

YUNCHAN LIM
Piano

LEE, HANURIJ (b. 2006)
...round and velvety-smooth blend...

This newly commissioned work for piano, written for Yunchan Lim, delves into the profound interplay of contrasting forces. It unfolds in two major sections, "Élégie" and "Rudepoema," hinting at the contrasting moods that will be explored.

"Élégie," evocative of a mournful song or lament, may initially present itself with hushed, introspective melodies and delicate textures. Yet, within this stillness, seeds of energy may begin to stir, hinting at the "Rudepoema" to come.

"Rudepoema," a term suggesting a raw, unrefined poem, might unleash a more forceful, dynamic energy. This section may feature driving rhythms, bold harmonies, and perhaps even moments of explosive intensity. However, echoes of the "Élégie" may linger, creating a dialogue between the contrasting elements.

Crucially, these two sections are not rigidly defined. They intertwine and evolve organically throughout the piece. Gentle passages may erupt into moments of raw power, while moments of intensity may subside into introspective contemplation. This dynamic interplay creates a captivating tapestry of sounds, inviting the listener on a journey through a richly nuanced sonic landscape.

This piece, in its exploration of contrasting forces, offers a unique counterpoint to the intellectual and intricate architecture of Bach's Goldberg Variations. While Bach's masterpiece demonstrates the pinnacle of order and meticulous craftsmanship, this new work embraces a more fluid, organic approach, celebrating the beauty of both stillness and movement, gentleness and rawness.

(approx. 6 minutes)

Program notes by IMG Artists.

JOHANN SEBASTIAN BACH (1685-1750)
Goldberg Variations, BWV 988

Aria

Var. 1 a 1 Clav.

Var. 2 a 1 Clav.

Var. 3 Canone all' Unisono a 1 Clav.

Var. 4 a 1 Clav.

Var. 5 a 1 ô vero 2 Clav.

Var. 6 Canone alla Secunda a 1 Clav.

Var. 7 a 1 ô 2 Clav. Al tempo di Giga

Var. 8 a 2 Clav.

Var. 9 Canone alla Terza a 1 Clav.

Var. 10 Fughetta a 1 Clav.

Var. 11 a 2 Clav.

Var. 12 Canone alla Quarta a 1 Clav.

Var. 13 a 2 Clav.

Var. 14 a 2 Clav.

Var. 15 Canone alla Quinta a 1 Clav. Andante

* * *

Var. 16 Ouverture a 1 Clav.

Var. 17 a 2 Clav.

Var. 18 Canone alla Sexta a 1 Clav.

Var. 19 a 1 Clav.

Var. 20 a 2 Clav.

Var. 21 Canone alla Settima a 1 Clav.

Var. 22 a 1 Clav.

Var. 23 a 1 Clav.

Var. 24 Canone all' Ottava a 1 Clav.

Var. 25 a 2 Clav. Adagio

Var. 26 a 2 Clav.

Var. 27 Canone alla Nona a 2 Clav.

Var. 28 a 2 Clav.

Var. 29 a 1 ô vero 2 Clav.

Var. 30 Quodlibet a 1 Clav.

Aria da capo

(approx. 80 minutes)

Johann Sebastian Bach Goldberg Variations, BWV 988

History

Bach's *Goldberg Variations* (1741) counts as the single largest keyboard composition published in the eighteenth century. In this monumental collection of 30 variations on an elegantly embellished theme, Bach lays out for amateur and professional keyboard-players alike the most advanced techniques for playing the harpsichord, while striking admiration in the hearts of his fellow composers for his mastery of arcane contrapuntal procedures and his command of the popular musical styles of his day.

By the mid-eighteenth century, however, musical tastes had changed, and esoteric feats of contrapuntal wizardry had fallen out of fashion. The Goldbergs were then largely forgotten, although Beethoven appears aware of them when composing his *Diabelli Variations* (1819–1823), as does Brahms when composing his *Variations and Fugue on a Theme by Handel* (1861).

The Goldbergs were then “rediscovered” as concert repertoire in the twentieth century by the feathery flock of harpsichordists, with Wanda Landowska (1879–1959), who first recorded the set in 1933, as Mother Hen to the brood.

