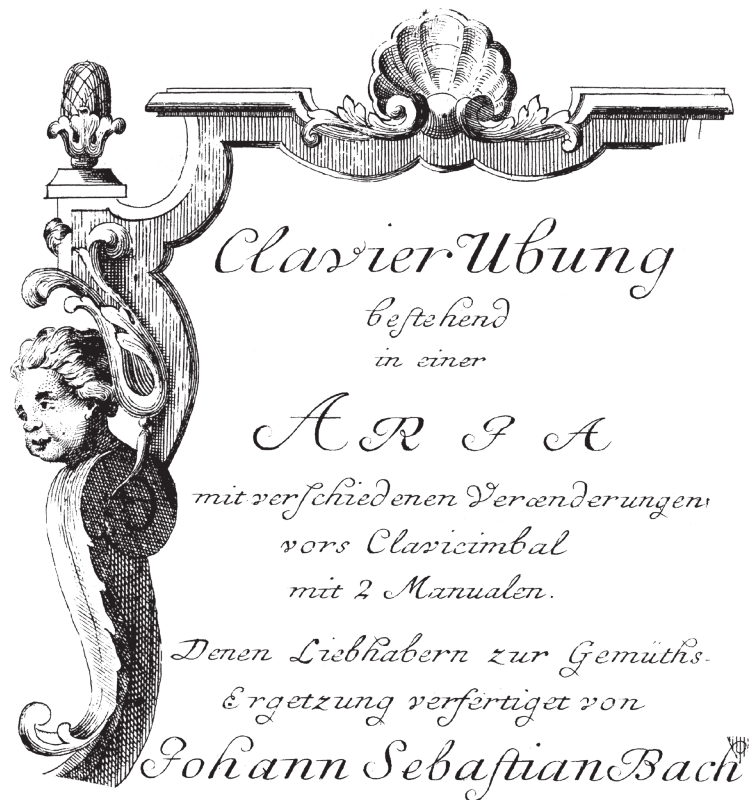




## GOLDBERG VARIATIONS

The ‘Goldberg Variations’ are regarded as a pinnacle of keyboard composition and a crowning jewel of Baroque variation technique. From the bassline of a graceful aria, Bach developed a rich cycle of thirty variations meticulously arranged within an elaborate overall structure. In it, he unfurled a kaleidoscope of the most diverse moods and musical ideas. Each variation has its own unique character. Intricate canons segue into virtuoso movements, such as suite dance movements and other familiar types, showcasing Bach’s ability to blend a wide array of musical styles, techniques and structural means.



## For bouts of insomnia?

Did Count von Keyserlingk really commission Bach to compose keyboard music for him, to be played during his sleepless nights by his own personal harpsichordist, Johann Gottlieb Goldberg? This anecdote was reported by Johann Nikolaus Forkel in his 1802 biography of Bach.

Yet, there was no dedication to the count in the first edition. Instead, Bach wrote on the title page that the 'Variations' were intended for "enthusiasts, for the refreshment of their spirits". Furthermore, could a 14-year-old Goldberg truly have mastered these intricate pieces? Back then, he was studying under Bach's son, Wilhelm Friedemann. After the publication of the 'Goldberg Variations', Bach journeyed to Dresden, possibly presenting a copy to his esteemed patron.

# Aria.

## with fundamental bass

Bach wrote a gallant aria as the opening movement with a “smooth and lively character” (Johann Nikolaus Forkel). However, he based his variations on the bass line instead of its lavishly ornamented melody. Each bar is underpinned by a fundamental note. The initial eight notes borrow a popular motif used by composers like George Frideric Handel. Bach expanded the bass to 32 bars, embedding it within a colourful harmonic framework that forms the foundation for the entire cycle.

With Bach exploring all the compositional and stylistic possibilities in an unprecedented way, his variations take us through a wide range of emotions and states of mind.

**Aria from the  
Goldberg Variations**  
Copy added by Anna Magdalena  
Bach to her second Notebook,  
c. 1740 (bars 1-15)

The bass theme consists of 32 fundamental notes. The first eight notes were taken from a motif also used by George Frideric Handel in his Chaconne with 62 Variations, HWV 442.





# Character variations

The Goldberg Variations offer a lively mix of virtuosic showpieces, intricate canons, and variations grounded in familiar movement types. Five variations draw inspiration from suite dance movements. For instance, the seventh variation is composed as a gigue, featuring a spirited character and bouncing, dotted rhythm in 6/8 time. Interspersed slides (ornaments that slide multiple scale steps up to the primary note) highlight the vibrant mood of this two-part variation. A copy of the first edition discovered in Strasbourg (France) in 1975 — bearing Bach's handwritten note 'al tempo di Giga' — reveals additional ornaments by the composer himself.

