

## On Bach's Goldberg Variations BWV 988.

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[Readers are expected to have the score open before them.

My recording of this can be found in the Youtube site: Gilead Bar-Elli plays at home]

In the Jewish Mishnah there are several explanations of why Adam was created single.

One of them is:

"...To tell of the greatness of the Holy One, Blessed be He, that man stamps many coins with one seal, and each is like the other, but the King, King of Kings, the Holy One, Blessed be He, stamps every man with the seal of Adam and not one of them is like his fellow..."

(Tractate Sanhedrin, ch. 4)

Nice is the ending, but concerning the beginning, the Jewish sages (of circa 1<sup>st</sup> century) probably did not know J. S. Bach's Goldberg Variations: they are all coined with one seal but not one of them is like the other. As with men the diversity is so conspicuous that often what needs commentary are the lines of similarity and some of the features of the one seal on which they are founded. This indeed will be our main concern.

It seems that Bach did not like writing variation sets, and regarded it as a relatively uninteresting genre. Prior to the Goldberg Variations – probably in 1709 – he composed only one set of 10 variations – *Aria variata alla maniera italiana*, BWV 989 in A minor.<sup>1</sup> Then suddenly about 32 years later, as a quite old man, in 1741 he composed this gigantic work – "*Aria mit verschiedenen Veraenderungen*".<sup>2</sup> Why? Was it because of some biographical circumstances, or for particular musical messages? Of course, the question is not always appropriate, but in the following I shall propose some speculations of the second kind. It is more usual however to give an explanation of the first kind, based on a story told by Johann Nikolaus Forkel, Bach's first biographer. According to his story (in his 1802) the Count Keyserling – Russian ambassador to Saxony –

was often ill and had sleepless nights. At such times, Goldberg, who lived in his house, had to spend the night in an antechamber, so as to play for him during his insomnia. ... Once the Count mentioned in Bach's presence that he would like to have some clavier pieces for Goldberg, which should be of such a smooth and somewhat lively character that he might be a little cheered up by them in his sleepless nights. Bach thought himself best able to fulfill this wish by means of Variations, the writing of which he had until then considered an ungrateful task on account of the repeatedly similar harmonic foundation. But since at this time all his works were already models of art, such also these variations became under his hand. Yet he produced only a single work of this kind. Thereafter the Count always called them *his* variations. He never tired of them, and for a long time sleepless nights

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<sup>1</sup> It consists of a short choral Aria (12 bars) and ten variations. The aria and the last variation are in 4 voices. All the rest are in two. All the variations are in the minor and in 4/4 meter, except No. VII which is in 12/8. Although the variations are of different characters, in all of them the general melodic line of the aria is clearly leading. The harmonic progression of the aria is also kept, except for bar 7, where Bach inserts a lower II instead of the IV of the aria – a Neapolitan harmony (perhaps in light of the Italian reference in title of the set). In the last variation, which is similar to the aria, Bach changes this to VII (m.126), but brings the Neapolitan character back in m.130.

<sup>2</sup> It is probably the longest classical work for the keyboard until the 20th century. It is also possible that some of his later works, like the canonical variations for the organ on the choral *vom Himmel Hoch* (BWV 769) are influenced by it.

meant: 'Dear Goldberg, do play me one of my variations.' Bach was perhaps never so rewarded for one of his works as for this. The Count presented him with a golden goblet filled with 100 louis-d'or.

Forkel was a serious man and had talked with Bach's sons – C.P. Emanuel, and Wilhelm Friedmann – but nowadays many people doubt the credibility of his story. Among the obvious reasons for this is that the work has no dedication, which is extremely unlikely if Forkel's story was true; there is no other evidence for the story, nor for the gold; and one can wonder whether the work fits its purpose as told. Hence the story is probably not true, and Bach did not receive gold from Keyserling, but Goldberg (whose name means "mountain of gold") was fortunate to have the work be named after him ...

The work was published in 1742 as a "clavier exercise" (*Klavier Übung*), from which three volumes were published before (by a different publisher). It is written for a two-manuals harpsichord, but beginning from mid 19th century, and particularly after Glenn Gould's phenomenal (and problematic, some think) recording of 1955 it is often performed on the piano. In the following we shall explore some of its features that can perhaps shed some light on Bach's musical purpose and on its significance as expressing a particular conception of both the notion of variation and on that of a set of variations. It can help understanding the work, I hope, even if as a biographical motivational hypothesis it is completely wrong.

### **General Structure**

The work is an aria with a set of 30 variations, at the end of which the aria returns (by *aria da capo* indication). The aria consists of 32 bars, divided into two equally long parts of 16 bars each (which are to be repeated). Each part is also clearly divisible into 8+8 bars. Each of the 30 variations contains also 32 bars (with a little change, to be explained in the sequel, see on No. 3) and is divided like the aria. As mentioned, the aria is repeated at the end, so that all in all there are 32 movements in the work, and in each movement – 32 bars, like the number of bars in the aria. This can hardly be accidental, and as some scholars have noticed (and the pianist Murray Perahia emphasized in the liner notes in his recording of the work) 32 is 4 times 8, and the unit of 8 is very significant not only in the aria but in the work in its entirety: Variation 7 (which is the 8th movement) concludes the first section of the work. In Bach's personal copy, including corrections and additions in his handwriting, which was rediscovered in 1974, it is indicated "in tempo di Gigue".<sup>3</sup> Wolff thinks that this was to prevent playing it too slowly, like a kind of a siciliano. Perahia connects it to the significance of the units of 8, for a gigue, in many of Bach's cyclic works (like the suites), was the concluding movement; and here too Bach saw the first 8 movements as one section (concluded by the 7th variation).

