Introduction

The hallowed reputation

When in 1935 the American harpsichordist Ralph Kirkpatrick prefaced his playing edition of the *Goldberg Variations* with a quote from Sir Thomas Browne's *Religio medici* of 1642 – 'there is something in it of Divinity more than the eare discovers' – he was not meaning to use it as an example of English aesthetics of the late Renaissance and platonic ideals of soundless music. Rather, he was looking for a way to signal his own admiration and enthusiasm for a unique piece of actual music, to invoke not so much the cleverness of its strategy and tactics as the kind of spiritual world it seems to occupy and the special feelings it arouses in both player and listener. To listen to or play any of the *Goldberg Variations* seems to many people more than a 'merely musical' experience, and its appearance in modern recital programmes attracts special attention as a peak to be scaled by the harpsichordist or a work to approach with respect by the pianist. I think myself that it 'feels special' because, whatever antecedent this or that feature has, its beauty is both original – seldom like anything else, even in Bach – and at the same time comprehensible, intelligible, coherent, based on simple, 'truthful' harmonies. The *Goldberg* has its own language, but one made from standard vocabulary.

The uniqueness of this music can be expressed in a more mundane way, for example by describing it as 'the largest single keyboard composition published at any time during the eighteenth century'. Or historians trying to place it might point out how often a set of variations does indeed represent a period's keyboard music at its best: Byrd's *Walsingham*, Frescobaldi's *Cento partite*, Beethoven's *Diabelli* or late sonatas, Brahms's or Rakhmaninov's *Paganini*. The awe the *Goldberg* inspires in musicians

might take the form of admiration (of an apparently objective kind) for the effortless way the variations adopt virtually any up-to-date musical genre of the time. Or its emotional impact on later composers can be illustrated by finding similarities between, say, its Variation 25 and Beethoven's *Diabelli Variations* No. 31. Or some modern listeners, less willing now to speak in Romantic terms, tend to cloak their admiration for the *Goldberg* by erecting intricate schemes of symbolism or rhetoric around it, enthusiastically proving the work to be based on (to take two instances) Renaissance cosmology or Roman oratory.

But like any great piece of music, what the *Goldberg* really brings to the listener is a world of experience otherwise unknown, and I am not sure anyone can succeed in describing that world to others. What kind of language could convey the realm of the imagination opened up by its very opening bar? Or the feelings aroused by the final dying away of the theme, after it has returned and been heard the second time? This repeat of the Aria seems itself to say something about the strange power of great music, for as one hears it a final time, its aura is different. It has changed from a greeting to a farewell, from elegantly promising to sadly concluding. But how can that be, when the notes are the same and even the manner of playing them need not have changed?

Well before the nineteenth-century editions of the *Goldberg* – the first to appear after the original print of 1741 – admiration for it had spread beyond the borders of Saxony, or so one can suppose from an unusually lengthy extract in Sir John Hawkins's *History of Music* (London, 1776), which gives the Aria plus Variations Nos. 9 and 10 complete, though without commentary. Evidently Hawkins knew these movements not, as one might suppose, from a copy given him by the composer's youngest son (Johann Christian), then living in London, but from a manuscript apparently given by Sebastian himself to an English visitor to Leipzig in 1749 (probably one James Hutton, a Moravian – see Dok III, p. 311). In such ways the work was already being 'used' by authors: while Hawkins gathered such musical examples as other English gentlemen of the time collected orchids or beetles, biographers of the German Enlightenment period used such complex musical works for the ideal picture of the self-taught, hard-working, stay-at-home German genius. Bach's Obituary already had several anecdotes of the kind useful for such pictures, including the famous account of the *Goldberg* as a cure for insomnia.

