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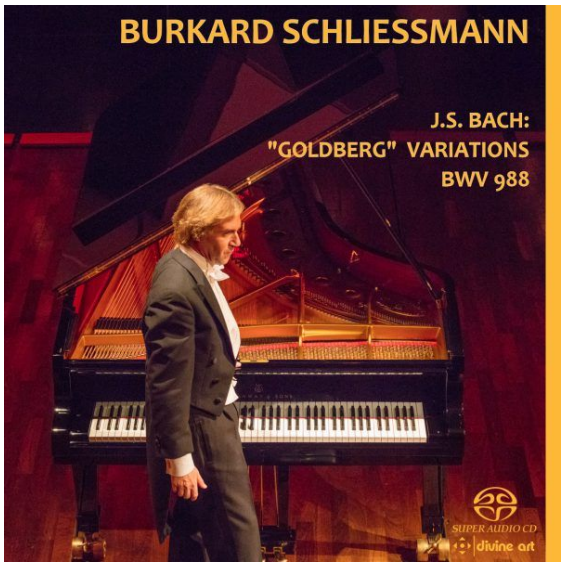
## Interview: Burkard Schliessmann and His Affective Affinities

## A conversation with Burkard Schliessmann

***By Dr. Gary Lemco***

***Reviews by Ken Meltzer, James Harrington and Colin Clarke***

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# Burkard Schliessmann and His Affective Affinities

**BY GARY LEMCO**

My correspondence, or rather, my communion, with pianist Burkard Schliessmann began formally on Wednesday, November 10, 2021, when I received a letter from the Maestro, sent in gratitude for my review of his three-CD set *At the Heart of the Piano,* which appeared in *Fanfare* in the January/February issue (45:3). What made the occasion particularly poignant lay in the fact that I had not read Maestro Schliessmann's interview in that same issue with Robert Schulslaper, which explored in detail the contents of the CD set, as well as Schliessmann's aesthetics in relation to his mission as an artist. So, if my response to his work in my review struck a sympathetic chord, the reaction had been essentially intuitive, buttressed by careful consideration of the works Schliessmann realized with resonant effect. For the present discussion, I took Mr. Schulslaper's article as my point of departure, complemented by issues, mostly aesthetic, that the Maestro and I addressed in correspondences that ensued after his initial letter to me. The other impetus to a new interview arises with the 2022 remastering at the Teldex Studio, Berlin, of his original, 2007 reading of the Bach *Goldberg Variations* on the Divine Art label (ddc 22754).

*Maestro, I must admit the sonic image of the "new" incarnation of the* Goldberg*s has a startling immediacy, a piercing clarity of detail. What is your own assessment of the remastered product and its technical means, Dolby Atmos? The potent* Adagio *at Variation 25, for instance, has gained a metaphysical authority.*

Thanks for the compliment. Yes, indeed, the *Adagio,* Variation 25, was the "initial ignition" to remaster my *Goldberg*s in Dolby Atmos, which indeed provides a new aspect and experience of listening of "multi-dimensionality." However, Variation 25 is like a center of the *Goldberg*s, 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."

*You chose as your instrument, given your status as a Steinway Artist, your own Steinway Grand Piano D-274. What would say to one like András Schiff, who criticizes the Steinway as "cold and sometimes austere," in favor his preferred Bösendorfer for the music of Bach and Schubert?*

I personally think that the character of an instrument is much more revealed by the technician who works on the instrument and is responsible for voicing, intonation, regulations, etc. Since 1984 my property Steinways are provided by Georges Ammann, who is well known as one of the best Steinway technicians all over the world and can cite outstanding references and experience. As you can convince yourself, my piano concert grand isn't "cold and sometimes austere." When we have a look to the tradition of famous technicians, it's also the question with whom the artists have collaborated. For example, Horowitz, Serkin, and others of the U.S. have preferred the voicing of Franz Mohr and Ron Coners; Michelangeli and Pollini—only to mention a few—in Italy exclusively collaborated (and Pollini still does!) with Angelo Fabbrini; in Europe it's Mitsuko Uchida and Burkard Schliessmann who look for the sound of Georges Ammann. They all have provided and still provide a very personal sound to the artists. We all are—on this high-end level of interpretation—dependent on our technicians and trust them or not. So, maybe if András Schiff prefers the character of a Bösendorfer, perhaps it's due to experience with his technician who meets his artistic vision.

