

## Burkard Schliessmann talks to Pianist about his latest album – Bach's Goldberg Variations

Erica Worth sits down with the German classical pianist to discuss Bach, his love of Gould, and why Steinway is his preferred choice of piano



### 1. You recorded the original album in the summer of 2007, and remastered it this year, in 2022. Explain the remastering process?

When I recorded the *Goldberg Variations* in 2007 with my record producer Friedemann Engelbrecht and my sound engineer Julian Schwenkner in the famous Teldex Studios in Berlin, we already produced it with numerous microphones and used the extraordinary acoustic possibilities from this studio hall. It already had been our vision to point out the multidimensionality of this monumental and visionary work, the Goldbergs. So, already in 2007 it was released on SACD (5.0) – at this time it was the first release of the Goldbergs in this audio-format. Now, with the new audio format, the 'Dolby Atmos', we could use the material we already had – and the idea was born for the remastering. My label, Divine Art (distributed by NAXOS International) and its chief Stephen Sutton, had been enthusiastic and so we all pushed this project.

The slower movements of the *Goldberg Variations* had given me the initial ignition: the kick-off to deliver a special acoustic experience to the listener, and the experience and nearly adventure to be embedded in the sound itself. Especially Variation 25, which I personally

see as the heart and centre of the Goldbergs, inspired me for the idea of the remastering and new release. Here, in Variation 25, it's like a personal confession of Bach himself, where Bach meets us in an extremely human reference and confesses: *"Oh death, how bitter is your sting."*

Independent from the remastering, I wanted to present the Goldbergs in a new way: My label did a great job in organising for the release to be available not just on physical CD, but all digital platforms. The 'Dolby Atmos' version is well presented on Apple, Amazon and Tidal – and others will follow. So, I think it's a good way.

## 2. When did you first start to work on the *Goldberg Variations*?

Like The Art of Fugue, the *Goldberg Variations* are a 'Work of the century' and have inspired me already as a youngster, as a 13-year-old boy. So, frankly, I have studied these works throughout all of my life. As one can learn, I also studied organ and performed the complete organ work from Bach – by memory – at the age of 21.

The occupation and engagement with Bach has joined me all over my life. And the engagement with such works like the *Goldberg Variations* is an endlessly unrolling, dynamic process.



*Schliessmann's Goldberg Variations is out now on Divine Art*

### **3. What does the piece mean to you?**

As pointed out in my booklet text, it is a virtuoso development out of silence and transcendental concealment in apotheosis, or: without a beginning and an end.

The *Goldberg Variations* have always enjoyed a special status, with pianists regarding them as a touchstone of their technical and interpretative powers. At stake are the ability to light up the work from within, a tightrope walk that at the same time describes a vast circle (starting out and returning to a state of apotheotic stillness), the ability to find one's bearings within a particular concentration of inner and outer complexity, an inner and outer coherence and homogeneity that are all-embracing, and the ability – finally – to produce an explosion of inner cells by reduced means (hence a particular sensitivity, sinewy tension and colour).

The performer must play a game with particular devices, finding solutions to the problems posed by the work not in octave doublings and other playful expedients but in a tightly structured inner rigour and order. What is demanded is a particular form of internalization, of inner and outer lyricism. It is this that makes the *Goldberg Variations* so unique – and so demanding.

One also could say: for me it's the *Alpha and Omega* in music.

### **4. Are there any past and present legends who play this piece that you admire? And what is it about their playing that you admire?**

Of course I do know numerous interpretations of the legends, past and present. The calligraphic clarity of Glenn Gould and the human warmth of Murray Perahia are a milestone in the history of the interpretations of the Goldbergs.

