

The Goldberg Variations

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We were waiting impatiently for the train. They said it would leave from platform 9B, and it took us a while to find 9B, which was through the main station and out the back somewhere. There was no sign of a train, but perhaps we were still a little early. We paced up and down, until past the time for the train to leave.

I wasn't too worried, preoccupied in my thoughts with the music I was going to play, fragments from different parts of the score churning around, as they do, in no particular order. I couldn't prevent this internal monologue of sound. It was always there: pieces I was working on for concerts usually in the foreground but anything, anything at all might pop up, any other repertoire I'd learnt, popular songs my parents used to know, advertising jingles from last night's telly, openings of slow movements from random symphonies, and – my pet hate – snatches of Gilbert and Sullivan. Just before a concert my head was usually dominated by music I was about to play. Sounds jostling around, vying to be first in the queue, waiting for my hands to spew them out, actualise them on the keyboard. Try as I might – and I often did this just before a concert as a self-imposed discipline - it was difficult to get them lined up in exactly the right order, in slow motion, away from the piano. Only once I sat down on the piano stool, on stage, when the hush had fallen and I could begin - in that dreadful moment when you think 'this is it' - only then did the sounds behave themselves, stay on the leash, move in an orderly fashion to the tyranny of time. Out they came, one by one, bar by bar, phrase by phrase, for minutes on end, all at the right moment. More or less. Sometimes, when I didn't quite allow enough time for them they came out too soon and spoilt the effect, or when I had an occasional memory lapse – that moment where one of the fragments refuses to appear and the next one isn't quite ready.

I made Richard go and ask the guard what was happening. My fingers were beginning to freeze, even in fur gloves. I clutched my music case tightly. The concert was scheduled for 5.30 in Cambridge, less than an hour away by train, but I was anxious, there was a queasy feeling in my stomach. It was partly the usual nerves about playing, of course, but now in addition some anxiety about the train. It was a Sunday and trains were scarce. We were waiting for the 3.30 express. He came back after a few minutes. "Snow on the line, further up. They're clearing it. They don't know how long it'll take." I closed my eyes, my mind racing. There was nothing I could do, nothing. The snow was so heavy everywhere that even taking a taxi – a huge extravagance but sometimes in emergencies one did it – would not get us there any faster. The roads were also clogged with snow. I tried to think calmly, breathing deeply, focussing intently on the opening of the music I was about to play.

Two lines danced slowly together in my head, in stately sarabande rhythm, one a melody that began high up and then gradually spiralled elegantly downwards, the other a bass line that played outlines of the harmony in a quietly-moving cycle of descent. Two figures walking in a landscape, downhill, taking a gentle afternoon stroll, occasionally talking to each other or linking arms. The opening of *The Goldberg Variations*. There was something very calming about the effect it had on me. I kept my eyes closed, then very slowly began to work through the whole piece in my mind, taming it to submit to the slow internal rhythm of my narrative.

After Bach wrote this piece in 1741 the legend, which grew after his death in 1750, was that his patron Count von Goldberg commissioned it as a way of whiling away sleepless nights. I began learning the variations three years ago, and from my reading I learnt that this was not the case at all: it was a Count von Keyserlinck, a Russian living in Dresden who commissioned the piece, for a young musician called Johann Gottlieb Goldberg, although the story about the Count's insomnia seemed to stick. I often wondered about this, the more so when I began learning the music in earnest. There was an Aria and there were thirty Variations, some written in strict contrapuntal style, most of them technically demanding. It was a long piece, and the relation of theme to variations sometimes felt

very tenuous. Right at the end, after a long journey through all the variations that gradually took us further and further away from it, the original theme came back as a kind of coda. It was the most difficult thing to play, this last Aria. What was the purpose of it? Surely not just a ‘reminiscence’ of the tune to round things off, as jazz musicians are wont to do – playing the tune, improvising for ten minutes, then playing the tune through again as if nothing had happened.

Bach was a towering musical intellect, I told myself, he wouldn’t just see this final aria as a crass kind of ‘full-stop’. He was also a mystic, and he understood the way music worked as a kind of abstraction from life, yet at the same time he knew how hard it was to escape life’s realities. Was this what the ending was about? Was it merely conceptual, written out but not intended to be played, only imagined? Or was one supposed to hear the Aria differently the second time around, after the journey through the variations, feel changed in some way? Hear it filtered through the rest of the music as if one was hearing a new meaning in it, as if, indeed, one were hearing it for the first time? This kind of paradox would appeal to Bach. But the question was, how did one *show* this in performance? More difficult still: how did Bach imagine the piece as a whole? Was it really some kind of huge intellectual exercise – like *The Art of Fugue*? – not meant to be performed so much as imagined, studied, taken apart, played in sections.