Migrating from the harpsichord to the concert grand, however, would take some time. With their “sewing-machine” rhythms, probing explorations of chromatic harmony and awkward hand-crossing textures designed for a two-manual instrument, the Goldbergs were considered too “antiquarian” to compete with the lushly Romantic, deeply emotional repertoire that dominated the recital programs of leading pianists such as Sergei Rachmaninoff and Josef Hoffmann in the early twentieth century.

Until June 1955, that is, when a 22-year-old Glenn Gould walked into the New York studios of Columbia Records to record what was destined to become one of the best-selling classical albums of all time. What Gould revealed was the emotional richness and feverish excitement that lay hidden in this much-neglected work.

Like an art-restorer cleansing the Sistine Chapel of the grime and haze that had built up over centuries, in his 1955 recording Gould brought to a public inured to the warmly pedalled sound of Romantic piano music a dazzling clarity of texture and kaleidoscopic range of tone colours, brought to life by the fingers alone.

And now, far from being merely a niche interest of “brainy” keyboard-players, Bach's Goldbergs have gone “mainstream” and are at the centre of the

performing repertoire. Proof of which is the fact that Icelandic pianist Víkingur Ólafsson has just won his first Grammy for his recording of ... The Goldberg's.

The Aria

The theme that Bach wrote for his variations is a *sarabande tendre*, identified by its highly expressive style and stately rhythm, emphasizing the second beat of the bar.

The first system of the musical score for the Aria, consisting of the first 16 measures. It is written in G major and 3/4 time. The score is in a two-part form, with the first half (measures 1-16) repeated. The music features a stately, expressive style with a strong emphasis on the second beat of each bar. The right hand plays a melodic line with various ornaments and slurs, while the left hand provides a steady, rhythmic accompaniment. The first system ends with a repeat sign and a fermata over the final measure.

Floridly ornamented in the French manner, its 32 measures unfold in the traditional two-part form of a dance movement, with each half repeated, which provides an opportunity for the performer to vary the performance by means of changes in dynamics, articulation and ornamentation.

The second system of the musical score for the Aria, consisting of measures 17-32. This system continues the two-part form, with the second half (measures 17-32) repeated. The music maintains the same stately and expressive style as the first system, with the right hand playing a melodic line and the left hand providing a rhythmic accompaniment. The second system ends with a repeat sign and a fermata over the final measure.

The harmonic rhythm of the Aria is deliberately slow, one chord to the bar, and Bach's variations are based not on the melodic content of the Aria, but rather on its bassline and underlying harmonies, in the manner of a chaconne.

The Variations

There is a large-scale symmetry in the way that Bach arranges his variations. First of all, the set is book-ended by the Aria's appearance both at the beginning and at the conclusion of the work.

Secondly, the set divides evenly into two halves. The first half ends on an enigmatic open 5th at the conclusion of the plaintive Variation 15.



The second half then starts off anew, with a bang, on a robust G-major chord that begins the No. 16 French overture variation.



Thirdly, the 30 variations are organized into 10 groups of three, each group containing:

- (1) a **dance or genre piece**,
- (2) a **virtuoso display piece**, bright in mood, and most often featuring a number of hand-crossings, and
- (3) a **two-voice canon**, which is to say a round, in which a melody is accompanied by itself, entering a set number of beats after its initial appearance and beginning a set interval above its initial note.

In keeping with Bach's systematic approach, these canons, spaced out every three variations, begin at the unison and progress to the ninth in Variation 27, which is the only canon not accompanied by a running bass line by way of harmonic support.

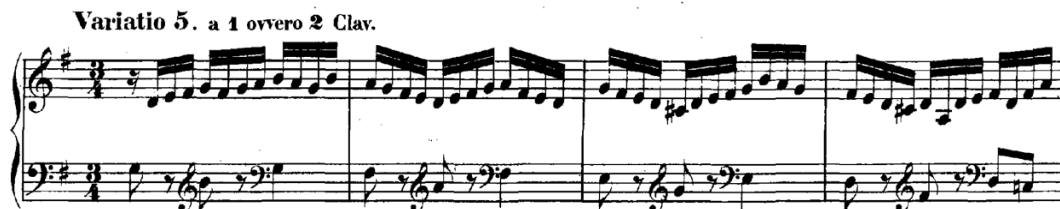
Such a layout ensures variety in the succession of variations and is aided by the extraordinarily wide range of meters used: 3/4, 2/4, 6/8, 12/8, 9/8 etc.

