



# RSNO

SCOTLAND'S NATIONAL  
ORCHESTRA

## Chamber Series 14:15

### Goldberg Variations

**DOVECOT STUDIOS, EDINBURGH**

SUN 3 MAY 2015: 2.30PM

**ST MARY'S CATHEDRAL, GLASGOW**

SUN 10 MAY 2015: 2.30PM

[rsno.org.uk/live](http://rsno.org.uk/live)



The RSNO's Chamber Series continues at Dovecot Studios, Edinburgh, and St Mary's Cathedral and Cottiers Theatre, Glasgow.

A unique opportunity to hear the musicians of the RSNO up close and personal, these performances also offer a refreshing chance to experience music by the great composers in an intimate setting.

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## FORTHCOMING RSNO CHAMBER CONCERTS

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### **Mendelssohn's Octet**

FRI 5 JUN 2015: 8.30PM  
COTTIERS THEATRE, GLASGOW

SUN 7 JUN 2015: 2.30PM  
DOVECOT STUDIOS, EDINBURGH

Programme includes:

**New work** by the winner of the Cottier Chamber Project Composition Competition

**Mendelssohn** Octet in E flat

### **Summer Classics**

SUN 14 JUN 2015: 3PM  
COTTIERS THEATRE, GLASGOW

**Schubert** Quartettsatz in C minor D703

**Schubert** String Trio No1 in B flat D471

**Brahms** String Sextet No1 in B flat



# Goldberg Variations

**Bach arr Dmitry Sitkovetsky**  
Goldberg Variations [80']



**James Clark**  
[VIOLIN]



**Tom Dunn**  
[VIOLA]



**Aleksei Kiseliov**  
[CELLO]

## Goldberg Variations

Johann Sebastian Bach (1685-1750)

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The *Goldberg Variations* is quite simply one of the greatest and most influential keyboard works ever written, an encyclopaedia of musical styles and techniques of JS Bach's time. And there's a quaint story as to how it came to be written, as recounted in Johann Nikolaus Forkel's 1802 biography of the composer.

The Russian ambassador to Saxony, Count Hermann von Kaiserling, would take the keyboard player Johann Gottlieb Goldberg with him as musician-in-service when he was travelling on diplomatic business, and he kindly stopped off in Leipzig so that Goldberg could take a few lessons with the great JS Bach. Kaiserling was a notorious insomniac, and he happened to mention to Bach one day that he'd like some cheerful pieces for Goldberg to play to ease him through his sleepless nights. Bach promptly came up with the *Goldberg Variations*, and received the princely reward of a golden goblet filled with 100 coins for his efforts.

It's a lovely story, but almost certainly made up. Although Goldberg was an accomplished player, he was only 14 when the work was published in 1741, and there's no dedication to either Kaiserling or Goldberg on Bach's manuscript. What's more likely, if less sensational, is that Bach planned his sublime Aria with 30 variations as the culmination of his four-volume *Clavier-Übung* (or keyboard exercises), as a grand display of his towering command of counterpoint, dramatic pacing and contemporary musical trends.



### A three-piece pattern

It was once disputed, too, that Bach even wrote the graceful **Aria** with which he opens the piece, although it's now accepted as Bach's own work. It's a slow sarabande with a heavily ornamented melody, and it forms the basis of all of Bach's visionary creativity across the ensuing variations. But it's not the Aria's tune that prompts Bach's inventiveness. Instead, he homes in on its bassline and harmonic progression for his remarkable series of contrasting variations, each of which also follows the original Aria's form of two large sections, each of which is repeated (AABB).

After the slow-moving serenity of the opening Aria, **Variation 1** is a kind of wake-up call that prepares us for the tumult of styles and virtuosity across the rest of the piece, and **Variation 2**

is a gentler evocation of a Baroque trio sonata, with two intertwining melodies over a bass.

And from that point on, Bach imposes a recurring three-variation pattern across the rest of the work. Every third variation (3, 6, 9, etc) is a canon at regularly increasing musical intervals; these canons are immediately followed (in variations 4, 7, 10, etc) by genre pieces evoking styles (often dance styles) popular during Bach's time; and the three-variation pattern is completed (in variations 5, 8, 11, etc) by what have been termed 'arabesques' – lively, imaginative variations that call for virtuoso playing.