Variation 16 is another, even more obvious, point of division. It is, as explicitly marked, a French overture (*Ouverture*), i.e. a beginning of a new section, so that up to this we have again a section of 8 movements (Nos.8-15). and it clearly divides the work into two halves of 16 movements each. Variation 24 can be also regarded as the beginning of a new section – the final section, also of 8 movements. The reason is that

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<sup>3</sup> Christoph Wolff: "Bach's *Handexemplar* of the Goldberg Variations", *Journal of the American Musicology Society*, 1976, 224-241. But see our remarks on No. 7.

each third variation in the set is a canon, and they are all in an ascending order: the first canon is at the 1st (unison), the second is at the 2nd, the third at the 3rd etc. Variation 24 is a canon at the octave (8th), which is a sort of a new beginning – repeating the 1st. In it the series of 3 movements (each containing a canon) and the units of 8 converge. Here begins the final section of 8 units, ending with No. 30 (the Quodlibet), and after it the aria is repeated, so that all in all we have 32 movements. The Quodlibet combines in a free canonic and gay style two, probably well known then, folk songs (see on it at large in the sequel). The return of the aria at the end (of which I don't know a precedent, and is quite rare also in subsequent sets of variations<sup>4</sup>) may suggest a circular conception of art-work and of creative activity, and is a particularly moving moment at which we feel that all the wonderful miracles heard up to that point are concealed in this modest and seemingly simple piece, and while wondering about this it is quietly over.

The structure of the work at large is as we see similar to that of the aria: as the aria divides into two parts of 16 bars each, so the work at large divides into two parts of 16 movements each, and like in the aria, each such part divides again into two sections of 8 movements, so that the work at large consists of 4 sections of 8 movements = 32 movements, as the number of bars in the aria.

As said, the 30 variations (except for the Quodlibet) are set in triples of 3 movements, the last being a canon. In a canon each voice copies another, where the first (the leading one) is called the dux. The canons in our work are in two voices (with an accompaniment), and they are arranged in an ascending order, from the unisono (1st) – where the second voice begins on the same note as the dux – then the 2nd – where the second voice begins one note higher than the first – to the 3rd, etc. until the 9th – where the second voice begins nine tones above the dux. This structure, combining the units of 3 variations with those of 4 sections of 8 (when the aria and its repeat are added), ending in total of 32, can also explain why Bach didn't end with a canon at the 7th or the 8th (octave) as might seem natural, for these wouldn't give him 32 in total.

Needless to say, this work exhibits Bach's phenomenal mastery of the treasures of counterpoint and harmony, and also the technique of the clavier. The series of canons, in the ascending order as explained above, with their accompaniments, within the restrictions of harmony, counterpoint, and the required length of the aria, is in itself a most remarkable compositional accomplishment. But beyond all this, anyone confronted with this work, even on first hearing, cannot but be amazed of the richness, variety of musical textures, sorts of feeling and emotions that are expressed in the various variations. It is no wonder that in spite of its length (usually about 75 minutes, all in G, and all, except 3, in major), and its difficulties, it is one of Bach's most beloved works for the piano (clavier). Indeed, it is possible (though not very probable) that in this work Bach gave a musical answer to critiques that were raised against him in the 30s (which probably troubled him) that in comparison to the gallant, natural, and flowing style of his contemporaries, his clavier works were outmoded, archaic, too serious and learned, too

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<sup>4</sup> One exception is e.g. Haydn's variations in F minor (H VII:6).

difficult and tiring.<sup>5</sup> Bach's musical response to this (if it is) is especially interesting, not only in its rare quality, but also in the special combination of typical Bachian movements of his old style (especially in the canons) with brilliant, flowing and indolent movements, more agreeable to his contemporaries. This may provide for some explanation for the creation of this work, independently of Forkel's dubious stories about Keyserling's sleepless nights.

But there is, I propose, another, deeper explanation. A common position, almost standard, is that the Goldberg Variations are built entirely on the bass line and the harmonic progression of the aria, and that the melody of the aria has no function in the variations. This indeed was common in many sets of variations at the time. This view is expressed, for instance, in Willi Apel's article "Variation"<sup>6</sup>, and it is quite the standard position. It is expressed clearly e.g. by Glenn Gould in saying: "So far as motivic representation is concerned [the soprano line] is completely forgotten in the thirty variations"<sup>7</sup>. Even the notable analyst and Bach scholar D.F. Tovey writes: "...the melody of the theme, fine and graceful as it is, has nothing whatever to do with the variations".<sup>8</sup> (*Essays in Musical Analysis*, Chamber Music, Oxford University press, 1944, p.35, see also *ibid.* p. 37).

However, as we shall see, this is not quite true – in fact, quite the opposite is true: The main motifs, or motivic seeds of the melody of the aria feed all the variations, and are constitutive elements of them. This is in the essence of the work and one of the secrets of its greatness. It also explains an essential feature of the ending Quodlibet.

First, although the harmonic progression of the aria is maintained in the variations, in some of them the bass line is not present on the surface (for instance, in some of the canons, e.g. No 15) or is deeply hidden in the progression (e.g. Nos. 6, 9). In some others it is divided between the voices (in No. 7 it passes to the soprano from m.9; In No. 18 it begins in the soprano and at m. 5 passes to the bass; In Nos. 19 and 20 it is crossed between the voices).

