

18 March 2024

VÍKINGUR ÓLAFSSON

PERFORMS BACH'S
GOLDBERG VARIATIONS



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WELCOME

Welcome to the International Pianists in Recital series for 2024, and to this concert, Víkingur Ólafsson Performs Bach's *Goldberg Variations*.

This sensational pianist hails from Iceland, and it is fair to say that he has taken the world of classical music by storm.

With a recent London performance of the *Goldberg Variations* described by *The Guardian* as 'a hypnotic presence at the keyboard' and 'breathtakingly organic', it is clear that Sydney audiences are in for an absolute masterclass in the music of Bach.

The *Goldberg Variations* are in many ways a perfectly clear gem. Bach, a master improviser himself, left no instructions on how the *Variations* were to be performed. This creates the perfect opportunity for colour, interpretation, blazing musicianship and personality to shine through each performance.

Theme & Variations are very proud to be the Presenting Partner of the 2024 International Pianists in Recital series, a year in which we also celebrate 22 years of partnership with the Sydney Symphony Orchestra.

Together, the Sydney Symphony and Theme & Variations are proud to bring some of the top pianists to Sydney to give unsurpassed musical experiences to audiences.

We do hope you enjoy this phenomenal recital by the brilliant and exciting Víkingur Ólafsson as he takes on the great JS Bach.



Ara Vartoukian OAM

Director, Theme & Variations Piano Services



2024 CONCERT SEASON

INTERNATIONAL PIANISTS IN RECITAL

Monday 18 March, 7pm

Concert Hall,
Sydney Opera House

VÍKINGUR ÓLAFSSON PERFORMS BACH'S GOLDBERG VARIATIONS A STUNNING MUSICAL JOURNEY

VÍKINGUR ÓLAFSSON piano

JOHANN SEBASTIAN BACH (1685-1750)

Aria with diverse variations for double-manual keyboard
(*Goldberg Variations*), BWV988 (1741)

Pre-concert talk

By Andrew Bukonya in the
Northern Foyer at 6.15pm

Artist signing

Víkingur Ólafsson will be signing
vinyl, CDs and concert guides
in the Southern Foyer at the
conclusion of this performance

Estimated durations

This concert will run
approximately 75 minutes
without interval

Cover image

Víkingur Ólafsson
Photo by Air Magg

Víkingur Ólafsson's performances
with the Sydney Symphony Orchestra
are generously supported by Tony &
Carol Berg

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Víkingur Ólafsson. Photo by Air Magg

ABOUT THE ARTISTS

VÍKINGUR ÓLAFSSON piano

Icelandic pianist Víkingur Ólafsson has made a profound impact with his remarkable combination of highest level musicianship and visionary programmes. His recordings for Deutsche Grammophon – *Philip Glass Piano Works* (2017), *Johann Sebastian Bach* (2018), *Debussy Rameau* (2020), *Mozart & Contemporaries* (2021) and *From Afar* (2022) – captured the public and critical imagination and have led to career streams of over 600 million.

In October 2023, Ólafsson released his anticipated new album on Deutsche Grammophon of JS Bach's *Goldberg Variations*. Ólafsson has dedicated his entire 2023-24 season to a *Goldberg Variations* world tour, performing the work across six continents throughout the year. He brings Bach's masterpiece to major concert halls including London's Southbank Centre, New York's Carnegie Hall, Wiener Konzerthaus, Philharmonie de Paris, Tokyo's Suntory Hall, Harpa Concert Hall, Sydney Opera House, Walt Disney Hall, Sala São Paulo, Shanghai Symphony Hall, Tonhalle Zurich, Philharmonie Berlin, Mupa Budapest, Teatro Colón, KKL Luzern and Alte Oper Frankfurt, to name a few.

Now one of the most sought-after artists of today, Ólafsson's multiple awards include CoScan's International Nordic Person of the Year (2023), the Rolf Schock Prize for Music (2022), *Gramophone* magazine's Artist of the Year (2019), Opus Klassik Solo Recording Instrumental (twice) and Album of the Year at the *BBC Music Magazine Awards* (2019). In 2023, Ólafsson was nominated for three Opus Klassik awards, including Instrumentalist of the Year.