In Variation 26, one hand actually plays in 3/4 while the other is in 18/16.



The display-oriented virtuoso variations feature two kinds of hand-crossing.

First there is the Italian type, à la Scarlatti, in which one hand crosses over and above the other to catch a note perilously distant from its home turf.



Then there is the French type, à la Couperin, in which the running melodic lines of the two hands cross over each other in the same patch of keyboard terrain, risking a digital derailment of both, as in this passage from Variation 8.



This would be easy on a two-manual keyboard instrument, but alas the modern concert grand has only one!

The inclusion of *canon variations* helps to mask the recurring regularity of the Aria's four-bar phrases and repeating bass line.

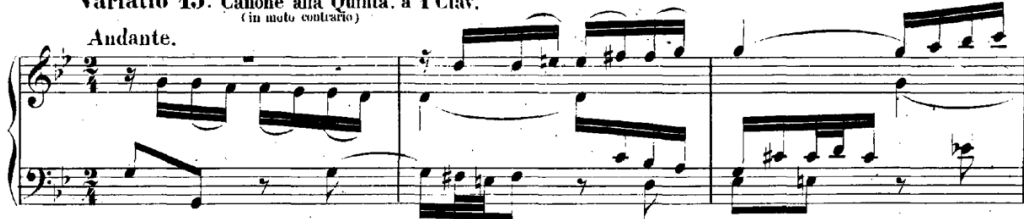
But the canons are not always straightforward rounds. Variations 12 and 15 each feature a *canon inversus*, in which the leading voice is accompanied by itself — turned upside down!

Variatio 12. Canone alla Quarta.



Variatio 15. Canone alla Quinta. a 1 Clav.
(in moto contrario)

Andante.



The Goldberg's emotional heart comes in Variation 25 in the minor mode, described by Wanda Landowska as the work's "crown of thorns."

Variatio 25. a 2 Clav.



At an *Adagio* tempo, it is the longest of the set, although it has the same number of measures as the other variations.

Its extraordinary expressiveness and aching beauty derive from the combination of its plangent melodic leaps, agonizing chromaticisms and halting syncopations.

* * *

There then begins a build-up in energy as the work races towards its climax, with sonorous written-out trills invading the inner voices of Variation 28

Variatio 28. a 2 Clav.



and hammering fists of chords chopping between the hands in Variation 29.



The Quodlibet

According to the pattern already established, one would expect a canon at the 10th in Variation 30, but here Bach surprises us with a musical joke, a *quodlibet* (Latin for “what you please”) that fits two popular ditties into the harmonic scheme of the Aria.



The two overlapping folk tunes that Bach shoehorns into service over the ground bass of his Aria are the urgent love lyric

Ich bin solang nicht bei dir g'west, ruck her, ruck her	I have been away from you so long, come here, come here
--	--

and the anti-vegetarian anthem

Kraut und Rüben haben mich vertrieben, hätt mein' Mutter Fleisch gekocht, wär ich länger blieben	Cabbage and turnips have driven me away, had my mother cooked meat, I would have stayed longer
---	---

Coming at the very end of the work, there is something of the chorale in this quodlibet, something good-natured and healing that gathers all hearts in song, as at the end of a church cantata or Lutheran religious service.

Aria da Capo e Fine

It then remains only for the Aria that opened the work to echo once more off the walls of our listening space, repeated note for note as it was at the beginning. This gesture of return, too, has spiritual echoes that are intuitively felt but difficult to put into words.

Bach inhabited a world made comprehensible to him by his Lutheran faith, a world in which the divine presence penetrated every piece of Creation. In the

Goldberg Variations, Bach gives form in sound to the secular and the sacred world — the secular through the music of popular genres and dance forms, the divine through canons and the miraculous geometric transforms of their musical themes.

The melodic voice of the Aria, when it returns once again to our ears, seems small and vulnerable with respect to what had come before, and we with it. In this return to the work's beginnings, we hear, and intuitively share, the humble prayer of a pious man before his God.

Donald G. Gíslason 2025