



BACH
GOLDBERG VARIATIONS



Parker Ramsay | harp



PARKER RAMSAY

Parker Ramsay was the first American to hold the post of Organ Scholar at King's, from 2010–2013, following a long line of prestigious predecessors. Organ Scholars at King's are undergraduate students at the College with a range of roles and responsibilities, including playing for choral services in the Chapel, assisting in the training of the probationers and Choristers, and conducting the full choir from time to time. The position of Organ Scholar is held for the duration of the student's degree course. This is Parker's first solo harp recording, and the second recording by an Organ Scholar on the College's own label.

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CD**78:45**

1	Aria	3:23
2	Variatio 1	1:57
3	Variatio 2	1:54
4	Variatio 3 Canone all'Unisono	2:38
5	Variatio 4	1:15
6	Variatio 5	1:43
7	Variatio 6 Canone alla Seconda	1:26
8	Variatio 7 al tempo di Giga	2:24
9	Variatio 8	2:01
10	Variatio 9 Canone alla Terza	1:49
11	Variatio 10 Fughetta	1:45
12	Variatio 11	2:22
13	Variatio 12 Canone alla Quarta in moto contrario	3:21
14	Variatio 13	4:36
15	Variatio 14	2:07
16	Variatio 15 Canone alla Quinta. Andante	3:24
17	Variatio 16 Ouverture	3:26
18	Variatio 17	2:23
19	Variatio 18 Canone alla Sesta	1:58
20	Variatio 19	1:45
21	Variatio 20	3:10
22	Variatio 21 Canone alla Settima	2:31
23	Variatio 22 alla breve	1:42
24	Variatio 23	2:33
25	Variatio 24 Canone all'Ottava	2:30
26	Variatio 25 Adagio	4:31
27	Variatio 26	2:07
28	Variatio 27 Canone alla Nona	2:18
29	Variatio 28	2:29
30	Variatio 29	2:04
31	Variatio 30 Quodlibet	2:38
32	Aria da Capo	2:35



AN INTRODUCTION TO BACH'S *GOLDBERG* VARIATIONS ON THE HARP

Transcribing music from one instrument to another is a challenge, and it doesn't usually work very well. A Chopin piano piece is almost always diminished by orchestration, and if you change the timbres in a mature work by Anton Webern, it will no longer be the same piece.

But then there's Bach, whose work permits re-arrangement of all kinds so long as his musical structures remain intact. The composer himself made his Violin Concerto in E (BWV 1042) into his Keyboard Concerto (BWV 1054), to mention only one of many such ventures, and portions of the Mass in B minor came from earlier cantatas. In the 20th Century, works by Bach were successfully transcribed for large orchestra (Leopold Stokowski), jazz trio (Jacques Loussier), Moog synthesizer (Wendy Carlos), scat-singing chorus (Ward Swingle), and saxophone quartet (there are several versions of *The Art of the Fugue*).

Now along comes the young musician Parker Ramsay to give us his own *Goldberg Variations* arrangement for harp. The result is both brainy and beautiful, its easy-on-the-ear timbres stimulating, paradoxically, an even more intense

analysis than usual. Parker acknowledges that he was aware of the sonic similarities to ambient music, but for him it was an opportunity to present not only the counterpoint in the music but its overarching harmonic structures as well.

"The harp is my mother tongue, as my mother is a harpist and studied with Marcel Grandjany for 11 years," says Parker. "It was natural to me to use the harp, but I also saw it as the best of both worlds: it's a plucked instrument like the harpsichord, but is sensitive to pressure, like the piano."

Transposing the tonal center was out of the question - as it happens, the *Goldberg Variations* can only be played on the harp in G, Bach's original key. It is an unusual instrument, since the swooping flourishes that dazzle audiences are often easy to play but step-by-step melodies can be challenging, even impossible. Moreover, harpists have to change pedals, sometimes rapidly and quickly, to convey chromatic music.

This version of the *Goldberg Variations* was created in part to make a statement about the harp. "How many works for solo harp are longer than a 30-minute sonata?" Mr. Ramsay asks rhetorically. "I wanted to show the world that the harp is not a toy for composers to whip out in precious moments in orchestral music, but a serious instrument whose variety of timbre can hold the attention span of a listener for an hour or more."

Parker is also commissioning a set of very long works for harp over the next five years. I can hardly wait.

Tim Page

JOHANN SEBASTIAN BACH *GOLDBERG VARIATIONS*

Variety of Timbre in 18th-Century Keyboard Practice and “Apollonian” Affect in J. S. Bach’s *Aria mit verschiedenen Veränderungen* (BWV 988)

“A music that is well-appointed [...] is adept at taming the uncivilised and restless heart of humans.”