A captivating communicator both on and off stage, Ólafsson's significant talent extends to broadcast, having presented several of his own series for television and radio. He was Artist in Residence for three months on BBC Radio 4's flagship arts programme, *Front Row* – broadcasting live during lockdown from an empty Harpa concert hall in Reykjavík, and reaching millions of listeners around the world.

ABOUT THE MUSIC

WHO WAS JS BACH?

JS Bach's first biographer Johann Nikolaus Forkel describes a typical gathering of the extended Bach family, as remembered by Sebastian's two eldest sons:

They devoted their time together wholly to making music. Since the company consisted entirely of Kantors, organists and town musicians, all of whom had to do with the church, and in any case it was then still the custom to begin everything on a religious note, the first thing they did on being gathered together was to strike up a chorale. They proceeded from this pious beginning to jests that were often in great contrast. For they now sang folksongs, some of a rather comic and indelicate content, in such a way that the various improvised parts made up a kind of harmony, but the texts for each part were quite different. They called this kind of extempore harmonizing a quodlibet, and not only enjoyed a hearty laugh at it themselves, but provoked equally hearty and irresistible laughter in all who heard them.

It must have been quite something: the Bach family had dominated music in the Lutheran heartland of the central German provinces since the early sixteenth century and was linked by marriage to most of the other prominent musical dynasties there.

As Christoph Wolff has noted, we can never know just how it was that such prodigious talent was concentrated in one family – the *New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians* contains entries for 14 Bachs (of which only three are of Sebastian's generation), with a list of also-rans that contains many more. It is clear, though, that the profession of music was, like a trade, carried on from father to son. Indeed, the status of musicians like the Bachs was akin to that of tradesman well into the early eighteenth century.

Sebastian Bach was orphaned before his tenth birthday and was brought up by a much older brother, Johann Christoph, who was organist in the small Thuringian town of Ohrdruf. It is generally agreed that Christoph 'laid the foundation' for Sebastian's keyboard technique, and for his intense interest in the construction of keyboard instruments, especially the organ. There are numerous accounts of Bach being called in to road-test new instruments.

His first job as a musician, though, was as a violinist in the orchestra of the Duke of Weimar for six months in 1703, and returned to the Weimar court some years later serving as chamber musician and organist from 1708 to 1717. In the interim he held a series of organist positions in towns such as Arnstadt and Mühlhausen, but in 1717 entered the employment of Prince Leopold of Anhalt-Köthen. This was possibly the happiest period of Bach's life, though he was devastated at the death of his first wife Maria Barbara, but soon married Anna Magdalena Wilcke, a fine musician herself. The Prince had been raised a Calvinist so required no music for his chapel, but maintained a distinguished music staff for whom Bach – perhaps relieved at not having 'to do with the church' – wrote some of his most important instrumental music.

With the Prince's marriage to an unmusical bride, Bach left and took up employment in the city of Leipzig where he would spend the 27 years until his death in 1750. He was Cantor of the Thomasschule, training the students to provide music at the city's two main churches. This period saw the composition of the bulk of his surviving church music, notably cantatas for regular Sunday use and larger works like the St Matthew and St John Passions for Eastertide. But Bach also cultivated instrumental works, taking over the directorship of the local Collegium musicum (a pro-am orchestra founded by the composer Telemann) for which a number of larger scale pieces, some for visiting soloists keen to work with Bach, were doubtless written.

ABOUT THE MUSIC

Bach's innovations included his development of the keyboard concerto – often based on works (by himself or other composers like Vivaldi) for single-line instruments. The 48 Preludes and fugues of *The Well-tempered Clavier* explored, probably for the first time, the use of all possible keys, and works like *The Art of Fugue* (not Bach's title) or the B-minor Mass are mind-blowing compendiums of technical and structural ingenuity.

