

BACH GOLDBERG
VARIATIONS
FOR TWO PIANOS BY RHEINBERGER/REGER

Nina Schumann & Luis Magalhães



J. S. Bach (1685 - 1750):

Goldberg Variations, BWV 988 (1841)

Arr. J. Rheinberger (1839 - 1901), ed. Max Reger (1873 - 1916)

To meet Bach at the keyboard is to meet him at the very source of his artistic ingenuity. Many of Bach's enduring masterpieces were written for organ or harpsichord, and it would not be unreasonable to suppose that ideas conceived on the keyboard (whether improvised or composed) are at the base of many of his celebrated orchestral and chamber works. Bach the composer is intimately connected to Bach the keyboard player, a musician widely regarded as one of the finest organ improvisers of his time. The eminence of Bach's oeuvre in the art music canon in general has resulted in his keyboard works forming the foundation of the modern piano repertoire.

In the realm of music criticism and scholarship, Bach's music is often hailed as the epitome of functional musical logic. Every note has its place, every chord has its function, and all musical elements are combined in a masterful display of contrapuntal craft with few recognised rivals. But despite the intellectual reverence to which Bach's music is subjected, musicians are still able to find themselves intimately and affectively involved with his compositions. Bach's position in the repertoire surely has much to do with being a locale for the intersection of logic and affect.

Furthermore, pianists grow up with Bach, and continue to study his music closely throughout their careers as a matter of didactic necessity. In a profession where personal involvement in one's craft is a prerequisite, virtuoso pianists have developed a naturally close attachment to Bach's music.

Of course, there is something of an air of anachronism about pianists' engagement with the Bach repertoire. The vast majority of Bach's keyboard output was written for either organ or harpsichord, and not for the modern concert piano. (The piano was only beginning to become established as a standard keyboard instrument toward the end of Bach's lifetime.) Nonetheless, Bach's keyboard works loom large on piano recital programs: the French and Italian Suites (Clavier-Übung II), the 48 Preludes and Fugues, and the subject of this recording, the Goldberg Variations, are all standard repertoire. The pianistic appropriation of Bach prompts a natural question: if we take the liberty of playing Bach's harpsichord and organ works on modern concert pianos, are we not violating the composer's artistic intentions? And if we commit ourselves to this anachronistic exception on as basic a question as instrumentation, what grounds have we to make other judgements about what is stylistically appropriate?

These questions are often forestalled due to the sheer ubiquity of Bach transcriptions in the repertoire. However, the practice could be justified (if justification is deemed necessary) by pointing to the fact that Bach himself was a frequent transcriber of his music. In fact, there are numerous cases where Bach did not even specify instrumentation in his scores. However, other questions of artistic interest remain—many of which were central concerns in creating this recording. To what extent should one follow the directions of the score, if the score fails to unambiguously specify the composer's intentions? Should period-style ornamentation be used, and should it be used throughout the performance? Should all repeats be observed, and how should one treat phrasing with regard to tempo? Where should the musical work dominate the expressive tendencies of the players, and where should the opposite hold true?

These questions are thrown into even sharper relief on this recording of the Goldberg Variations, because the arrangement being played is not of Bach's doing but rather the Reger edition of Rheinberger's duo arrangement. Joseph Rheinberger (1839-1901), in spite of being considered by his peers as one of the preeminent traditionalist composers of his day, is remembered principally as a teacher (who taught, amongst others, the conductor Wilhelm Furtwängler).

Rheinberger's fascination with the music of Bach led to his arrangement of the Goldberg Variations for piano duo in 1883. Rheinberger took substantial liberties with Bach's original voicing, doubling melodies and fleshing out harmonies as he saw fit. In so doing, Rheinberger left an unmistakably Romantic impression on the work. Some years later, Rheinberger's piano duo arrangement came to the attention of Max Reger (1873-1916), also a musician of great esteem. Reger edited the arrangement and published it in 1915, having smoothed a few of the rough edges. Most of Reger's changes, however, consisted of altering and supplementing dynamic markings, and clarifying instructions on articulation and phrasing. Thus, the score upon which the present recording is based is something of a joint effort between Bach in the early 1840s, and Rheinberger and Reger about a century and a half later. And, as is very much the case, a significant interpretative contribution has been made by the performers themselves—pianists on the southern tip of Africa in the early 21st century.