„Eine wohlgesetzte Music [...] ist geschickt, das verwilderte und unruhige Herz des Menschen zu bezähmen.“

**Anonymous author (“Henke”),
Der musikalische Patriot. (Braunschweig: 1741)**

The distinguished reputation of Bach’s *Goldberg Variations* (BWV 988) is inextricably linked with a restorative and healing quality that theologians, theorists and critics alike ascribed to the best kinds of music in the 18th century. In keeping with a venerated philosophical tradition, which was traced back by Bach’s contemporary Johann Mattheson, for example, to the French Neoplatonist Pontus de Tyard (1521–1605), music had a profound effect on the minds of listeners.¹ As a result, its quality could also be judged, based on listeners’ reactions: whereas agitation and confusion indicated bad, or possibly, even demonic

music, serenity and calm were considered the hallmarks of truly good music. The mechanism was paraphrased neatly (and without recourse to unwieldy terminology) by the poet Christian Friedrich Hunold in 1711. In an Ode, entitled *To a Viola da Gamba* he wrote: “Your tender tones drive no man wild / effectively, you are a picture of virtue. [...] So come, my worthy, leisurely pursuit / Which sings away my annoyance.” („*Dein sanffter Thon macht keinen Menschen wild / Der Würckung nach bist du der Tugend-Bild. [...] So komm mein wehrter Zeit-Vertreib / Der mir den Unmuth kan versingen.*“)²

The quote and its philosophical underpinnings can be linked directly to the reception-history of the *Goldberg Variations*. As is well-known, it was no lesser historian than Johann Nikolaus Forkel (1749–1818), who forged an enduring link between Bach’s *Aria with Diverse Variations* (as it was known in the 18th century) and the name of Goldberg. In his pioneering Bach biography of 1802, Forkel included the claim that Bach had composed the music for an influential nobleman, the Dresden diplomat Hermann Carl von Keyserlingk. Forkel also added an enduring association of the *Variations* with a performance-context of nocturnal seclusion and quasi-solitary contemplation. According to Forkel, Keyserlingk commissioned Bach to compose the cycle of variations as a remedy for Keyserlingk’s insomnia. The count is reported to have made repeated use of the music, by calling on the services of the former Bach pupil Johann Gottlieb Goldberg as chamber musician. Goldberg allegedly performed the *Variations* to save the

Count from sleepless nights by performing Bach's music from an adjacent chamber.³

Whilst the historical accuracy of this scenario is doubted by most modern scholars (both on account of a missing dedication to Keyserlingk and the youthful age of Johann Goldberg (of 14) at the time),⁴ there can be no doubt that Forkel's writings document that Bach's *Variations* were directly associated with the effect of soothing the troubled mind of Hermann Carl von Keyserlingk. As a result, Forkel's anecdote not only preserved a legendary aspect of the early reception-history of Bach's music. It also illustrates its quality by espousing the tenets of Hunold's account of good music, as a contemplative "picture of virtue". Just as in Hunold's poetic description of the sonority of a viola da gamba, Goldberg's performances of the *Goldberg Variations* are depicted as music that "sings away annoyance" and transforms agitation into peace of mind.

Given that the historicity of Keyserlingk's commission has been called into question, it is worth bearing in mind in this context that Bach's first biography coincided with new editions of Bach's historical compositions. There was a strong necessity to create new audiences and promote the repertoire at the time. Forkel's text, for example, was published by Bureau de Musique, which was a company established in 1800 by Franz Anton Hoffmeister. It specialised in Bach's music.⁵ This does not, however, undermine Forkel's credibility. Rather, it emphasises Forkel's great skill in backing up his promotional zeal by appealing to the testimony of historical figures. Whilst preparing

his Bach biography, Forkel was not only in touch with a great many members of the so-called Bach Movement in the early 19th century. He had also corresponded with Bach's sons, Wilhelm Friedemann (1710–1784) and Carl Philipp Emmanuel Bach (1714–1788). It seems likely, therefore, that the story of Keyserlingk's fondness for nocturnal performances of Bach's *Aria with Diverse Variations* had been disseminated by surviving members of Bach's inner circle during the second half of the 18th century. After all, the evocative scenario continues to resonate strongly, even today. To 18th-century audiences, it must have provided an even more powerful illustration of the unique quality of Bach's composition.