Gordon Kerry © 2024

BACH AND THE KEYBOARD

When period-instrument performances of Baroque music became mainstream in the 1970s, it must have seemed like a breath of fresh air after the sort of outings in which, as Debussy once put it, Bach seems to 'bear the weight of many subsequent centuries'. Faster tempos, stylish ornamentation and smaller ensembles made for a clearer appreciation of the music's many simultaneously occurring voices or polyphony; gut strings, looser bow tension and a slightly lower pitch meant less penetrating but often more subtly-coloured string playing; cross-fingered woodwind and valveless brass made chromaticism sound genuinely dangerous and exciting. Nikolaus Harnoncourt founded the *Concentus Musicus Wien* in the mid-1950s; by the 1970s the field was crammed with the *Academy of Ancient Music*, *Leonhardt Consort*, *Musica Antiqua Köln* and numerous others, and performances of Baroque music by 'symphony' orchestras became rare.

Polish virtuoso Wanda Landowska had pioneered the revival of the harpsichord in the 1940s (though later purists sneer at the gargantuan 'plucking piano' she commissioned from Pleyel; revisiting her recordings one is struck by the oddity of the sound when compared with the lighter-timbred instruments favoured by, say, Leonhardt). But Bach and Handel remained a large part of every aspiring pianist's diet.

At the height of the period-instrument revival, however, performances of keyboard music on the modern piano likewise became rare, and those that occurred were frowned upon in certain circles. (Bach would have been bemused, partly as his concern was always firstly with structure, but also given that he was happy enough to oblige Frederick the Great by playing on the many fortepianos in the King's palace.) The subsequent period of peaceful coexistence has been wonderful, with the many insights of historical research informing performances on period and modern instruments – Harnoncourt conducting the *Concertgebouw Orchestra* in Haydn, or Lorraine Hunt Lieberson's account of Bach's cantata *Ich habe genug*, BWV82, or Angela Hewitt's explorations of Bach solo music and concertos, for instance. We realise, perhaps, that we can never know exactly how a piece sounded 300 years ago – indeed, historical research is re-examining performance practice as recent as that of the late 19th century – nor can we un-hear everything that has appeared since and which inevitably colours our appreciation. At least it's no longer a matter of shame to admit that while, say, Dafitt Moroney's recording of *The Well-tempered Clavier* on harpsichord is huge fun, so is Glenn Gould's on piano; that the Jordi Savall/Ton Koopmann recording of the gamba/cello sonatas are complemented by the Mischa Maisky/Martha Argerich recordings.

Bach's music for, shall we say, *Clavier* can be played on any instrument with a long enough keyboard, leaving individual players considerable creative latitude regarding speed, dynamics and expression. One suspects he would have applauded any performance of the *Goldberg Variations* on any instrument provided that the player expressed the work's clarity, sophistication and joy in virtuoso display.

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ABOUT THE MUSIC

Aria [quasi sarabande, G major]

Variation 1 [Two-part invention, quasi corrente]

Variation 2 [Three-part sinfonia]

Variation 3 Canon at the unison [with free bass]

Variation 4 [Four-part contrapuntal movement, quasi passepied]

Variation 5 for 1 or 2 manuals [Two-part invention, with hand crossing]

Variation 6 Canon at the second [with free bass]

Variation 7 for 1 or 2 manuals, in the tempo of a gigue

Variation 8 for 2 manuals

[Two-part invention, with hand crossing]

Variation 9 Canon at the third [with free bass]

Variation 10 [Four-part] Fughetta

Variation 11 for 2 manuals

[Two-part gigue, with hand crossing]

Variation 12 Canon at the fourth

[in contrary motion with free bass]

Variation 13 for 2 manuals [Aria descant movement with two-part foundation]

Variation 14 for 2 manuals [Two-part toccata movement, with hand crossing]

Variation 15 Canon at the fifth, *andante* [in contrary motion with free bass (G minor)]

Variation 16 Overture [French overture]

Variation 17 for 2 manuals [Two-part concerto movement, with hand crossing]

Variation 18 Canon at the sixth [in stretto, *alla breve*, with free bass]