Questions of interpretation aren't the only perplexities associated with the Goldberg Variations. In fact, even the genesis of the work is unclear. One of the best-known tales about the origins of the work was put forward by the famous biographer and champion of Bach, Johann

Nikolaus Forkel (1749 - 1818). In his celebrated 1802 biography of Bach, Forkel relates the tale as follows. The Goldberg Variations derive their nickname from the esteemed harpsichord player, Johann Gottlieb Goldberg (1727 - 1756). Goldberg was a musician in the service of Count Keyserlingk, Russian Ambassador to the Electoral Court of Saxony. Count Keyserlingk was an insomniac, and often asked the faithful Goldberg to play for him, late at night, during bouts of sleeplessness. Forkel contends that the Variations were written at the request of Count Keyserlingk, whose persistent insomnia fuelled an insatiable appetite for new music. The resultant Variations soon became the Count's favourite, and as a result, poor Goldberg spent many long nights playing them for his employer.

While Forkel's account makes for an interesting story, its accuracy is in doubt. At the time of the publication of the Variations by Balthasar Schmid (Nuremberg, 1741 - 1742), Goldberg would have been rather young—only 14 years of age. Therefore, the question naturally arises as to whether he was capable of playing the more technically demanding movements in the work. In defence of this account, it might be argued that Goldberg was something of a prodigy, whom the Count had seen fit to employ as a musician as early as 1737 when Goldberg was only 10 years old. The Count had also seen to it that Goldberg

received lessons from both J. S. Bach and Wilhelm Friedemann Bach around that time. However, in spite of this defence, the most damning argument against Forkel's account is that the published first edition title page bears no dedication to either Goldberg or Count Keyserlingk. In fact, there is no dedication at all, which makes it most unlikely that the Variations were the result of a commission. (The full title of the Schmid first edition is 'Keyboard Exercise, Consisting of an Aria with Diverse Variations for Harpsichord with Two Manuals', and was one of the published works subtitled 'Clavier-Übung', or 'Keyboard Practice'.) So while Bach and Count Keyserlingk were certainly acquainted, and while it is highly probable that Goldberg played the piece during his short career, the precise origins of the nickname and the purpose of its composition remain in the realm of speculation.

Turning from music history to the nature of the work itself, the Goldberg Variations are a masterpiece of contrapuntal invention. There has also been much commentary regarding structure. What logic, then, lies behind the Goldberg Variations? The work as a whole consists of an Aria, followed by thirty variations, and then finally a repetition of the Aria. The tonic key is G major, and is used as the home key for all but three variations in the minor. The Aria itself is 32 bars long, and serves as the 'theme' to the variations.

The character of the Aria—arguably one of the most recognisable pieces that Bach ever wrote—is at first appearance considerably more complex than one might expect from a piece that is to be the subject of further variation. However, it would probably be more accurate to think of the ‘theme’ as being constituted by the bass line of the Aria, with the melody above serving as an embellishment. It hasn’t escaped scholarly attention that the first eight notes of the Aria bass are the same as can be found in a set of 62 variations written by G. F. Händel in 1732. In fact, this commonality can be found in a number of pieces from this time, and is indicative of the theme’s origin in a harmonic formula called the ‘Ruggerio’, which originated in 16th century Italy. This formula is akin to the ‘Romanesca’ and ‘Folia’ harmonic recipes used as foundations for variation and contrapuntal treatment by many other Baroque composers.

