

***Aria with Thirty Variations (Goldberg)* by J.S. Bach: Program Notes**

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Title Page. *Aria with Thirty Variations* BWV 988 was published as the fourth volume of Bach's *Clavier Übung* in 1741. The title page specifies the work for a harpsichord with two manuals. Though many pianists have performed this piece, their job is made more difficult by the limitation of one keyboard, as there are a number of movements where both hands occupy the same space.

Nickname. Johann Forkel tells the origin of the nickname "Goldberg Variations" in his 1802 biography of Bach. Count Keyserlingk would have his young musician, Johann Gottlieb Goldberg, play the variations to help him get through sleepless nights. Though the story is likely apocryphal, the nickname has stuck.

Form. The structure is symmetrical. *Aria* (the theme) is a thirty-two measure sarabande, divided into sixteen-bar segments. Each half is divided further harmonically by eight bar sections: G major – D major – E minor – G major. Including the da capo of the *Aria*, there are a total of thirty-two movements, mirroring the thirty-two measures of the theme. Rather than varying the melody itself, Bach instead builds each movement on the harmony implied by the bass line of each measure.

Overview. Taking their cue from the proportions of the *Aria*, the variations are all either 16 or 32 bars in length. They can be grouped into ten sets of three, with the third variation in each being a canon. Bach starts the first canon in Variation 3 at the unison, and moves up one scale degree with each subsequent canon, reaching a canon at the ninth in Var. 27. Canons at the fourth and fifth are in contrary motion, and all save the last are accompanied by an independent bass line. Of the other two variations in each group, one is what Ralph Kirkpatrick called "arabesques" – cross-hands virtuoso works for two manuals. The third in each set is variable, including: passepied (Var. 4); giga (Var. 7); fughetta (Var. 10); richly decorated sarabande (Var. 13); French Overture (Var. 16); minuet (Var. 19); contrapuntal alla breve (Var. 22), adagio aria (Var. 25), and Quodlibet (Var. 30).

The French Overture (Var. 16) convincingly announces the second half of the work, reflecting the binary form of the *Aria*. This comes directly after the first of three variations in G minor, the others being Var. 21 and Var. 25. Wanda Landowska famously called the latter "the black pearl," as it is the emotional high point of the work. One of the biggest challenges for the performer is to come out of this highly chromatic, highly emotional variation and then switch gears quickly to the great technical demands of Var. 26. Var. 25 also brings us to the final part

of the work, as a crescendo of variations builds to the end. Var. 30 is a Quodlibet, Latin for “what pleases.” It is based on two German folk songs and invokes a Bach family custom of improvising by piecing together popular songs. When the work closes with a return of the initial *Aria*, we meet up with an old familiar friend, though now our encounter is somehow different. The intervening variations have changed us both.

Theme. The *Aria* is a triple time sarabande with a highly decorated melody. Listen to the bass line with its one implied harmony per measure. (Repeats omitted.)

Variation 1. This is a bouncy movement with an emphasis on the second beat. Some cross hands notes are heard toward the end of the first half.

Variation 2. This is a contrapuntal conversation between two upper voices over an independent bass line.

Variation 3. A simple dance in 12/8 meter, this is a canon at the unison: the follower begins on the same note as the leader, one measure later. As with all the canons, save the last one in Var. 27, there is a supporting bass line. (Repeats omitted.)

Variation 4. A *passepiéd* (French court dance), this variation is in 3/8 time with some playful syncopation (off-beat rhythm).

Variation 5. This is the first of the “arabesques”: hand-crossing, two-part variations. One line moves constantly in sixteenth notes, while the other features very wide leaps.

Variation 6. A canon at the second, the follower starts a major second higher than the leader. This movement is based on a descending five-note figure and can be described as enchantingly tender.

Variation 7. Bach writes in his copy “al tempo di Giga”. Despite the Italian terminology, this is an unhurried joyful French gigue. Frequent use of a dotted rhythmic pattern in 6/8 meter is heard.

Variation 8. The French style of hand-crossing such as is found in the works of François Couperin is employed, with both hands playing in the same range of the keyboard, one above the other. A pattern of eleven sixteenth notes and one rest is heard often in this triple time movement. Both halves end with descending thirty-second note downward scales.

Variation 9. This is an *andante* canon at the third. In quadruple meter, an active supporting bass line helps to provide forward movement.

Variation 10 is a cut time four-voice fughetta. The subject enters in a different voice every four measures, starting with the bass. Trills in the melody help the listener identify the theme each time it comes in.