Variation 19 [Three-part minuet]

Variation 20 for 2 manuals [Two-part toccata movement, with hand crossing]

Variation 21 Canon at the seventh [with free chromatic bass (G minor)]

Variation 22 *alla breve* [three-part fugato over a free bass, quasi ricercare]

Variation 23 for 2 manuals [Two-part toccata, scales expanding to parallel thirds and sixths, with hands crossing]

Variation 24 Canon at the octave [with free bass (quasi gigue)]

Variation 25 for 2 manuals, *adagio* [Aria descant movement with two-part chromatic foundation (G minor)]

Variation 26 for 2 manuals [Quasi sarabande (in 3/4, with skeleton of Aria melody) played against running semiquavers (in 18/16), alternating between hands]

Variation 27 Canon at the ninth [without free bass]

Variation 28 for 2 manuals [Toccatto movement (trills and double trills, with hand crossing)]

Variation 29 for 1 or 2 manuals [Toccatto movement (chordal trills, triplet semiquaver broken chords)]

Variation 30 Quodlibet [quoting two popular song melodies, over free bass]

Aria da capo



Aria from the Goldberg Variations, copied by Anna Magdalena Bach

ABOUT THE MUSIC

The Goldberg Variations BWV988 (1741)

In contrast to Beethoven, Bach's *œuvre* features only a half-dozen sets of variations or the related forms of chaconne and passacaglia, with the stunningly unique of exception of what we have come to call the *Goldberg Variations*.

Bach's first biographer, Johann Nikolaus Forkel, maintained that 'variations, on account of the constant sameness of the fundamental harmony, he had hitherto considered as an ungrateful task.' So while any number of contemporaries produced variations on, for instance, the ever-popular *La Folia*, Bach largely eschewed the 'through-bass' or 'formula' variation form. Since one of the gambits of Bach's contrapuntal technique consists in running a limited number of melodic/rhythmic figures through wide-ranging and dynamic harmonies (whereas the formula variation requires the opposite), this is not surprising. So, whence the *Goldberg Variations*?

Once again, Forkel is the source of the well-known anecdote according to which the former Russian Ambassador to the Electorate of Saxony, Count Keyserling, is said to have brought with him to meet Bach his virtuosic young protégé, Johann Gottlieb Goldberg, to have him instructed in music. During the visit, the Count apparently asked Bach to write some clavier pieces for Goldberg to play 'that he might be a little cheered up by them during his sleepless nights'. Bach acceded, receiving 'a golden goblet, filled with a hundred Louis d'ors' as payment for the commission. Whether true or false (there are as many reasons to surmise the one as the other), the story has stuck.

Bach was 55 in 1741, when he published what he styled 'Keyboard exercise consisting of an aria with diverse variations, for the two-manual harpsichord. Composed for amateurs for the recreation of their minds by Johann Sebastian Bach, court composer

of Poland and of the Prince-Elector of Saxony, Kapellmeister and choir director in Leipzig.' It was the fourth, and final, *magnum opus* which Bach published at his own expense, and owing to the cost of engraving and printing, he probably lost money on the enterprise. In his three previous sets of *Keyboard Exercise* ('Clavier-Übung' in German), Bach had presented, respectively, six partitas (suites), an Italian Concerto partnered with a French Overture, and a set of organ chorales flanked by an immense prelude and fugue. The fourth set, though not so numbered by the composer, would similarly place before the public an exemplary work of the highest artistry.

Like these earlier works, the *Goldberg Variations* assimilate influences from German, Italian and French styles, underpinned by a masterly display of contrapuntal mastery rivalling that of either *The Well-tempered Clavier* or *The Art of Fugue*. A work like Buxtehude's *La Capricciosa, Partite diverse sopra una aria d'inventione*, which presents 32 variations on an original theme, may have suggested a structural template (although, given the ubiquity of the form, Bach would scarcely have needed a specific model), but also important, surely, are Domenico Scarlatti's characterful and virtuosic keyboard *Essercizi* or Exercises, sets of which were published in Amsterdam during the 1730s and 40s and with which Bach is likely to have been familiar. One of the features of the *Goldberg* set is the lively and idiosyncratic nature of each variation.