Second, and more important, although it is true that the melody of the aria is not used in the variations, it would be a mistake to ignore melodic factors of the aria that serve as constitutive motifs or motivic seeds in all the variations. From this perspective one could say that there is here a radically new conception, which we may dub "deconstructionist",

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<sup>5</sup> See Johan Scheibe's letter from 1737, translated in *The Bach Reader*, ed. H. David and A. Mendel, Norton, 1972, p. 238. It should be noted that Scheibe, who was a prolific composer, influential editor and music critique, was an admirer of Bach, and regarded him, with Handel, as the greatest German composer (*ibid.* 230). In particular, he praised the Italian Concerto as a paradigm of writing for the clavier (*ibid.* 234). Therefore, Bach probably knew that the letter was written in good intention. A debate heated up in an exchange between Scheibe and Bach's friend and defender Johan Abraham Birnbaum. See a large discussion in Allan Street, "The Rhetorical Musical Structure of the Goldberg Variations", *Music Analysis*, vol. 6, 1987, 89-131.

<sup>6</sup> Willi Apel (ed.) *Harvard Dictionary of Music*, 2nd Edition, p. 893, and many more.

<sup>7</sup> *The Glenn Gould Reader*, faber and faber, p. 25. This may be the reason for Gould's surprising saying that "as a piece, as a concept, I don't really think it quite works" (quoted in the liner notes to his disc of the toccatas). Much of what we say here goes against this.

<sup>8</sup> *Essays in Musical Analysis*, Chamber Music, Oxford University press, 1944, pp.35, 37.

of the concept of a variation. This is perhaps the main message of the work, and the deep motive for its creation.

The motivic seeds we shall be talking about are so elementary that one might think they cannot bear the significance I ascribe to them, for they are likely to occur anyhow, with no relation to the aria. This raises a rather notorious and intricate problem of the limits of thematic relations in general, to which I cannot enter. It is difficult to make here generalizations: much depend on specific details in each work, frequency of occurrence, its place, what comes before or after, etc. and ultimately – on fine shades of discretion and how insightful the alleged relations are. I can only hope that when the following remarks are read through the significance of these relationships will be found convincing.

Third, in addition to the clear connections between the aria and each of the variations, there are points of connection between the general structure of the aria and specific points (bars) in it and the structure of the whole set and specific variations in it whose numbers correspond to the numbers of these bars. We shall expand on all these with examples in the sequel.

In addition to creating beautiful music, praising and blessing God, Bach, in general had other didactic and educational goals, particularly in his works for the clavier. This, I think, is true also of the Goldberg variations. As said above, Bach probably was not fond of writing sets of variations in the customary style of his time, because he found the fix harmonic pattern, that was part of it, not particularly interesting.<sup>9</sup> The didactic-educational aim of the Goldberg variations was to change this and to show a gigantic set, which, with all its rich variety and the vivid vitality of its separate movements, is carefully organized and has rigorous structure, where the links between each of the variations and the aria are much deeper and multifarious than that of maintaining the bass line and the harmonic progression. The variety and copiousness of various features of the movements (harmonic, melodic, rhythmic etc.), the thematic connections between the aria and each of the variations, and the careful planning of the entire set, are all essential components of this mission. Bach's Goldberg Variations, beyond their unique musical qualities, present therefore a special conception of the notion of variation and of the musical genre of a set of variations. Various aspects of this will be detailed in the sequel.

### **The Aria**

The aria is in G in 3/4. It was written many years before the set and was found in a booklet written in 1725 for Anna Magdalena – Bach's second wife, who was herself a musician, and assisted Bach in many of his musical tasks. The fact that Bach used here an earlier work of his may perhaps indicate that he liked it in particular. Let me pause here on some well-known aspects of the aria that are operative and echoed in the variations as well. Like all the following variations the aria is clearly divided into two halves of 16+16 bars; each half is itself built of two parts of 8+8 bars, where each of these parts is further

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<sup>9</sup> Some scholars believe that Bach knew Handel's *Chaconne and 62 variations* in G on a theme whose bass line is quite the same as that of the first 8 bars of the Goldberg. However, Bach's aria is definitely not a chaconne, and Handel's Chaconne is, as all chaconnes' themes very short; I believe, if I may, that even Handel's fans would agree that there is no comparison between the quality of these two works.

built of two sub-parts of 4+4 bars, and each of these – of 2+2 bars. The first half of the aria is a move from degree I to V and the second from V back to I. The bass line is a skeleton to the harmonic base of all the variations, and in many of them it literally appears – sometimes *simpliciter*, sometimes with some changes, and sometimes it is deeply concealed in the harmony. It is balanced and symmetric, with repeated cadences at the end of each phrase. Here it is:



(This, taken from Wikipedia's article on the Goldbergs, is quite customary, but it differs from the Aria bass at some points, e.g. (21) which should be E.)

The basic period opens with a somewhat tense sentence (1-2; here and in the following, numbers in parentheses indicate a bar numbers), which is repeated, an octave lower, somewhat more indolently. Here are the four first bars:



What has drawn less attention is that in the two opening bars we encounter the three basic motivic seeds of the melody that will feed the entire set, one after the other. These are:

- (a) the "**rising second motif**" – G-A (m.1);
- (b) the "**neighbor tone**" motif, A-B-A (m.1-2);
- (c) the "**descending fifth motif**" - the descent from A to D (m.2).

