

THE GOLDBERG VARIATIONS – A PERFORMER'S CLASSIC

In his book of literary criticism *Why read the Classics?* Italo Calvino develops, with considerable humour, but also incisively, a number of definitions for what might constitute a classic. His introduction concludes:

'A classic is a work which relegates the noise of the present to a background hum, which at the same time the classics cannot exist without.

A classic is a work which persists as background noise even when a present which is totally incompatible with it holds sway.'

These ideas seem particularly resonant for musical classics too. No matter the eternal debate about which works might indeed be considered classics: as one compiles one's own imaginary library of 'great works' one steps voluntarily into the past, or confronts it, or is made to yearn for it – and as images (sometimes vivid, sometimes opaque) emerge of these works in their own contemporary landscapes it also becomes increasingly difficult to disentangle them from the web of historical narratives within which they are enclosed: the classic, of course, stands in relation to those works which precede it and which might have had an influence on it, but also, to us, in relation to those which *succeeded* it and which *it* might have influenced – or not. Elements in the work might well have been 're-interpreted' and re-worked by later composers in memorable ways – occasionally so much so that the re-working becomes more powerful than its source, at other times a complement to it, or a reminder, or a secret or open declaration of affinity; but forever transforming, adding significance/value/mystique to the original at the same time as removing us further from it – and as direct contact becomes ever more difficult we feel the classic ever more acutely to be an object of desire and nostalgia.

For the performer there are other layers of complication too: changing instruments, changing instrumental techniques, the vagaries of arrangements and editions (can a Schubert singer affect ignorance of Liszt's transcriptions?), and most of all, distinguished performances of

the work where one hears it also in relation to the artistic concerns, thoughts and sensibilities of other players, some of whom may be dead and themselves considered 'great' and worthy of emulation (can a harpsichordist playing Scarlatti feign indifference to Horowitz's colourful pianism?).

In this way our relationship with many different pasts becomes part of our subject matter. The classic becomes the stage for the plots and dramas of intertextuality and influence, and the performer must participate, not because it may be 'clever' or 'fun' – although these games, when well-played, can sometimes be beautiful in themselves – but because the classic thus becomes a catalyst for exploring values *that he deems timeless*; becomes so much more than simply an enquiry after the 'meaning' of the original, or the 'intentions' of the composer. The performer *tests* his values, puts them into practice using the means at his disposal.

A 'classic', undoubtedly, is the Goldberg Variations of 1742, even if not one immediately accessible to the uninitiated. Much has been written about its genesis, its richness, the unanswered questions it presents, the arcane aspects of its construction, puzzles, number games even. The variations are as profligate in their sources and references, in their syntheses of and departures from these sources, in their unashamed virtuosity of invention and technique – and as open to 'interpretation' and contemplation – as any of Bach's great collections. That certain aspects are hidden from immediate view, others baffling, is entirely in keeping with the late Bachian ethos: the work must yield its treasures in part only, and at the cost of sometimes arduous exploration.

What is the role of the player? It is in the nature of the performer's art to bring to the surface of the listener's attention what he chooses to. In the case of the Goldberg Variations, where solitary discovery – over time – is so integral to the experience, one of the key questions he has to answer must be whether he will indeed *deliver* the work as a single performance, appreciable as such, or not. Public performances of BWV 988 (as we often hear now) would have been unthinkable in Bach's day. The great length of the work and the connoisseurship required to enter into its

complexities made – still make – it hard going all in one hearing. Some listeners today seem *content* to, even *want* to hear Bach as abstract and 'difficult'; or think of his music as 'transcendental', as inducing a special state of mind. This kind of listening side-steps true involvement with the great variety of idiosyncratically characterised, colourful, dramatically and oratorically compelling elements, the curious admixture of adamant intelligence and sensuous charm – and seeks perhaps to explain away the lethargy that may accompany the lack of engagement with such specifics. It may even foster ways of playing that pander to its expectations. The paradox is that classifying Bach as 'geometric/mathematical' – and therefore as difficult (i.e. the intellectual snobbery of the abstract over the concrete) – is a gross simplification.

How may we perform the Goldberg Variations today so as to be entertaining in a single sitting, without necessarily sacrificing its less obvious aspects? The choice to include, or even superimpose, elements of continuity and 'drama', and also of diction, which might very well be of musical cultures subsequent to Bach's own, the choice to manipulate proportions or deliberately underline certain moments by taking selective repeats, for instance – these could be telling reflections of the performer's own values.

Inevitably thoughts of unity and diversity arise. But a note of caution: tight organisation of means doubtless underlies that which we perceive as powerful aesthetic or emotional experiences in art, but to invoke 'structure' in isolation, or prior to, or as superior to the experiential, may ultimately prove to be a soulless pursuit (even the absolute formalist must feel psychologically/aesthetically compelled to his creed).

