

1741: a space odyssey

Is the cosmos the key to the Goldberg Variations?

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It lasts over an hour without a break, it consists of 30 variations on one aria, and it was written more than 250 years ago. Yet Bach's keyboard marathon known as the Goldberg Variations is enjoying an almost unprecedented surge of popularity. On the Classic FM chart of listeners' favourite pieces it is now more popular than Tchaikovsky's Romeo and Juliet and John Williams's score for Star Wars. So what is so special about it?

The Canadian pianist Angela Hewitt, who will be playing the Goldberg Variations at London's Wigmore Hall this month, says: "If I could choose the one piece I'm most attached to, this is it. It's a compendium of keyboard technique of the time and beyond - Bach really pushed the limits. It's also a piece of sheer beauty and people can love it and appreciate it for that alone. Crowds love marathons and they love to see a performer carry off a feat, which the Goldberg Variations certainly is. But when it's well played it has the power to move people more than any other work in the keyboard repertory."

Legend has it that Bach wrote the variations for a young musician named Johann Gottlieb Goldberg to play to Count von Keyserlingk, who was an insomniac and required gentle, refreshing entertainment overnight. The story is probably apocryphal, but if Goldberg did perform the piece, he must have been a talented chap: Bach knew how to make a harpsichordist sweat. The work is difficult, demanding virtuoso fingerwork and infallible coordination, with the hands frequently crossing over each other.

Before 1950 the Goldberg Variations was popularised by Wanda Landowska on the harpsichord and Rosalyn Tureck on both piano and harpsichord; but for many years the work was identified with Hewitt's fellow Canadian Glenn Gould. His idiosyncratic recordings - his last, from 1981, is particularly eccentric, with its exaggerated tempos and spiky, mannered articulation - had such a cult following that for a while they proved hard to follow.

Later, through the 1980s, when "authentic" baroque performances became increasingly fashionable, Bach teetered on the brink of being walled into an early-music ghetto. The piano wasn't "authentic"; the harpsichord was. Consequently, pianists were frightened off Bach for years - except for Andras Schiff, who ignored the snobbery of the early-music brigade and claimed the Goldbergs, and the rest of Bach's keyboard music, as glorious repertoire for the piano. His performances have helped to prove that it's the authentic spirit, not the instrument, that counts. Today the Goldbergs is fair game for both pianists and harpsichordists; there are arrangements for string orchestra and even an

experimental jazz treatment by the Uri Caine Ensemble. Consequently it is reaching an ever-wider audience.

But is there another "something" hidden in the Goldberg Variations, something that may help account for that sense of upward progression and "completeness" that people love so much? David Humphreys, a lecturer at Cardiff University's music department, has suggested that the Goldberg Variations is a musical allegory of an ascent through the nine dimensions of Ptolemaic cosmology, rising from the Earth to the Fixed Stars. It sounds incredible, but Humphreys declares: "In 1741, when the variations were published, the theory wouldn't have surprised anybody who was well versed in the traditions of baroque astronomical thought. No other work in the whole of baroque keyboard literature is constructed in this way and it does need explaining."

The South Bank Centre's Philip Pickett, who has programmed the Goldberg Variations several times, agrees with Humphreys. "There was no such thing as 'pure' music then," he asserts. "Baroque paintings are full of symbolism that can be easily 'read' by an audience that is familiar with its references; Bach's music can be 'read' in the same way."

Humphreys's theory mostly holds up uncannily well. Every third variation is a canon (like a round) for two voices. In each successive canon, the set interval between the voices rises another step; between the canons, Bach provides a virtuoso variation and a variation in free form. Each of the latter, Humphreys claims, portrays the character of the next planet in the ascent: Venus is a sensuous love song; Saturn is full of dissonances that intimate pain, death and mourning; and the Fixed Stars twinkle over a shimmering background of trills.

If it all sounds too esoteric, Bach himself brings everything down to earth in the last variation before the aria's return. He combines two popular songs of the day in a "quodlibet", a kind of Bach family singsong that they would enjoy at gatherings of their sizable clan. "It represents the ending of a year, the closing of a cycle," Humphreys suggests. Symbolic or not, the effect is delicious - as if Harrison Birtwistle had approached the conclusion of a big, serious work with a medley of "Here we go" and Auld Lang Syne.

Angela Hewitt is not wholly convinced by Humphreys's theory, though she keeps an open mind, saying: "There are a lot of theories; you can see many things in the Goldbergs and it's all fascinating, though I don't know whether it necessarily makes for a better performance." Pickett feels that, in the end, "it doesn't matter whether this particular allegory is true or not; what matters is that there would have been some allegorical concept behind the work, whatever it might be". Just listen and decide for yourself.

- Angela Hewitt performs Bach's Goldberg Variations at the Wigmore Hall, London W1, on May 22. Box office: 020-7935 2141.