

J. S. BACH - GOLDBERG VARIATIONS

Since the beginning of the twentieth century the Goldberg Variations have been part of the keyboard canon; for the harpsichord as well as the piano. The title 'Goldberg Variations' is not Bach's choice. It probably evolved at a later date when Bach's pupil Johann Gottlieb Goldberg performed the cycle for Count Hermann Carl von Keyserlingk. The count was the Russian ambassador at the Dresden court and suffered from insomnia. It is debatable whether the Goldberg Variations are effective in soothing an insomniac, however we may assume that Keyserlingk was sufficiently well informed to recognise the ingenuity of the entire cycle.

Bach printed the following on the fly-leaf of his work:

ClavierÜbung
bestehend
in einer
ARIA
mit verschiedenen Veränderungen
vors Clavicimbal mit 2 Manualen
Denen Liebhabern zur Gemüths-
Ergetzung verfertiget von
Johann Sebastian Bach
Königl. Pohl. U. Churf. Hoff-
Compositeur, Capellmeister u. Directore
Chori Musici in Leipzig
Nürnberg in Verlegung
Balthasar Schmids

The title page refers to the variation technique as well as Bach's prescribed instrument, namely a 2-manual harpsichord. The word 'ClavierÜbung' places the Goldberg Variations immediately in a wider category, namely as the last of four books under this title. The first consists of the six Partitas, the second of the Italian Concerto and the French Overture in B minor, whilst the third consists of a collection of organ works (the word 'klavier' being the general term for harpsichord, organ or clavichord).

The text Bach had printed after his name is also of some importance: 'Composer to the Royal Court of Poland and to the Elector, Kapellmeister (concert master) and Music Director of the choirs and musicians in Leipzig'. Bach had been Music Director in Leipzig since 1723 and only became Court composer in 1736. We may now assume that the composition of the Goldberg Variations was closely connected with Bach's wish to become Court composer in Dresden. It was written either as a stimulant beforehand or in appreciation afterwards.

In 1733 when August III began his reign as Elector of Saxony, Count Keyserlingk commenced his duties as ambassador at the Dresden court. Because of a later conflict with the young rector of the Thomas school in Leipzig, an appointment in Dresden would have been very acceptable especially after Bach's happy years in retrospect at the Köthen court. On this basis we can assume that Bach perhaps had already commenced his work on the 'Aria and variations' before 1736.

The title bestowed on Bach with intervention from count Keyserlingk was 'Composer to the Royal Polish Court and to the Elector'. August III (1696-1763) was, like his father, Elector of Saxony (since 1733) and king of Poland (since 1734). The Polish title especially has a direct link with the Goldberg Variations as many of the variations contain elements of the polonaise. In gratitude for all the intercession and support shown to him by the count, Bach presented him with a manuscript of the Goldberg Variations in 1741. As Johann Gottlieb Goldberg was barely fourteen years old at the time, it is unlikely that Goldberg already performed the variations for Keyserlingk during this period.

The Goldberg Variations are not just a series of variations written as a token of gratitude. The work is a masterpiece in the art of variation as well as in its total structure, not to mention the use of Bach's many prescribed ways of playing. The technique aspect especially qualifies the Goldberg Variations as an important pianistic composition. If Bach had composed the variations just before 1741 then he may well have gladly copied some of Scarlatti's technique used in the *Essercizi per gravicembalo* which appeared in 1739. If not, we cannot fail to notice Bach's knowledge of the Italian music of his time and the new instrumental techniques that were developed mainly in Italy during the first half of the 18th century.

In any case the Goldberg Variations rank as one of Bach's foremost works. Ten sets of 3 variations are enclosed within one initial and one final statement of the Aria. Nearly each set contains a polonaise and another dance (gavotte, sarabande, passepied etc.). The third variation of each set is written in the form of a canon. For each one, the pitch interval of the entry of the imitating part is augmented by one tone (a unison canon, a canon at the second, at the third, at the fourth etc.). The middle variation is written in the style of a French Overture and the last is a Quodlibet - an ingenious form of variation in which well-known tunes are interwoven. Bach incorporated two popular melodies ('Ich bin so lang nicht bei dir g'west' and 'Kraut und Rüben haben mich vertrieben').

Finally the question we should ask ourselves is can the Goldberg Variations be played on the piano? Even if Glenn Gould's interpretation had not been in strong defence of this view, there is no reason why this beautiful music and indeed all harpsichord music should not be performed on the piano. Of course Bach would not have heard his music played this way. However the essence of music does not lie in the sound of the instrument but in the deeper

intention of the music, of the notes. It is because of this that many pianists already have proved that the Goldberg Variations are to be considered part of the canon not only for the harpsichord but also for the piano.

Leo Samama, 1997

Translation Elly Leegte