These are elements of the melody of the aria, and, in addition to the harmonic base, they function, as we shall see, as constitutive elements in all the variations. The conception of variation here is not the common one – definitely not in Bach's time, and as said above, it can be regarded a "deconstructionist": Although, truly enough, the general melodic line of the aria is not operative in the variations, these three building motifs of it are: they are, as we shall see, constitutive motifs in all the variations.

The second sentence opens in a similar way, but at its second part (7-8) we have a surprise: by the symmetry to the first sentence we might expect a calm and indolent answer, similar to (3-4), but what we have instead is a more intensive movement in all the voices, with the first melodic jump in the work (C-A<sup>1</sup>), which slightly increases the tension. We thus see that Bach exploits the structural symmetry to build up expectations and to frustrate them, by means of inserting rhythmic movement and a change of character in the second half of the symmetric structure

In the second part of this half, the rigid periodic structure is relaxed and the tension increases. In the opening sentence (9-10) the harmonic rhythm is intensified, and reaches,

with the answering sentence (mm.11-12), a cadence of II/V (E minor) - V/V (A) - V (D). The ending is a sequence of mini-variations of the descending fifth of the opening (our (c) 2, 4). Moreover, they sort of summarize in diminution the preceding tension-relaxation moves of the first period: The first two (13-14) – of the tense-relaxed pattern in the first sentence (1-4), the following couple (15-16) – of the second sentence (5-8).

The second half of the aria is equal in length to the first, but more free and tense, and contains expansions of the elements of the first half. For example, the ascending second G-A (1) before the descending fifth is expanded here to an ascending fifth A-B-C-D-E (17). This half is also divisible into two parts: the first (17-24) is tense and of intensive expressiveness. Of particular importance here is the repeated emphasis (as if of complaint) of E, which we have encountered as quite surprising in the first half (11). This becomes the dominating tonality in this part of the second half. In some of the variations this difference between the parts is blurred, and they are more homogenous in character than the aria. The second part of this half (from 25) begins in A minor, and has a gloomy tranquility about it, with wider steps and relaxation of the tension of the first part. Likewise, it contains an expansion of the breaking of the periodic symmetry in the parallel place to that in the first part. The sequential move there (13-15) is also expanded here (27-31), leading to the cadence to the tonic (G).

A notable feature of the aria, which is perhaps part of its charm, is that in contrast to its simple symmetric structure, from the point of view of its musical content and of its expressive force it is not symmetric, and has its climax in the first part of the second half. It is possible (though more speculative) that this contrast is related to other contrasting characteristics of the work, such as the one between the four-fold structure of 4 units of 8, against the triple structure of every third variation being a canon (in a rising order). Also, that some of the variations maintain the triple meter of the aria, whereas almost half of them don't; most are in the major, but three (particularly important ones) are in the minor; the majority are in three voices, but about a third are in two. There are many subtler, local contrasts (like e.g. that between the aria and var. 1 we shall see shortly, or the rhythmic one we shall point out in var. 8) but we shall not expand on this feature here. It is possible that part of the reasons for these contrasts is Bach's desire to enrich variety and multifariousness within the rigid confinements of the common form of a set of variations, and to load it with complexity of both contents and structure it has never known before.

### **The Variations – first half (1-15)**

As said above ("General Structure"), every third variation is a canon, and the canons are in a rising order – from the 1st (unisono) to the 9th. We would expect the last one (No.30) to be a canon at the 10th, but it is not – It is a Quodlibet – a sort of a sophisticated joyful game, which has a canonic character, but is not strictly a canon. It is like a naughty winking, if we may say, on account of canon: as if to tell us that we shouldn't take the series of canons too strictly, and we may amuse ourselves in diverging from it (see on the Quodlibet in the sequel). All the canons (except for the last) are in two voices with an accompaniment in the bass. A variation before a canon is usually virtuosic, in two voices, and written for a two-manuals harpsichord. A variation after a canon is usually in three voices, and these variations differ in character from each other. Thus, as R. Kirkpatrick

has elaborated, we get a fairly clear pattern of these triples (the first triple is an exception to this, as will be explained in the sequel). In all the variations the basic harmonic progression of the aria is maintained; in some of them also the bass line. However, as said before, it is very important to realize that basic motifs of the melody of the aria are constitutive elements in the variations. Examples are given in the sequel.

**Var. 1** – The variation is in two voices and in a triple rhythm. It comes immediately after the aria and in its vigorous and decisive character stands in blatant contrast to it. This contrast was probably important for Bach (see the last paragraph on the aria above), for it is not common in sets of variations, and according to the above pattern of the triples it would be natural to exchange variation 1 and 2, but then this contrast would be weakened or lost, and Bach didn't do it. Constitutive elements of the aria are prominent in the variation: first and foremost – the bass line and the harmonic progression. But not only them. In the main theme an emphatic assertion of our (b) – the neighbor tone motif (or its inversion) – in the right hand, which is answered immediately with its echo in the left, is conspicuous. This is repeated in the next four bars with the hands exchanging roles. Note also the change of texture in (9) and the rising tension in (13), which enhances the subtle changes in the corresponding places in the aria. The assertive and vigorous character are characteristic also in the second half of the variation, which is very homogeneous in comparison to the aria, in which, as we have seen, there are clear differences of texture and character between the two halves.