ABOUT THE MUSIC

Harpichordist Glen Wilson has used the striking image of a formal French garden as a metaphor for the *Goldberg Variations*, noting that from his workroom at St Thomas' School Bach could look over the river at the most famous private garden in Leipzig, newly laid out *à la mode française*. Like such a garden, the *Variations* boast many levels of symmetry. They start and end with a sarabande-like Aria, comprising two sections each sixteen bars in length, highly decorated in the French manner. The 30 intervening variations, based on the descending bass line of the Aria, can be subdivided in a number of ways. The central axis sits between Variations 15 and 16, the latter being a (French) overture, so, like the Aria, the whole set also comprises two sections each sixteen units in length (Aria + Variations 1-15, Variations 16-30 + Aria da capo). Furthermore, the variations are grouped in subsets of three, the third of which is always a canon over a free bass: No.3 at the unison, No.6 at the second, No.9 at the third, and so forth, until No.27, a canon at the ninth which lacks the bass line. Instead of a canon (at the tenth), Variation 30 is a Quodlibet (Latin for 'what you will'), which quotes the tunes of two popular songs, whose words translate as 'It's been so long since I was with you, come closer!' and 'Cabbages and turnips have driven me away. If my mother had cooked meat, I might've stayed longer.' With the first song, we might imagine, the performer/listener is asking where the Aria has gone, while with the second the Aria is explaining its long absence (pushed aside for so long by so many variations).

If Forkel's account of Bach's usual antipathy to the variation form is true, then he may indeed have denigrated them (ironically) as 'cabbages and turnips'. But like those great Baroque artists whose still lives fascinate us with the hyper-reality of their fruit and flowers, Bach's *Goldberg Variations* represent a transcendental triumph of skill and invention over mere formal plan.

Stephen Schafer © 2003



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"The young Icelandic piano virtuoso Víkingur Ólafsson is a shining example of what seems to me an emerging golden age of pianists" - **Sydney Morning Herald**



INTERVIEW

‘A POET CAN'T ESCAPE BEING A POET’: ÓLAFSSON ON BACH'S *GOLDBERG VARIATIONS*

Icelandic pianist Víkingur Ólafsson has spent a year travelling the world performing Bach's iconic *Goldberg Variations*, and tonight he makes his long-awaited Sydney debut. He explains what makes this piece so endlessly fascinating, and why it remains one of the great landmarks of Western art.

By Hugh Robertson

Víkingur Ólafsson is one of the biggest names in classical music. Since bursting onto the scene with his first album for Deutsche Grammophon in 2017 the accolades and awards have followed in waves, each new album causing more to join the chorus singing his praises.

‘The new superstar of classical piano,’ wrote *The Daily Telegraph* (UK); ‘a breathtakingly brilliant pianist,’ enthused *Gramophone*. ‘Whatever he plays,’ said *The Times* (London), ‘Ólafsson treats the music with equal distinction: articulation wonderfully fleet and clean; the phrasing flexible, always alive; the range of touch in his fingers stretching into infinity.’

This past year Ólafsson has embarked on an extraordinary musical odyssey devoted to Bach's *Goldberg Variations*. He has performed this landmark work all over the world, originally planning 88 concerts, one for each key on a piano (though he admits that due to overwhelming demand he is getting closer to 100), and his recording was released on Deutsche Grammophon in October 2023 to more rave reviews. ‘Bach at the keyboard has rarely sounded so fresh, expressive and joyous,’ wrote the *Sunday Times* (UK); ‘Ólafsson's clarity of texture and articulation are marvels to behold,’ said *Limelight*.

Ólafsson finally makes his Sydney debut tonight, performing the *Goldberg Variations* in the Sydney Opera House Concert Hall: a fitting space for a phenomenal work.