## Variatio 7.

The image shows a page of handwritten musical notation for Variation 7, Gigue. The score is written in two staves (treble and bass clef) and is annotated with green and blue lines. A green line points to a dotted rhythm in the first staff, labeled 'Dotted rhythm'. A blue line points to a slide ornament in the first staff, labeled 'Slides'. A red handwritten note 'al tempo di Giga -' is visible in the first staff. A white box on the left contains the text 'Bach's written remark: al tempo di Giga.' The score is titled 'Variatio 7. à 1. ó verso 2. Clav.' and includes a signature 'Bach' at the end.

Bach's written remark:  
al tempo di Giga.

**Variation 7. Gigue**  
Bach's personal copy of the  
'Goldberg Variations'

# Bravura pieces

Bach was keenly aware of contemporary stylistic trends and performance innovations (such as the refined harpsichord mastery of François Couperin and Jean Philippe Rameau as well as Domenico Scarlatti's virtuosic compositions), and adapted them in his music.

Variation 14 presents a spectacular display of virtuosity, demanding triadic semiquaver arpeggios, trill motifs, demisemiquaver motifs and complex hand-crossings. However,

the real sophistication lies in its musical architecture. In the second part, Bach ingeniously swaps the voices: motifs originally in the right hand are transferred to the left and vice versa, primarily moving in contrary motion!



## *Variatio 14.*

In the second half, there's a remarkable role reversal: the right hand adopts the part originally in the left hand, but mostly in the opposite direction, while the left hand takes on the part that was previously in the right hand.

# Precedented Canons

Bach's idea of making every third variation an ornate canon was unique. The two upper voices play exactly the same melody, offset in time, but the interval between them widens with each canon, reaching seven scale steps in the poignant Variation 21 in G minor.

The third voice, derived from the aria's bass line, connects chromatically (i.e. semitone steps) to a descending lament motif, known in the theory of musical rhetoric as the *passus duriusculus* (difficult passage). Bach ingeniously intertwined the bass with the upper voice motifs, creating the illusion of a three-part canon.

## *Variatio 21.* *Canone alla settima.*

The two upper voices begin with the interval of a seventh (seven scale steps). The second voice begins on **b flat**, the first voice on **a**.

Lament motif descending in semitone steps:  
*passus duriusculus* (difficult passage)

# CABBAGE



and

# TURNIPS ...

Bach brings us back down to earth with a stroke of genius in his final variation. A quodlibet is a humorous amalgamation of multiple songs. Bach's Quodlibet, as artistic as the other variations, draws upon two contemporary folk songs: 'Ich bin so lang nicht bei dir g'west' ('I have so long been away from you') and 'Kraut und Rüben haben mich vertrieben' ('Cabbage and turnips have driven me away'). The allusion is to the long-absent aria which, after journeying through Bach's contrapuntal variations, re-emerges in a new light.

## Variatio 30.

Quotations from the melody  
'I have so long been away from you'

Variatio 30. a 2 Clav. Quodlibet.

Aria da Capo e  
Fine.

Quotations from the melody  
'Cabbage and turnips have driven me away'