Variation 11. This is a whimsical movement in 12/16. It is largely made up of various scale passages, arpeggios, and trills.

Variation 12. This is a canon at the fourth with a stylish triple time swing. The canon is inverted: the follower enters in the second bar in contrary motion to the leader. Listen for the frequent return of the opening repeated quarter note idea in the bass line. (Repeats omitted.)

Variation 13. This variation is a beautiful, gentle, richly decorated sarabande. Most of the melody is written out using thirty-second notes. (Repeats omitted.)

Variation 14. This is a brilliant, rapid two-part hand-crossing variation featuring many trills and other ornaments. It is specified for two manuals and features large jumps between registers. After the opening right hand note, for example, a jump of three octaves is required for the next. Each half closes with rapid written out mordents in both hands.

Variation 15. This canon in contrary motion at the fifth (the leader appearing inverted in the second bar) is the first of three variations in G minor. The anguished mood contrasts sharply with the playfulness of the previous variation. The ending is remarkable, as the two hands slowly move farther apart with the right hand suspended in mid-air three and a half octaves from the left on an open fifth. This gradual fade leaves the listener ready for more, and is a fitting end to the first half of the variations. (Repeats omitted.)

Variation 16. Bach immediately fills the space in the center of the keyboard left void at the end of Var. 15 with an emphatic opening G major chord. This grand cut time French Overture marks the beginning of the second half. The Overture, characterized by majestic dotted rhythms, is followed by a quick 3/8 contrapuntal section. (Repeats omitted.)

Variation 17. This variation is another two-part, two-manual virtuosic movement. Each line is constantly moving in this triple time piece. Toward the end, ripples of thirty-second notes are heard.

Variation 18. This is a canon at the sixth in 2/2 time. The interplay of the upper voices in strict imitation at the half bar creates many suspensions.

Variation 19. This is a delightful three-part minuet. The hands alternate between steady sixteenth note movement and a rhythm of three eighth notes per measure.

Variation 20. This variation is a bubbling two-part piece in 3/4 time. Specified for two manuals, the hands again occupy the same range. Both halves include rapid triplet figures.

Variation 21. The second of the minor key variations, Var. 21 is a canon at the seventh in 4/4 time. After an initial low note, the bass line proceeds with a slow descending chromatic lament. A similar pattern in the bass opens the second half, while the right hand begins with the opening motive inverted. (Repeats omitted.)

Variation 22. This variation features four-part counterpoint with much imitation. Listen for the long trill in the first half.

Variation 23 opens with a cascade of downward scales, one hand chasing after the other. Shortly after, the scales reverse to ascending. The rest of the first half and the opening of the second feature short, quick outbursts. The last dramatic section features alternating thirds between the hands.

Variation 24. This canon at the octave in 9/8 time is a gentle pastorale. An extended trill opens the second half, repeated by the canonic answer two measures later. It is the only canon in which the leader alternates between voices in the middle of a section. (Repeats omitted.)

Variation 25. This is the third and last variation in G minor. It is marked *Adagio* in Bach's own copy. The melody is written out predominantly in 16th and 32nd notes and features much chromaticism. Wanda Landowska famously described this variation as “the black pearl” due to its beauty and dark passion. It is the emotional high point of the entire work. (Repeats omitted.)

Variation 26. The performer must make the difficult transition from the highly emotional Var. 25 to the extremely virtuosic Var. 26. Bach actually uses two time signatures simultaneously: 18/16 for the incessant sixteenth-note figuration, and triple meter for the underlying sarabande. During the last five bars, both hands play in 18/16.

Variation 27. This last canon is at the ninth and is in 6/8 time. A cheerful movement, it is the only canon without a supporting bass line.

Variation 28. Written-out trills using 32nd notes are present in most measures. They are heard in one hand and then the other, and sometimes simultaneously.

Variation 29. This triple meter variation consists mostly of heavy chords alternating with sections of brilliant triplet figuration shared between the hands.

Variation 30. *Quodlibet* is Latin for “what pleases.” It is based on two German folk songs and invokes a Bach family custom of improvising by piecing together popular songs. One is translated, “I have so long been away from you,” perhaps a veiled reference to the time spent away from the *Aria*. (Repeats omitted.)

Aria da capo. This reprise of the opening *Aria*, though familiar, sounds somehow different. A distinctive new dimension has resulted from the intervening thirty variations. (Repeats omitted.)