Speculation about perfection of formal arrangement is a major pastime for Bach scholars, and the Goldberg Variations hold pride of place in that tradition. Whether on a small scale (e.g., rhythmic symmetries within phrases) or on a large scale (symmetrical or otherwise significant ordering of movements across the entire work), analysts have examined the Variations from every conceivable angle. The cake has been cut up in numerous ways. The 30 variations can

most obviously be divided into three groups of ten, the boundaries in each case ending with a canon. Yet another way in which to demarcate the 30 variations is into two groups of 15. In this scheme, Variation 16, a French overture, marks the beginning of the second half of the work. (French overtures, characterised by dotted rhythms and slow, stately tempi, were commonly used as opening movements in Baroque suites.) This latter observation is often suggested to reflect a larger symmetry beyond the Goldberg Variations: if Bach’s other works subtitled ‘Clavier-Übung’ prior to the Goldberg Variations are lined up chronologically (i.e., Clavier-Übung I, II and III), then the mid-point of the three is also marked by a French overture (the opening movement of the French Suite, if one counts the Italian and French Suites in Clavier-Übung II as two separate works). Thus, the Goldberg Variations (which Bach did not number as Clavier-Übung ‘IV’) contains within itself a symmetry reflected in Clavier-Übung I-III, as if it is a commentary on previous published works bearing that title. In a similar vein, it has been remarked that the Aria, with a length of 32 bars, mirrors the 32 movements comprising the entire work.

As an aside, mention should be made of the Handexemplar of the Goldberg Variations, discovered in 1974. This document, in Bach’s own hand, featured corrections and alterations

made after the publication of the first edition (which is infamous for being error-ridden). In the back cover, Bach penned an additional 14 circular canons, based on the first eight notes of the Aria bass. These were never published in any edition of the Goldberg Variations, and are separately titled “Diverse canons on the first eight notes of the ground of the preceding aria by J. S. Bach”. These canons are exercises in the technique of contrapuntal writing; the use of inverted and retrograde motives looks forward to the techniques employed in the Musical Offering and Art of Fugue. One of these canons is featured in the famous E. G. Haussmann painting of Bach (1746), on the sheet of paper the composer is holding. Christoph Wolff, the first musicologist to examine this Handexemplar, pointed out that the number of additional canons (14) matches the letter-values of B-A-C-H in the old Roman-style of the numerical alphabet that Bach was acquainted with.

Whether these structural features were intended, or whether they are salient or at all significant, is moot. In such score-focused analysis, there is always a danger of confirmation bias—that is, the analyst seeing precisely what he wants to see, and little more than that. For instance, marvellous and presumably significant fugal sections are in evidence in Variation 10 and the second half of Variation 16. But this

structural arrangement does not appear to reflect some grand, God-like symmetry. It is this sort of ‘imperfection’ that numerologically-minded commentators seem to overlook all too often. What is unmistakable is that in the second half of the work, which is dominated by brilliant toccata-like writing, there is general forward motion toward Variation 30, the famous quodlibet. The word ‘quodlibet’ is Latin for ‘whatever pleases’, and in musical terms is taken to mean a piece that features the contrapuntal treatment of multiple instances of popular melodies. Here, Bach sets several popular, well-known themes from his musical surroundings against one another in a masterclass of counterpoint.

It has been often remarked that music is the art that depends most on time: musical pieces are, essentially, meaningful patterns of sounds with varying duration. Unlike visual art or literature, music cannot be frozen in time and hung on a wall; nor can it be truly experienced as notation on paper. Musical scores themselves are simply lists of instructions, a testament to the fact that music cannot be realised without action performed in time. Thus, the matter of artistic choice in the recording studio and on the concert stage is essentially a question about what to do with musical time.

Aesthetic decisions are not made in intellectual and artistic isolation, of course. Established stylistic traditions and issues of performance practice invariably form the backdrop to interpretation of music from any epoch, but it is with the music of the Baroque that these questions are particularly pronounced. On the other hand, there is an argument to be made for the idea that musical performance is also a vehicle for the performer's own expressivity, and that there must be something of the spirit of the performers alongside the spirit of the composer. If this were not something to be sought after, there would be little value in multiple recordings of the same work by different players, and recording would be limited to creating the most accurate and faithful rendition of the score possible. A balance must be struck, and it is in doing this that artistic decisions come to the fore.

