

BACH 731 - THE GOLDBERG VARIATIONS & French Suite No. 5

In addition to the duties required of his various positions at Court or for Church use, Bach clearly felt the need to summarize his art for posterity. His four part *Clavier-* (*bung* or *Keyboard Exercise* series which he pursued for ten years between 1731 and 1741 encompasses the major keyboard instruments of the day, and all known keyboard compositional styles. Part I, published 1731, consisted of the Six Partitas or German Suites for Harpsichord; Part II, 1735, the Italian Concerto and French Overture (BWV 971 and 831); Part III, 1739, Preludes on the Catechism Hymns for Organ; while Part IV, 1741, offered the set of Air with Variations BWV 988.

Bach's own title was simple: "*Keyboard practice, consisting of an Aria with different Variations for the harpsichord with two manuals. Prepared for the enjoyment of music lovers by Johann Sebastian Bach.*" The story that has given the name *Goldberg Variations* to this monumental work comes from Forkel's biography of Bach (1802). From Forkel we learn that Johann Gottlieb Goldberg, a youth of 15 and a pupil of Bach, was employed by Count Kaiserling, the Russian Ambassador to the Saxon Court, as Court Harpsichordist. The Count was often sickly and enjoyed the distraction of music played to him on sleepless and pain-filled nights. The *Variations* were Bach's response to the Count's request for pieces of a "*soft and somewhat lively character*" to be written for the gifted young Goldberg. That the published copy does not bear any sort of dedication to the Count as would be expected, casts doubt on this story. However Forkel, normally reliable in such matters, continues that Bach was rewarded by the Count with "*a golden goblet filled with 100 Louis'd'or,*" so the story may be true, perhaps a manuscript copy, now lost, was presented to the Count with a personal dedication.

The pattern – typically Bach that there should be a well-defined scheme – is as follows: The Aria on which the Variations are based a sarabande in Anna Magdalena's Notebook of 1725, begins and ends the work. The thirty Variations are grouped as ten sets of three, each group of three ending with a Canon. The work falls naturally into two parts, breaking at Variation 15.

Yet form and pattern are only the foundation. As Sylvia Marlowe observes, "the challenge of the mosaic-like variation form inspired Bach to revolutionary writing of unprecedented brilliance: the use of chromatics, quasi-trills, huge skips, pounding chords, broken parallel sixths and thirds, scales chasing each other - and many other innovations. No other work of Bach or his contemporaries uses the harpsichord's double keyboards so inventively. Full of lilting songs, lively dances, jokes and parodies, it has prodigious variety, wit and gaiety. Enjoyment and pleasure are its theme, humane and humorous its character. One of the most highly schematized works in music, it wears its learning with unequalled grace."

The Variations

ARIA - 1. "*The entrance gate*" - a lively dancelike two-part invention.

2. Three-part Invention - the upper voices a duet in imitation.

3. Canon at the unison - a pastoral, playful canon in exact imitation.

4. An energetic dance in four-part counterpoint - cross rhythms, syncopations.

5. Arabesque - the first of the stunningly brilliant arabesques for two keyboards.

6. Canon at the second - a quiet singing canon, the second voice one whole tone higher.

7. A Siciliano in a capricious duet

8. Arabesque - broken chords, arpeggios - the rhythm sometimes in three.

9. Canon at the third - dark and pensive, the later voice entering one third lower.

10. Fughetta - four-part counterpoint in a gay dance.

11. Arabesque - delicate triplets flowing in a pastoral duet.

12. Canon at the fourth - canon by inversion - the leader goes upward, the imitation downward and vice-versa. Similar in spirit to Variation 1.

13. A highly embellished and eloquent **Cantilena** reminiscent of the Aria.

14. Arabesque - trills, mordents, 32nds in a merry chase.

15. Canon at the fifth - imitation, by inversion, and in minor - reminiscent of the *Crucifixus*.

16. Overture in 2 parts - a grand introduction in dotted rhythm, then a lively contrapuntal Allegro.

17. Arabesque - one of the wittiest - broken 3rds, 6ths, galloping over the two keyboards.

18. Canon at the sixth - an energetic march in exact imitation.

19. Minuet or *passepied*.

20. Arabesque - two voices in constant, brilliant pursuit over the two keyboards.

21. Canon at the seventh - in minor and full of tragedy and pathos.

22. A march in four-part texture.

23. Arabesque - revolutionary passages in 3rds and 6ths.

24. Canon at the octave - a lyrical, spacious canon.

25. One of Bach's greatest embellished **Arias** with extraordinary exploitation of chromatic harmonies.

26. Arabesque - a sarabande with accompaniment of continuous running 16ths.

27. Canon at the ninth - mischievous and witty, the only canon in two voices.

28. Trills in the Lisztian manner - thoroughly unique keyboard writing for the time.

29. Sanctus - a powerful pounding of the keyboards followed by running triplets.

30. Quodlibet - It was the custom in Bach's family to improvise on popular songs - some comic, some indecent. This improvised harmonizing was called a *quodlibet*.