Did Bach really write music to put the Count to sleep, or did he, on the other hand, write a set of variations to entertain him because he could *not* sleep? I liked trying to imagine the circumstances under which music was first played, and so that last question was the one that puzzled me the most. Now that I knew the music, it was in my head and my fingers, the answer to that last question still didn’t feel any closer. If anything, it was all the more puzzling. If Bach had written music to sleep by, why would he do so by writing something that was extremely complicated, going to great lengths to use such interesting counterpoint and such varied metre and tempi? Or was the point of it that the music was meant to be fairly ‘difficult’, challenging (because it changed so often) and not expressively tuneful like *The Italian Concerto*, therefore likely to appeal to a Russian diplomat who was bored with living in parochial Dresden?

The train was slowly pulling into the station, finally, shaking me out of such thoughts. Richard hurried me along the platform to the end carriage, which would be the first carriage when we arrived so we could make a quick getaway to rush and be first in line for a taxi in Cambridge. Rush, wait, Rush, wait. This was the only way to get there, and if I weren't playing a concert I wouldn't notice how it grated on my nerves. We would just about make it in time. All the notes flew around like a blizzard in my head and then disappeared. At the same time as thinking about the Count I had also, without noticing it, got to Variation 6, the second Canon, and was irritated at being interrupted to worry about seats, keeping out of a draught, jostling up against other people running along the platform. Richard threw open a door and we collapsed into an empty corner, huddling together for warmth. Hot air blasted from under the seat, scalding the back of my legs, although I was still chilled from the long wait. I was already dressed in my balloon gown ready to play, since there would be no time to change, and my lower calves, exposed to the heat in black stockings, began to feel itchy and uncomfortable as we pulled off. Again I tried to put it out of my mind - my cold face, my hot ankles - and concentrate on the music.

Where was I? Variation 7. Yes. I closed my eyes. But it wasn't the same, the interruption was too complete and had wiped not just the notes but the accumulative effect of the music, out of my mind. I stared at the grey buildings gradually giving way to white fields and ashen sky. The music tentatively began to creep back, random snatches from here and there, all Bach, mostly *The Goldberg Variations*, but in no particular order. I took my fingers out and blew on them to warm them up. I started to sweat, not so much from heat as from nerves. This was the first time I was going to play the piece in public. Several friends had heard it, and of course Richard, who knew it by heart from hearing me practise it for three years. As I always do with a new piece, I had played it for my old teacher from college, still my mentor, my best critic. She had listened to the first few bars and stopped me. Too fast, was all she said. I started again, slower. She listened a little longer, stopped me again. She knew that I was completely on top of the notes and that wasn't why she was stopping me, that wasn't what she was listening for (wrong notes),

nor would she have dared to stop me so early in the piece if we didn't know each other extremely well, if we hadn't been through this kind of thing many times before.

Start again, take a few breaths, imagine how it is going to end, was all she said. I took a few slow breaths, imagined the whole sweep of the piece in a few seconds, imagined the Count listening to it for the first time. The large sparsely furnished room, a log fire in the huge grate, candles making a pool of light around the harpsichord, the dark outside, a silent imaginary German countryside under a blanket of snow. I began again. This time she listened right through to Variation 15, nearly 40 minutes' worth of music. We sat in the sounds for those 40 minutes, intently hearing what I was doing. I enjoyed these sessions more than I could ever express. No-one listened like her. It was the concentration of someone who had been there before, knew the music from the deepest part of her life, from playing it in concerts many times, knew what it was like not merely to play to an audience but to *present* a piece, to experience what an actor experiences performing a role, holding the audience in your hand, taking them on the journey that you and you alone have planned.