But admiration for the ingenuities of the *Goldberg* might deflect one from its more elusive qualities: the special tone of it, so distinct that once initiated one is unlikely, I think, to mistake it for any other work, even in the shortest of extracts. A more modern way to express mysterious beauty than Thomas Browne's word 'divinity' is Harold Bloom's word 'uncanny': that mysterious property of the *Goldberg* as we are transported to a world of unfamiliar but not obscure sound, something inexpressible and puzzling. The historian can make prosaic points about, say, the final return of the theme, pointing out that another publication had done this recently (see below, p. 92) and that it actually produces a shape very suitable for new kinds of public recital. But to any listener, its eventual dying away is one of music's most touching moments.

The popular name '*Goldberg*'

The list of printed works in Bach's Obituary, eventually published in 1754, speaks of 'An Aria with 30 Variations, for two *Claviere*' or manuals, which is partly but not exactly quoting the original title page appearing early in the deceased's final decade:

> Clavier Ubung bestehend in einer Aria mit verschiedenen Veraenderungen vors Clavicimbal mit 2 Manualen
>
> Keyboard Practice, consisting of an Aria with diverse variations for the harpsichord with 2 manuals

The title goes on to express a formal purpose virtually identical to that of three other books of 'Keyboard Practice' previously published (Books I, II and III described below): it was a work

> denen Liebhabern zur Gemüths-Ergetzung verfertiget
>
> prepared for the soul's delight of music-lovers.

Other translations for the phrase 'soul's delight' can, like this one, easily miss the pious connotations it had for the orthodox Lutheran believer. For him, spirits are refreshed or re-created not merely for idle pleasure but to prepare us for further work in the talents that have been entrusted to us, and this for the sake of our neighbour. Much more than an empty formula, the phrase suggests that any such volume of music was not to

be taken as the vainglorious product of some showy performer but was, indeed, a pious offering. Something similar had appeared on the title page of a publication in Leipzig by one of the town's previous organists, Daniel Vetter of St Nicholas's.[1]

More interesting than such formulas to a later German biographer like J. N. Forkel, author in 1802 of the first major Bach monograph, were personal stories and heart-warming anecdotes. Although in Chapter 6 he refers to the *Goldberg* only as 'the great variations' ('den grossen Variationen', p. 31), in a later chapter he writes more about it than about any other work of Bach but the *Art of Fugue*, which he takes to be the final opus. (This work too, by the way, offered an intriguing combination of contrapuntally clever music and touchingly personal anecdote – in this case, a story concerning the so-called *Deathbed Chorale* and the sad fact or supposed fact that the composer had died before completing the most complex movement of the work as a whole.) Presumably on the basis of what he had learnt from correspondence with the Bach sons Philipp Emanuel Bach or (more likely) Wilhelm Friedemann, Forkel tells the following well-known story about the *Goldberg* and how it came about.

It seems that in Dresden at the time, the influential Count Keyserlingk (the courtier Hermann Carl, Reichsgraf von Keyserlingk, with whom Bach stayed in November 1741), employed a young house-musician, Johann Gottlieb Goldberg. The Count

> kränkelte viel und hatte dann schlaflose Nächte. Goldberg . . . musste in solchen Zeiten in einem Nebenzimmer die Nacht zubringen, um ihm während der Schlaflosigkeit etwas vorzuspielen. Einst äusserte der Graf gegen Bach, dass er gern einige Clavierstücke für seinen Goldberg haben möchte, die so sanften und etwas muntern Charakters wären, dass er dadurch in seinen schlaflosen Nächten ein wenig aufgeheitert werden könnte. Bach glaubte, diesen Wunsch am besten durch Variationen erfüllen zu können, die er bisher, der stets gleichen Grundharmonie wegen, für eine undankbare Arbeit gehalten hatte. (Forkel, *Bach*, pp. 51–2)

> was often unwell and then had sleepless nights. On these occasions, Goldberg had to spend the night in an adjoining room so that he could play something to him during this sleeplessness. The Count once remarked in Bach's presence that he would very much like to have some keyboard pieces for his Goldberg, of a character so gentle and somewhat merry that

> he could be a little cheered up by them in his sleepless nights. Bach believed that he could best fulfil this wish with some variations, which until then he had held to be a thankless task because of the basic harmony always being the same.

