

PINCHGUT OPERA



GOLDBERG *Variations*

J.S. Bach

Performed by Erin Helyard

CITY RECITAL HALL, SYDNEY

SAT 1 MARCH, 2PM | SUN 2 MARCH, 5PM

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Any microphones you observe are for recording not amplification

GOLDBERG VARIATIONS

Composer - Johann Sebastian Bach (1685-1750)

Bach's Goldberg Variations, BWV 988, consists of an Aria followed by 30 variations. First published 1741.

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|--|---|---|
| Aria | 11. a 2 Clav. | 21. Canone alla Settima |
| 1. a 1 Clav. | 12. a 1 Clav. Canone alla Quarta
in moto contrario | 22. a 1 Clav. alla breve |
| 2. a 1 Clav. | 13. a 2 Clav. | 23. a 2 Clav. |
| 3. Canone all'Unisono. a 1 Clav. | 14. a 2 Clav. | 24. Canone all'Ottava. a 1 Clav. |
| 4. a 1 Clav. | 15. Canone alla Quinta. a 1 Clav.:
Andante | 25. a 2 Clav.: Adagio |
| 5. a 1 ô vero 2 Clav. | 16. Overture. a 1 Clav. | 26. a 2 Clav. |
| 6. Canone alla Seconda. a 1 Clav. | 17. a 2 Clav. | 27. Canone alla Nona. a 2 Clav. |
| 7. a 1 ô vero 2 Clav. al tempo di Giga | 18. Canone alla Sesta. a 1 Clav. | 28. a 2 Clav. |
| 8. a 2 Clav. | 19. a 1 Clav. | 29. a 1 ô vero 2 Clav. |
| 9. Canone alla Terza. a 1 Clav. | 20. a 2 Clav. | 30. a 1 Clav. Quodlibet
Aria da Capo |

NOTE FROM ERIN HELYARD

The story behind the name *Goldberg Variations* comes from Bach's first biographer, Forkel, in 1802, 52 years after the composer's death. Apparently, Bach was commissioned by a Dresden courtier called Count Keyserlingk. The Count suffered from insomnia and wished for a work which his house musician, Johann Gottlieb Goldberg, could play, and thereby be 'cheered up by them in his sleepless nights'. There is no dedication to the Count on the title page of the work which was published in 1741 with the title *Clavier-Übung* or 'Keyboard Practice'. It seems more likely that when Bach visited Dresden in 1741 to see his beloved son Wilhelm Friedemann he brought with him, and conceivably presented to the Count, a copy of the newly engraved set of variations. Perhaps the story of the insomnia was embellished over time by Wilhelm Friedemann. Peter Williams speculates that Bach might have originally intended the *Goldbergs* for Wilhelm, as material for virtuosos display by the brilliant young harpsichordist.

Bach designated the *Goldbergs* as being written for a "Clavicimbel mit 2 Manualen" or two-manual harpsichord, and the work explores the technical and sonic possibilities of two choirs of strings activated by two keyboards. This kind of technique, in which the hands on two keyboards are inhabiting the same range of notes, was occasionally to be found in the work of the French *clavecinistes* as *pièces croisées* (or 'crossed pieces', as the hands cross over one another). Bach labels each movement of the *Goldbergs* with the designation "a 1 Clav" (for one manual) or "a 2 Clav" (for two) and occasionally gives you the option of either one or two. As such, any performance of the two-manual variations on a single-manual instrument, like a piano, means that you must adapt the work somehow, as two fingers often cannot depress the same keys at the same time. Indeed, it might have been this aspect of the work that led to most pianists

of the 19th century overlooking the *Goldbergs* in favour of other works by Bach.

The *Goldbergs* is without question one of the greatest works ever written for the harpsichord. A set of variations not of a tune, but of a ground bass, Bach composes an ambitious thirty variations that demonstrate exceptional architectural, technical and contrapuntal skill. Patterns emerge in the *Goldbergs*: the thirty variations can be seen to be divided into ten triptychs of three variations each. Each triptych contains a variation that involves hand-crossing on two manuals, a genre or style piece that presents a wide array of Baroque dance types and genres, and finally a canon. These canons are the clearest structural device in the work as each canon's imitation expands by an increasing interval. The first is at the unison, then the second, then the third, and so on until a canon at the ninth. The fourth and fifth canons are in contrary motion, and the ninth canon is the only one in two voices without an independent bass line. The *Goldbergs* thus invite us to admire the physicality of the musician in performance in the hand crossing, the mind of the composer with the ingenuity of the canons, and the enduring products of musical culture, i.e. things made with both the mind and body, in the wide range of genre pieces.

The hand-crossing variations are without precedent in much of the harpsichord literature. They explore the subtle differences in tone between the two keyboards of a harpsichord, and you could also view them as a kind of homage to French techniques (the *pièces croisées*) and Italian ones (and most notably Scarlatti's legendary hand crossings). The canons are masterpieces of counterpoint, and the genre pieces are testament to the diversity of Bach's imagination. Many see an arc-like shape in the *Goldbergs*, with the French Overture (Var. 16) at the very

centre, however Peter Williams has noted that Bach's three-part scheme is not clearly defined at the beginning and end of the arc. The irregularity at the beginning of the work might suggest that the plan gradually took on coalescence as it was being written. The close of the work also smudges the arrangement; Williams posits that 'perhaps the composer consciously broke the pattern to avoid too neatly calculated a scheme, or to make sure the work begins and ends energetically, irrespective of any scheme.'

