

This disc, the first in our Heritage Performances Series, celebrates the career and the artistry of Millicent Silver, who for some forty years was well-known as a regular performer in London and on BBC Radio both as soloist and as harpsichordist with the London Harpsichord Ensemble which she founded with her husband John Francis. Though she made very few recordings, we are delighted to preserve this recording of the Goldberg Variations for its musical integrity, its warmth, and particularly the use of tonal dynamics (adding or subtracting of 4' and 16' stops to the basic 8') which enhances the dramatic architecture.

Millicent Irene Silver was born in South London on 17 November 1905. Her father, Alfred Silver, had been a boy chorister at St. George's Chapel, Windsor where his singing attracted the attention of Queen Victoria, who had him give special performances for her. He earned his living playing the violin and oboe. His wife Amelia was an accomplished and busy piano teacher. Millicent was the second of their four children, and her musical talent became evident in time-honoured fashion when she was discovered at the age of three picking out on the family's piano the tunes she had heard her elder brother practising.

Eventually Millicent Silver won a scholarship to the Royal College of Music in London where, as was more common in those days, she studied equally both piano and violin. She was awarded the Chappell Silver Medal for piano playing and, in 1928, the College's Tagore Gold Medal for the best student of her year. As a violinist she was taken under the wing of W.H. Reed, leader of the London Symphony Orchestra and intimate friend of Edward Elgar. She actually earned her first professional fees playing as an extra violinist in the Hallé Orchestra.

As a pianist she tackled the large works. Her husband, the flautist John Francis, recalled that the first time he saw her she was playing the solo in a Liszt concerto. Many decades later a distinguished pianist who had been a contemporary student warmly recalled Millicent's playing of the Brahms D minor. She herself was particularly proud of a concert under the baton of Adrian Boult in which she performed the Emperor Concerto before the interval, and for the rest of the programme led the orchestra from the principal violin desk. After graduating from the RCM, she studied for a further period with Tobias Matthay.

The Depression years of the early 1930s severely hampered the careers of many musicians, and Millicent and John Francis (whom she married in 1932) were no exception. She taught piano in a girls' school which was so reactionary that staff were not permitted to be married, and she had to keep her marriage a secret. Her husband queued up at stage doors seeking work in London theatre bands. Later in the 1930s however, things improved.

John got increasing amounts of orchestral work in London, particularly with Sir Thomas Beecham, and he began an early collaboration with the young Benjamin Britten (which was resumed after the War and lasted well into the 1950s). At the same time his keen interest in chamber music led him into a serious exploration of the then largely unknown field of Baroque music for small ensembles. He and Millicent became regular broadcasters on BBC Radio, both as a duo and in larger ensembles.

At this point, when Millicent Silver, like John, was well launched as a public performer, World War Two further disrupted their careers. John played in dance bands and served as an auxiliary in the Metropolitan Police in London, while she returned to teaching. They both toured widely playing for the troops. The decisive break in Millicent Silver's career came just at the end of the War, when at Dartington Hall in England she was persuaded by the conductor Hans Oppenheim to play the continuo in a performance of Purcell's *Dido and Aeneas* on a harpsichord. It immediately became obvious to both her and John that their future as chamber musicians had to be built around the harpsichord. The group which they very soon named the London Harpsichord Ensemble gave its first performance in 1945 at one of the last of Dame Myra Hess's legendary lunch-hour concerts at the National Gallery in London.

There had been harpsichord players in Britain before the War – notably Violet Gordon Woodhouse and members of the Dolmetsch family – but the harpsichord was really established in Britain in the two decades following 1945 by three outstanding players, namely George Malcolm, Thurston Dart and Millicent herself. John Francis quickly saw the wider potential for mounting small-scale concerts of baroque chamber music. Millicent acquired a Kirckman harpsichord, which had been rebuilt by the British instrument maker Henry Tull, and the London Harpsichord Ensemble toured widely and became a prolific broadcaster for the BBC. An early highlight was a programme of ten concerts given at the 1950 Edinburgh Festival to mark the Bicentenary of the death of J.S. Bach, when the Ensemble made a great impression through the pioneering lightness and clarity of its playing. By the late 1940s it had become obvious that Millicent's Kirckman harpsichord would not stand up to the amount of touring which it had to do. She persuaded Robert Goble, instrument maker in Oxford, to build for her the magnificent double-manual harpsichord which she received in 1952 and used for the rest of her life. She played on it for this recording of the *Goldberg Variations*.