**Var. 2** - is a totally different world – introvert and contrapuntal in its nature in 2/4. It is a sort of "synphonia", or invention in three voices. As said, according to the triple pattern portrayed above, it would have been natural to put this variation first, and variation 1 second, but then the contrast with the aria would be weakened. The bass line and the harmony follow those of the aria, with measured quaver-sequences of the neighbor tone motif (our (b)) throughout. The main theme in the right hand is built by a combination of (b) and the descending fifth (our c) of the aria. Although this is not a canon, the counterpoint of the two upper voices approaches that of a canon. The first four bars are strictly a canon (at the 6th) and in the following four bars we have a rhythmically freer imitating counterpoint – a sort of a stretto. This contrapuntal pattern is maintained in the following 8 bars to the end of the first half, and with some slight changes also in the second one. From this perspective it can be regarded as anticipation or preparation for the first strict canon that comes in the next variation. The preparation, one could say, is not less beautiful and sophisticated than what it prepares.<sup>10</sup>

**Var. 3** – This variation begins the series of canons at every third variation (i.e. the last in a triplet as described above) in a rising order from a canon at the 1st – where the second, copying voice begins on the same tone as the first (dux) – to that at the 9th (in No.27). In a canon each voice imitates exactly the preceding one in its entirety (not only a theme or a sentence). Our canon is at the 1st (unisono), so the second voice imitates the first (the

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<sup>10</sup> This needs not mean, as Busoni strangely concluded, that in a concert performance one could skip the coming canon (var. 3); Busoni, by the way, thought likewise of 7 other numbers; see his introductory notes to his edition of the work).



dux) beginning on the same note. Like all subsequent canons (except No. 27) it is in two voices with an accompaniment in the bass, and like Var. 2 it is in a quadric metre (12/8). The main theme is built on the "rising second" (our (a)) of the aria or its inversion (B-A), and after each of them there is a sort of expansion of the neighbor tone motif (our (b)). With the entrance of the second voice (2), the first continues in the higher register with another expansion of the neighbor tone motif (b). From (3) this is accompanied with a permanent flow of semi-quavers (16th notes) in the bass, built again on an expansion of the neighbor tone motif (b). The harmonic progression follows that of the aria, but except for the first four bars, the bass line is not maintained on the foreground.

In the second half, the subject of the canon is a sort of variation on that of the first. In addition to the canonic imitation in the upper voices one should notice an additional imitation of the descending fifth (our (c)) with the neighbor tone at its end, introduced first in the bass of (9) and imitated immediately in the main voices.

The variation is of 16 bars – half of the usual number – but the harmonic beat is on every half a bar, so all in all we have 32 units, as the usual number of bars (this is also the case in vars. 9, 21, 30).

**Var. 4** - is yet another world. It is a jumpy joyful play on the notes of the chords in 3 and sometimes 4 voices in a syncope rhythm of 3/8, in a marked contrast to the distinguished linear moves of the previous variations and of the aria. This is done with strict keeping with the bass line and the harmonic progression of the aria. Also here, the contrapuntal fabric is masterly, though it is confined to short motifs. For example, the motif B-G-D in (1) is imitated in the tenor of (3), and its answer, which is its inversion D-F#-B in the alto is answered by its imitation in the bass of (4) and then of (5), (6), (7), and all this is done in a weaver-like work between the voices, with strict keeping of the harmony and bass line of the aria.

**Var. 5** – This is a virtuosic piece, in two voices, as will be all subsequent variations preceding a canon (i.e. the second in the triplet). It is clearly written for a two-manuals instrument (harpsichord) and is usually played at a fast tempo (roughly double than that of the aria). It generally follows the harmony and the bass line of the aria; this is clear in the first half, and somewhat more concealed in the second.

**Var. 6** – This is the second canon in the set – a canon at the 2nd – i.e. the second voice imitates the first one step (2nd) above it (if the first begins on G, the second begins on A). In the whispering bass of 16th notes one clearly notices the neighbor tone motif (our (b)), while the main theme is built on the descending fifth motif (our (c)). The two upper voices, since they are at a distance of a second, bring forth the rising second motif (our (a)). Thus, all our three constitutive motifs of the aria are operative here simultaneously.

The canon follows the harmonic progression of the aria but not the bass line. In its gloomy atmosphere this variation may recall the descending fifth in the A-minor part (25) in the second half of the aria.

**Var. 7** – This variation is in two voices in a dual metre of 6/8. In its character it is a sort of *Santarello*, but, as remarked above, in his personal copy, rediscovered in 1974, Bach

indicated *in tempo di gigue*.<sup>11</sup> As some scholars note, and M. Perahia emphasizes in the liner notes to his recording of the Goldberg Variations, gigue was almost regularly the last movement of a cyclic work (like a suite).<sup>12</sup> Hence, Bach probably meant it to be the last movement of the first section, consisting, with the aria, of 8 movements. It is therefore distinguished in being simultaneously the conclusion of the first section of 8 movements, and the beginning of the third triplet of 3. It follows in general the harmonic pattern and the bass line of the aria, though beginning in (9) the second part of the first half of it (G-F#-E-A-F#-G-A-D) passes to the soprano, and appears, with a syncope-effect, on the second beat of the bar with a slight change in texture (see "General Structure" above). But in addition, a prominent constitutive motif, appearing in almost every bar, is the neighbor tone motif (our (b)), as well as the ascending fifth taken from the second half of the aria (our (c) inverted). So, basic motifs of the melody of the aria are operative also here (as in all preceding variation and in fact in the entire set).