Nonetheless, Keyserlingk's high regard for the *Goldberg Variations* did by no means translate into widespread popular appeal of the music. Its 19th-century advocates must have been acutely aware of this. They decided to portray the commercial challenge as a further hallmark of the true virtue of Bach's music. A clear example of this can be found in the writings of E.T.A. Hoffmann (1766–1822). In the first decades of the 19th century, Hoffmann created a successful fictional character by the name of *Kapellmeister* Kreisler. In his literary role, however, Kreisler is mostly unsuccessful and struggling too. Hoffmann's Kreisler-novels first appeared in Leipzig's influential music-periodical, *Allgemeine Musikalische Zeitung*, in 1810.⁶ Its first part is entitled "The musical sufferings of Johannes Kreisler, the Kapellmeister" („*Johannes Kreislers, des Kapellmeisters, musikalische Leiden*“), and illustrates this suffering with direct reference to

Bach's *Goldberg Variations*.

In a ghostly scene, Kreisler is obliged to perform "the" *Bachian Variations* (BWV 988) to an indifferent, and even devilishly hostile, audience. It is useful to recall the dramatic content, especially as it can reveal an important, if antithetical, kinship with Forkel's case for Bach's *Variations*. As a torturous, and "wasted musical evening" approaches its undignified conclusion, a score of the *Goldberg Variations*, which happens to sit on Kreisler's fortepiano, is mistaken for virtuoso variations on some operatic smash hit (Giovanni Paisiello's "*Nel cor mi non più sento*") or a popular tune ("*Ah vous dirai-je, maman*"). Kreisler is asked for a performance, but the effect of the music is the exact opposite of the desired outcome, which was to stimulate an already inebriated audience even further.

Kreisler is forced to, proverbially, cast Bachian pearls before swine. Under the given circumstances, the music does not provide comforting solitude, but causes anguished isolation. In despair, Kreisler cries out to himself (as well as Hoffmann's readers): "Truly there is no other art that is subject to so much ill-fated abuse, as the magnificent, holy art of music, which is so easily desecrated owing to its delicate nature!" („*Wahrhaftig, mit keiner Kunst wird so viel verdammter Mißbrauch getrieben als mit der herrlichen, heiligen Musika, die in ihrem zarten Wesen so leicht entweiht wird!*")⁷

As is easily recognised, Kreisler's audience furnishes an almost exact counterpart to Forkel's virtuous *Graf Keyserlingk*. Whereas the latter appreciated Bach's music in its true spirit,

Hoffmann's crowd embodies everything that is opposed to it. It flees from the supreme skill of Bach's accomplishment in denial, ignorance and confusion. Yet both accounts merely present two sides of the same coin. Whereas Forkel situates Bach's *Goldberg Variations* in an ideal performance setting, Hoffmann places the music in the midst of an audience of misguided and superficial thrill-seekers. The central focus is shared, however. It consists in the distinctive quality of Bach's music. As a contrasting pair, both narratives illustrate how strongly Bach's *Goldberg Variations* were identified with notions of musical virtue, both in the 18th and 19th century.

Indeed, the original title of Bach's set of variations also announced the beneficial effect of the music for performers and listeners, in the more familiar dedication "to [Music] Lovers to Delight their States of Mind" („*Denen Liebhabern zur Gemüthsergötzung verfertigt*").⁸ The wording was used consistently by Bach's 18th-century publishers. It integrates *Goldberg Variations* into an astonishingly varied context of print music, which was meant to further domestic Keyboard Practice (*Clavier-Übung*). The connection between BWV 988 and, say, Bach's Partitas or earlier publishing ventures by Johann Kuhnau, is well documented indeed. Yet it has been overlooked so far that the 1742 title of Bach's *Goldberg Variations* also invokes this cultural context by identifying the first movement as an "aria". Vocal music and solo singing was associated arguably just as closely with the concept of *Clavier-Übung* as the goal of refreshing the spirits of practitioners. Arias, as well

as strophic songs and odes, possessed a unique importance in Bach's time both for domestic keyboard playing (i.e. *Clavier-Übung*), its concomitant print publications, so-called *Klavier- und Singstücke*, and 18th-century music pedagogy.