As with so many of Bach's other keyboard works, the Goldberg Variations are likely to have had a significant improvisatory heritage. As such, a meeting point between stylistic faithfulness and personal expression can be found. In this recording, it is in the interaction between ornamentation, attack, tone and dynamic range that spontaneity during performance has been sought. Instead of pre-planning every facet of technical execution in order to express affect, expressive communication has been left to the

spur of the moment. This injection of spontaneity lends a spirit of improvisatory exuberance to proceedings. A less conscious approach to technical matters has been taken in cognisance of the improvisatory tradition from which Bach hails; in the minds of the performers, emotional expression has been wrested from pure, premeditated technical facility.

Decisions regarding embellishment and ornamentation are a case in point. It is a common stylistic practice to add ornamentation to repeated sections in Baroque works. However, in this recording, a conscious decision has been made to only include ornamentation if it serves as a complement to the musical context of the repetition, and not simply for the sake of a hard-and-fast stylistic rule. In place of the dictates of tradition, ornamentation is regulated by the musical factors deemed important by the performers, such as the sparseness of voicing, overall texture, or the purity of particular melodic lines. In this manner, the technical execution of ornamentation can be used for affective communication, allowing the voices of the performers, the composer, and the two arrangers to be present in the finished product.

Of course, the most significant artistic choice made on this recording is the matter of arrangement. The transformation of the work

from solo to duo presented both Rheinberger and Reger with substantial challenges in timbre, texture and voicing. Further challenges in the realm of interpretation also arise as a result of arrangement, not only because matters of technique and ensemble need to be taken into consideration, but also because there are now two interpreters attempting to render a unitary performance. Whereas achieving unity of timbre, attack, and tonal inflection may be one approach to recording a piano duo, a conscious decision has been taken here to eschew over-analysis in this regard. Instead, an approach has been favoured that allows the listener to be fully aware of the fact that there are two performers providing interpretative input in the performance. Again, overt and detailed planning has been abandoned in favour of spontaneity in performance, allowing musical context to determine which player comes to the fore at any given moment. In the end, the interpretation showcased on this recording is one that results from giving every musician involved a voice, whether it be Bach, Rheinberger, Reger, or the duo partners themselves.

Barry Ross

NINA SCHUMANN
LUIS MAGALHÃES



By gaining comparisons to the fabled piano duos of Ashkenazy-Previn and Argerich-Freire (American Record Guide, November-December 2010), the Magalhães-Schumann duo, best known as TwoPianists, has already left an indelible mark on the musical world. Comprised of established musicians Luis Magalhães and Nina Schumann, TwoPianists was formed in 1999 when the pair met at the University of North Texas. Now based in Stellenbosch, South Africa, TwoPianists has become one of the finest chamber music groups on African soil.

Both Nina and Luis are established musicians of the highest calibre, bringing a wealth of solo and chamber music experience to the ensemble. In the piano duo arena, they have staked their claim as experts in the genre. Their intimate knowledge of the two-piano repertoire and sound command of technique, in combination with a finely developed sense of ensemble, have allowed TwoPianists to focus on the nuance and detail that has won so much praise from critics. A native of the Portuguese town of Lousado, Luis Magalhães received his first formal piano tuition at the age of five. His prodigious talent at the keyboard was fostered by a line of eminent teachers, amongst them Eduardo Rocha, José Alexandre Reis, Pedro Burmester and Vladimir Viardo. He has also received high-profile masterclass tuition from musicians as distinguished as Paul Badura-Skoda and Alicia de Larrocha, in addition to collecting a wide array of competition prizes and awards in recognition of his talent. The quality of Luis's contribution to the piano-duo idiom is rendered all the more impressive when one considers that recital works, concertos, and a wide range of chamber music fall within his active repertoire.

Nina and Luis share a common teacher: maestro Vladimir Viardo. The pair met and formed TwoPianists at the University of North Texas in 1999, where Nina had already spent three years under Viardo's tutelage. Born and raised in picturesque Stellenbosch, Nina's musical talent from a young age was impossible to ignore. En route to studying under Viardo at the University of North Texas, and having benefited from the guidance of piano pedagogues Lamar Crowson and

Vitaly Margulis, Nina scooped up virtually every major South African music prize on offer. It is testament to her skills that she was appointed associate professor in piano at the University of Stellenbosch in 1999, a post that she held while still undergoing tuition at North Texas. TwoPianists quickly became a well-known and much loved name in the South African music scene. In addition to many performances for a devoted local following, the TwoPianists duo have also toured extensively throughout the US, Germany, Portugal, Austria, Switzerland, China and Japan, to critical acclaim. The ensemble's debut disk, comprising the full works for two pianos by Rachmaninov and released by Universal Records, established their reputation as recording artists; their second release, consisting of virtuoso showpieces and recorded for their own label, served to further cement that position.

