

Pavel Kolesnikov

Pittville Pump Room

Saturday 5 July

Johann Sebastian Bach (1685-1750)

Goldberg Variations BWV 988

About the Programme

*We shall not cease from exploration
And the end of all our exploring
Will be to arrive where we started
And know the place for the first time.*

T. S. Eliot was not writing about Bach in these well-loved lines from 'Little Gidding', last of the *Four Quartets* - but he could have been. The *Goldberg Variations* are many things to many people - feat of keyboard technique, object of historical enquiry, sonic wallpaper, desert island disc, uncountable other unspoken encounters - but perhaps above all they are a journey. Starting with a simple slow dance, their arc unfolds over thirty variations of astonishing contrapuntal inventiveness and emotional depth, creating out of a single thread a fabric of brightest vermillion and deepest black which serves only as a vehicle for its own unravelling. At their end is their beginning: a verbatim restatement of the opening, changed beyond measure by the memory of that which has gone before.

Bach, of course, would likely not have seen the *Variations* in such terms. For him, they were a *Clavier-Übung* ('keyboard exercise') with a financial end, as suggested by the untypical self-publication of the work in 1741. The *Goldberg* of the title was appended later, and refers to an account from Bach's early biographer Johann Forkel - according to whom the variations were a commission from one Count Keyserlingk, to be played by his court harpsichordist Johann Gottlieb Goldberg as an aid for insomnia. (For various reasons, amongst them the fact that Goldberg would have been fourteen at the time, scholars have dismissed this story as apocryphal.) Whatever the circumstances of their creation, the *Variations* languished like much of Bach's music in relative obscurity - though Beethoven likely used them as inspiration for his *Diabelli Variations*, and Busoni made a transcription of them for piano - until a surge of popularity in the 20th century, largely precipitated by Glenn Gould's legendary 1955 recording. Today the *Goldbergs* exist in myriad transcriptions and interpretations, from string orchestra to jazz trio; their essence as a triumph of musical architecture and affect, however, remains unchanged.

On the face of it, the opening Aria is simple: a Sarabande in G major with an ornamented melody over a slow bass, constructed in two symmetrical halves of 16 bars each. Yet this innocuous dance is actually a seed, containing within itself its own unrealised outgrowths of immense complexity. This seed is not found in the curlicued lines of the melody but rather in the tectonic motion of the bass line, whose harmonic implications provide the foundation for much deeper exploration. (This is the same technique as is used in other Baroque forms with a ground bass, like the *chaconne* or *passacaglia*.) The architecture of the ensuing variations unfolds across multiple layers of time. On the largest scale, the whole work is symmetrical (like the Aria), with a pronounced renewal of energy between the 15th and 16th variations. At the mid-level, it is cyclical, with repeated groups of three variations in distinct styles: first a dance or character piece, then a technical exercise in touch and dexterity, then finally a canon, whose subjects are imitated at increasingly large intervals throughout the work (beginning with a unison canon, followed by canon at the second, then third etc.). Within each variation the form is again symmetrical, following the Aria, and within these halves it is linear, following the forward momentum of the bass line.

This formal complexity, however ingenious, is only the background to the immense expression and compositional skill contained in the individual variations. Within the stylistic limits of Baroque counterpoint is contained much of the range of human experience: there is the sparkling joy of the *moto perpetuo* variations (generally the second of each group of three), whose frequent hand-crossings are difficult enough on a two-manual harpsichord and fiendish on a modern grand piano; there are the cerebral canons, feats of contrapuntal creativity; there is the earthiness of Variation 30, which instead of the expected canon at the tenth features a quodlibet (a Baroque mashup of popular tunes, one of which is a folk song about cabbage); and there is also deep sorrow, in the form of three minor key variations (Nos. 15, 21, and 25). The emotional nadir comes in Variation 25, dubbed the 'Black Pearl' by harpsichordist Wanda Landowska. With its winding chromaticism and *lamento* bass, this is the *Goldbergs'* dark night of the soul - out of which eventually emerges once more the spontaneous joy of *moto perpetuo* and the final set of decidedly extroverted variations.

After such a journey, why return to the Aria? Having wrung out every possible colour and Affekt, why not accept the total transformation of the original material as a kind of Promethean liberation? Bach is wiser than that. First, there is a formal reason: the restatement of the Aria rounds out the number of individual pieces in the whole work to 32, mirroring the number of bars in the original dance - the final piece of fractal ingenuity. There is perhaps another reason, however, more psychological or even spiritual, to do with the nature of exploration. The value of a journey is often in illuminating neglected aspects of the explorer's own world: "...to arrive where we started/And know the place for the first time." The closing Aria is a homecoming, yes, but at the same time involves a profound alteration of the sense of home. Downstream of the variations, a listener cannot help but hear this music differently, its limits and possibilities having been so thoroughly explored. Heard this way, the *Goldberg Variations* are not simply a collection of clever expansions on a simple theme, but rather a quasi-theological statement on the nature of time and the patterns of constancy and change which underpin our lives. That one short dance contains these multitudes is, simply, a miracle.

Programme notes written by Will Fox (winner of RPS Young Classical Writers Prize 2025)

Artist Biographies

Pavel Kolesnikov *piano*

Following performances with the London Symphony Orchestra at Classical Pride this summer, the 24/25 season sees Pavel give recitals at Southbank Centre, Wigmore Hall, Concertgebouw Brugges, Spivey Hall and Severance Music Center as part of the Cleveland Orchestra's Piano Series. He also returns to The Hallé, Bournemouth Symphony, Hong Kong Sinfonietta and debuts with Adelaide Symphony.

Highlights of the 23/24 season included concertos with the Danish National Symphony, Cincinnati Symphony, Philharmonia Orchestra, Royal Philharmonic Orchestra, Netherlands Philharmonic and at the BBC Proms with the BBC Scottish Symphony, collaborating with conductors Susanna Mälkki, Manfred Honeck, Sir Mark Elder, Alpesh Chauhan, Gemma New, Alexander Bloch and Vasily Petrenko.

Pavés seven-concert residency at the 2023 Aldeburgh Festival showcased the breadth of his artistic vision. In addition to recitals and concertos with the Britten Sinfonia and Sinfonia of London, Pavel gave immersive performances with partner and pianist Samson Tsoy. The duo have since performed at Carnegie Hall, Barbican Centre and BOZAR.

Pavel won the 2012 Honens Piano Competition and was a BBC New Generation Artist between 2014-16. He was artist-in-residence at Wigmore Hall during the 20/21 season, and has performed at Amsterdam's Concertgebouw, Berlin's Konzerthaus, Klavier-Festival Ruhr and La Roque-d'Anthéron and Piano aux Jacobins festivals. His discography includes music by Reynaldo Hahn, Louis Couperin and Chopin.