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**J. S. BACH**  
**Goldberg Variations**  
**Chen Pi-hsien**



## Johann Sebastian Bach (1685 – 1750)

### Goldberg Variations

(Aria mit verschiedenen Veraenderungen, BWV 988)

The Aria and 30 Variations, known as the Goldberg Variations, constitute a superb example of Johann Sebastian Bach's achievement as a composer for the clavier. The work was published in 1741 or 1742 as the fourth part of the *Clavier-Uebung*, a title that had been used by his predecessor as Thomaskantor in Leipzig, Johann Kuhnau. The first part of this collection of compositions for the clavier had been published complete in 1731 and included six Partitas, which had appeared annually, one by one, from 1726, three years after his appointment to the Leipzig Thomaschule. The second part, published in 1735, contained the contrasted Italian Concerto and Overture in the French Style, and the third part, issued in 1739, contained a series of organ compositions and the keyboard Duets.

Doubt had been cast on the story associated with the Goldberg Variations, the source of the title by which they are commonly known. Bach's early biographer Forkel alleged that Count Hermann Karl von Keyserlingk, Russian ambassador to the court of Saxony in Dresden, had commissioned the work for performance by his protégé, the young harpsichordist Johann Gottlieb Goldberg, to amuse him during hours of sleeplessness.

Goldberg himself was born in 1727 in Danzig (Gdansk), where he came to Keyserlingk's attention ten years later. He was said to have taken lessons not only from J. S. Bach but also from the latter's eldest son, Wilhelm Friedemann Bach, who was working in Dresden from 1733 until 1746.

Goldberg may have remained in Dresden after Keyserlingk's departure in 1745 to Potsdam, and in 1751 he entered the service of the First Minister in Dresden, Count Heinrich von Bruehl. He died of tuberculosis at the age of 29 in 1756, leaving a reputation rather as a virtuoso performer than as a composer.

There was, of course, a close connection between J. S. Bach and Count von Keyserlingk, his patron at the court of Dresden. It was through Keyserlingk that Bach had in 1736 finally secured the title of Court Composer to the King of Saxony, and the ambassador's only son was a student in Leipzig from 1741, so that both Keyserlingk and Goldberg might well have visited Bach. Wilhelm Friedemann Bach owed his introduction to the court of Dresden to Keyserlingk, whose house was open to other Dresden musicians of distinction. The *Aria and Variations*, however, have no printed dedication, and it has been argued that Goldberg was remarkably young at the time of their composition, although their technical difficulties should have been within the competence of the young virtuoso even at the age of 14. Forkel concludes his story by adding that Bach was rewarded by Keyserlingk with a gold cup filled with a hundred louis d'or. His biography of Bach, published in 1802, is the only evidence for this.

The *Aria* on which the variations are based was included in the *Clavierbuechlein* copied in 1725 by Bach's second wife Anna Magdalena, a *Sarabande*, not necessarily the work of Bach himself. The variations that follow are derived from the harmonic structure and the bass line of the *Aria* and are grouped in threes, every third variation a canon at a higher numerical interval, with the final variation a *quodlibet*, a hotch-potch seemingly remote from the original *aria*, that follows in conclusion.

The first three variations, ending with a canon at the unison, are for one manual, while the second group includes a fifth variation for an optional

second manual, leading to a canon at the second. The seventh variation offers the same option for a gigue-like movement, followed by a two manual variation and a canon at the third.

The fourth group opens with a fughetta and ends with a canon at the fourth, and the fifth, designed for two manuals, ends with a single manual G minor canon at the fifth. An Overture opens the sixth group, a solemn introduction in the French style, followed by a fugal section, the group ending with a canon at the sixth.

The seventh group ends with a G minor canon at the seventh, and the eighth with a canon at the octave. This is followed by a ninth group opening in G minor and closing with a canon at the ninth. The final group, providing opportunities for greater brilliance of performance, ends with a quodlibet, a mixture of popular tunes that include *Kraut und Rueben haben mich vertrieben* (Cabbage and turnips have driven me away) and *Ich bin so lang nicht bei dir g'west* (It is so long since I was at your house), set against the variation ground.

The Goldberg Variations offer a conspectus of Bach's wit and technical accomplishment, and herald a final period in which he would continue to explore the possibilities of canon and the use of a single theme, notably in *The Musical Offering* and *The Art of Fugue*.

## Chen Pi-hsien

Chen Pi-hsien was born in Taiwan in 1950. When she was four, she began to take piano lessons. At the early age of five Chen Pi-hsien gave her first public performance. The nine year old girl was sent to Germany to continue her studies at the *Musikhochschule* in Koeln with Hans Otto Schmidt, where she received her diploma as a concert pianist in 1970. In the following years she pursued her studies with Hans Leygraf and took part in piano

courses given by Wilhelm Kempff, Tatjana Nikolajewa and Geza Anda. In 1972 she won international appreciation with a prize at the Concours Reine Elisabeth and the first prize in the competition of the Rundfunkanstalten in Munich. Since then she has given performances at important places such as London, Amsterdam, Zurich, Berlin, Munich and Tokyo as well as at the Festivals of Lucerne, Schwetzingen, Hong Kong and Osaka. Chen Pih-sien has played with famous orchestras and conductors, such as the London Symphony Orchestra, the BBC Symphony Orchestra, the Concertgebouw Orchestra, the Residentie Orchestra, the ORTF, the Sinfonieorchester of the Bayerische, Hessische, Suedwestdeutsche und Norddeutsche Rundfunk and the Radio-Sinfonieorchester Berlin as well as the Zuercher Kammerorchester, Tonhalle Orchester and the Collegium Musicum Zurich, appearing with conductors Haitink, Davis, Martinon, Leitner, Neumann, Klee, Rieger, Janowski, Inbal, Sacher, de Stoutz, Bour, Stein, Eotvos and Foster.



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STEREO

J. S. BACH

DDD

 Playing  
 Time:  
 55'07''

NAXOS

## Goldberg Variations

Chen Pi-hsien, Piano

J. S. BACH: Goldberg Variations

1	Aria	(3:13)	17	Variation 16	(1:55)
2	Variation 1	(0:53)	18	Variation 17	(1:06)
3	Variation 2	(0:58)	19	Variation 18	(1:42)
4	Variation 3	(1:53)	20	Variation 19	(0:36)
5	Variation 4	(0:47)	21	Variation 20	(1:01)
6	Variation 5	(0:49)	22	Variation 21	(2:50)
7	Variation 6	(1:38)	23	Variation 22	(0:45)
8	Variation 7	(1:00)	24	Variation 23	(1:10)
9	Variation 8	(0:56)	25	Variation 24	(2:59)
10	Variation 9	(2:14)	26	Variation 25	(4:19)
11	Variation 10	(0:53)	27	Variation 26	(1:02)
12	Variation 11	(1:18)	28	Variation 27	(1:58)
13	Variation 12	(2:07)	29	Variation 28	(1:20)
14	Variation 13	(2:20)	30	Variation 29	(1:12)
15	Variation 14	(1:05)	31	Variation 30	(2:19)
16	Variation 15	(4:54)	32	Aria D. C.	(1:55)

Recorded at the Festeburgkirche, Frankfurt, FRG  
 in October, 1985

Producer: Wolfgang Seikritt  
 Music Notes: Keith Anderson

Cover Painting: Portrait of Nadezhda Zhdanovich at the Piano,  
 1849. (Painting by Pavel Fedotov)

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