**Var. 8** – This variation opens the second section, and is also written for a two-manuals harpsichord. In its vigorous character and its general texture, it resembles Var. 1, which enhances the feeling of a new beginning here and of the thesis of the significance of the unit of 8 in the work. Like in var. 1 the bass line of the aria and its harmonic progression are clearly kept on the foreground. One should note the turns, preceding the broken chords in the left hand, which are slight expansions of the neighbor tone motif (our (b)). The bass at the beginning is naturally heard as in two beats of 6/8, and the contrast of its combining with the obviously triple metre of the right hand gives a special rhythmic effect. One should also notice that just like in var.1 there is here a subtle change of texture in (9) and an enhancing tension in (13), which correspond to the parallel places in the aria. They do not hinder the general character, which is kept also in the second half, and this is perhaps the most homogenous variation in the set.

**Var. 9** – This is the third canon – a canon at the 3rd. The second voice enters a 3rd below the first (2). It is in 4/4 and, like the first canon (var. 3) contains 16 bars (8+8 with each 8 to be repeated), but, again, the harmonic beat is on every half a bar, so we have, as usual 32 units. We are further from the aria here than in all previous variations. The harmonic progression is similar to that of the aria, but only in its general outline. The bass line of the aria is hardly recognizable. This is also a canon in two voices with a bass accompaniment, but this bass line is quite independent, much more so than in previous variations. The neighbor tone motif (our (b)) is prominent both in the main subject (in quavers) and in diminution (semi-quavers) in the bass, particularly in the first half.

**Var.10** – this variation is a fughetta (a short fugue) in four voices, that inserts a new contrapuntal dimension to the set, and this is particularly interesting because it occurs right after a canon (recall the general pattern of the triples, where variations after canons

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<sup>11</sup> This indication appears in the edition of Bischoff, who died in 1889. I don't know if it was added much later by the publisher. The indication also appears in Tovey's article (ibid.) of 1900 and in the Hebrew book: *The Pianist World* by P. Gradenwitz, published in 1952; so this was known before the rediscovery of this copy.

<sup>12</sup> Indeed W. Apell speaks of "a trend, quite common in the Baroque era toward merging the form of variations with that of the suite" (Harvard Dictionary of Music, 2nd ed. 894).

are of various kinds). This is a "short fugue" mainly in not containing episodes between the entrances of the subject. The vigorous and determinate subject (1-4) is very different in character from that of the aria, but thematically it is connected to the aria even more than previous variations. It contains all the three basic motifs of the melody of the aria we have noticed: the rising second (a) in (1-2), the neighbor tone (b) in (4), and the descending fifth (c) in (3-4). In the second half of the fughetta, where the subject appears in a "tonic copy" (i.e. a copy with slight changes of intervals to fit the harmony) there is a marked increase of movement in the bass, and besides taking the subject (25-28) it provides a rapid accompaniment to the upper voices, but all this with a strict adherence to the harmonic progression of the aria (the bass line is not strictly maintained).

**Var. 11** – This variation is like an imitating invention in two voices, for a two-manuals instrument. It is also in a dual or quadric metre of 12/16. It follows the harmonic pattern of the aria with slight changes of detail (e.g. the lower VII in (22) which creates a Neapolitanic effect to E in (24)). The bass line is not strictly kept (note the raised G in (14) that serves as VII to the dominant of D). In (9) the hands exchange roles with a modulation to V. In the second half the bass line of the aria is even more concealed: it is noticeable by crossing the head tones of each bar between the hands. In the first part of the second half the tension is increased. It is built on a subject, which is an inversion (with variants) of the first one, which returns in its direct form in the subdominant C (25). This is also reminiscent of the corresponding half of the aria.

**Var. 12** – this is the fourth canon – an inverted canon at the 4th, where the second voice enters a 4th below the first. But this time the second voice is not a copy of the first *simpliciter*, but an inversion of it. The neighbor tone motif (our (b)) is prominent in the head of the subject and in its inversion. One cannot miss also the descending and ascending fifths (our (c) in the inverted and direct forms correspondingly). All this is accompanied by resolute crochets in the bass, which asserts the bass line of the aria in a much more emphatic and clear way (except (21-22) than in all previous movements, as if to compensate for its latent occurrence in the previous canon (var.9). In the second half the order of voices is exchanged, and it begins in the lower voice with the inversion, but changes its ending (18), and continues with a free development, using various motifs of the first half (this, by the way, is true also of the last canon (var.27). This variation is also homogenous in texture and rhythmic structure throughout, in spite of the diversity of the musical material in its second half. As we shall see in the sequel, the next canon (var. 15) is also inverted. I don't know why these two and only them are inverted canons.

**Var. 13** – By the common notions of the Baroque, there are variations that maintain the harmonic structure of the subject and invent new melodies for it, and there are those that make variations also to the melody of the subject. Our variation, on these notions, lean on the second type more than all previous ones. It does not only maintain the harmonic structure and the bass line, but its melody (in the upper voice) is quite obviously related to the melody of the aria, and in particular to two of its constitutive motifs: the neighbor tone and the descending fifth (our (b) and (c)). This is repeated (with slight changes) 8 times, without losing tension and continuity. Again, the texture and character undergo

changes at the point of increasing the harmonic tempo (9-10), which is repeated in emphasizing E minor in the second half (21-24), just as we have seen in the aria. The sighing descents in A minor (from 25) are also similar in character to the A minor descent in the corresponding place in the aria.