Variation 30, the *quodlibet*. is a musical joke based on two popular songs: " *I've been away from you for so long, / Come closer, closer, closer.*" ... and ... "*Cabbage and turnips drove me away. / If mother had cooked some meat I'd have stayed longer.*"

ARIA - serenity returned.

(Notes by Sylvia Marlowe)

While Bach composed both for church, and for study by his sons and many pupils, he also wrote for pure entertainment. Anna Magdalena's celebrated Notebook contains a selection of fun pieces, and Bach's own title page of his published edition of the Six Partitas or German Suites as they are often called, reads: *Keyboard Practice, consisting of preludes, allemandes, courantes, sarabandes, gigues, minuets, and other galanteries, composed for music-lovers, to refresh their spirits, by Johann Sebastian Bach.....*

The Suite of Dances for instrumental ensembles or a solo instrument such as lute or harpsichord, was an important and popular musical form of the Baroque era; the separate movements were of contrasting speeds, metrical patterns and textures, but bound together into a coherent group by generally sharing the same key and thematic material. The form grew out of the customary "paring" of dances (e.g. *Pavane* and *Galliard*) – a duple time dance of moderate or slow tempo being followed by a faster one in triple time, the second often being a rhythmically-varied version of the first. The most significant of these couples was the *Allemande and Courante*, which became the main pair of movements of the Suite.

A central figure in the history of the Suite was the Austrian composer Froberger (1616-1667), a pupil of Frescobaldi and tireless traveler; in his music he drew together many of the separate national styles of his time and his great talent fused these disparate elements into a coherent and powerful style that was to have a formative influence on German music. He had learnt from Chambonnières the adaptation of the French Suite of Lute Dances to the harpsichord, and in his own Suites fixed the order of the three main movements: *allemand* (in moderate tempo), *courante* (faster) and *sarabande* (the slowest of the three).

In addition to the Partitas, or German Suites, Bach also produced a set of six English Suites, and six French Suites, both dating from the C(then years, 1717-1723. We offer here the fifth French Suite, BWV 816.

A Note on German Harpsichords in Bach's time.

It has become fashionable in recent years to define the lightly-framed, preferably single-manual harpsichord giving forth a thin, resonant sound as "authentic". While such an instrument may be suitable for early Italian music, and less so for Flemish and French music, it bears little resemblance to the much more solid, larger and more richly-toned instruments which would have been found in Baroque Germany.

A major role of the domestic harpsichord, particularly in Lutheran Germany, was to provide an organ practice instrument. Two manuals at least would have been essential to practice "terrace dynamics", a technique considered vital to display the architecture of the piece. A painting of the Jena Collegium Musicum giving an outdoor concert, painted in 1744, clearly shows a three-manual harpsichord. A 16' stop was normal (Bach's main harpsichord had one) and a separate pedal-board would be placed under the harpsichord. The German harpsichord thus bore more resemblance to a small organ, and was far removed from the light single-manual instrument more typical of Baroque Italy.

During Bach's later Leipzig years he directed a Collegium Musicum which gave regular concerts in Zimmermann's Coffee House. Gottfried Zimmerman frequently re-equipped his establishment with the latest musical instruments, one of his prize possessions in the late 1720s being "*a clavicymbel of large size and range of expressivity*" which was a Leipzig attraction in itself. A further instrument was obtained in 1733 described as "*even finer*" – perhaps similar to the three-manual instrument illustrated in the 1744 print of a concert by the Jena Collegium referred to above.

As for the sound itself, the typical Baroque German harpsichord would certainly have sounded rounder and richer, without the "jangle" often associated with "authentic" instruments; but even this sound did not exactly match Bach's personal taste, as evidenced by his long-time wish to own a harpsichord with the soft sound of the lute. He would ultimately have two such "Lute-harpsichords" custom-built for his own use. It is our firm contention, for which we believe there is substantial historical evidence, that the instrument recorded on this disc with its strong 'Germanic' character resembles far more closely that which Bach would have used, rather than the lighter, thinner sonorities of those currently dubbed as "authentic".