Beautiful, beautiful. She always said that first. Lovely, you're playing really well. Such a lovely sound, the timing is good, the touch seems just about right. I wonder, though (this was always her way of beginning a constructive criticism), I wonder if you could project more of a sense of where the piece is going; you know, the architecture of it. I thought of her now, sitting on the train, a reverie of memories about her, her comments on the piece, her insight into my structural weaknesses. She had hit the nail on the head, as always. Where was the piece going? It was a good question. This wasn't a teleological piece like a sonata or a fugue. Variations were not, in general, Bach's kind of thing. *The Goldberg Variations* was a meditation on a theme, but far from meditative in the way it was written. To fall asleep to, or to listen to? a cure for insomnia, or a way to pass the time intelligently? - like reading a good book or paying someone to make conversation. What was this piece all about? Many small movements, stitched together by their relation - sometimes none too clear - to the main theme. First the Aria, then the variations tentatively recalling the Aria's melodic line, then its harmonies, finally just its harmonic

scheme. A progression? Not at all. A kind of cyclic form? Again, no, which is why playing the theme again at the end was so difficult. It was not a culmination of all that came before. The best word I could think of was not a memory, but, a kind of re-memory. Every three variations Bach wrote another canon – strict counterpoint weaving lines that ran one behind the other, now close together chasing the same notes, now one note apart, now a third apart, now a fourth. He spaced these canons out between other variations so that they came every third variation. He loved this number play: 3/4 time for the theme (the sarabande), patterns of threes in the variations, canons that progressed from the interval of 1 to the interval of 9 – three times three. Some of the canons used triple counterpoint. Who in the audience, trained musicians aside, could possibly follow all that, understand all that, through well over an hour's worth of music? Could the Count do that? That's how long he had to sit listening: nearly an hour-and-a-half of continuous music.

For this occasion, my debut with the piece, I had decided to play it without a break. The Cambridge Music Society had reluctantly agreed. I was at first offended then mildly irritated with the way I had to convince them of this. Surely they can manage without the usual tea break? Surely they can sit for ninety minutes without having to go and pee, I asked the woman, tetchily. She was not impressed. I was the musician, not the concert organiser. My role was to provide the music, not decide on other arrangements. She didn't exactly say so but I got the message. Finally she relented. Well, on condition that you will come and mingle with the audience afterwards, I'm sure they'll cope.

Mingle. How I hated this, this mingling, as if people wanted to touch you afterwards to make sure you were real, 'mingle' their body with yours. It was faintly disgusting, somehow. All the more so because after a feat like this, after remembering ninety minutes of music, playing it intensely moment by moment as if your life depended on it, taking the audience in your hand through all that music, you were physically and psychically exhausted. And you were on another plane. For you it had lasted hours, days, even. Time had stopped. The last thing you felt up to was coming down to earth and mingling. "That was wonderful! Tea or coffee? Do you take sugar? How many spoons? Would you like to

meet Mr So-and-so? Here he is. Could I ask you, now, as a musical amateur (I've never learnt to play the piano but I have a keen interest in music and a huge collection of CDs), how do you think Glenn Gould's interpretation compares to Ashkenazy's? I've got both, and of course they're very different. Do you know them? What? No? That's rather surprising, isn't it?"

No – it isn't surprising at all. I don't sit at home like you do, listening to CDs. I sit at the piano for hours learning the music, taking it apart, memorising it, one hand at a time, one page at a time, over several years while I'm also learning a lot of other music. If I were to spend all my time listening to various recordings of *The Goldberg Variations* there wouldn't be a moment left to practice. I wouldn't be able to do it, time-wise, never mind the fact that I don't want a whole lot of other performers' interpretations cluttering up my internal soundways. Why should I know all these recordings? I'm a pianist, not an amateur or a musicologist. Shut up and let me drink my wine. Let me 'mingle' a bit more and see what else I have to deal with before I can go home.

Of course, I don't say any of this. I would get a reputation for being 'difficult', and this might damage my chances of getting further concerts in Cambridge. I'm not such a big name that being difficult is part of the attraction. So I have developed a technique for dealing with audiences afterwards. I smile sweetly: "Excuse me. It was so nice meeting you, but I need to get a drink and go outside to have a smoke." That sort of thing usually works, usually lets me off the hook.

Snow on the line, snow on the line, snow on the line. The rhythm of the train was not in sync with the rhythm in my head: the anticipation of audience's stupidities churning around, which I tried to stop. This isn't fair, I thought, I need the audience, I must woo it. I must think only of the music. I focus on Bach again, speeding him up to match the speed of the train, making a mockery of Variation 25 in the process but never mind, at least I can remember it at that speed. I recite poems, mantras, homilies, Anything to take my mind off my nervousness but not fill it with anything else too serious, too distracting. The music is there. I know it is there, but we're too close to the concert now for me to

rehearse it in my head. I just have to trust that it'll all come out in the right order, at the right moment.

