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SUNDAY

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MINSOO SOHN, *piano*

GENEROUSLY SPONSORED BY SUSAN GRAY AND ALEC DINGEE

Bach's Goldberg Variations**GOLDBERG VARIATIONS: ARIA WITH 30 VARIATIONS, BWV 988 (1741)****Johann Sebastian Bach (1685-1750)**

Aria

Variation 1

Variation 2

Variation 3 Canone all'Unisuono

Variation 4

Variation 5

Variation 6 Canone alla Seconda

Variation 7 Al tempo di Giga

Variation 8

Variation 9 Canone alla Terza

Variation 10 Fughetta

Variation 11

Variation 12 Canone alla Quarta

Variation 13

Variation 14

Variation 15 Canone alla Quinta in moto contrario: Andante

Variation 16 Overture

Variation 17

Variation 18 Canone alla Sexta

Variation 19

Variation 20 Canone alla Settima

Variation 21 Alla breve

Variation 22

Variation 23

Variation 24 Canone all'Ottava

Variation 25 Adagio

Variation 26

Variation 27 Canone alla Nona

Variation 28

Variation 29

Variation 30 Quodlibet

Aria da capo



Bach in 1746, five years after publishing the *Goldberg Variations*. This is the most famous portrait of Bach, oil on canvas, by Elias Gottlieb Haussmann (1695-1774), painter to the Saxon court and the city of Leipzig.

GOLDBERG VARIATIONS: ARIA WITH 30 VARIATIONS, BWV 988

Johann Sebastian Bach (b. Eisenach, Germany, March 21, 1685; d. Leipzig, Germany, July 28, 1750)

Composed 1741; 80 minutes

First, a good story. Legend has it that Bach wrote his *Goldberg Variations* for an insomniac patron. Count Keyserlingk is said to have wanted something of a “soft and somewhat lively character” played by his harpsichordist, Johann Gottlieb Goldberg, during his sleepless nights. According to Bach’s first biographer, Johann Forkel, in an account published in 1802, the Count was well pleased with what his doctor might have called the sedative-hypnotic effect of the *Goldberg Variations* and rewarded Bach with a gold goblet filled with one hundred gold coins.

Now, the more likely story. Bach was a guest of Count Keyserlingk, the Russian ambassador to the Saxon Court in Dresden, in November 1741. The young Johann Gottlieb Goldberg (baptized 1727 – died 1756), a prodigy from Danzig, was employed by the count at the time. While it is conceivable that the 13- or 14-year-old virtuoso could have played the variations, it is highly unlikely that Bach would have designed such demanding music for so young a musician. When Bach came to publish the work just before he undertook the journey to Dresden, he did not include a dedication to the Count—an omission that would have been highly unusual in the 18th century. A likely scenario is that during his visit, Bach gave the Count a copy of the newly printed music as a gift. This and subsequent nocturnal performances by the young Goldberg is probably the starting point for a legend that has ever since surrounded the *Goldberg Variations*.



“Bach’s *Goldberg Variations* is a spiritual journey for both listener and performer. His music is an infinitely revealing, ever-renewing life force. The process for the performer is to find an inner voice and, through it, the message from Bach. Although this process is always evolving, the outcome comes from a humble search through one’s heart. Sharing this experience is especially rewarding and can be powerful and stimulating to the imagination.”

– MINSOO SOHN

All the evidence points to Bach writing the *Goldbergs* for musical reasons rather than as a commission. For several years Bach had been working on a huge project. It was called *Clavier-Übung* (Keyboard Practice) and it was designed to provide a printed legacy of his own artistry. He started cautiously in 1726 with a single Partita for keyboard, testing the market for sales. Other Partitas followed annually. Then came a collected edition of all six Partitas. Part 2 of the *Clavier-Übung*, containing the *Italian Concerto* and Overture in the French style, BWV 831, followed during the 1735 Easter fair in Leipzig. Four years later came an eclectic collection of organ music. Then, in 1741, the fourth and final part of the *Clavier-Übung* presented the *Goldberg Variations* as its crowning glory.

There are thirty variations in all. Some of them are song-like, some are dance-like. All are different. Every third variation is a canon in two parts, in which each part imitates and overlaps with the other. As the variations progress, so do the intervals between the two parts, hence the Latin descriptions at the top of each variation. There’s a canon at the unison in the third variation, a canon at the interval of a second by the sixth variation, then a canon at the third by the ninth variation, all the way up to a canon at the interval of a ninth by the 27th variation. Then, instead of the expected canon at the 10th for variation 30, Bach writes a humorous medley of tunes, a quodlibet, that uses popular

tunes of the day in combination with the theme of the *Goldbergs*. The resulting rich, densely written, four-part texture, with the folk melodies embedded in it, shows how Bach was able to stand back and poke fun at his own learned writing.

In between the canons are character pieces and virtuoso variations, designed (as Bach's Latin performing directions indicate) for either one or two manuals of the harpsichord. The virtuoso pieces increase in brilliance towards the conclusion and precede the canons. In character, they inhabit the world of the toccata while, in spirit, they share something of what Domenico Scarlatti referred to as an "ingenious jesting with art" in his 1738-39 keyboard sonatas. Not surprisingly, playing variations designed for the two-manual harpsichord on today's single-manual piano increases the virtuoso impact of the collection, as the pianist's hands overlap and interweave. Bach's character pieces include two trios, a *stretto*, a gigue, a fughetta, two arias, an *alla breve*, the quodlibet and, at the center-point of the variations, an imposing French overture. All three genres reveal diversity through their unity throughout the cycle since Bach builds each variation on the bass line and harmonies of the theme, rather than on the melodic line alone—the only harmonic change being the shift from major to minor at key points. In the process he provides a characteristically encyclopedic overview of the canonic and variation techniques that he employed throughout his career. Many of the variations are cumulative, resulting in a feeling of having come full circle through the sequence of 32 movements, when we hear the return of the 32 measures of the Aria. When Bach published the *Goldberg Variations* in Nuremberg, his elaborate title page modestly described his enduring masterpiece as "Keyboard Practice, consisting of an Aria with Diverse Variations for the two-manual harpsichord. Composed for Music Lovers, to refresh their spirits."

– Program notes © 2018 Keith Horner. Comments welcomed: khnotes@sympatico.ca



About the Artist

MINSOO SOHN, piano



Known as a performer with poetic vision and musical intelligence, the pianist Minsoo Sohn has toured extensively throughout North America, Europe and Israel at major venues and has appeared at many prestigious festivals. An avid chamber musician, Mr. Sohn has performed with Aviv Quartet, Cecilia Quartet and Ysaÿe

Quartet, Israel Camerata Woodwind Quintet and Gryphon Trio. In January 2010, he collaborated with Mark Morris Dance Group alongside Russell Sherman and the Orchestra of Emmanuel Music in the Boston

premiere of *Mozart Dances*. Mr. Sohn's notable interpretation of Bach's Goldberg Variations has been broadcast numerous times on CBC and NPR's *Performance Today*. In 2006, Sohn became the First Laureate of the Honens International Piano Competition and prior to that, he was top prize winner of the Busoni, Cleveland, Rubinstein, Santander, and Queen Elizabeth competitions. Born in Korea, Mr. Sohn began piano studies at age three. Later, he moved to Boston to study with Russell Sherman and Wha Kyung Byun at New England Conservatory where he received his artist diploma in 2004. Previously on the faculty of Michigan State University, he currently lives in Korea and is a professor at the Korean National University of Arts.