

Tuesday, January 30, 2024 • 7:30 PM

Wednesday, January 31, 2024 • 10:30 AM

Ordway Concert Hall

Presented in partnership with

THE GREAT
NORTHERN

VÍKINGUR ÓLAFSSON, PIANO

This concert is dedicated in honor of Catherine and John Neimeyer
by Nancy and Ted Weyerhaeuser

Goldberg Variations, BWV 988 (1741)

Johann Sebastian Bach (1685–1750)

Aria

Variatio 1. a 1 Clav.

Variatio 2. a 1 Clav.

Variatio 3. Canone all'Unisuono. a 1 Clav.

Variatio 4. a 1 Clav.

Variatio 5. a 1 ô vero 2 Clav.

Variatio 6. Canone alla Seconda. a 1 Clav.

Variatio 7. a 1 ô vero 2 Clav. al tempo di Giga

Variatio 8. a 2 Clav.

Variatio 9. Canone alla Terza. a 1 Clav.

Variatio 10. Fughetta. a 1 Clav.

Variatio 11. a 2 Clav.

Variatio 12. a 1 Clav. Canone alla Quarta. a 1 Clav. in moto contrario

Variatio 13. a 2 Clav.

Variatio 14. a 2 Clav.

Variatio 15. Canone alla Quinta. a 1 Clav.: Andante

Variatio 16. Ouverture. a 1 Clav.

Variatio 17. a 2 Clav.

Variatio 18. Canone alla Sesta. a 1 Clav.

Variatio 19. a 1 Clav.

Variatio 20. a 2 Clav.

Variatio 21. Canone alla Settima. a 1 Clav.

Variatio 22. a 1 Clav. alla breve

Variatio 23. a 2 Clav.

Variatio 24. Canone all'Ottava. a 1 Clav.

Variatio 25. a 2 Clav.: Adagio

Variatio 26. a 2 Clav.

Variatio 27. Canone alla Nona. a 2 Clav.

Variatio 28. a 2 Clav.

Variatio 29. a 1 ô vero 2 Clav.

Variatio 30. Quodlibet. a 1 Clav.

Aria da Capo



the former Russian ambassador to the court of Saxony. The Count suffered from terrible insomnia, and at such times he would summon his private harpsichordist, Johann Gottlieb Goldberg, to perform the variations whenever the need arose.

This is probably an apocryphal story (a Dresden urban legend?) simply because when Bach wrote the Variations, Johann Goldberg was only 13 years old. He was no doubt precocious, but I doubt he was that gifted.

As recently as 1987, another plausible theory surfaced to explain why Bach would write something so monumental, and it was attributed to competition with a rival. Musicologist Alan Street asserts that Bach had a specific agenda in mind in writing the Variations, because a contemporary of his, Johann Adolph Scheibe, denounced his music for lack of both “general academic knowledge” and the “true basis of music and its real beauty.” (Herr Scheibe, a forgotten, baroque-era hack, might have overlooked a thing or two in his assessment of Bach, but I digress.)

The Goldberg Variations

“To music lovers, for the pleasure of their souls”

That unassuming inscription appears in Bach’s hand on the manuscript of his so-called “Goldberg” Variations, the longest non-choral work he would write. Bach’s 30 variations on an original theme encompasses in one single document a distillation of all the compositional techniques up to and including Bach’s time. It contains all manner of baroque dances—gigues, bourrées and minuets—as well as virtuosic fugues and brilliant counterpoint.

On one level, it’s simply a beautiful keyboard work, while on another, it’s a Rubik’s Cube of invention and architecture from Bach’s inexhaustible reservoir of ideas. Virtually all the essential styles of the time—from France, from Italy, from the Netherlands and from all over Germany—are represented in this single work, a most beautiful music lesson in the styles of the high baroque.

But who was Goldberg and why are these “his” variations? Legend has it that Bach wrote it to sooth the sleepless nights of one Count Kaiserling,

According to Mr. Street’s theory, Bach, with a chip on his shoulder, decided to rebut Scheibe by musical example, pulling out all the stops to prove his case. (“Anything you can do, I can do better!”)

Maud Moon Weyerhaeuser Sanborn International Artist Series



Maud Moon Weyerhaeuser Sanborn (1876-1965) was born in Rochester, Minnesota. She married Charles Weyerhaeuser in 1898 and lived most of her life in Saint Paul. A talented singer always active in the musical community, she supported Schubert Club and the Minneapolis Symphony. She had a special affection for Salzburg and Tanglewood where she spent summers. She developed close friendships with important musicians of her day such as Dmitri Mitropoulos and Serge Koussevitsky. The International Artist Series is dedicated to her memory by her grandchildren.

It would also explain why Bach chose the Theme and Variation form—something he rarely did—because it challenges a composer to wring every bit of musical meaning from a given theme, using every technique available.

