



STEFANO GRECO  
classical concert pianist

## Bach: Goldberg Variations

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The most famous variations,  
as written by Bach.  
A return to basics

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Year of composition: 1741

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### Historical notes

“For these variations, we have to thank the initiative of the former Russian ambassador to the electoral court of Saxony, Count Kaiserling, who often stopped in Leipzig and brought t with him the aforementioned Goldberg, in order to have him given musical instruction by Bach. The Count was often ill and had sleepless nights. At such times, Goldberg, who lived in his house, had to spend the night in an antechamber, so as to play for him. Once the Count mentioned in Bach’s presence that he would like to have some clavier pieces for Goldberg, which should be of such a smooth and somewhat lively character that he might be a little cheered up by them in his sleepless nights. Bach thought himself best able to fulfill this wish by means of Variations [...], which thereafter the Count always called his. He was never tired of them, and for a long time sleepless nights meant: ‘Dear Goldberg, do play me one of my variations.’ Bach was perhaps never so rewarded for one of his works as for this. The Count presented him with a golden goblet filled with 100 louis-d’or. Nevertheless, even had the gift been a thousand times larger, their artistic value would not yet have been paid for”

(N. Forkel, *biografia di Bach*, 1802)

### No adjustments

These variations were written by Bach for 2 keyboards harpsichords. For this reason, they are considered “almost impossible to perform” on the piano, without making any adjustments in the distribution of the notes between left and right hand. According to some musicologists, Glenn Gould was the only one who was able to perform all the Goldberg Variations without any adjustments. However, by analyzing his videos it is easy to see that the Canadian pianist had in fact made some modifications. For instance, in the Variation No. 11. Stefano Greco performs the entire work without any adjustments, in order to keep, in his gestures, a more rigorous behavior and obedience and better realize the alchemy of this music.

### Bach’s tempos

In Greco’s execution, the tempos are not chosen according to aesthetics. They are the result of mathematical proportions that are hidden in Bach’s music. The consequence is a performance that sounds new, somewhat shocking, compared to the usual interpretations. Though this performance is strengthened by precise indications of the composer, among which there are even the note values. As an example, Bach took the trouble of asking his son-in-law Altnikol to copy the Prelude in B flat minor BWV 893 of the second book of the *Well-Tempered Clavier* with semiquavers rather than quavers, because he wanted it played faster. In the light of this, it seems really strange that some Variations, normally performed very slowly, were written with 32nd and 64th notes (the fastest possible notes).

### Ideal setting

In order to turn the traditional concert into a more involving experience, it is possible to use a big screen and to project the images taken by a camera that is positioned on the keyboard. This way, the public could see the spectacular crossings of hands.

### Program

• J.S. Bach: Goldberg Variations BWV 988

**Duration: 60 minutes (+ 15-20 minutes of talk)**

### Performances

**Alice Tully Hall - Lincoln Center** (New York, USA); **Castleton Theatre** (Virginia, USA); **Opera City Concert Hall** (Tokyo, Japan).

**Other cities:** Brussels (Belgium); Kingston, Montreal (Canada); Hamburg, Munich (Germany); Barletta, Cagliari, Rimini, Roma, Firenze, Napoli (Italy); Amsterdam (Netherlands); London (UK); Little Rock, New York (USA)





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