One of the most remarkable effects in the *Goldbergs* is also the simplest and is achieved merely by three words: *aria da capo*. Peter Williams has written that the repeat of the Aria

at the close 'seems itself to say something about the strange power of great music, for as one hears it a final time, its aura is different'. Tovey's brilliant 1900 essay on the *Goldbergs* also remarked on this magical effect: 'The Aria returns in its original shape, with a strangely new and yet familiar effect ... As the Aria ... ends, we realise that beneath its slight exterior the great qualities of the variations lie concealed, but living and awake; and in the moment we realise this the work is over.' The Aria has transformed from a greeting to a farewell, and the poignancy of this – Williams calls it 'one of music's most touching moments' – underscores both the unique beauty of the *Goldbergs* and Bach's genius.



ERIN HELYARD

Erin Helyard has been acclaimed as an inspiring conductor, a virtuosic and expressive performer of the harpsichord and fortepiano, and a lucid scholar who is passionate about promoting discourse between musicology and performance. Erin

graduated in harpsichord performance from the Sydney Conservatorium of Music with first-class honours and the University Medal. He completed his Masters in fortepiano performance and a PhD in musicology with Tom Beghin at the Schulich School of Music, McGill University, Montreal. His monograph *Clementi and the woman at the piano: virtuosity and the market for music in eighteenth-century London* was published by Oxford University Studies in Enlightenment in 2022. As Artistic Director and co-founder of Pinchgut Opera and the Orchestra of the Antipodes he has forged new standards of excellence in historically

informed performance in Australia. The company won Best Rediscovered Opera for *Artaserse* (2019 International Opera Awards) and Best Australian Feature Film for *A Delicate Fire* (2021). Operas under Erin's direction won Best Opera at the Helpmann Awards for three consecutive years (2015-2017), and he has received two Helpmann Awards for Best Musical Direction (*Saul*, 2017; *Artaserse*, 2019). With Richard Tognetti, he won the ARIA and AIR Awards for Best Classical Album (2020). Erin has collaborated with the Australian Chamber Orchestra and the Australian String Quartet and conducted for the Sydney, Adelaide, Tasmanian and Queensland Symphony Orchestras, ACO Collective, the Australian National Academy of Music and the Australian Haydn Ensemble. As a duo partner, he has performed with Avi Avital, Melissa Farrow, David Greco, Stephanie McCallum, James Morley, and Richard Tognetti. Recognised with a Music and Opera Singers Trust Achievement Award (2018), he was *Limelight's* Critics' Choice Australian Artist of the Year (2023). He has been Artist in Residence at the Melbourne Recital Centre (2022) and Melbourne Symphony Orchestra (2024). Erin is an Associate Professor at the Sydney Conservatorium of Music.

RUCKERS DOUBLE HARPSICHORD, CAREY BEEBE MMIII

Bach specified a double-manual harpsichord for three of his most significant solo keyboard works: The French Overture BWV831, the Italian Concerto BWV971, and of course the *Goldberg Variations* BWV988 you will hear today in City Recital Hall. Erin Helyard has chosen one of my favourite instruments, my 2003 Ruckers Double harpsichord, for this performance. You may have already heard this harpsichord in some previous Pinchgut Opera productions, on stage with Sydney Symphony, Opera Australia, or on tour with Australian Chamber Orchestra. It made its debut in March 2003 with two concerts given by William Christie and Les Arts Florissants at the opening of Singapore's Esplanade Theatres on the Bay.

The Ruckers Double was quite naked then: Intensive use meant it wasn't possible until January 2008 to remove the strings for my artist Diana Ford to decorate its soundboard in the style of early Ioannes Ruckers c.1620. The characteristic blue arabesques exploding from the scalloped borders fill in the blank spaces between floral motifs – but close examination will reveal that these are Australian flowers and fruits rather than European. This is an organic harpsichord: the 171 tapered pearwood jacks have holly tongues sprung by boar bristle, and its strings are plucked with plectra cut from Canada goose quill.



DAMIEN COOPER Lighting designer

Damien Cooper is a lighting designer working in theatre, opera and dance. He has designed over 600 shows, including Pinchgut Opera's recent production of Handel's *Julius Caesar*. Career highlights include Neil Armfield's production of the *Ring Cycle* for Opera Australia; *Exit the King* on Broadway, directed by Neil Armfield; Graeme Murphy's *Swan Lake* for The Australian Ballet, which was presented in New York, London, Paris and Tokyo; *Keating! The Musical*; and Australian Dance Theatre's *Birdbrain*, which played over 60 venues around the world. *Goldberg Variations* is Damien's sixth Pinchgut Production.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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The performance lasts approximately 80 minutes, without an interval.

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Re-entry will not be permitted once the performance has begun.

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