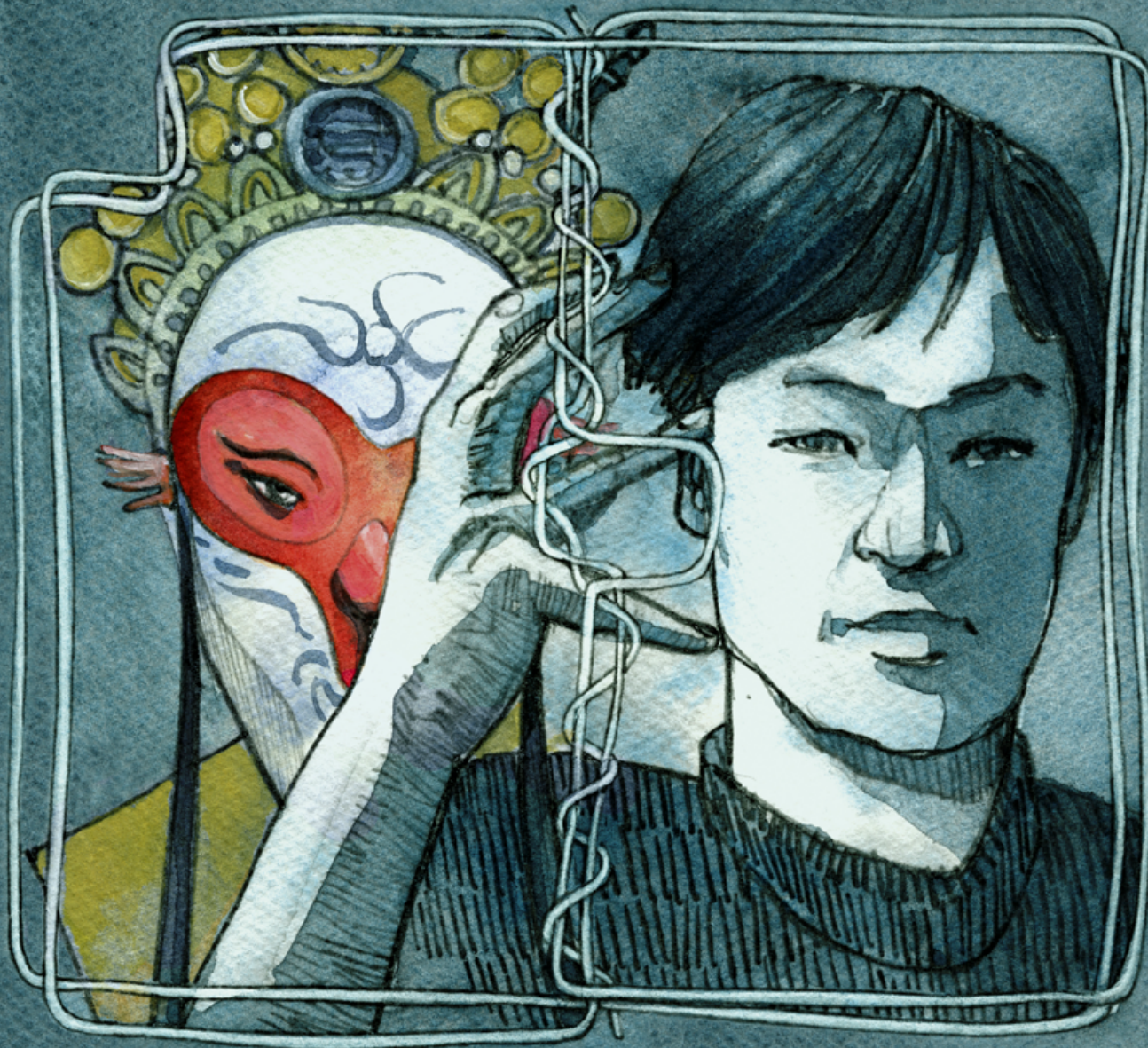




Bach • Busoni

Goldberg Variations
& other works



Chiyan Wong

Credits →

Tracklist →

Programme note →

Biography →

Bach · Busoni
Goldberg Variations
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Recorded in St George's Bristol ¹⁻²¹
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57:19

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CHIYAN WONG
piano

JOHANN SEBASTIAN BACH (1685–1750)

Goldberg Variations ('Air with Thirty Variations'), BWV 988

edited by Ferruccio Busoni, BV B 35 (1914); with modifications by Chiyon Wong

Variations in italics are omitted in this recording.