**Var. 14** – This is again a virtuosic piece, written for a two-manuals instrument, in accordance to the pattern of the triplets we have described. Besides following, in its arpeggi, the basic harmonic pattern of the aria, and following its bass line, prominent in this variation are also the neighbor tone motif (our (b); from (9)) and the rising second motif (our (a)) – G - A (1-2)), which is immediately answered by its inversion F# - E (2-3)), and C - B (the bass of (4-5)). This rising second motif is in fact an essential element in the variation, and here we see again that not only the harmony and the bass line, but also melodic elements of the aria are constitutive elements in the variations. The noticeable change in (9) is also related to the specific quality we have noticed in the corresponding place in the aria, but this variation, as many of its predecessors, is quite homogenous in character – much more than the aria.

**Var. 15** – This is an inverted canon at the 5th, where the second voice is an inversion of the first and begins a 5th above it. Even in the "Alpine heights" of the Goldbergs and its supreme quality (especially of the canons) this wonderful variation, which concludes the first half of the set, stands out in its special quality and atmosphere. Like the preceding canon this one is also an inverted one, but unlike var. 12, which was in a triple metre, it is in a dual one of 2/4. Another feature of contrast between them is that whereas in var. 12 the bass line of the aria was strictly and emphatically followed, here it is rather concealed in the harmony and can hardly be noticed. A conspicuous feature of this variation is of course the minor mode: it is the first variation in the minor (after it there will be only two other in the minor - Nos. 21, 25). This fits the solemn, even agonizing character of the piece, with its sequences of sighs of seconds – sometimes descending in despair, sometimes ascending in hope. Prominent throughout the canon are the neighbor tone motif (our (b) in the bass of (2), the middle voice of (3) etc.) and the descending fifth (or its inversion, our (c) in the middle voice of (2) etc.). Here is the beginning:



In the second half of the canon (from (17) the contrapuntal sophistication is gradually enhanced. The two upper voices present an inverted canon on a new theme (though it appears at first as an expansion of the middle voice and the bass of (8-9), soaked with syncopes, combining the voices like in a weaving, while the bass as if supports, or perhaps leads with strands of the first subject. In hearing a canon, it is natural to concentrate on the theme and the copying voices, and in many canons this is in fact what they consist in. All the canons in the Goldberg variations (except the last one – var. 27), however, contain a bass accompaniment, which is, as usual in Bach, an independent melody in itself, of great – sometimes central – importance (see e.g. also var. 18, the second half of var. 24). The second half of our variation is also a good example. The bass

here does not only accompany the upper voices, but in many respects leads, or is, at least of equal importance.

The increasing contrapuntal intensity here fits our remarks about the increased intensity in the second half of the aria. Moreover, in the place corresponding to the very special A minor descent in the aria (25), since this variation is itself in the minor, Bach passes, with chromatic moves to the relative major of A minor (C, end of 26). In the last bars Bach uses repeated touches on the dominant to get back to the tonic, in which, in the very last bar, the two voices separate in opposite directions in a most touching move that sounds like a quiet passing away.

It would be nice to end with words Glenn Gould have said on this canon:

"It's the most severe and rigorous and beautiful canon ... the most severe and beautiful that I know, the canon in inversion at the fifth. It's a piece so moving, so anguished—and so uplifting at the same time—that it would not be in any way out of place in the St. Matthew's Passion; matter of fact, I've always thought of Variation 15 as the perfect Good Friday spell."

(cited in the article on the Goldberg Variations in Wikipedia)

### **Var. 30 – The Quodlibet**

I have concentrated on the first half of the set. There are of course many pearls in each of the variations in the second half as well (in particular in the two minor ones, nos. 21, 24) but I shall confine myself to some remarks on the last variation – the Quodlibet, for it is quite enigmatic and often underestimated, and even regarded as a sort of an anti-climax.

Its understanding poses a challenge that can be presented thus: it is the last variation in this gigantic set, and is the only one prepared by two virtuosic ones, Nos. 28, 29. One could expect it therefore to be a climax. Moreover, according to the triplets organization of the set it should be a canon – a canon at the 10th. One could therefore expect it to be a peak-canon – the climax of the work. But on the face of it, it is not, almost the opposite – not only isn't it a canon, but it looks as relaxing the tension, as almost a musical joke.<sup>13</sup> How should we understand it? I wish to propose an explanation whose essence is that within a humoristic framework Bach casts here a highly sophisticated contrapuntal content on the basis of a simple melody built on our three motivic seeds of the melody of the aria that feed all the work – as if reminding or summing up their significance.

In general, Quodlibet is a humoristic *gener*, often with words and citations that are also full of jokes and winks. Bach wrote in this spirit another Quodlibet – the "wedding quodlibet" (BWV 524, whose fragmentary autograph was discovered in 1932). According to Bach's biographer J. Forkel, in family gatherings the Bach large family (most of whom were musicians) often amused themselves with such musical games – sometimes attaching humorous and "naughty" words to the music. Our Quodlibet is based on two German folk songs: *Ich bin so lang nicht by dir gewest...*(it is so long that I haven't been

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<sup>13</sup> See John Butt's article on the Goldberg variations in *Oxford Composer Companions: J. S. Bach*, Boyd, ed., Oxford University Press, 1999, p. 196. See also Thomas Braatz: *The Quodlibet as Represented in Bach's Final Goldberg Variation BWV 988/30*, (Jan 2005), Bach Cantatas Website.

with you...) – tenor in (1), and *Kraut und Rüben haben mich vertrieben...*(cabbage and turnips have driven me away...) – alto in (2-3). Bach combines them so that the second is a counter-subject to the first, and creates, out of this combination, a work that sounds like a festive and joyful hymn that has a canonic nature, but is not a real canon.