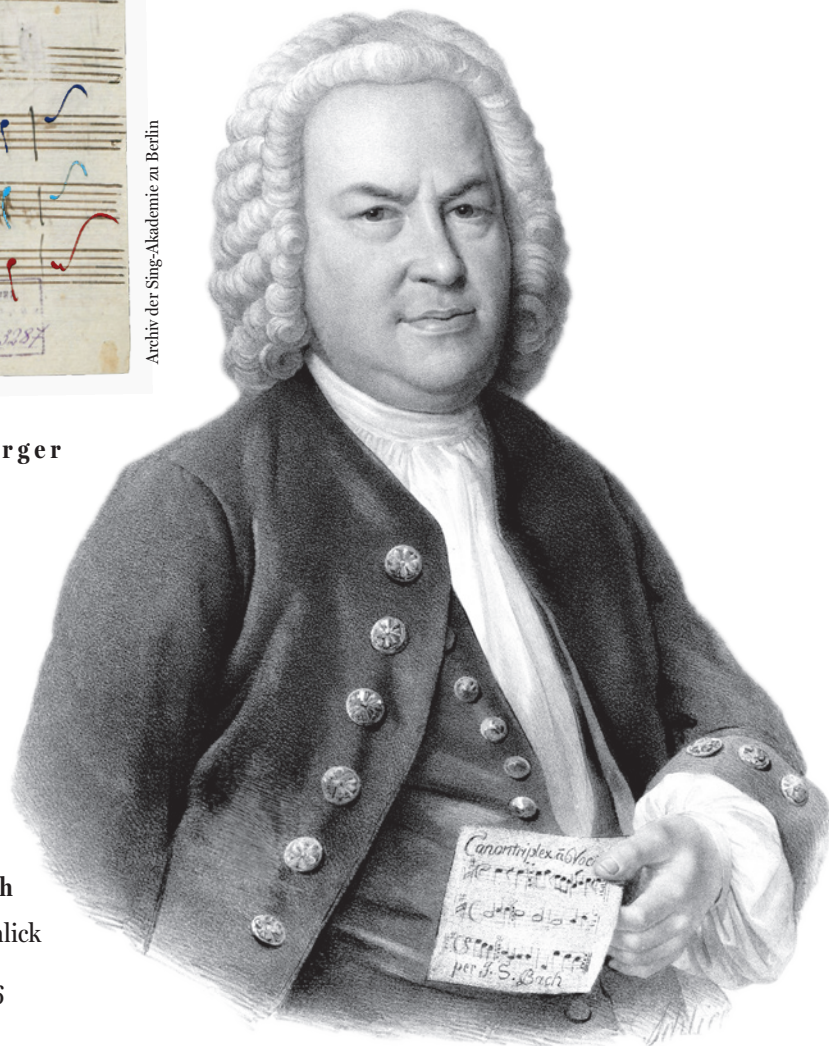
# Puzzle Canon

In his own personal copy, Bach penned a further 14 canons “on the first eight fundamental notes of the previous aria” on a blank page. One of them can also be seen in Elias Gottlob Haussmann’s famous portrait of Bach, the bass theme featured on the third line. This puzzle canon for six voices, even though only three voices are displayed, can be inverted to reveal the remaining three. The original portrait can be seen in the Treasury Room of the Bach Museum.



Archiv der Sing-Akademie zu Berlin

**Solution to the puzzle canon by Bach's student Johann Philipp Kirnberger**



**Johann Sebastian Bach**  
lithograph of Friedrich Gustav Schlick  
after an oil painting by  
Elias Gottlob Haussmann, 1746

*Identificare Canones libro in sistema agli fundamental =  
 Noten noxfeniger Arie. von J. S. Bach.*

*1. Canor simplex*      *2. all'overscio.*  
*3. Canor varijau Canores zigbij. motu drecto e contrario.*      *4. motu contrario & recto.*  
*5. Canon duplex a 4.*      *6. Canon simplex. libro by fagf 6*  
*7. Idem. a 3.*      *8. Canon simplex. il soggetto*  
*9. Canon in unijou post semiferam. a 3.*  
*10. Alio modo. per appropiatione & per ligaturis.*  
*11. Canon duplex a 4. fundamental. a 5.*      *12. Canon duplex a 6. a 7. a 8. a 9. a 10. a 11. a 12.*  
*13. Canon triplex. a 6.*  
*14. Canon a 4. per Augmentationem et Diminutionem.*

*Gi:*

Bibliothèque nationale de France, Paris

**Bach's personal copy  
 of the Goldberg Variations**



# MILESTONES *for* interpretation



Although Bach wrote the ‘Goldberg Variations’ for a two-manual harpsichord, contemporary performances often take place on a modern grand piano.

**Wanda Landowska**  
(1933)

... recorded the then rarely played work on a harpsichord specially built for her by Pleyel, a piano manufacturer.

**Glenn Gould**  
(1955, 1981)

His legendary piano recordings popularized the ‘Goldberg Variations’ and continue to set standards.

**Gustav Leonhardt**  
(1978)

A pioneer of the early music movement, he performed the cycle on a historically designed harpsichord, creating a reference recording. Recipient of the Bach Medal of the City of Leipzig 2003.

**András Schiff**  
(1982, 2001)

These emotive piano interpretations highlight the polyphonic structures and melodic lines. Recipient of the Bach Medal of the City of Leipzig 2022.

**Martin Stadtfeld**  
(2004)

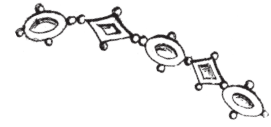
Martin Stadtfeld, with youthful spontaneity, occasionally shifts the melody an octave higher. International Bach Competition Leipzig, 1st prize 2002.

**Lang Lang**  
(2020)

Lang Lang’s nearly meditative performance of the Goldberg Variations showcases a broad emotional palette and elaborate ornamentation.