First group

- 1 — Aria: Largamente e cantato 2:12
- 2 — Variatio 1: Allegro con freschezza, e deciso 0:59
- 3 — Variatio 2: Andantino, dolce 0:47
Variatio 3 (Canone all'unisono): Andante con eleganza e con moto
- 4 — Variatio 4: Lo stesso movimento 0:29
- 5 — Variatio 5: Allegro, non troppo 0:47
- 6 — Variatio 6 (Canone alla seconda): Allegretto tranquillo 0:38
- 7 — Variatio 7: Allegro scherzando 0:59
- 8 — Variatio 8: Allegro 1:01
Variatio 9 (Canone alla terza): Moderato
- 9 — Variatio 10 (Fughetta I): Alla breve 0:55
- 10 — Variatio 11: Lostesso tempo, più vivace 1:04
Variatio 12 (Canone alla quarta e per moto contrario): Moderato
- 11 — Variatio 13: Andante con grazia [ossia] 2:32

Second group

- 12 — Variatio 14: Allegro ritenuto 1 : 10
- 13 — Variatio 15 (Canone alla quinta in moto contrario): Quasi adagio 2 : 50
Variatio 16 (Ouverture): Grave – Allegro moderato scherzoso (Fughetta II)
Variatio 17: Allegro slanciato
Variatio 18 (Canone alla sesta): Tempo giusto, alla breve
- 14 — Variatio 19: Allegretto piacevole 0 : 48
- 15 — Variatio 20: Allegretto vivace [Variante des Herausgebers] 1 : 07
Variatio 21 (Canone alla settima, semi cromatico): Andante con moto, non troppo dolce
- 16 — Variatio 22 (Fugato): Alla breve 0 : 40
- 17 — Variatio 23: Non Allegro 1 : 12
Variatio 24 (Canone all'ottava): Allegretto
- 18 — Variatio 25: Adagio 4 : 35

Third group

- 19 — Variatio 26: Allegro corrente 1 : 02
Variatio 27 (Canone alla nona): Moderato ma vivacemente
- 20 — Variatio 28: Andante brillante [Version des Herausgebers] 1 : 19
- 21 — Allegro finale [Variatio 29], Quodlibet [Variatio 30] e Ripresa:
 Allegro non troppo – Frisch und volkstümlich,
 doch nicht ohne Würde – Largamente (Aria) 4 : 53

- CHIYAN WONG (b. 1988)
- 22 — **Inversion of Variation 15 (Canone alla quinta)**
from Bach's Goldberg Variations, BWV 988 2 : 34
- FERRUCCIO BUSONI (1866–1924)
- 23 — **Sonatina 'in diem Nativitatis Christi MCMXVII' (No. 4), BV 274 (1917)** 7 : 16
- JOHANN SEBASTIAN BACH
- 24 — **Chaconne** (from Partita for violin No. 2 in D minor, BWV 1004)
 arranged by Ferruccio Busoni, BV B 24 (1893) 15 : 00

In memory of Peter Cossé (1948–2017)

As the eyes drink in the black and white keys of the piano, undreamed-of, unheard possibilities open up to me. They do not come from nowhere. They come from the music of the past.

A voice emerges: it is the cackling laughter of the Chinese mythical figure, the Monkey King, possessing the powers of 72 transformations.

This recording is like a little chamber. At its centre stands the illuminated text of the Goldberg Variations, reflected by three mirrors:

I — The *Inversion* reverses Goldberg's variation 15, which in turn engages in shadow play: the opening drooping melodic figure is answered by its own silhouette in the descant.

II — The *Sonatina* mirrors the polyphonic, serene sensibility of the Goldberg. It conceals diverse transformations of the *Sonatina*'s own opening theme. A passage of hushed chords, conjuring the sound of church bells, will be ultimately reincarnated in Busoni's *Doktor Faust* as a choir intones 'Credo in unum Deum, Patrem omnipotentem'.

III — The organ is invoked in Busoni's transcription for piano solo of Bach's 'Chaconne'. The result is a more Gothically etched version of the original, which is built, like the Goldberg, by reiterating the fundamental bass.

Duality is sown deep into our beings, in the form of exhalation and inhalation.

Reflection needs not be a weaker version of the original: with imagination and persistence, it might take shape and blossom into another being altogether. For instance, Giovanni Pico della Mirandola turns the following passage from the Vulgate (Job 32:8), ‘sed ut video spiritus est in hominibus’ (‘but there is the spirit in man’), to ‘sed ut video spiritus est in omnibus’ (‘but there is the spirit in all’).