We slowly pull into the station, rush out, fight for a taxi, climb in. It is usually at moments like this that I forget the exact address of the concert hall. In advance I always think: we'll take a taxi from the station, as if the taxi driver will do the rest. Of course, he doesn't know Cambridge, has only just moved there. He gets out his map slowly, frozen fingers, studying it. The seconds tick past. The concert is due to begin in fifteen minutes. It will take about ten minutes to get to the hall, pay the driver, get to the Green Room, take off my coat, warm up my hands. I hope they have hot water. There will be absolutely no time to try out the piano. This is a major blow. I knew it was coming, but now it's a reality. I snap at Richard, as I always do in such moments, blaming him. By now I am very tense, almost sick with apprehension, my stomach heaving, hands sweating but not from warmth.

We pull up, Richard pays, I stumble up the steps, no-one comes out to greet me. I suppose they're already mingling, peeing the last drop of tea out because now they'll have no break for ninety minutes. I walk in. No-one there to help. A student selling programmes at the door tries to take my ticket. I almost yell at her – "I don't need a ticket - it's *me* playing!" "Where's the Green Room", asks Richard behind me, patient to the last. We throw ourselves in that direction, find a cold little room lit by a naked light bulb, with a small wash basin, a glass of water, a heater that has only just been turned on. It'll be nice and warm when I come off stage, when it's all over, I mumble to Richard. He knows me well enough by now, gives me a quick kiss and a squeeze, leaves me alone, pulls the door to. A few moments later a burly red-faced woman comes briskly in. "How nice to meet you, everything all right? we were afraid you weren't going to make it! Terribly cold, isn't it? The hall's quite warm though. Small audience so far. Perhaps we could wait another five minutes. They always take their time, come at the last minute. Sorry! I'll call you when we're ready. Would you like anything? Tea, Coffee?"

I can barely answer this monologue, I just try to get her out as quickly as possible. After she has gone I go over to the basin. There are two rituals I always need to do before concerts: one is to relax by slow stretching and deep breathing, the other is to immerse the hands in very hot water to get all the muscles expanded and activated. However cold it is in the hall, this can usually keep me going for just about long enough, until it doesn't matter any more. After a while, I don't usually notice my body. Sometimes people say, Did you hear that person coming in ten minutes late and banging the door? – and I never heard a thing. The water runs for a minute. It is stone cold. I can't touch it, it will make my hands worse than they are. I let it run longer, then try the other tap. There is no hot water coming out of either of them, even after five minutes. The woman is knocking at the door again. It is my cue. I haven't even done my breathing, and my hands are cold, she is talking about something, I'm trying not to listen, to keep the notes balanced in a delicate sequence in my head, ready to flow out in the right order.

I walk on stage. There is a sound like heavy rain on a metal roof – the kind of applause that you get at the beginning of a concert rather than at the end. The house lights don't go down early enough and I can see clumps of people in overcoats as well as rows of empty wooden seats here and there. There is a microphone swinging over the piano. They are recording this concert! How dare they! They never asked me! It is too late to do anything about it. I am walking up to the piano, bowing, the first notes are jostling into position, the air is chilly, I have no idea what kind of sound will come out of the piano, which I haven't had a chance to try out.

The Goldberg Variations. Everyone is waiting for me to play it, one of the most daunting things in a pianist's repertoire. How will I play the beginning? How will I play the end? I shut everything out, and the essentials move in. I close my eyes, and after a few seconds the room is there in my mind, as I knew it would be. The Count sitting in a large chair, the dog at his feet, logs blazing in the hearth. He has a glass of wine in his hand, comes over to me, gently pats my shoulder. He thanks me for coming, we talk about the music, about Bach, about the wonderful counterpoint in the canons, the mystery of it all.

Then he asks me a question. It is the same one that has always puzzled me. I sleep badly, he says. I hate these German winters, so much damper than St Petersburg, so boring, the people are dull, there is no-one to talk to. I am very lonely. I find that I have to read every night into the early hours of the morning. It is difficult for me to have more than two, three hours of sleep a night. My servants don't speak Russian, they misunderstand me, exploit my kindness. I cannot afford to let myself sleep much, besides which the place is so cold, and there is too much to do. I hate talking to Prussians: they have no taste, least of all in music. All they want are good tunes, to tap their clumsy feet to. I have no friends, no family here. And I have a sense of urgency. Life is slipping by. That is why I need music, that is why I have asked you to come. Please, now, play for me. And if, he says with the slightest hint of a smile, if I should fall asleep while you are playing, if for a moment I do slip into unconsciousness, will you promise me something? Promise me, that no matter what happens, you will keep playing until you come to the last variation. And then, right at the very end, when you reach the last bar of Variation 30, will you please play the theme, the Aria, once more, as if you were going to begin all over again?