But no dedication to the Count is documented on the title page or any known copy, and while this is not conclusive, the likely period of composition (about 1739–40) hardly fits in with the age and putative abilities of young Goldberg, who was born in 1727. The likeliest explanation is that when J. S. Bach made that particular visit to Dresden in 1741, perhaps not least to see his beloved son Wilhelm Friedemann, he brought with him, and at some point presented to the Count, a signed copy of the set of variations newly engraved in Nuremberg and now on sale. Not unlikely is that the whole incident was first set in motion, then witnessed and finally narrated to Forkel (having been embroidered over time, perhaps) by Wilhelm Friedemann. Note that only in the last clause does Forkel imply that the variations would not have been composed except in this connection, something he could have misunderstood when the tale was told him – the rest could be taken to mean that having some variations to hand, Bach thought them suitable for the Count's need when he came to hear of it. (Chronology can easily become elided, just as it was when a chorale first said to have been 'dictated by Bach in his blindness' later became one 'dictated on his deathbed'.)

Either way, we could speculate further and suppose that the virtuoso in the mind of the composer as he produced these demanding pieces was not young Goldberg or even himself but Wilhelm Friedemann: it was for him that Sebastian had already assembled several volumes of music (the *Clavierbüchlein*, the Six Sonatas for organ, and perhaps Book 1 of the *Well-tempered Clavier*) and probably fair-copied another masterpiece for his first professional audition (the 'Great' Praeludium in G major, for the job of organist in the prestigious Sophienkirche, Dresden, in 1733).[2] Not impossible too is that in some sense it was for Friedemann that Sebastian had planned, composed and published all three previous volumes of 'Keyboard Practice', and later was moved to transcribe – or allow someone to transcribe – the *Schübler Chorales* for organ, including the well-known setting 'Wachet auf!' (These chorales Friedemann doubtless played when he became the newly appointed organist at the Liebfrauenkirche, Halle,

about that time.)[3] There is no document now linking any of these works with Friedemann, except that he had copies of the *Schübler Chorales* for sale. But that the father supplied the son with virtuoso pieces with which to make a stir as a harpsichordist in a cosmopolitan capital city, and as organist in one of its churches, is more than possible.

Two further details in Forkel's story raise questions about his reliability in musical matters. First, his phrase 'gentle and somewhat merry' hardly conveys the impression left by the *Goldberg Variations*. Did a composer expect players to pick and choose which variations to play, or was it that Forkel's respect got in the way of grasping the impression the work makes in practice? Or – and this is to put greater trust in Forkel – is the brilliance of modern performances an anachronism, and are the variations more gentle than we now think? Secondly, while it seems the case that after youthful attempts at keyboard variations (including the so-called Chorale Partitas) Bach did shun them in the form familiar to so many of his contemporaries, a 'thankless task' is hardly the way to view other masterpieces of his in the field of harmonic variations, the Chaconne in D minor for violin and the Passacaglia in C minor for organ. Forkel knew these pieces but appears not to have seen – as Bach himself surely saw – that they have important points in common with the *Goldberg*.

Looking at these three pieces now, we can recognize them as presenting three commanding conceptions of variation form, unmatched as a group in the work of any other composer, each totally different in strategy and tactics, but all of them obviously aiming to wrest harmonic variety and create substantial works by deferring to (not merely decorating) a pattern of chords – a pattern moreover which is in itself already coherent, convincing, logical and, above all, potentially melodious. It would have been a 'thankless task' to write the usual kind of variations in which a melody and its (simple) harmonies were decorated with standard note-patterns, and no mature sets of variations by J. S. Bach are of this kind.