In the performance history of the *Goldberg Variations*, Rosalyn Tureck, Wanda Landowska and Glenn Gould were all pioneers who set new standards in the work's interpretation. In the liner notes for his 1955 recording, Gould wrote that, 'it is, in short, music which observes neither end nor beginning, music with neither real climax nor real resolution, music which, like Baudelaire's lovers, "rests lightly on the wings of the unchecked wind".' Gould is referring here to the circular design of the work, a circularity whose development is polarized, inspired and fed by more and more new energy fields. The result is a universe which in its significance resembles the alpha and omega of music in general; music that evolves out of nothing and disappears back into nothing as if in a state in which time stands still.

All this knowledge has led me to a long-lasting experience, an experience which I personally express in my interpretation as an *Aspect of Human Realism*.



Canadian classical pianist Glenn Gould. ©Don Hunstein/Sony Classical

**5. Do you think there is scope to interpret the Goldberg Variations in many different ways?**

Absolutely! This is the greatness of Bach himself that the way of interpretation is very fluent and flexible. And never stands still. Have a look at the development of interpretation of Angela Hewitt. She presented *The Well-Tempered Clavier* in totally different interpretations. While the first version points out rhythmic rigour and austerity, the second version is like an improvisation not only in the Preludes, but also in the Fugues. So, it's an aspect of something nearly Romantic. This is justified and, I personally confess, also my way.

**6. Was Bach very specific when he wrote the Variations?**

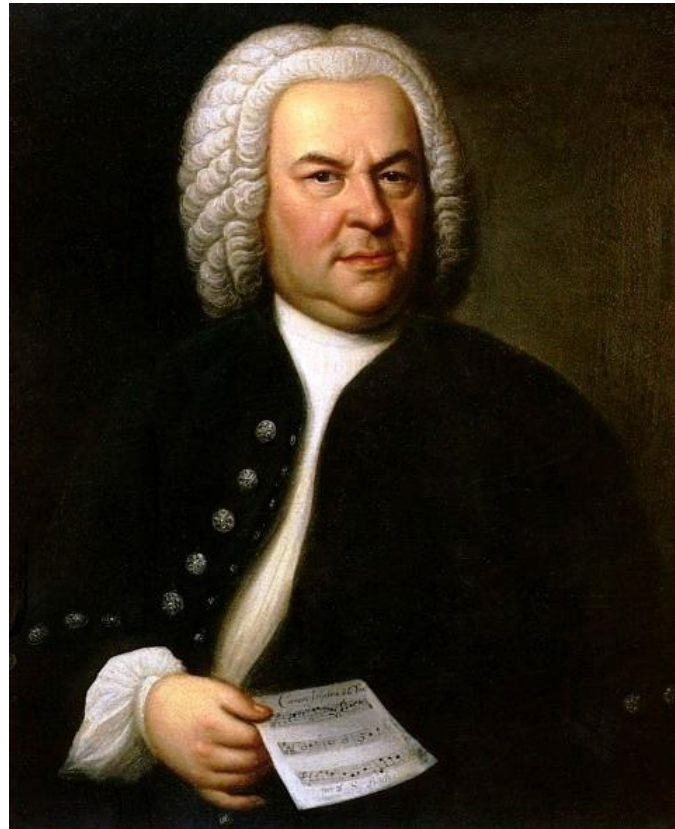
The engagement with Bach, and the point of view of Bach, really is something special because Bach allows so much flexibility (in a positive way). This also is a reason why the historical style of play is becoming more and more modern.

I personally confess that Bach has to be considered as a secular composer, not only as the 'Thomas Cantor'. Most of his works – nearly 75% – already existed in his years of Cöthen and Weimar. And the major works later had to be converted by the procedure of parody. For example, the 'Weihnachts-Oratorium' (*Christmas Oratorio*):

Originally, it was the 'Geburtstagskantate für die sächsische Kurfürstin' BWV 214 with the text: "Tönet Ihr Pauken, erschallet Trompeten, klingende Saiten erfüllet die Luft". Bach

already composed this in direct coherence with the words. He started with the timpanis, then the trumpets and the strings.

Later, in the 'Weihnachts-Oratorium', Bach replaced the text to: "Jauchzet, frohlocket, auf, preiset die Tage, rühmet, was heute der Höchste Getan!"