As such, the seemingly disparate characters of Chinese mythology, Renaissance philosophy, Baroque music and modern sensibility aspire to be one.

Chiyan Wong, 2020

I WOULD LIKE TO THANK
JONATHAN FREEMAN-ATTWOOD AND BOB BOAS
WHO MADE THIS RECORDING POSSIBLE.

– CHIYAN WONG, 2020

Goldberg Variations & other works

The music of Johann Sebastian Bach was immensely influential throughout the career of the Italian composer, pianist, writer and editor Ferruccio Busoni. Some of his original works, like the *Fantasia contrappuntistica*, BV 256 (1910), derive or rework material from his music. His catalogue of transcriptions and editions comprises 27 works by Bach, a little more than Liszt (22) and a little less than Mozart (30). The transcriptions brilliantly rethink the models in pianistic terms, whereas the editions offer stimulating accounts of the originals viewed through the lens of a performer of immense intellect. For instance, in his edition of Bach's Well-Tempered Clavier, Busoni offers transformations of preludes into virtuoso etudes, as in the B flat major prelude from Book I, or shows how imitations of the subject at other intervals are possible, as in the B flat minor fugue from Book II.

Written for a two-manual harpsichord and first published in 1741, the 'Air with Thirty Variations', which became known in the nineteenth century as the 'Goldberg Variations', are so named in reference to the harpsichordist and composer Johann Gottlieb Goldberg (1727–56), who appears to have been a pupil of Bach and of his son Wilhelm Friedemann. At the age of fourteen he served as *Kammermusicus* to Count Hermann Karl von Keyserlingk (1697–1764), the Russian ambassador to Saxony. The story that Goldberg had to play the music during the Count's insomnia is of doubtful authenticity.

The work is based on an aria in triple time, in fact a sarabande consisting of two repeated sections, each further divided into two phrases. Bach uses the aria's bass line throughout the thirty variations, of which every third (3, 6, 9, 12, 15, 18, 21, 24, 27) is a canon, starting at the unison and going up to the ninth. Variation 10 is a fughetta; variation 16 a French overture; and variation 30 a Quodlibet, that is, a combination of two German folk songs. Variations 8, 11, 13, 14, 17, 20, 23, 25, 26, 27 and 28 call for an instrument with two manuals, which creates difficulties when playing on a single keyboard like the piano.

Busoni's version is part of the 25-volume edition of Bach's piano works (Breitkopf & Härtel, 1894, 1914–21) he prepared with his disciple Egon Petri (1881–1962) and the Italian pianist Bruno Mugellini (1871–1912). Busoni devoted volume 15 (1915), one of the nine he personally edited, to the 'most copious and the most ingenious' of Bach's variation works. He sought to 'rescue this remarkable work for the concert hall [...] either by shortening it, or paraphrasing it, to render it more suitable both for the receptive powers of the hearer, and for the possibilities of the performer'. He thus suggested omitting the repetition marks and, as he saw it 'expedient' for public performance, suppressing some variations; Bach's music nevertheless appears in its entirety in the edition. Busoni suggested that, in concert performances, a different sequence comprising three large groups be followed. He likened this to 'three distinct conditions of creative production: interplay within the circle; inward penetration; outward exaltation'. The first group covers variations 1 to 13, omitting 3, 9 and 12. The second group starts with either variation 14 or 17 (Chiyan Wong chooses the former) and continues up to variation 25, omitting 16 to 18, 21 and 24. The final group comprises variations 26 and 28, followed by an 'Allegro finale, Quodlibet e Ripresa'

consisting of the last two variations and the recapitulation of the opening aria. Busoni chooses to ‘restore the theme to its original melodic outline, simplified and freed from the elaborate network of ornamentations’, giving the conclusion ‘something hymn-like in effect, and increasing the volume of tone’. Chiyan Wong rather uses this section’s original text, but ‘washes away ornaments, albeit with some [...] contrapuntal “comments”’.

In 1910, during the second of his four American tours, Busoni played in Chicago, where he had discussions on counterpoint with the organist, composer and teacher Bernhard Ziehn (1845–1912) and his pupil Wilhelm Middelschulte (1863–1943). In his book *Canonical Studies* (1912), Ziehn discussed symmetrical inversion, whereby the strictness of the process is carried out without regard for the resulting harmony. Both this technique and his ideas on how to complete Bach’s *Art of Fugue* would eventually find their way into Busoni’s *Fantasia contrappuntistica*.