World-class musicians aren't the product of musical vacuums, and as is the norm with accomplished musicians, Luis and Nina are themselves teachers. Both hold lecturing positions in the Music Department of the University of Stellenbosch, passing on their artistic knowledge and producing students of the highest calibre. As TwoPianists, they have also given masterclasses both in South Africa and abroad, including recent masterclasses at the famous Juilliard School in New York. Their services to the South African musical community also include the founding of an independent record label, TwoPianists Records. This exciting venture has not only scooped up music awards at home, but also abroad, simultaneously winning praise from critics and audiences alike. It is the art-centered ethos of TwoPianists Records that really sets it apart in the modern record industry, and the company serves as a platform not only to promote opportunities for local and international musicians to record, but also to put South African musical life on a global stage. One might imagine that such an artistically successful partnership would only work if there were an underlying relationship of harmonious and mutual respect. This is indeed the case, as more than music binds TwoPianists: Luis and Nina are husband and wife.

GOLDBERG VARIATIONS, BWV 988
JOHANN SEBASTIAN BACH (1685 - 1750)

- 1 04:25 ARIA
- 2 01:39 VARIATIO 1. A 1 CLAV.
- 3 01:14 VARIATIO 2. A 1 CLAV.
- 4 01:55 VARIATIO 3. CANONE ALL'UNISUONO A 1 CLAV.
- 5 00:58 VARIATIO 4. A 1 CLAV.
- 6 01:16 VARIATIO 5. A 1 Ô VERO 2 CLAV.
- 7 01:09 VARIATIO 6. CANONE ALLA SECONDA. A 1 CLAV.
- 8 02:25 VARIATIO 7. A 1 Ô VERO 2 CLAV.
- 9 01:50 VARIATIO 8. A 2 CLAV.
- 10 01:22 VARIATIO 9. CANONE ALLA TERZA. A 1 CLAV.
- 11 01:28 VARIATIO 10. FUGHETTA. A 2 CLAV.
- 12 01:30 VARIATIO 11. A CLAV.
- 13 02:22 VARIATIO 12. CANONE ALLA QUARTA. A 1 CLAV.
- 14 06:46 VARIATIO 13. A 2 CLAV.
- 15 02:05 VARIATIO 14. A 2 CLAV.
- 16 04:13 VARIATIO 15. CANONE ALLA QUINTA. A 1 CLAV.
- 17 02:40 VARIATIO 16. OUVERTURE. A 1 CLAV.
- 18 01:39 VARIATIO 17. A 2 CLAV.
- 19 01:35 VARIATIO 18. CANONE ALLA SEXTA. A 1 CLAV.
- 20 01:47 VARIATIO 19. A 1 CLAV.
- 21 01:42 VARIATIO 20. A 2 CLAV.
- 22 02:55 VARIATIO 21. CANONE ALLA SETTIMA. A 1 CLAV.
- 23 01:28 VARIATIO 22. A 1 CLAV.
- 24 01:48 VARIATIO 23. A 2 CLAV.
- 25 03:38 VARIATIO 24. CANONE ALL'OTTAVA. A 1 CLAV.
- 26 08:23 VARIATIO 25. A 2 CLAV.
- 27 01:51 VARIATIO 26. A 2 CLAV.
- 28 01:41 VARIATIO 27. CANONE ALLA NONA. A 2 CLAV.
- 29 02:24 VARIATIO 28. A 2 CLAV.
- 30 02:15 VARIATIO 29. A 1 Ô VERO 2 CLAV.
- 31 02:43 VARIATIO 30. QUODLIBET. A 1 CLAV.
- 32 02:33 ARIA DA CAPO

TOTAL TIME: 77:55

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Bösendorfer 280 Models

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