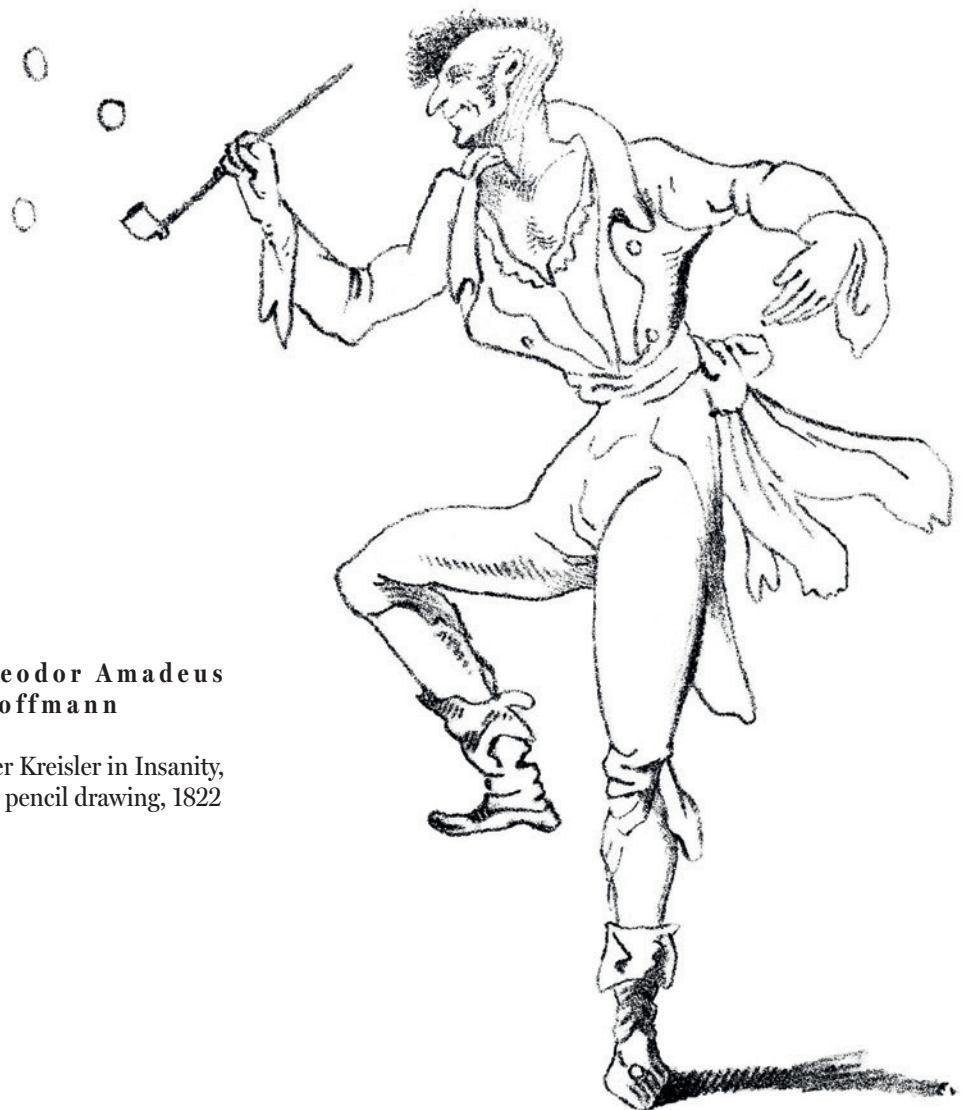
# *Literary* REFLECTIONS



The Goldberg Variations have inspired various writers to weave them into their narratives and novels. In 1814, E.T.A. Hoffmann created the character of Johannes Kreisler — a conductor and a tortured artist despairing of his unrefined audience. Kreisler performs Bach's Variations on the piano at a soirée.

However, to his chagrin, the attendees find his performance uninspiring and depart the room. Alone, Kreisler immerses himself in Bach's music, spiralling into a state of ecstatic improvisation.

More recently, Thomas Bernhard (*The Loser*, 1983) and Anna Enquist (*Counterpoint*, 2008) refer to the Goldberg Variations in their novels.



**Ernst Theodor Amadeus  
Hoffmann**

Kapellmeister Kreisler in *Insanity*,  
self portrait, pencil drawing, 1822

## Music to the exhibition on Spotify:

<https://open.spotify.com/playlist/72BluaFOLKLpMGHLFherMF?si=93396020dc4943aa>

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gemeinsam mit der  
Sparkasse Leipzig

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