The idea of writing an inversion of variation 15 (Canone alla quinta) of the ‘Goldberg Variations’ occurred to Chiyan as a *compositional étude* suggested by Ziehn’s theoretical concept. Chiyan preserves the transparent layout of Busoni’s edition, which presents the three voices on separate staves. As a result of inversion, the outer parts are exchanged: the soprano begins with an octave leap upwards, instead of an octave descent in the bass. Using the note D as a mirror, the original, sombre key of G minor is transformed into a D major, with deceptive passing notes. This inversion may be compared to the inversion of the series by the American jazz pianist Dan Tepfer who, as of mid-2020, has reached midpoint. In this case, variation 15 is in G major, with G as pivot.

Busoni composed six stylistically diverse works called ‘sonatinas’ between 1910 and 1920. The first two sonatinas are increasingly modernistic and dissonant, whereas the next two are suffused with the more transparent and approachable style characteristic of his ideal of a *Junge Klassizität* (‘Young Classicism’). In 1920 he described this new compositional attitude as ‘the mastery, the sifting and the turning to account of all the gains of previous experiments and their inclusion in strong and beautiful forms’. The last two sonatinas are, respectively, a reinterpretation of a work (of dubious authenticity) by Bach and a paraphrase on themes from Bizet’s opera *Carmen*. The fourth such work, called *Sonatina ‘in diem Nativitatis Christi MCMXVII’* (‘on the day of Christ’s Birth 1917’), was completed in around four days on 21 or 22 December 1917 during Busoni’s Zurich exile. The intimate one-movement work that reflects Busoni’s desire for a ‘re-conquest of serenity (*serenitas*)’ is divided into four sections of which the central ones, marked ‘Sostenuto alla breve’ and ‘Moderatamente vivace’, are the most striking. The former section consists of a series of static dissonant chorale-like chords, called ‘Campane di Natale’ in a page of sketches. Its latter part, played with the two pedals held continuously, uses mostly bitonal combinations suggesting bells, a subject of fascination for Busoni. The latter section, replete with open fifths and fourths, is what, on the same sketch page, he called a *pifferata*, i.e., a piece played on a double-reed instrument from the Italian Apennines.

The ‘Chaconne’, which forms the fifth and last movement of Bach’s Partita for violin No. 2 in D minor (1720), already existed in at least seventeen arrangements, among others by Mendelssohn, Schumann and Brahms, when Busoni turned to it in 1893 – and others have followed. His version has rightly

become a classic of the genre, even more than his many reworkings of Bach's organ preludes and fugues and chorale preludes. Busoni, who gave the first performance of the work in Boston during his one-year at the New England Conservatory of Music, wrote that he 'treated the tonal effects from the standpoint of the organ-tone'. He added that the procedure had been attacked but was justified 'by the breadth of conception, which is not fully displayed by the violin'. Indeed, the luxuriant sound is fully in keeping with the piano's possibilities, which is called upon to realize a harmony that the violin must struggle to suggest.

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Pianist Chiyan Wong's audacity and vision have captivated listeners in repertoire ranging from the early Baroque to the twenty-first century, nuanced in particular by his interest in the music of Franz Liszt and Ferruccio Busoni. In recognition of his critically-acclaimed debut album *Liszt Transfigured: Operatic Fantasies for Piano* on Linn, he was awarded the prestigious 40th Grand Prix du Disque in 2018 by the Franz Liszt Society in Budapest, Hungary. The album features Liszt's operatic transcriptions completed and edited by Wong himself.

Wong has performed at the Hong Kong Arts Festival, Wigmore Hall, London, the International Music Festival in Dinard, France, and the Singapore International Piano Festival, where he has been a frequent guest. He has appeared as soloist with the Hong Kong Philharmonic Orchestra on several occasions and in 2017 was a prizewinner at the Mozarteum International Summer Academy in Salzburg.

Wong began his musical studies in his native hometown of Hong Kong and moved to England to further his studies at the Chetham's School of Music and Royal Northern College of Music under Norma Fisher. His interest in composition has led him to studies with Thomas Adès at the Prussia Cove International Musicians Seminar, as well as private studies with Naji Hakim in Paris. He graduated from the Royal Academy of Music, where he worked with Christopher Elton.

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