"Playing a Bösendorfer requires sensitivity," Schiff is quoted as saying by Bösendorfer. In his

opinion, many pianists are simply not trained enough with regard to tone colors and touch nuances and therefore initially have more difficulties with the Viennese instrument, both tonally and mechanically. The reward for the effort is a great variety of tone colors as well as astonishing possibilities for differentiation, especially in the *pianissimo* range. And last but not least, Schiff believes that the spirit of the Viennese fortepianos of the early 19th century has been preserved in the Bösendorfer. It is an interesting development that it was the Yamaha group, of all companies, that bought Bösendorfer in 2007. However, Bösendorfer's head of communications, Rupert Löschnauer, promises that the different strengths and advantages of the two brands will be emphasized and promoted even more intensively in the future. As far as Yamaha's own concert grand pianos are concerned, the company is still having a hard time freeing itself from the image of a technically adept Steinway imitator. Yamaha instruments are considered to be robust, but opinions differ about the sound: What one person praises as objective and well-balanced seems flat, even soulless, to another. To this accusation Sviatoslav Richter is said to have commented thus: "I don't need a grand piano with character—I have character myself."

In this regard, we should have a deeper look at the development of piano manufacturing. Of course, Steinway & Sons still is the market leader in the concert world and on the stages, but we also have to respect the high quality of others who are coming out—for example Fazioli. In the recent Chopin Competition 2021 in Warsaw the winner played on a Fazioli F278, and also the winners of the third and fifth prizes.. And Angela Hewitt plays exclusively on Fazioli; on her recordings she plays her property Fazioli F278. Hewitt looks simultaneously for warmness and clarity, which the Fazioli gives for her highly personal Bach interpretations.

The other great piano which comes on stage is Shigeru Kawai. Shigeru Kawai pianos are very special and individual as well personal instruments. To point out their sensitivity and character you need a "MPA," a Master Piano Artisan, who has been part of the building and development of these instruments and can refer to the insights of these instruments. A "normal technician" is not qualified to work on these instruments. One has to respect that there are only a few of these MPAs, about 20 all over the world. The second, fourth, and sixth prize winners of the 2021 Chopin Competition played in the finals on a Shigeru Kawai SK-EX 278. Arimune Yamamoto, for example, is one of those MPAs, who really does a great job! And no less than Martha Argerich collaborates with Arimune Yamamoto; she trusts his art and today prefers Shigeru Kawai in her concerts. This speaks for itself!

More: The Polish pianist Ewa Poblocka does all her recordings on the Shigeru Kawai SK-EX under the technical supervision of Arimune Yamamoto. Among these I know a CD of Bach's *Well-Tempered Piano*, published by the Fryderyk Chopin Institute, which she played in the Witold Lutosławski Concert Studio of Polish Radio, Warsaw in June-July 2018. Besides the fact that this recording has been distinguished with several international prizes, for me personally it's one of the best CDs available of the *WTC,* both in the interpretation of Poblocka and the outstanding sound of the Shigeru Kawai SK-EX.

*You and Mr. Schulslaper raised the issue of the "erotic" nature of improvisation in performance, the "fusion" of the performer with the entire milieu and immediate context of the concert proper. Artur Rubinstein used to say that, for each recital, he would peer into the audience for the one astute listener-attendee with whom he would establish an intimate contact. Does his psychological, even amorous, approach ring true for you?*

Absolutely! I also feel each listener in the auditorium and feel the intensity (or lack of intensity?) of his listening to my interpretation. This gives me special inspiration and experience. It's quite an obsession to me to communicate at this moment, at this time, with my audience. I don't only play for them; it's something I want to give back to them. I feel how each listener in the audience is listening to me. I feel the intensity of hearing, of listening. This is like electricity, and this I give back to the audience. It's very stimulating.

*Since you spoke of "artistic truth: Truth of music and truth of sound form," my own aesthetic gravitated, as my chosen title for this interview indicates, to Wolfgang von Goethe, whose own credo,* Wahrheit und Dichtung*, "Truth and Poetry," defines, it appears, your own artistic vision. Your emphasis on the power of intuition embraces much of the Romantic ethos, even so far as the visionary*

*poets Wordsworth—his "intimations of immortality"—Shelley, and Coleridge, the last of whom urged the "esemplastic" nature of the poetic imagination, its mystical, creative power. Your remarks on Schumann and Scriabin would confirm their kinship, yes? Goethe, of course, raises all of your interest in the Faust motif, that element of hubris which drives many a Romantic protagonist.*

You can hardly put it better than that. You already have stated it extraordinarily with the best words ... Bravo!

*With the diverse discussions of the role of "variation" in the world of music, embracing Bach, Schumann, Liszt, and Berg, I felt the impact of Hegel's dictum, "The Idea unfolds itself in the form of being Different." This is what Kaufmann calls "dialectical monism," rather Manichean, in that two contending forces, opposites, work within the frame of a transcendent unity. I imagine that Bach, like Dante, would speculate that one sitting at God's side would witness the resolution of all apparent contradictions. As one who "worships" at the altar of Art, do you, too, seek a higher confluence of paradoxical perspectives? Wouldn't Bach's Quodlibet conform to such a view?*

I personally have understood Bach all the time 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. In playing Bach, we have a surreal and metaphysical experience.

