

**scottish
ensemble**

The Goldberg Variations
with Steven Osborne (piano) & Jonathan Morton
(violin)

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An introduction to The Goldberg Variations:

There is a famous story about The Goldberg Variations – probably apocryphal, certainly appealing. Perhaps you know it. The story goes like this:

There once was a count who couldn't sleep. This count was the ambassador to Russia for the same German court in which Bach held the position of court composer. The year is 1742, or thereabouts. The story goes that Bach was asked to write some music to help the insomniac count drift off. Interestingly, the 'Goldberg' of the Goldberg Variations is not the sleepless count himself, but Johann Gottlieb Goldberg, the virtuosic court keyboardist who would play the work. More on him in a moment.

The dominant mood of the aria that opens (and closes) this set of 30 variations, is indeed one of tranquility and grace, encouraging reflection and stillness. After this, however, it must be said that one might find it difficult to drift off to any of the subsequent - often dazzlingly virtuosic - variations. Indeed, the irrepressible outburst of energy at the beginning of Variation 1 seems to almost deliberately puncture the gentle aria's initial mood of repose. After this, we are into the constantly shifting world of the variations.

Having a renowned virtuoso to hand - and the composer's own proficiency at the keyboard - likely allowed Bach's compositional imagination to run riot. And the Variations do feel riotous at times. Though likely to have been performed first on the harpsichord, as with many of Bach's instrumental works the instrument is not strictly specified in the score. In the centuries since, the work has proven just as popular among pianists - most famously perhaps, with the Canadian pianist Glenn Gould, whose iconic recording in 1955 sold tens of thousands of copies and introduced the Goldberg Variations to the public at large.

One fascinating element of the Variations is how our listening experience can change based on the instrument playing them; how different instruments seem to emphasise different aspects of the original material. There is something especially obsessive, for example, in the buzz of a harpsichord making its way through the variations; there is the dynamic variety of the piano, able to emphasise the emotional range of the original material; there are arrangements for strings, both trio and string orchestra, making clear the complex counterpoint at work across the piece; and there have even been arrangements for guitar ensembles, saxophone quartets, recorder groups and harmonica...! Not to mention interpretations involving dance, like Scottish Ensemble and Andersson Dance's 2015 Goldberg Variations: *ternary patterns for insomnia*, which has since been performed over 30 times across 5 continents.

No matter the context in which they appear, an interesting tension between uniformity and variety emerges from the variations. Because each variation shares the same bassline - bar the three minor-key variations (Variations 15, 21 and 25), which notably stand out - it can sometimes be difficult to notice where one variation ends, and the next begins. And yet the Variations do display a remarkable formal variety, featuring canons on each degree of the scale, fughettas, a fanfare-like overture (Variation 16, halfway through the work, funnily enough), and even a quodlibet, incorporating popular tunes from the day.

Listening closely, we can perceive that each Variation does indeed have a unique character - one of the ideas that SE Artistic Director Jonathan Morton wanted to explore through combining the music with choreography. Interestingly, other than the bassline which unites them all, the subsequent variations bear little motivic resemblance to the aria they originate from - they extend out in all directions, trying to encompass as much as possible, from exuberant joy to weary dolor, and everything in between.

And yet, when the Aria returns at the end, we feel that we have arrived somehow inevitably at home. Rather than a clear, linear process, the variations are, to borrow some words from Glenn Gould, 'a community of sentiment', a group, a constellation. The theme is 'radial', the variations 'circumferential' and the repeated bassline at the heart of everything is really just 'the focus for their orbit'.

'The Goldberg Variations are, in short,' Gould writes, 'music which observes neither end nor beginning, music with neither real climax nor real resolution'. Perhaps this is why it proves so enduringly fascinating for both performers and listeners today.

Questions to Consider While Listening:

- **How do different instruments colour your listening experience?**
Do they make you notice certain aspects to the music in different ways? Do you have a favourite?
- **Does the listening experience differ if you listen to the Variations as a whole, versus one Variation by itself? Or several, out of order?**
Play around with different ways of encountering the pieces - does this change how you hear them, and what you notice?
- **What can dance add to the experience of the music?**
Does it clarify? Transform? Or distract?
- **What do you make of Bach's use of the theme and variations form?**
How do you feel the variations relate back to the aria (if at all)? And what do you make of its return at the end?

Links:

- **The Goldberg Variations**
[*Performed on Harpsichord*](#) (by David Ponsford)
- **The Goldberg Variations**
[*Performed on Piano*](#) (by Andras Schiff)
- **The Goldberg Variations**
[*Arranged for String Trio*](#) (Live performance featuring Pekka Kuusisto)
- **The Goldberg Variations**
[*Arranged for String Orchestra*](#) (performed by Britten Sinfonia)
- [Pianist Jeremy Denk performs and discusses the Aria](#)
- **Goldberg Variations: *ternary patterns for insomnia***
['Making Of' Documentary](#)