The *Goldberg Variations* are something like the *Hamlet* of the piano: audiences know them inside and out, and sooner or later every major pianist must offer their interpretation. In an article for *The Guardian*, Ólafsson revealed that he had been dreaming about recording the *Goldbergs* for 25 years. So why now?

‘I just turned 40 and realised now is my time to do the *Goldberg Variations*,’ says Ólafsson. ‘This is my year to reflect, and it's my year touring the whole world playing this, my favourite work of all time.’

‘I told the *New York Times* it's a workaholic's sabbatical,’ he says with a laugh. ‘I'm taking a year off by playing Bach!’

Devoting himself to these works for so long has given Ólafsson the opportunity to think even more deeply about their significance and legacy: not just their ongoing significance to listeners in the 21st century, but what they represented for Bach in the 17th.

‘I think the *Goldberg Variations* represent Bach's message for posterity,’ says Ólafsson.

‘This is his testament when it comes to keyboard writing. It is an encyclopedia



Víkingur Ólafsson. Photo by Air Magg.

INTERVIEW

for how you think and dream on the keyboard. I think he was playing a bigger game – the *Goldberg Variations* show us a little bit of what he wanted the world to remember him for.

‘But of course, he wouldn't have had many hopes for that, because people didn't play old music in 1741 when this piece was composed. People only played new music – playing something that was older than 10 years old was basically impossible just because there was no circulation of manuscripts, and almost no great music libraries.’

‘That was all about to change, but Bach finds himself in this moment where he writes a piece which is out of fashion. Nobody cared for canons, fugues, all these toccatas, all these incredible structures that you find in the *Goldberg Variations*. Nobody cared about that in 1741; people wanted the new classical style, with simple melodies and basic accompaniments. People wanted pleasing music that would be easily understood.

‘But Bach always writing outside of his own time. Sometimes with the *Goldberg Variations*, what is so striking and beautiful about them is that they are a message to the future. And when you listen to the *Goldberg Variations* and play them today, you cannot escape thinking about the last three sonatas of Beethoven, much of Schumann, some Wagner, a lot of Mahler. This piece had an incredible influence on later giants of music history – it really shaped so much of what came afterwards.

‘It's also interesting to think about 1741. It becomes even more original and even more incredible that Bach would be able to invent something like this without everything else that we know today. The invention of this piece is even more magnificent if you think about it from that perspective.’

What is perhaps most amazing about this work is that even after a year of performing it, after close to 100 concerts, Ólafsson is still finding wonder in it, mystery in it, and joy in performing it night after night. And a big part of that is the different audience responses that he experiences in each performance.

‘It is a very beautiful thing – this work becomes a part of everybody's life who plays it, and indeed very often it becomes a part of the listener's personal lives.

‘Something about the work makes us reflect on our existence. Something about the cyclical nature of the *Goldberg Variations*, it is almost like a metaphor for the human condition. The return of the Aria at the end, like the return of the hero in *The Odyssey*, or the return of ourselves at the end of our own lives to our beginnings.

‘And when you play it for an audience, you have all these people together in a room but they are all on their individual paths, and they all go to a different place with this music. And that is the beautiful paradox of the *Goldberg* experience – we are so connected to other people but in the end we are also alone.’

At one point in our conversation I remark how extraordinary it is that Bach produced so much music – over a thousand works – often in a very mercantile manner, having to produce yet another cantata for that weekend's church service. And yet despite he was often capable of transcendence, of timelessness, of greatness. How is that possible?

‘A poet is a poet,’ says Ólafsson very matter-of-factly. ‘Even though Bach had all these obligations, a poet can't escape being a poet. And every little musical invention of Bach has that poetic core to it.

‘But in the end we don't listen to Bach today because of that mathematical awe that strikes us, but because of how this musical abstraction is very easily translated into human experiences that we all relate to one way or the other.’

Don't miss Víkingur Ólafsson's only Australian concerto appearances in 2024, when he performs Ravel's Piano Concerto in G with the Sydney Symphony Orchestra and Principal Guest Conductor Sir Donald Runnicles from 20-23 March, at the Sydney Opera House.

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