

Zhiheng Guo
piano

Recital in partial fulfillment of the
Doctor of Musical Arts degree, 2025
Student of Bruce Brubaker

Sunday, February 26, 2023
8:00 p.m.
Williams Hall

PROGRAM

Johann Sebastian Bach
(1685–1750)

Prelude and Fugue in G Minor, BWV 885
from *Well-Tempered Clavier, Book 2*

Goldberg Variations in G Major, BWV 998 (1741)

Aria

Variation I: [Polonaise]

Variation II: [Imitation]

Variation III: Canon at the unison

Variation IV: [Passepied]

Variation V: [Cross-hands]

Variation VI: Canon at the second

Variation VII: [Giga]

Variation VIII: [Arpeggiations in contrary motion]

Variation IX: Canon at the third

Variation X: Fughetta

Variation XI: [Scales in crossing hands]

Variation XII: Canon at the fourth

Variation XIII: [Sarabande]

Variation XIV: [Arpeggiations crossing hands]

Variation XV: Canon at the fifth

Variation XVI: Overtura

Variation XVII: [3rds and 6ths]

Variation XVIII: Canon at the sixth

Variation XIX: [Passepied]

Variation XX: [Arpeggiations contrary motion]

Variation XXI: Canon at the seventh

Variation XXII: Alla breve [Canzone]

Variation XXIII: [Scales in 3rds]

Variation XXIV: Canon at the octave

Variation XXV: [Adagio: Sarabande]

Variation XXVI: [Triplets]

Variation XXVII: Canon at the ninth

Variation XXVIII: [Fantasia]

Variation XXIX: [Chords in tremulo]

Variation XXX: Quodlibet

Aria

* *The titles of individual variations from the performer's interpretation are marked in brackets.*

This doctoral recital expresses my deepest gratitude toward my major teacher, Bruce Brubaker, my doctoral advisor Thomas Handel, and New England Conservatory.

Well-Tempered Clavier, Books I & II

Bach's *Well-Tempered Clavier I & II* are considered two of the greatest bodies of polyphonic literature ever written for the keyboard. There are twenty-four pairs of preludes and fugues for each Book arranged in all major and minor keys. The *Well-Tempered Clavier* explored the new temperaments that allowed for performance in all twenty-four keys. Book II of the *Well-Tempered Clavier* was composed and published in 1742 during Bach's stay in Leipzig, twenty years later than Book I from his Köthen period.

Prelude and Fugue in G Minor, BWV 885

The prelude begins with a solemn bass note followed by dotted rhythmic figures. Throughout the piece, the prelude is characterized by its organ effect of the sustained bass notes and the dotted French-overture rhythm. Its tempo marking, *Largo*, is rare among Bach's *Well-Tempered Clavier*, which enhances the dignified character of the work. This majestic prelude introduces the four-voice fugue in 3/4. Besides its fiery character, the structure of this fugue is designed around the number fourteen, the sum of letters of Bach's name: B-A-C-H=2+1+3+8, in terms of the fugal entrances, measure number, and subject placement. For instance, there are fourteen fugal entrances; the total number of measures of the fugue is eighty-six, which is six times fourteen; the first major-key fugal entrance takes place at the seventh entrance, the halfway point of the fourteen entrances; and around the golden section of the fourteenth entrances Bach places the first simultaneous subjects.

In this program, the *Prelude and Fugue* serves as a prologue to the *Goldberg Variations*, which are connected through the key of G. Furthermore, it predicts the three minor variations that will take place in the latter section of the *Goldberg Variations* (var. 15, var. 21, var. 25).

Goldberg Variations in G Major, BWV 988

Composed in 1741, the *Aria with Diverse Variations*, BWV 988 constitutes the fourth and last part of the *Clavier-Übung* series of keyboard works. It is one of the largest keyboard compositions from the 18th century. The common title of the work, *Goldberg Variations*, relates to the following apocryphal story: Johann Gottlieb Goldberg, a student of Bach, asked his teacher to compose this theme and variations for Count Kaiserling, the ambassador to the electoral court of Saxony. The Count had insomnia, and Goldberg often played the variations for him during the night in the ambassador's house.

Whether this story is true cannot be proved by scholars. However, the composition itself is a masterpiece beyond a doubt. The piece begins with a slow aria in Sarabande style, which is the theme upon which all the variations are based. The simplicity of the melody and harmonic succession of the Aria is beyond praise. The thirty variations have a well-planned structural design. Bach places canons in

multiples of three so that the third variation is a canon at the unison, and the sixth variation (two times three) is a canon at the second. The sequence goes on until the thirtieth variation, where Bach quotes two German folk songs: *Ich bin solang nicht bei dir g'west, ruck her, ruck her* ("I have so long been away from you, come closer, come closer") and *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'd have opted to stay").

While Bach doesn't provide titles for the other variations, they are typically genre pieces that are divided into groups of three. Variations 1, 4, and 7 are character pieces. Variations 2, 5, and 8 are vigorous etudes exploiting specific technical aspects such as hand-crossing. The titles of these variations, from the performer's perspective, are provided in the program above in brackets.

The piece ends with the return of the theme. Bach has taken us through a journey, only to find that we come back to the place we began. It is a special moment of experience and Bach's ingenious method of composing in a loop, which reflects the nature of time perceived by human beings as a circular motion, like the pointer of a clock travels back to its original point in a day. The link from the end of a work to its very beginning and the feeling of a cyclical closure are further supported through a high A in the penultimate measure of the Aria, which hangs dissonantly over the final chord of the piece. This pitch asks the audience to recall the first note of the beginning Aria through memory for its resolution so that the *Goldberg Variations* can be repeated infinitely. The loop also existed between the *Prelude and Fugue* and the *Goldberg Variations* as the Aria ends with the exact two notes G that starts the *Prelude and Fugue in G Minor*. Thus, the recital cycles back to its beginning.

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