Regarding the *Goldberg*s: 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. This is 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, finally, the ability to produce an explosion of inner cells by reduced means and hence a particular sensitivity, sinewy tension, and color. 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 rigor 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.

*Corollaries to your discussion of Schumann's op. 13* Symphonic Etudes, *the "mood paintings" with "rushing melodies in the right hand, carried along by the quotation of the theme, unaltered in the left," had my musical imagination rush to Grieg's poignant 1875 Ballade in G Minor, another example of an "affinity," if not a direct scion, of Schumann's contribution. Grieg not only quotes in Variation 3 Schumann's Romance in F♯ Major, op. 28/2, but he utilizes an A♭ as a kind of peripeteia in Variation 8, a rude awakening, the inverse of the A♭ that for Schumann invokes Schlegel's kindred listener. After all, Grieg's is a tragic vision, born of mortality in his family and perhaps his intuition of the imminent death of the Humanistic spirit.*

I totally agree. I am very sorry that Grieg's music is almost forgotten today, especially the piano music, which has experienced a downgrade as being mere "house music." So, it's great to hear that Nelson Freire, one of my favorite pianists, gave extraordinary interpretations on his "Encores CD" of the *Lyric Pieces*, pointing out the development from the early to the late pieces. Even there we can learn of this aspect of "tragic vision" of which you speak in your question.

*You cite Arthur Schopenhauer as a correspondent to Schumann, "mindful of the delightful sensuality" at the heart of music, with Schopenhauer having written of the inner core of music that "it is to witness great music's main and original concern becoming reality ... perceived and beheld in a realm that transcends the mind and the senses." Isn't such a claim Platonic in essence, on a par with Kant's notion of the noumenon? And how does such a pure intuition manifest itself, except by sounding tones in space and time, which are indeed empirical? The paradox begs music for an answer, but Schopenhauer is careful to qualify it as "great music." By whose standard? Look how your much-admired creator of* Tristan und Isolde *was received, the Liszt Sonata, or the Brahms D-Minor Concerto? Prokofiev's op. 45,* Choses en Soi, *Things in Themselves, seems to parody all these ambitions as sheer vanity, which leads to your own remarks on the excesses in Scriabin.*

Schopenhauer was often misunderstood and misinterpreted, especially because he was over-

shadowed by Hegel, who attracted many more students than Schopenhauer. So, what Schopenhauer wants to express with "it is to witness great music's main and original concern becoming reality … perceived and beheld in a realm that transcends the mind and the senses" really has to be understood as a visionary aspect: music and its interpretation, embedded in the tranquility of eternity, as an experience of the aesthetically resting in itself, beautiful.

Regarding the acceptance of great music in the mirror of critics: It is a well-known fact that works throughout that century—both in music and the visual arts—were misunderstood at the time of their creation. So this should be put into perspective accordingly.

By this, let's have a look at the Liszt Sonata, which you mention. The critic Eduard Hanslick, on hearing Liszt's B-Minor Sonata premiered by Hans von Bülow in 1857, thundered: "I am immensely glad to have heard this little-known and almost unplayable piece presented in such a perfect and authentic performance. Admittedly, words fail me to convey to others any idea of this musical monster. Never have I encountered the phenomenon of such utterly disparate elements being strung together so resourcefully, indeed wantonly, never have I experienced such wild ranting, so bloodthirsty an onslaught against everything music stands for. After feeling initially baffled, then enraged, I was finally overcome by the irresistibly comic effect it made. It was like the bustling, breathless laborings of an ingenious steam-powered mill grinding out virtually nothing. If Bülow had deliberately set out to convince the public that Liszt is an utter charlatan, he could hardly have chosen a better vehicle. But this sonata must be accorded one distinction at least: nothing else of its kind is ever likely to be found in the whole repertoire of music. All criticism, all discussion stops there. Anyone who hears this piece and finds it beautiful is beyond redemption."

Well, the critic was surely wrong here. Or was he? Hanslick had fully grasped the work's outrageous nature and taken up his stand against it. But if we take the trouble to read his observations in another light, it becomes evident that behind his apparently negative judgement there lies a whole set of observations which, if interpreted in a more positive way, are absolutely accurate.