In all this, the variation, which concludes the set, is a clear opposite to variation 15 that concludes the first half of the set. At its beginning Bach as if fools us and begins it like a real canon as we would expect (though not on the 10th), but he soon deserts it, as if telling us with a wink: "enough with these canons with their rigid laws ("canon" means law, after all); let us have some fun". This in itself is wonderful and masterly done, but when one remembers that this is the final variation in this gigantic work, it may seem rather inappropriate, and one could wonder about its logic: Humoristic fun may seem a rather bizarre look on the main course of the work, so much so that many consider this variation as an unsuccessful anti-climax. They miss, I would surmise, the main point.

Granting the above remarks about the general character of the piece, I wish to propose that this variation is indeed a climax, and designed in a most sophisticated contrapuntal texture, as appropriate to the last variation of this marvelous set. I shall indicate some of its conspicuous features:

- A) Except for Var.4 this is the only variation in full four voices. (I ignore cases in which a fourth voice is a doubling, or serves mainly as harmonic filling (e.g. var.22).
- B) This is a movement of a chorale character – festive and hymn-like, somewhat like the chorales that end many of the cantatas.
- C) It maintains the harmonic pattern of the aria, and its bass line appears here explicitly, as if to remind and re-emphasize their role in the set.
- D) But this is a climax in which the contrapuntal sophistication is particularly impressive; let me indicate some of its outstanding features:
  - i. In the first two bars we hear a canon at the octave on the first subject (A) which is the beginning of the first song.
  - ii. But soon, together with the entrance of the second voice in the soprano (2), the alto introduces the beginning of the second song (B) as a second subject (2-3).
  - iii. B is immediately copied in the soprano in a stretto that sounds again as a canon at the 5th (3-4).
  - iv. This pattern is repeated with slight changes (5-8) and with a different bass.
  - v. In the second half (from 9), the contrapuntal sophistication is enhanced: Within a dense texture of 4 voices, B re-appears in the alto (9-10), and before it ends, it appears again in a stretto in the tenor in a phase of 3/2 (end of 10), and then, while we are still held in this stretto, it enters again in an accelerated stretto in the alto in a phase of 1/2 (11). If that is not enough, we hear simultaneously a sort of inverted variation on A in the soprano. All this happens with the bass playing a variant of the bass line of the aria. In the festive conclusion in the last two bars, within a dense texture of 4 voices, B enters again in the tenor – the 8th time in the variation. These are the ultimate tones of the last variation.



E) We thus see here, within a joyful Quodlibet, an emphatic exclamation of the importance of B. What is this importance? Why did Bach chose this song as the main melody of his final variation, and as the last one to appear there in its ultimate notes?<sup>14</sup> The answer I propose is that **B is clearly built out of the three motivic seeds that we have seen to be essential elements of the melody of the aria and constitutive elements in the entire set:** the rising second (our (a)); the neighbor tone motif (our (b)); and the descending fifth (our (c)). As we have said before in talking of the "deconstructive" conception of variation here, the melody of the aria is in general inoperative in the variations, but its motivic seeds are – they are not only operative but constitutive. Hence in a more abstract sense the variations are built on the melody of the aria and not only on its harmony and bass line. Now, these motivic seeds are operative, as we have seen, in all the variations; but here in B of the Quodlibet they are put together clearly and "nakedly" on the foreground: B is in fact explicitly a sequence of them in their clear and naked form. It is built out of them put one after the other – (a), (b) and (c) – in the same order they appear in the first sentence of the aria. In this it as if reminds or sums up their significance in the set. Thus the Quodlibet presents the motivic organic unity of the entire set. This is a unity that suggests a new, "deconstructionist" conception of a variation and of a set of variations.

The contrast realized in this variation between the humoristic character, and the serious and highly sophisticated contrapuntal content, is added to, and perhaps consumes the series of enriching contrasts that characterizes this work, as we have remarked at the end of the section on the aria. It seems to me that within the humoristic nature of the Quodlibet,<sup>15</sup> this is indeed a climax of a concentrated contrapuntal sophistication which is perfectly appropriate to this work – not an anti-climax but a masterly climax of the highest order.

(This is a translation of my Hebrew article that has been in my website: Bar-Elli.co.il since 2010.)  
Gilead Bar-Elli, Jerusalem, January 2021

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<sup>14</sup> There is much scholarly work on the text and origin of these songs, but to my knowledge, this question is seldom, if at all, asked. I believe that the analysis in the text gives it at least a partial answer. As to the first song, A, my guess is that it was chosen for contrapuntal reasons on the basis of B.

<sup>15</sup> I find it worth mentioning that the last Sinfonia (three-part Invention) in B minor is notably light and jolly, particularly in comparison with the two preceding ones. Moreover, the last fugue (in B minor) of The Well-Tempered Clavier II (finished more or less at the same time as the Goldberg Variations) is also somewhat humoristic, definitely more so than any other fugue in this canonic set. So, these gigantic clavier works – supreme models of their genres, two of which from last decade of Bach's life – end up in a joyful spirit. Halleluya!