When the Royal Festival Hall was opened in London in 1951 the London Harpsichord Ensemble began a series of fortnightly concerts in the smaller Recital Room, which lasted for a decade until that hall was closed for concerts in 1961. Two new smaller concert halls were added to the Festival Hall complex in 1967 and from then on the Ensemble played in London every month, as well as continuing to tour extensively.

Millicent always performed a substantial solo item in London Harpsichord Ensemble concerts, usually as the second item in the first half. She and John Francis made their last public appearance together (in Bach's 5th *Brandenburg Concerto*) in January 1981, when she was already 75 years old. She played in public just once more in 1982, when she accompanied her daughter the soprano Hannah Francis on the piano in a recital of Russian songs, sailing unperturbed through the terrifying accompaniment to Rachmaninov's *Spring Waters*. She died, following several years of declining health, at the age of 80 on May 1, 1986.

Her background and times inevitably made Millicent Silver a late starter on the harpsichord. She made up for it with a 35-year career on the instrument during which she played a very wide solo repertory: not only most of the keyboard works of Bach, including all his Concerti, Partitas, English Suites, etc, but also Bach's sons, scores of Scarlatti and Soler sonatas, many of the works of Francois Couperin and Rameau, and the English virginalists. The *Goldberg Variations* featured repeatedly in her recital programmes. She played them from memory, and a performance was always preceded by much soul-searching and several months of intensive practice. Sometimes she would play them (without repeats, or with just a few as on this recording) as the second half of a concert in whose first part she performed Bach flute sonatas with John Francis. Sometimes she played them as a whole concert, with every repeat even in the final reprise of the Aria, and a pause before the French Overture, Variation 16.

For an artist who was so widely known in her day and is fondly remembered by many, Millicent Silver made disappointingly few recordings. Actually she hated the process of recording. She did however leave an excellent disc of Scarlatti Sonatas, made for a short-lived label; a couple of records of Baroque Chamber Music with the London Harpsichord Ensemble; a Decca/Argo disc of Oboe Sonatas with her oboist daughter Sarah Francis and the cellist Bernard Richards; and a Saga disc of her own arrangement for seven instruments of Bach's *A Musical Offering* (which was used, movement by movement, by the Argentine novelist Julio Cortázar as the framework for his short story *Clone*). The present recording of the *Goldberg Variations* was made during the 1950s in Millicent Silver's own studio in London. It was first issued privately, then in 1957 by Classics Club in Britain, and later by the Saga label.

Millicent Silver taught throughout her life. For over 20 years she was a professor of both piano and harpsichord at the Royal College of Music where she worked, and sometimes fought tirelessly for her pupils. With very few exceptions they responded with gratitude, respect and enduring affection. They included solo performers as distinguished as Trevor Pinnock; the organist and harpsichordist Christopher Herrick; Melvyn Tan; and the late Christopher Kite. Very many other pupils have made careers in a wide range of musical activities, from successful orchestral conductors to local music teachers.

It is fitting, in view of Millicent Silver's dedication to her teaching activities, that she should have given so much attention during her life to the performance of the Goldberg Variations, which as part of Bach's *Clavierübung* was also educational in concept. In addition to the duties required of his various positions at Court or for Church use, Bach clearly felt the need to summarise his art for posterity. His four part *Clavier-Übung* 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.

Our cover illustration is a facsimile reproduction of the title page of the first edition of Bach's work. 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 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 as harpsichordist by Count Kaiserling, the Russian Ambassador to the Saxon Court and sometime patron of Bach. 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 *Sarabande*, or *Aria* as it is named, both starts and finishes the whole work. Each third variation is a canon and in each canon the interval between the imitative parts is increased by one step so that the first canon is at the unison, the second at the interval of a second, the third is a canon at the third and so on. The final variation is a quodlibet (a collection of different tunes or fragments of composition brought together as a musical joke) on two popular tunes "Long have I been away from thee" and "Cabbages and Turnips".

John Francis and Millicent Silver retired from public performance in January 1981. The London Harpsichord Ensemble continued under the direction of their daughter and distinguished oboist Sarah Francis, to whose husband Michael Johnson we are indebted for the performer's biographical article which forms the main part of this note.