A first time listener to such a monumental work could easily get the impression that Bach tacks on variation after variation willy-nilly. On the contrary, he is brilliantly intentional in the way the variations are ordered. Here is a quick road map for listening:

The Aria (Theme) both begins and ends the piece, while the 30 variations are laid out in 10 groups of three pieces each. Every third variation is a *canon*, (like “Row, row, row your boat”), where each added voice is an exact copy of the first voice, but staggered at different intervals. (For example, the third variation is a canon at the unison, the 6th variation a canon at the second, 9th variation is a canon at the third, etc.)

Throughout the variations, Bach treats us to all manner of stylized dances: minuets, gavottes, bourrées and gigue, all based on the harmonic plan laid out in the opening Aria. Bach composed the Aria in two halves of 16 bars each and indicates that each should be repeated (AA; BB) That rule applies to each variation as well, which essentially allows the listener to hear every variation twice!

While many of Bach’s works have an overt sense of religious mission, the Goldberg Variations, ostensibly a secular work, does incorporate religious numerology into its structure. As mentioned above, the number three is the significant organizing principle in the variations, a not accidental manifestation of the Holy Trinity for a pious Lutheran such as Johann Sebastian Bach.

Despite its seriousness of purpose on the surface, the Goldberg Variations is not the work of a sober, humorless dilettante. Bach imbues the piece with touches of whimsy, and even a sense of humor can be found in its pages. The best example is in the final variation, titled “Quodlibet,” which is a kind of musical joke.

The word Quodlibet comes from the Latin for “what pleases.” In Bach’s day, a Quodlibet was a piece of music that combined several

different melodies—usually popular tunes—set in counterpoint in a humorous way. In other words, it was a whimsical mashup of different melodies meant to be an inside joke to those in-the-know. Bach inserts the Quodlibet as a tongue-in-cheek way to sum things up before the Aria returns once again.

This Quodlibet is based on several German folk songs, two of which have been identified. The first is “I have so long been away from you, come closer, come closer,” while the second is “Cabbage and turnips have driven me away, had my mother cooked meat, I’d have opted to stay.” To listeners in the day, it would have provoked a chuckle, maybe even a startled feeling of “Whoa! After all those variations, how did I end up here?”

According to Bach’s first biographer (Forkel), there is a backstory that explains the Quodlibet even further. At Bach family reunions (nearly all his relatives were musicians), a custom was observed: as soon as they were assembled, a familiar chorale-tune would be struck up. From this devout beginning they proceeded to alter the text with off-color jokes and indecent lyrics. In short, they took their powdered wigs off and down came the hair.

Imagine a get-together of the whole Bach clan, who would riff on this indecent content on the spur of the moment, (a ‘non-sober’ moment?), to a somber Lutheran chorale tune. This irreverent, improvised harmonizing came to be called a Quodlibet, which suggests clearly that Bach meant it to be an inside joke. You have to love a guy that ends one of the most amazing displays of his entire career with a joke.

After that chuckle comes the unlikely instruction: “Aria *Da Capo*,” (Italian, meaning “from the top.”) After such a voyage of transformation and discovery over 30 variations, this return to the Aria is arresting, as the theme might now seem wistful, nostalgic, or subdued on repeat hearing. One can almost conjure an image of the proverbial old man, sitting in a chair facing the sunset, looking back on a life well-lived.

Program notes ©2023 by Michael Adams



Víkingur Ólafsson © Ari Magg

VÍKINGUR ÓLAFSSON

Icelandic pianist Víkingur Ólafsson has made a profound impact with his remarkable combination of highest level musicianship and visionary programmes. His recordings for Deutsche Grammophon – *Philip Glass Piano Works* (2017), *Johann Sebastian Bach* (2018), *Debussy Rameau* (2020), *Mozart & Contemporaries* (2021) and *From Afar* (2022) – captured the public and critical imagination and have led to career streams of over 600 million.

In October 2023, Ólafsson releases his anticipated new album on Deutsche Grammophon of J.S. Bach's *Goldberg Variations*. Ólafsson has dedicated his entire 2023/24 season to a *Goldberg Variations* world tour, performing the work across six continents throughout the year. He brings Bach's masterpiece to major concert halls, including London's Southbank Centre, New York's Carnegie Hall, Wiener Konzerthaus, Philharmonie de Paris, Tokyo's Suntory Hall, Harpa Concert Hall, Walt Disney Hall, Sala São Paulo, Shanghai Symphony Hall, Tonhalle Zürich, Philharmonie Berlin, Mupa Budapest, KKL Luzern and Alte Oper Frankfurt, to name a few.

Now one of the most sought-after artists of today, Ólafsson's multiple awards include Opus Klassik Instrumentalist of the Year (2023), Opus Klassik Solo Recording Instrumental (twice), CoScan's International Nordic Person of the Year (2023), the Rolf Schock Prize for Music (2022), *Gramophone's* Artist of the Year (2019), and Album of the Year at the *BBC Music Magazine Awards* (2019).

A captivating communicator both on and off stage, Ólafsson's significant talent extends to broadcast, having presented several of his own series for television and radio. He was Artist in Residence for three months on BBC Radio 4's flagship arts programme, *Front Row* – broadcasting live during lockdown from an empty Harpa concert hall in Reykjavík and reaching millions of listeners around the world.