*I found your admiration for Schumann's inventiveness, his "[discovery] in the fugues and canons of earlier composers a Romantic principle" compelling, reminding me that Schauffler found in Schumann elements from Johann Hermann Schein's music for* Banchetto musicale*! Wouldn't what you add about the metaphysical import of counterpoint naturally lead you to Brahms and Reger as your next explorations after your Schumann "Fantasies" project?*

I played—and recorded—all the major works from Brahms in my "earlier" years, in 1990 until 1991, in the well-known Friedrich-Ebert-Hall in Hamburg, famous for its outstanding acoustics. The recordings are available on Antes on three CDs. However, I now distance myself from these recordings—not from my interpretations, but rather from the way the label presents them and does not mention these recordings in my discography. So, frankly, you inspire me to think about organizing a new project! This could start with Reger and the *Bach-Variations,* op. 81, which I have performed numerous times in concert.

In general, Reger is today an unjustly neglected composer; only his organ compositions are occasionally performed, and only among insiders is Reger understood as a protagonist and appreciated accordingly. In our previous discussions by email we mentioned Serkin (of whom we are both big fans and whom you experienced live). He was a famous interpreter of Reger, especially the *Bach-Variations*, op. 81. Reger had a lasting influence on the New Viennese School, and he was the most frequently interpreted contemporary composer in the German-speaking world in the 1920s. In a conversation with Reger biographer Helmut Wirth, Paul Hindemith commented, "Max Reger was the last giant in music. I can't even think without him." Reger would certainly deserve a new renaissance.

*When you mention "the transports of the young Schumann reaching up to the heights of the late Beethoven sonatas and translating their yearning to another idiom," am I correct that you are thinking primarily of the A-Major, op. 101, given its impact of the Schumann's second movement of his Fantasie?*

Yes, of course. The Fantasie in C Major, op. 17, from Schumann is a gigantic work with an outstanding range. We have to consider that, stylistically, Schumann's piano works belong to a transitional period that was inspired by Bach's polyphony and conditioned by the successors and imitators of Viennese Classicism, particularly Beethoven. The elements of Schumann's style that make him

original and great, and which are uniquely characteristic of him, can be viewed in two ways. His compositional inventiveness took him far beyond the harmonic progressions known up to his time; on the other hand, he discovered in the fugues and canons of earlier composers a Romantic principle. He saw counterpoint, with its interweaving of voices, as corresponding to the mysterious relationships between external phenomena and the human soul and, being a Romantic composer, found himself impelled to express these in complex musical terms.

The challenge of finding adequate musical and intellectual substance to fill a large-scale form was one that Schumann never fulfilled better than in the Fantasie in C, op. 17; indeed in the field of piano music he never again equaled this achievement. For these reasons the ambitious Fantasie occupies a special place in Schumann's *oeuvre.* It is arguably the boldest and most uninhibited work he ever wrote, and not only because it is dedicated to Franz Liszt, the boldest and most uninhibited piano virtuoso of all time. It also harks back to a freer and more improvisatory conception of sonata form anticipated by Beethoven. Moreover, this homage to Beethoven carries the telling sub-titles "Ruins," "Triumphal Arches (Trophies)," "Crown of Stars" (Palms). Their primary intention is to serve as a reminder of the glory and triumph of genius, its palms of victory, and its immortality in the starry firmament of high creativity. In the rarefied world of Romantic sensibility and personal passions, such aspirations had to find the only possible way open to them to achieve the same high accolade. This uniquely personal Romantic language is clearly audible in the lines by Friedrich Schlegel, which Schumann later chose as the motto for the whole work instead of naming the individual movements:

Through all the tones in the
many-colored dream of the earth,
one single tone can be
discerned by the secret listener.

It is the final verse of a mystical nature poem, "Die Gebüsche," which had already been set by Schubert. It suggests the hidden link between the composer figure, who is best able to listen to the song of the cosmos and understand it in depth, and those poets in whose words the ineffability of earthly dreams is summoned to the threshold of human comprehension. Schumann's Fantasie expresses in magical music the meaning behind the metaphors chosen by the great German Romantic writers such as Schlegel, Novalis, Eichendorff, and Jean Paul.

Schumann himself described the Fantasie's opening movement as the most passionate of all his works. This was a significant remark, but the circumstances of the work's genesis should not be overlooked, especially when it is being performed. There is no question of insipid sentimentality about it. Indeed, structurally speaking, the world of *Tristan* is already omnipresent in the first movement. In the development section the theme starts as if heard from far off, "as if re-telling a legend," and first occurs in the dominant minor before appearing in more decisive form in the main key of C. It reaches its *fff* climax on an unresolved suspended chord that is identical to the famous Tristan chord, whose accented A♭ is still present in the C Minor of the soothing "postlude." With the second reprise of the main theme we encounter Schumann's most audacious inspiration, an interrupted cadence suspended harmonically over three bars. Various critics have insisted that the first movement dominates the other two, but in fact the rhythmic and technical extremes of the second movement, and the variety of tonal color of the third, are what ensure the strength and coherence of the work as a whole. Here, in particular, the passionate outbursts lead the listener into Romantic depths far out of reach of the cozy drawing rooms of the period. Lyrical melody, and a craving for death, transfiguration, and spiritual bliss, sublimate the ecstatic quality of the anticipations of *Tristan* into a more chaste dream world.

