a pause, and reconvene for the second half of the variation cycle opened by no. 16, a French Overture.

One final comment on the return of the Aria at the very end of this masterpiece: as if by magic, we listen to its return as different people, as different inheritors.

- *Notes by Alexander Weimann*