### The music

Thus **Variation 3** is a canon at the unison; **Variation 4** is a kind of *passepied* Baroque dance; and **Variation 5** is a two-part piece that (in the keyboard original) requires the player's left hand to jump up and down across the right. **Variation 6** is a canon at the second; **Variation 7** is a French *gigue*; and **Variation 8** requires more hand-crossing as the two parts imitate each other. **Variation 9** is a canon at the third; **Variation 10** is a four-voice *fughetta*; and **Variation 11** is a virtuosic, two-part toccata. **Variation 12** is a canon at the fourth; **Variation 13** is a gentle *sarabande*; and **Variation 14** is a quick-fire showpiece buzzing with trills and ornamentation. **Variation 15** – a canon at the fifth, and the first of the work's minor-key variations – begins the *Goldberg Variations'* central trio of pieces, but it's **Variation 16** that marks the work's halfway point, and Bach recognises the milestone with one of his most distinctive variations in the form of a grand French *ouverture*, with a slow, stately opening section

followed by a propulsive, dance-like closing section. **Variation 17** – another virtuosic toccata involving hand-crossing – completes this central trio of pieces.

**Variation 18** is a canon at the sixth; **Variation 19** is another three-time dance; and **Variation 20** has the keyboard player's hands chasing each other up and down the keys. **Variation 21** is a canon at the seventh (the second of the work's minor-key variations); **Variation 22** is in the form of a fugue; and **Variation 23** has the keyboardist's hands copying each other in quick succession. **Variation 24** is a canon at the octave, and it's followed by **Variation 25**, the third and final variation in G minor, a harrowing lament that pushes the theme's by now familiar harmony in ever more extreme and unexpected directions. There's a complete mood change in the joyful, sparkling **Variation 26**, however. And the ebullient 26th Variation also serves as a prelude to the *Goldberg Variations'* final trio of pieces: a canon at the ninth (**Variation 27**); a two-part toccata with lots of repeated notes and written-out trills (**Variation 28**); and a joyous romp that contrasts alternating chords with flashy *arpeggio* flourishes (**Variation 29**).

Bach concludes his sequence with **Variation 30**, a glorious summation that he calls 'Quodlibet' or 'what you will', and in which he combines the Aria theme with two German folksongs. The piece then ends with a magical return of the opening *Aria* in its original form, but now transfigured in our minds beyond all recognition by the intense spiritual journey of the preceding 30 variations.



### **The Goldbergs on other instruments**

Long revered as one of the keyboard repertoire's greatest works, the *Goldberg Variations* has been co-opted for centuries by musicians eager to experience its music played by different instruments and ensembles. Even ignoring the work's transition from early keyboard instruments (principally harpsichord) to the modern-day piano, it's been transcribed for saxophone quartet, viol consort, and even reborn in jazz arrangements by Jacques Loussier and Uri Caine.

Russian-born violinist Dmitry Sitkovetsky made his arrangement for string trio in 1984 (he followed it in 1992 by an arrangement for string orchestra), inspired, he says, both by Bach's original music and by Canadian pianist Glenn Gould's iconic recordings of it. The most obvious difference with

the keyboard original is in the violin, viola and cello's ability to sustain notes – in the opening Aria, for instance, the melody truly sings. Elsewhere, Bach's original music is often in two- or three-part textures, and therefore suited perfectly to being articulated across three stringed instruments. On the rare occasions that Bach expands into four parts (in Variation 4, for example), Sitkovetsky either subtly simplifies the texture or simply asks his musicians to play more than one note at once. Only Bach's 'arabesque' variations (5, 8, 11 etc) are articulated slightly differently – rather than experiencing the showy virtuosity of the keyboard original, listeners can instead appreciate Bach's glittering, energetic music shared more equally across the intimate string threesome.

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SEASON  
2015:16

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# FORTHCOMING CONCERTS



## DAVIS CONDUCTS MAHLER FOUR

**Delius** A Song Before Sunrise

**Berg** Seven Early Songs

**Mahler** Symphony No4

**Sir Andrew Davis** CONDUCTOR

**Erin Wall** SOPRANO

**EDINBURGH** FRI 8 MAY 2015 : 7.30PM

**GLASGOW** SAT 9 MAY 2015 : 7.30PM



## OUNDJIAN CONDUCTS BRAHMS TWO

**Berlioz** Le carnaval romain

**Lalo** Symphonie espagnole

**Brahms** Symphony No2

**Peter Oundjian** CONDUCTOR

**Ray Chen** VIOLIN

**EDINBURGH** FRI 22 MAY 2015 : 7.30PM

**GLASGOW** SAT 23 MAY 2015 : 7.30PM