The formal name '*Clavierübung IV*'

For convenience, this Handbook will continue to refer to the Variations for Harpsichord in G major, BWV 988, as the *Goldberg*, aware that in

much German scholarship the name *Klavierübung IV* is often used. Here too, however, the received title is not quite straightforward.

Although neither the volume's original title page nor the Obituary calls it 'Part IV' of 'Keyboard Practice', the custom of doing so was established once and for all in 1853 when the Bach Society edition (BG vol. III) grouped it with the three previous volumes of harpsichord and organ music called *Clavierübung*. (These are described briefly in Chapter 1, below.) Publishing the four as a single volume in this way implied something more than when an individual owner of a *Goldberg* copy happened to mark it 'Part IV' by hand, as must have been the case now and then (for an example, see KB, p. 103); but the power of a monumental nineteenth-century edition to imply this 'something more' might not be justified. The original ornate and elegant title page was quite different from that of the three earlier volumes, and up to that point all Bach's published keyboard music had been called *Clavierübung*.

Thus, why the volume was not officially called 'Part IV' or 'Opus IV' raises several questions, such as whether yet later volumes also belonged in some sense to the series. It is true that following custom, the *Goldberg* publisher, Balthasar Schmid of Nuremberg, was unlikely to acknowledge in this way a series he himself had not previously published; *his* was not a fourth part of anything. But he had also been involved in Parts II and III and some years later was to publish the *Canonic Variations* for organ, which would then have been 'Part V' or even 'Part VI', had they or any further publication (such as the set of chorales called *Schübler*) still kept the general title of 'Keyboard Practice'. But this was becoming an archaic term.

In any case, finding titles seems not to have been a prime consideration for J. S. Bach. Some major keyboard compilations – the original *Orgelbüchlein*, the Six Sonatas for organ, the so-called *Well-tempered Clavier* Book 2, the late collection of organ chorales (nicknamed 'The Eighteen') and even the *Art of Fugue* – received no final title or title page. If any or all of these were or came to be intended for publication, as they might well have been during the new market-expansion of the 1740s, there is always a faint possibility that they too could have kept the generic title of 'Keyboard Practice Part X, consisting of . . . '. To see only the *Goldberg Variations* as part of some intended grand sequence, therefore, may well reflect the influence of the nineteenth-century Complete

Edition on subsequent references and editions, including the titles and terminology in the *New Bach Edition* and the BWV catalogue, which always speak of *Klavierübung IV*.

Nevertheless, for present purposes, and so long as other collections like the *Art of Fugue* are borne in mind, there are good reasons for taking the four volumes of *Clavierübung* in sequence as we have them, for each, in its way, is a highly organized and explicit collection of musical techniques, theoretical allusion and practical usefulness. Furthermore, some looking back might be discernible in each successive volume, though to recognize this could lead to exaggeration and encourage fanciful speculation, especially the kind involving number-counting. However all this might be, Chapter 1 surveys these previous collections of 'Keyboard Practice' in the belief that with them some idea can be glimpsed of the composer's original conception and its part in the compendium of musical techniques he seems to have spent so much of his life assembling.

A note on editions

The Bach Society edition of 1853 (BG vol. III, ed. C. F. Becker) is based on one example of the first print but has no critical commentary; its Dover reprint of 1970 unfortunately reduces the page-size. Kirkpatrick's edition referred to above (Schirmer 1935, with reprints) has a lengthy preface raising many questions of interpretation and performance, not without anachronism but still useful for study by performers. The Peters edition by Kurt Soldan (EP 4462, originally 1937) and the Henle edition of Rudolf Steglich (originally 1962) use one or two manuscript sources as well as a first print, but by far the most authoritative is the *Neue Bach-Ausgabe* vol. V/2 (Christoph Wolff, 1977) and its Critical Commentary of 1981 (KB or *Kritischer Bericht*, pp. 91–143, 153–5). Though not without begging some questions, this draws for its text on the so-called 'composer's copy' of the print, the rediscovery of which in France was announced by Olivier Alain in 1975. This has a few autograph markings and/or corrections, plus – most significantly – the 'Fourteen Canons', BWV 1087, an autograph manuscript copy of pieces otherwise unknown as a set (see below).