So, all giants are present in Schumann's op. 17. And yes, Beethoven's op. 101 can be part of inspiration and impact for the second movement of Schumann's Fantasie.

*The explicit references to eroticism and sexuality that arise in your discussion alert me to the Tristan myth certainly; but more to the curious, vampiric element in Romantic art and fiction, such as Fuseli's work, Poe's "The Oval Portrait," and that most eloquent testimony to Narcissus,* The Picture of Dorian Gray. *Each explores the theme of love-death in his own way. I think of that remark by the female protagonist in* Wuthering Heights, *"I am Heathcliff!" as a confession of the equally*

*potent impulse to androgyny in the Romantic sensibility. The music of Olivier Messiaen occurs to me, ambitious in its fusion of profane and sacred impulses. Are you going to explore the* Vingt Regards*? I would venture your comments on the Berg Violin Concerto could be construed in a similar fashion of erotic necromancy.*

Yes, of course, this cycle could be something for me. Please keep in mind that I also can refer to a complete organ study. Already at the age of 21 I performed the complete organ works of Bach, and this by memory. So, I also was confronted and inspired by Messiaen and studied the major works such as *L'Ascension,* etc. The world, colors, and mystic as well visionary philosophy of Messiaen are omnipresent to me. So, regarding the *Vingt Regards sur l'Enfant Jésus*, each of the 20 pieces is either a view of the Child Jesus or a contemplation of the Child. The central aspect of the cycle is the union of human and divine nature in the form of Jesus. The chosen order of the pieces results in clear contrasts in tempo and intensity, but was probably also chosen for symbolic reasons; thus the "God theme" occurs in every fifth piece, but also in the sixth and 11th. For example, the Trinity (first piece "Father," fifth "Son," 10th "Holy Spirit") is made clear. Thus, the "God theme" is the central motif of the cycle. The "theme of mystical love" appears in the sixth, 19th, and 20th pieces. A number symbolism is revealed, for example, in the fact that the piece "Gaze of the Cross" is in the seventh place and "Gaze of the Angels" in the 14th place (seven is a sacred number, and 14 is its double). The "chord theme" is the basis of all the pieces. According to Messiaen, it is a "complex of sounds, destined for constant variation, abstractly preexistent as a sequence, yet very concrete and easily recognized by its colors." Messiaen incorporates numerous rhythmic canons, polymodal passages and irreversible rhythms, augmented in both directions, progressively accelerated or decelerated time values, asymmetrical augmentations, changes of register, etc. In addition, the composer uses numerous bird songs in this work, some of which occur verbatim. I regret that only a few pianists today play the complete cycle in the concert hall, preferring instead individually composed sequences of individual pieces in which Messiaen's richness of expression and piano style can be effectively demonstrated.

Is the Violin Concerto of Berg to be construed in a similar fashion of erotic necromancy? Yes, of course, especially in view of the direct reference to Bach. Like a number of other works by Berg, the piece combines the 12-tone technique, typical of serialist music learned from his teacher Arnold Schoenberg, with passages written in a freer, more tonal style. The score integrates serialism and tonality in a remarkable fashion. Although the row contains all 12 notes of the chromatic scale, there is a strong tonal undercurrent. The first three notes of the row make up a G-Minor triad; notes three to five are a D-Major triad; notes five to seven are an A-Minor triad; notes seven to nine are an E-Major triad; and the last four notes (B, C♯, E♭, F) and the first (G) together make up part of a whole tone scale. The roots of the four triads correspond to the open strings of the violin, which is highlighted in the opening passage of the piece. The resulting triads are thus fifth-related and form a cadence, which we hear directly before the row is played by the violin for the first time. Moreover, the four chords above imply the note sequence B (B♭)–A–C–H (B♮) which forms the BACH motif, thus connecting the piece to Johann Sebastian Bach, whose music plays a crucial role in this concerto.

The last four notes of the row, ascending whole tones, are also the first four notes of the chorale melody of "Es ist genug" (It is enough), another part of the whole tone scale. Bach composed a four-part setting of the hymn by Franz Joachim Burmeister with a melody by Johann Rudolph Ahle to conclude his cantata "O Ewigkeit, du Donnerwort," BWV 60 (O eternity, you word of thunder). Berg quotes this chorale directly in the last movement of the piece, where Bach's harmonization is heard in the clarinets. There is another directly quoted tonal passage in the work in the form of a Carinthian folk song in the second section of the first movement, which returns briefly before the coda in the second movement. This is perhaps the only section which does not derive its materials from the row.