The social customs surrounding domestic keyboard practice are of vital importance for a comprehensive understanding of Bach's *Goldberg Variations*. They can, for example, point to a uniquely personal, and quite possibly even heartfelt, meaning, the aria from BWV 988 may have possessed in the Bach household. To illustrate this, it is useful to consider a dramatic scene, written by Bach's longstanding librettist, Christian Friedrich Henrici, for a satirical drama, entitled *The Customary Academic Habits (Der akademische Schlendrian)*.⁹ In a scene, set in a private garden, a young woman called Little Caroline (Carolingen) proudly declares the following on her recent music lessons:

*"[T]oday I have learned a proper aria, this is how it begins: 'Grant me just one mouthful, beloved child of angels. Be kissed tenderly by me, no one shall ever know what good friends we are.' If Mr Jolie [a friend and admirer] had sung it to me, I could hardly have refused him a little kiss. It is a brand new aria; my instructor wants to enter it in my song book [...]."*¹⁰

The account, which was first mentioned by Philipp Spitta in 1894, clearly illustrates how closely courtship and domestic keyboard practice were intertwined in the 18th century.

It also resonates, for example, with the opening line of BWV 518, „*Willst du dein Herz mir schenken*“ (“Should you wish to give your heart to me, do proceed, but secretly”), which is contained in a bound volume of manuscripts, arias, chorales and pieces for solo keyboard, by Bach's second wife, Anna Magdalena Bach (1701–1760). Whilst the aria places a greater emphasis on restraint and internalised affection than Little Caroline's “proper aria”, it points towards a use of arias, song books and keyboard-practice, both for musical enjoyment and the conduct of reputable courtship and marital relationships in Bach's time. The aria from BWV 988 was, likewise, entered in the Anna-Magdalena-Bach Book of 1725 (which has long been noted by scholars),¹¹ and it is tempting to speculate indeed, therefore, that the centrepiece of BWV 988 may also have possessed a deeply personal significance in “singing away” troubling thoughts and strengthening soothing spirits in the Bach household.

What is more, 18th-century thought on affective serenity also included instrumental timbres. In Johann Kuhnau's novel, *The Musical Charlatan (Der musikalische Quacksalber)* a learned member of a fictitious Collegium Musicum, called *Gentulejus*, invokes “wise antiquity”, for example, to buttress a claim that “whistles [i.e. wind instruments], when compared to string instruments and human voices, cannot be seriously considered”.¹² *Gentulejus* correctly refers to an ancient dichotomy here, which was articulated even more sharply in Platonic writings as an opposition between the kithara and the flute.¹³ Bach was familiar with

these ideas. In his famous collection of ancient legends, *Metamorphoses*, Ovid espoused identical images in the tale of Midas, which forms the basis of the cantata “The Contest between Phoebus and Pan” (BWV 201).

As in Ovid, Pan loses the contest in BWV 201, and Phoebus (who is the Apollonian contestant) is awarded the following licence to perform his kind of music: “Now Phoebus, take up your lyre again: There is nothing lovelier than your songs.”¹⁴ However, Bach’s orchestration of Phoebus’s winning aria „*Mit Verlangen*“ (“With longing”) does not call for a lyre, and is no accompanied solo song. It even features prominent flute parts in the orchestration. Clearly, Bach did not endorse Socratic abstraction in his depiction of Apollonian music. Instead, Bach seems to articulate a powerful, 18th-century case for what he believed Apollonian timbre should sound like. As the instrumentation indicates, Bach envisaged it as a cornucopia of acoustic colours.

Recognising this variability of Bach’s Apollonian timbre opens up new possibilities also for performances of Bach’s *Clavier Übung*. The case for adding the sonorities of the harp to the more familiar choice between the harpsichord and the piano is particularly compelling in this regard. Similar to the piano, the harp is equally as powerful in articulating singing legato lines, which greatly enhances the vivacity of contrapuntal voice-leading. Stylised elements of keyboard texture, such as broken chord figures in the so-called *style brisé*, gain intriguing new levels of meaning, as they are neither retranslated into original plucked-string sonorities, nor rendered via mechanical keyboard



actions. Finally, the harp possesses a strong kinship with accompanied solo singing, which places it in a unique position, from a historical vantage point, to rekindle the varied sound worlds of 18th-century keyboard practice. Seen this way, the *Goldberg Variations* offer an ideal starting point to embark upon similar, and quite possibly Apollonian, metamorphoses of timbre.