*"Bach allows so much flexibility." - Burkard Schliessmann*

One has to consider: During Bach's lifetime (and afterwards) – including his biographers, above all Carl Spitta – Bach's art was regarded as 'mere occasionalism', and the direct connection between text and music was downright denied; Bach was 'forgotten' immediately after his death. It was only through the revival of the St. Matthew Passion in 1829 by Felix Mendelssohn Bartholdy that Bach moved to the centre of a new understanding and thus gained new relevance.

In the 20th century, Albert Schweitzer interpreted the direct connection between text and music as an indispensable unity and spoke of Bach's 'tonal language'. In particular in the cantata works, the chorale preludes (e.g. '18 Choräle von verschiedenen Art', 'Leipziger Choräle' for organ), Bach wrote a lot of music.

In the 'Orgelbüchlein' (organ), where Bach distributes chorales in concentrated-compressed compositional form over the entire church year, Schweitzer saw Bach's 'tonal language as unsurpassable'.

### **7. What are the major technical and artistic difficulties in mastering this monumental work?**

The major technical challenge of mastering this monumental work is to *reduce* those Variations, which are especially composed for a two-manual harpsichord, and play them on a one-manual; the Concert Grand. This may cause technical challenges where both hands are close together. However, the main challenge is to point out and produce different colours and articulations – to verify clarity and transparency.

### **8. What is your goal for your interpretation?**

I understand Bach as an *Aspect of Human Realism*. Bach really cannot be seen, understood, and interpreted from an isolated point. Bach has to be explored as part of something complete, unique, of a universe – an aspect of human realism. Playing Bach, we have a surreal and metaphysical experience. So, this was my way of interpretation.



*"Bach has to be explored as part of something complete, unique, of a universe – an aspect of human realism."*

**9. Have you performed the *Goldberg Variations* in public?**

Of course. Many times. With the experience of live performance, one really grows with and on the work! With each time it's a new experience, a new challenge, and, frankly, one has to confess, a new respect and even reverence and humility(!) for this work of the century.

**10. It is an extremely long work. How does one keep the concentration when performing it?**

I play it with all repetitions. And, as you can hear, I play each repetition in a different way. This also is the reason the edition is presented on 2 CDs.

For live performance, you must have great physical stamina and extreme mental fitness. Otherwise it would be doomed to failure.

**11. Is it an easier process to record? Or is it 'easier' to try to play straight through?**

Me and my team at Teldex Studios, Berlin, worked on it for 2 1/2 days. First, we recorded several Variations to have a major coherence and large curve.



*Burkard Schliessmann at Teldex Studios*

Then, we went back and studied each Variation and worked on minute details. After this minute process we went back to the beginning and produced again larger curves. My sound engineer Julian Schwenkner really did a great job to combine these elements in his editing. In whole, you can hear the result.



*Teldex Studios, Berlin*

**12. You decided to use your own piano for the recording. Why?**

I only play and produce on my Steinway instruments as it helps me achieve a very personal result of interpretation. Also, since 1984 I've been collaborating with Georges Ammann, who really is a star of the Steinway technicians and provides for me a very singular and personal voicing, intonation and regulation. He also assisted with this recording of the Goldbergs in Berlin. We have been friends for so many years and I can trust him blindly. He knows exactly what I need.

**13. You have a Steinway model D. It requires a large room! Do you have the perfect place for this?**

I have two Steinways Ds. They are placed in a nice room with air conditioning. On my [Steinway profile](#), I confess: "My two Steinway Concert Grands, my art and me: A legacy. What else."

**14. Do you think that if you record the *Goldberg Variations* in ten years from now, it will be a very different interpretation?**

If I'm still alive, of course! It will be very different in many ways. As already mentioned, great interpretation is inspired not only from a classical perspective, but as a constantly unfolding, dynamic process.

**Burkard Schliessmann's *Goldberg Variations* is out now on Divine Art. Take a look [here](#).**