*Perhaps all of our discussion will move, ineluctably, to what you quote from Glenn Gould as the "psychological problem of our time." That would seem to me, rather, the psychological problem of the 20th century: schizophrenia and anomie,* à la *T. S. Eliot. The need is to identify the poet in order to locate a definition of ourselves—but if the poet himself is a mask, then what? We are back to Schumann, Jean Paul, and E. T. A. Hoffmann. The Bach itself forms an ouroboros, a Sphinx, forcing us to confront the circularity of consciousness. Proust? The limits and perhaps failure of "Pure*

*Reason" invite us to trust intuition as our only recourse, but what of Poe's "imp of the perverse"? We might argue that, like Nietzsche, Schumann too looked once too often into the abyss, which stared him down. Are you not fearful of Nietzsche's mock-epitaph: "Death from Immortality"?*

There are several questions and aspects here, so several answers are needed. First, regarding what you point out with reference to Glenn Gould, I immediately recall the conversations of Gould with Jonathan Cott, where Gould expresses himself in a special way: "I'm fascinated by the fact that most of our value judgments are related to being aware of the identity that goes with it; we tend to get terribly afraid of making a judgment if we don't know the identity of the person responsible for a work of art. I'm convinced—despite the old adage that a good writer doesn't need a pen name—that a certain part of our personality functions within the framework of a certain way of life, of a certain name, while another part may function best only when you leave that framework." So, I think this also excellently points out the psychological problem of our time.

What you mention regarding Jean Paul and E. T. A. Hoffmann being in coherence with Schumann and his abstruse world, and especially of Poe's "imp of the perverse," means that we have to take a look to Schumann's *Kreisleriana,* op. 16. The literary background of the *Kreisleriana* cycle, which Schumann wrote in four days in 1838 in a feverish restlessness and depressive mood, is E. T. A. Hoffmann. Hoffmann's *Lebensansichten des Katers Murr nebst fragmentarischer Biographie des Kapellmeisters Johannes Kreisler* is one of those Romantically exalted phantasmagorias that made equally tuned strings sound in Schumann's soul, stirred by his own creative imagination. The fact that Hoffmann's hero ends in madness, eerily anticipating Schumann's own fate, signals that interweaving of the biographical, the literary, and the musical that is so characteristic of Romanticism, and which one encounters again and again in Schumann's *oeuvre.* Of course, it was not Schumann's intention to give a musical portrait of Hoffmann's whimsical *Kapellmeister* figure. Rather, the exaltations of the poet's figure correspond to the composer's abrupt change of moods, which in the eight-part, ballad-like, partly romance-like fantasies of the *Kreisleriana* draw a musical portrait of Schumann's soul, whose subjectivity represents an extreme case even within the music of the Romantic period, which is not lacking in subjectivisms. Whether the pieces, some of which are quite extended, were written for an overall cyclical presentation remains to be seen, although it is the norm in the concert hall today. Each of the fantasies can stand on its own, but the harmonic circle of the cycle, which encompasses only flat keys, favors a synopsis in musical terms as well. In spite of this tonal uniformity, the whole, with its abrupt changes of color, its transitions from the intimate to the extreme, is set entirely on contrasts. He returns to Baroque forms, as for example in the seventh fantasy of the cycle, not as a stylistic gimmick, but as a repeatedly impossible attempt by Schumann himself to compensate for his inner discord and turmoil over past greatness and glory. Thus the yearning Schumanesque neo-Baroque is transformed into the vicinity of abysmal flaming nervousness and overheating. The pale, twilight chords of the *Etwas langsamer* that conclude the piece make it clear once again what unfulfillability lies in this Don Quixotesque turning back. In no other cycle of Schumann's great works has the nocturnal, enigmatic, and chaotic found expression in such artistic perfection as in this one. The eighth and last piece of this collection in particular testifies to this. Like the sound of a "death ride," the figures flit by in a quiet, sustained rhythm, until—after horn sounds in the middle section have heated up the vision to chivalrous power and grandeur—they are extinguished spookily in night and mystery.

