



Johann Sebastian Bach: Goldberg Variations

aud 20.035

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American Record Guide (Bradley Lehman - 2018.05.01)

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BACH: Goldberg Variations
Kemal Cem Yilmaz, p
Audite 20.035—55 minutes

Ji-Yong Kim, p
Warner 57193—60 minutes

with *Aria Variata*; *Aria with Variations S 991*
Elisabetta Guggelmin, hpc
Onclassical 17111—71 minutes

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Ji-Yong Kim is a young Korean pianist who prefers to go by the single name of "Ji." The album's front cover has "BACH" printed over a caricature of B, and the back has "JI" printed over a caricature of Bach. The package doesn't say that he plays piano.

This is B's debut recording as a soloist, but he was already notorious several years ago for a television commercial for a smartphone operating system. He played some of a Beethoven sonata on a special piano where all the keys were tuned to middle C. But his musicianship deserves attention.

This is a young man's extraverted interpretation. It is in no way boring. On the repeats, and sometimes also the first time through, it freely adds bursts of spontaneous-sounding notes. He calls it "jazz" in the booklet, but it doesn't sound like either jazz or Baroque ornamentation. It's convincingly musical and enjoyable, regardless of what one might call it. His tempos tend to be fast. He's out to shake up the world of classical music with capriciousness. It works. The music can stand this bold adventure. I won't spoil the fun-house by telling you where the weirdest distorting mirrors are. The performance sounds wildly intuitive and extemporaneous, but two pages in the booklet show that he painstakingly assembled this from about 300 takes.

Guggelmin plays harpsichord. Her program gives us all three sets of Bach's harpsichord variations conveniently on a single disc. (There are also some chorale-based variations for organ.) The strongest performance here is the *Air Varied in the Italian Manner*, S 989. It has ten variations. She gives the piece a natural flow and plenty of excitement. This might be a sufficient reason to buy the album. Another plus is the obscure set of variations, S 991, a piece that is hard to find elsewhere. Bach left it as a small fragment. There are two variations, but only the right-hand part. Someone must make up appropriate things for the left hand to do. The solution here (composed by the album's producer!) is too conservative and dull, merely copying bass notes from the statement of the theme. Bach and his students surely would have worked out something more enterprising and rhythmically interesting. I have found only two earlier recordings of this incomplete piece. Isidore Ahlgrim's harpsichord performance from the early 1950s is not back on the market yet. Hanssler's set of the complete Bach works has this piece played well on clavichord by Mario Videla (Volume 43 of the set, not reviewed). So, this is the place to get these short variations on harpsichord.

Guggelmin is a player who follows instructions very well but seems reluctant to take creative risks with the music. I had similar disappointment in her surface-oriented set of Jacques's music (MA 2018). There is nothing "wrong" with her perfect execution of all the notes in the Goldberg Variations, but the performance is bland. It's clean, but the music could sound more playful and surprising, as we get from B. The Henschel-styled harpsichord sounds fine, but the D-sharps are tuned distractingly too high in the Goldberg Variations. The repeat structure in this performance creates some unfortunate imbalances—she takes the repeats only when Bach troubled to write out first and second endings. This gives us the architectural absurdity of the very long Variation 25 having repeats (along with Variations 2, 4, 6, and 16), taking more than six minutes by itself, but too-short variations elsewhere. Five of them are shorter than a minute. It's as if every note written by Bach is sacrosanct and must be delivered at least once, overlooking the meaning and direction of the longer phrases.

page 1 of 1
page 2 of 2
page 3 of 3
page 4 of 4
page 5 of 5
page 6 of 6
page 7 of 7
page 8 of 8
page 9 of 9
page 10 of 10
page 11 of 11
page 12 of 12
page 13 of 13
page 14 of 14
page 15 of 15
page 16 of 16
page 17 of 17
page 18 of 18
page 19 of 19
page 20 of 20
page 21 of 21
page 22 of 22
page 23 of 23
page 24 of 24
page 25 of 25
page 26 of 26
page 27 of 27
page 28 of 28
page 29 of 29
page 30 of 30
page 31 of 31
page 32 of 32
page 33 of 33
page 34 of 34
page 35 of 35
page 36 of 36
page 37 of 37
page 38 of 38
page 39 of 39
page 40 of 40
page 41 of 41
page 42 of 42
page 43 of 43
page 44 of 44
page 45 of 45
page 46 of 46
page 47 of 47
page 48 of 48
page 49 of 49
page 50 of 50
page 51 of 51
page 52 of 52
page 53 of 53
page 54 of 54
page 55 of 55
page 56 of 56
page 57 of 57
page 58 of 58
page 59 of 59
page 60 of 60
page 61 of 61
page 62 of 62
page 63 of 63
page 64 of 64
page 65 of 65
page 66 of 66
page 67 of 67
page 68 of 68
page 69 of 69
page 70 of 70
page 71 of 71
page 72 of 72
page 73 of 73
page 74 of 74
page 75 of 75
page 76 of 76
page 77 of 77
page 78 of 78
page 79 of 79
page 80 of 80
page 81 of 81
page 82 of 82
page 83 of 83
page 84 of 84
page 85 of 85
page 86 of 86
page 87 of 87
page 88 of 88
page 89 of 89
page 90 of 90
page 91 of 91
page 92 of 92
page 93 of 93
page 94 of 94
page 95 of 95
page 96 of 96
page 97 of 97
page 98 of 98
page 99 of 99
page 100 of 100

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