This 'composer's copy' is also the source for an inexpensive and 'cleaned up' facsimile edition published in 1990 by Editions Fuzeau (No. 2811), with introduction by Philippe Lescat. Apart from some

notation in the tenor clef from time to time, this or any facsimile edition need not give much trouble to a player already somewhat acquainted with the work, and it is warmly recommended. Of course a facsimile conveys such detail as the symmetrical pagination described below, though the consequence of this is a (superficially) cramped appearance, despite some slight enlargement in the Fuzeau reproduction. A more evocative and elegant facsimile is published by Peters (1984), based on another copy of the print, and completed by a booklet in which the editor, Christoph Wolff, describes all four *Clavierübung* volumes in facsimile, their history, publication process and various other matters arising.

The intended harpsichord

As with the organ works of J. S. Bach, the question 'What kind of instrument is most appropriate to this music?' is complex and needs careful wording. There seem to be several kinds of question:

- What range of instrument-types was familiar at the period and could have been in the mind of the composer, or owned by any of his buyers?
- What was the average or normal instrument of the time and place, and does this music have special requirements beyond it?
- What is lost if an instrument of another type, including modern harpsichords or even other keyboard instruments, is used instead?

The following remarks are concerned with the second of these questions, for the other two pass into realms involving far more than the *Goldberg Variations*. The first question requires a lengthy description of many instrument-types made in a country whose first keyboard-love was the organ and whose harpsichords are either simple work-horses or extravagant pseudo-organs with many sets of strings – individual or unique artefacts following no regular model. The third requires a probing of aesthetic issues that arise when music is transcribed (as when a modern piano is used for the *Goldberg*) or original timbres are imitated (as when a modern harpsichord copy is used) and is not unique to this repertory. However, these are the issues raised in any modern performance of the work, and an answer to the second question might point in a helpful direction.

Few technical details are known about the harpsichords in J. S. Bach's possession at any period of his life or how exclusive he was in his tastes and preferences, but the following states the background to the *Goldberg*:

> Although two manuals are not absolutely necessary to play all the notes, they are specified on the title page, obligatory for eleven variations and optional for three others.
>
> The compass required is GG–d‴ (Philipp Emanuel's Sonatas of 1742 require top e‴).
>
> The normal difference in tone between two rows of unison strings allows both parity in the two-part dialogues and a solo line for the right hand of Variations 13 and 25 (there are no left-hand solos as found in some organ works). This tone-difference will usually, perhaps always, mean that the right hand plays on the lower manual, the left on the upper.
>
> The period concerned is *c*. 1735–40.
>
> The music seems to have various links with Dresden.
>
> No particular effects or 'registrations' are specified.

It could be that the composer has consciously used the top and bottom notes normally available, as was certainly the case in some of his organ music. Such an overall compass was also required for *Clavierübung I*, while that for *Clavierübung II* was yet shorter (AA–c‴).[4] By 1740, these were old-fashioned compasses, but perhaps that was deliberate: they not only allowed older instruments to play the work but all things being equal, a longer compass (including that of most harpsichords made today) helps produce a different tone and encourages a colouristic approach to music rather alien to the counterpoint of the *Goldberg*. There is another advantage with a 'minimum instrument': it need have no 4′ row of strings influencing the behaviour of the soundboard, or any colour stop (lute, harp etc.) influencing the behaviour of the player. The four extant harpsichords by Michael Mietke, one of whose instruments was bought for Köthen in 1719 and collected in Berlin by J. S. Bach, have a compass only to c‴, d‴ (2) or e‴.

On the other hand, larger instruments, perhaps with more than three sets of strings, a longer compass and some 'colours' (suboctave strings,