If we take a look at Schumann's "Tagebuch," we find in the first volume the "Mitternachtsstück," a moving and shuddering testimony of Schumann's abysmal world of thought, expressions of *ur*-personal form, which impressively convey the coldness of death, but also the closeness to death of Schumann's fantasy. They could literally have served as a model for the last, oppressive work of the *Kreisleriana*:

"The two stars shone magically over the death-bars and the weeping willows and the cypresses whispered their language softly to each other—the graves towered mutely above the flowers tumbling in the breeze and the monuments cast great long shadows, like the hands of time or eternity, and they said: see, we show where you once but lie—the moon shone mutely and in the ether long swan songs sounded monotonous and somber—the earth lay formless and silent and slumbering. Selene, Selene, it called outside the window of the gravedigger; Selene straightened up; she looked

shyly into the moon, then she flung up her arms and wanted to embrace the moon—the bosom beat high and loud, like clock-beats; it was open and a long white night-dress hung carelessly over the body—the curly long hair fell wildly-duskily down—Selene ran quickly over the graveyard and read the epitaphs: here rests a broken heart, read the enlightened one; she sat down smilingly on the grave rail; now a skeleton came walking down the church aisle; she heard how the bones rattled; but she did not manage to get up, the skeleton came closer and sat down next to her and wrapped its arm around her body; a kiss do you want, she said shyly. The skeleton laughed and gave her an icy kiss—then it went away. I have well sinned, she cried, then she got up and went into the church and climbed around on the gallery—the skeleton sat at the organ and played a waltz—the moon went down—Selene went into the grave house. It was silent and still and she slumbered."

Schumann dedicated *Kreisleriana* to Frédéric Chopin, who however did not appreciate this composition accordingly. Apparently, the form-conscious Pole found the fantasies inspired by E. T. A. Hoffmann too disjointed, too eccentric, too confused.

So, I think, this also expresses the aspect you mention with Nietzsche, whether Schumann too looked once too often into the abyss, which stared him down. In conclusion your question of Nietzsche's mock-epitaph "Death from Immortality" and my personal fear: No, I'm not fearful of this!

*You look beyond Schumann, backwards, to* The Art of Fugue. *In a previous missive I mentioned that Paul Jordan—a Walcha pupil—and I discussed the darkness of* Der Kunst. *When I expressed concern, Paul said to me: "Gary, don't you now recognize what Bach has done here: he has shown us the beautiful creation, Earth, that God gave to Man and simultaneously shown us what Man has done with it."*

Oh, *The Art of Fugue* from Bach is not only *the* work of the century, it's much more my favorite. And you mention Helmut Walcha: His interpretation at the great organ at the Laurenskerk in Alkmaar is the best one can have. Imagine, already in the age of 14 I was taught by the last master student of Helmut Walcha, Hans Joachim Erhard. By this I was inspired already, being a youngster with a special insight to music. This remained like a Sphinx to all of my interpretations until today.

What Paul Jordan says about the *The Art of Fugue*, one cannot express in a better way. His words express the eternity of this work of the century in a perfect manner and give us a long-lasting experience, an experience which I personally express as an "aspect of human realism."

**BACH *Goldberg Variations*** • Burkard Schliessmann (pn) • DIVINE ART 25754 (2 SACDs: 83:06)

In the Jan/Feb 2022 *Fanfare* (45:3), I reviewed *At the Heart of the Piano*, a three-disc release from Divine Art (DA), showcasing Burkard Schliessmann in music by Bach (arr. Busoni), Schumann, Liszt, Scriabin, and Berg. For the greater part, these are reissues of recordings previously released on the Bayer label. I summarized my appreciation for Burkard Schliessmann's artistry as follows: "Schliessmann plays all of this challenging repertoire with an impressively assured technique that is always at the service of the music. Schliessmann is a pianist who avoids such exaggerations as italicizing passages to showcase his virtuosity, extremes in tempo, or an excessive application of rubato. That said, Schliessmann's interpretations exhibit a convincing ebb and flow, and the ability to draw upon a wide range of colors and dynamics to create the appropriate sound world for the work at hand. Schliessmann is also an artist with a keen sense of pacing. Both the Bach/Busoni and Schumann *Symphonic Etudes* are notable both for the accomplished and expressive way Schliessmann executes the variations, and the manner in which he connects one variation to the next."

A new release from DA (again, a reissue of a Bayer recording) presents Schliessmann in the Everest of solo keyboard variations. In the Jan/Feb 2008 *Fanfare* (31:3), James Reel interviewed Schliessmann, and offered a most positive review of the initial Bayer release of the pianist's recording of Bach's *Goldberg Variations*: "For the most part, Schliessmann presents this as music of optimism and joy, the exact opposite of much of Simone Dinnerstein's recording, reviewed in the previous issue. Oh, Schliessmann does know when and how to get serious, as in the extended (though not distended) traversal of the 25th variation (discussed in the accompanying interview). Yet even here, the playing is not self-consciously weighty; he doesn't try to make Bach sound like Beethoven…. [I]f you want something more in the tradition of Glenn Gould's first recording, minus some of the

peculiarities but plus the repeats, Schliessmann's account is highly satisfactory."