Do we want a performer to remind us of what we think we know, or do we want to be made aware of *new* shapes, shapes of the performer's invention even? The possibility of subverting the architectonic metaphor altogether must surely be worth considering too. Sometimes the same means may leave opposing impressions: a single steady pulse, or sustained dynamic calibration, for example, may hold the musical fabric together – or dull perceptions; mathematically controlled tempo relationships can aid an 'organic' sense of the whole, or form a mosaic of

juxtapositions. Sometimes the momentary rhetorical poses of departure, arrival, rest, continuing on, climax and so on can create what may be no more than an illusion of 'structural thinking'. And at others, formal proportions or junctures may simply not be of primary concern. Just as in other art forms there can be no delimiting of what the aesthetic priorities *should* be in the hands of an expert, likewise in the performer's craft. Such freedom is by no means a sign of 'disrespect' to the dead composer: it is, on the contrary, the proof that the performer wholeheartedly strives to make the work he plays his own, in a sense seeks to fashion it in his own image; that the work is in 'possession' of those who encounter it, a living presence to them, not a relic – in short, a classic. (Those who insist that the music somehow 'speaks for itself' are really saying that it is they, not us, who know what it says.)

Among the 30 individual variations there are two distinct families of nine each: every third variation, starting with No.5, is a kind of 'toccata' or 'exercise' (Scarlatti's first 30 keyboard sonatas appeared in 1738 entitled *Essercizi*); and every third variation, starting with No.3, is a canon between two voices accompanied by a free bass line – in the first canon the second voice follows the first at the unison, in the second at the interval of the second, and so on until variation 27. (The remaining variations are 'character pieces' – dance- or fugue- or aria-like, or simply the relishing of an enchanting texture.)

The 'toccatas' are perceivable as a kind of layer, even to the casual listener, because of their spectacular nature – with their continuously running figuration, the two voices (with the hands often crossing) in a seemingly free play of patterns, alternations, switches, mirrorings, chases; sometimes helter-skelter, sometimes with great lucidity – but not *striking* us as 'worked-out' counterpoint – effortless invention, speed and lightness the essential virtues.

With the canons we perceive their family resemblance perhaps not because we *hear* them as canons but because, even though a canon can be many things, the strictures of the most inflexible of contrapuntal disciplines impose a certain range of rhetorical stances with some distinctive affective implications too: these pieces can strike us as games,

the artifice impressing us sometimes as weird, sometimes even a little silly, or their strangeness might strike us as mysterious or elevated. They form a bedrock totally consistent, quietly dazzling. But generally they are emotionally quite low-key – only in two cases (Nos. 15 and 21, both in the minor) can we count them among the overtly charismatic variations.

Less rigorously organised is another distinct group – the variations in four voices (4, 10, 22 and 30). Together with the French Overture that introduces the second half (No.16) their sonorous qualities can be felt to exert a magnetic force. It is tempting to 'group' the 30 variations either around the canons or around the four-voiced pieces. (In the present recording repeats are observed in these harmonious variations and all the canons except the last, variation 27.)

With variation 24 the canons come full circle (the canon at the octave, i.e. the unison again, but in higher register) and if one is so minded a strong 'programmatic' element may be understood to come to the fore: The *Adagio* (var. 25) – a 'music of the spheres', the point of greatest isolation. A soul-searching which finally gives way to liberation: variations 26, 28 and 29 are all completely unconstrained in their brilliance, and richly sonorous; and in variation 27 the two canonic voices, having overshot the octave, now dart in duet – unfettered by the accompanying bass line of the earlier canons.

Then, free and fulfilled, the return home: the *Quodlibet* (var. 30) is a kind of patchwork of popular tunes, their texts perhaps tellingly dealing with departures and returns: 'I have for such a long time been away from you, come over here, come over here' and 'Cabbage and beets have driven me away, had my mother cooked meat I might have stayed longer' – good-humoured but ultimately not bucolic, for the skill displayed is sublime, the turn of phrase exquisite. So the return is not just to the theme (*Aria da capo*), which closes the cycle, but the use of folksongs suggests quite literally a return to shared ancestral roots. That the Aria itself appears in that most private of family treasures, the Anna Magdalena Notebook, apparently long before the genesis of the variations, now seems especially touching. (It is preceded there by the

secular song *Bist du bei mir*: 'If you are with me, I will gladly go unto death, unto my rest'.)

But ultimately one shies away from such speculation, because the merit of these variations lie not in what they might or might not *mean*, what they might be *about*, but in their intrinsic, captivating qualities as music. The Fourteen Canons on the first eight bass notes of the Aria (BWV 1087, here presented continuously as a kind of free passacaglia) form a marvellous addendum. Even though the variations strike us as utterly complete, Bach seems to reach yet further beyond in his tireless search for what his chosen materials, indeed the art of music itself, may yet yield; invention and discovery so deeply related. At the end of these canons in his *Handexemplar* he writes 'Etc.'. This 'Etc.' should perhaps be the performer's ultimate guide as he embarks on his own explorations in an inexhaustible realm.

Daniel-Ben Pienaar

2011