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Footnotes

- ¹ Johann Mattheson, *De eruditione musica* (Hamburg: Felginers Witwe, 1732), cited in Karsten Mackensen, Oliver Wiener, *Johann Matthesons und Lorenz Christoph Mizlers Konzeptionen Musikalischer Wissenschaft*, (Mainz: Are-Musik-Verlag, 2011), 58.
- ² Christian Friedrich Hunold, *Menantes Academische Neben-Stunden. Allerhand Neue Gedichte Etc.* (Halle und Leipzig: Johann Friedrich Zeitler, 1713).
- ³ Johann Nikolaus Forkel, *Ueber J. S. Bachs Leben, Kunst und Kunstwerke* (Leipzig: Hoffmeister und Kühnel, 1802), 51.
- ⁴ Peter May Williams, *Bach: The Goldberg Variations* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 5. Christoph Wolff, *Johann Sebastian Bach: The Learned Musician* (New York, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), 377.
- ⁵ Axel Fischer, ‘ „So, mein lieber Bruder in Bach...“. Zur Rezeption von Johann Nikolaus Forkels Bach-Biographie’, *Archiv für Musikwissenschaft*, 56/3 (1999), 225.
- ⁶ Hanne Castein, „Nachwort“ in: E.T.A. Hoffmann, *Kreisleriana* (Stuttgart: Reclam, 1983), 141.
- ⁷ *Ibid.*, 11.
- ⁸ For a facsimile reproduction see, for example, Hans T. David, Arthur Mendel, and Christoph Wolff (eds.), *The New Bach Reader* (New York; London: W.W. Norton, 1998), 215.
- ⁹ Christian Friedrich Henrici, *Picanders Teutsche Schau-Spiele* (Berlin, 1726).
- ¹⁰ This is my translation of the following: „[H]eute habe [ich] eine rechte Arie gelernet, sie fängt sich so an: Gib mir nur ein einzig Mäulgen, / Allerliebstes Engels-Kind. / Laß dich zärtlich von mir küssen, / Niemand soll es wieder wissen, / Daß wir gute Freunde sind. Wenn mir das Mr. Jolie fürgesungen, so hätte ich ihm ein Küßgen unmöglich können abschlagen. Es ist eine ganz neue Arie; Mein Lehrmeister will sie mir in mein Lieder-Buch einschreiben [...]“ *Ibid.*, 36.
- ¹¹ See, for example, Georg von Dadelsen, ‘Die Klavierbüchlein für Anna Magdalena Bach’, in Dadelsen (ed.), *Johann Sebastian Bach: Neue Ausgabe sämtlicher Werke. Kritischer Bericht* (V/4; Kassel, Basel, Tours, London, New York: Bärenreiter, 1957).
- ¹² Johann Kuhnau, *Ausgewählte Werke, Der musicalische Quacksalber*, ed. James N. Hardin (Bern: P. Lang, 1992), 85-6.
- ¹³ See, for example, Warren Anderson, “Apollo”, in: Stanley Sadie (ed.), *The New Grove Dictionary of Music & Musicians* (London: Macmillan, 1980), I, 503.
- ¹⁴ Alfred Dürr, *The Cantatas of J.S. Bach*, trans. Richard Douglas Jones (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 909.

PARKER RAMSAY

Harp

Parker Ramsay's artistry is distinguished by its breadth and depth, and by taking the harp in new directions. Equally at home on modern and period instruments, Parker splits his time between pursuing historical performance and working with composers to push the technical limits of the modern pedal harp.

At the age of seventeen, Parker was awarded the Organ Scholarship at King's College, Cambridge where he served under the direction of Stephen Cleobury. His tenure with the Choir of King's College, Cambridge included performing for the Festival of Nine Lessons and Carols in 2012, as well as six international tours and four recordings.

Winner of the 2014 Sweelinck Competition in Amsterdam, he went on to pursue graduate studies at Oberlin Conservatory and the Juilliard School. He is co-director of A Golden Wire and works regularly with Apollo's Fire, the Academy of Sacred Drama, the Shanghai Camerata, and a number of other period ensembles in the United States.

Dedicated to commissioning new works for the harp, he has premiered solos by Saad Haddad,



David Fulmer, Michael Seltenreich, Tom Morrison, and Josh Levine. He has performed at the Concertgebouw, the Royal Albert Hall, the Musée d'Orsay, Carnegie Hall, Lincoln Center, Verizon Hall (Philadelphia), the National Center for the Performing Arts (Beijing), and the Sejong Center for the Performing Arts (Seoul).

Parker holds a bachelor's degree in History from the University of Cambridge and a master's degree and artist diploma in historical keyboards from Oberlin Conservatory. He also holds a master's degree in harp performance from the Juilliard School, where he studied with Nancy Allen, principal harpist of the New York Philharmonic. His prior teachers include Isabelle Perrin, Sivan Magen, and Skaila Kanga. In addition to his work as a performer, he works as a staff writer for *VAN Magazine* and maintains his blog, *Harping On: Thoughts from a Recovering Organist*. He lives in New York City.

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