I share James Reel's enthusiasm for this recording. The admirable qualities I noted in my review of *At the Heart of the Piano* are evident here as well. And Schliessmann does a superb job of realizing Bach's all-embracing musical and emotional journey. In such episodes as the opening and closing Aria, and the aforementioned Variation No. 25, Schliessmann adopts a strikingly expansive, introspective, and poetic approach. But when the occasion merits, there is also a welcome lightness of touch and even playfulness. In his extensive and thought-provoking interview with Reel, Schliessmann notes how essential the *jeu perlé* technique is not only to Mozart and Chopin, but Bach's *Goldberg Variations*. And Schliessmann's combination of precision and elegance in fleet passagework is most gratifying throughout this recording. The Super Audio CD sounds quite impressive on my conventional two-channel stereo system; Schliessmann's Steinway D-274 concert grand emerges with richness and clarity. The pianist's superb liner notes further enhance this admirable release. Recommended. **Ken Meltzer**

**≈ BACH *Goldberg Variations*** • Burkard Schliessmann (pn) • DIVINE ART 25754 (Steaming audio: 83:06) https://music.apple.com/gb/album/j-s-bach-goldberg-variations-bwv-988-remastered-2022/1628878505

This performance was recorded in 2007 (there was an interview and review around it in *Fanfare* 31:3); this is the 2022 remastering, available also on Dolby Atmos. I have followed Atmos since its launch, and feel it is a force for good; and if anyone needs convincing, this release will do the trick. The sound here is anything but "floaty" (a frequent criticism of Atmos); it just feels perfectly positioned. We hear everything as Schliessmann intends; this review auditioned both via Amos and the physical Super Audio Compact Discs, and it is Atmos that feels the most involving. The sound feels purer, more crystalline; if there is a visual analogy, it is like one's first upgrade to Blu-ray from DVD. The aim of all of this—recording, transmission medium, player, piano—is to make us forget those are there and to bring us to Bach via Schliessmann. Divine Art and Dolby Atmos conspire to come closer to this ideal than anyone else. On a purely musico-emotional level, I derived more pleasure from the Apple Music Atmos medium.

Schliessmann's decision to play Bach on the piano might lose some purist listeners, but it would be their loss. The intellect that has gone into this realization is huge; similarly, the emotional range. As one listens, it feels as if the wisdom of centuries is somehow filtered down via some sort of alchemical distillation into the theme. Schliessmann gives the theme pace (one can hear the shadow of a slow dance in the background). The Aria also demonstrates the superior quality of his own Hamburg Steinway (the recording was made in Teldex Studio, Berlin). That "his own Hamburg Steinway" is significant, as Schliessmann knows this instrument inside and out; it is an extension of himself. Listen to the glistening clarity of Variation 1, and his way with the ornaments, free and improvisatory, and yet the pulse remains ever intact.

It is the freshness of the play of voices that impresses so much; dialogues proliferate (listen to the ever-so-civilized one in Variation 3). This approach also enables a real sense of humor (Variation 23). Schliessmann's touch is impeccable, so much reminiscent of that used by Argerich in her classic DG recordings. Yet his rapport with Bach is if anything closer. By bringing a sense of play to this performance (and with it, light), Schliessmann almost invites us to reframe Bach's intricacies as expressions of joy. This is the polar opposite of the lumbering high seriousness of Lang Lang's disaster of a traversal (DG). Tempos, even when he reinvents a variation (as in the *Tempo di Giga,* Variation 7), feel perfectly judged. There is no hint of the awkwardness that even the best can bring (I think particularly of Variation 8) where even Angela Hewitt (either Hyperion version, or even in a live performance I attended in Manchester, UK) can sound just a touch off-track; the same could be said of Schliessmann's cat-and-mouse way with Variation 14.

The sheer variety of touch on display is remarkable. Variation 13 seems to demonstrate this aspect of Schliessmann's performance in microcosm. At the heart of all of this seems to be an awareness of *Affektenlehre*; listen to the sighs of Variation 15, or the grand gestures of the Ouverture that opens the second part (Variation 16). The remarkable Variation 25 (sometimes called the "Black

Pearl" variation) becomes the emotive heart of Schliessmann's account; it is just shy of 10 minutes' duration, and he makes sure we hear the sheer modernity of Bach's writing. Interestingly, the decorations of Variation 26 feel modern after that, ahead of their time (as Bach was, of course), as does Variation 28 (with its neighbor-note oscillations that explode into joyful lines). Yet the nobility of Variation 30 is absolutely of its time.

The return to the beginning, the Aria, at the end has the effect of closing this cycle of a universe co-created by Bach and Schliessmann. This is important, as it means that what we experience in this traversal exactly what variation form brings: the examination of an object (the Aria) from a multiplicity of viewpoints.

The booklet note is extensive, a university-grade lecture, and cherishable in its own right. Schliessmann's recorded Bach is human, alive. It rejoices in its own endless ability to create from a germinal cell (the Aria); its exuberance is never-ending. **Colin Clarke**