

A2

Johann Sebastian BACH (1685-1750)

Aria mit verschiedenen Veränderungen BWV 988 ("Goldberg Variations")

Michael Tsalka (Clavichord)

rec. Roxy Studio, Berlin, Germany, 1-2 December 2012

PALADINO PMR0032 [67:07]

The "Goldberg Variations", a staple of the keyboard repertoire, are timeless. Over the years it has been recorded a multitude of times. Simply putting "Goldberg Variations" into a search engine leads one to a plethora of recordings. It was the piece that launched legendary pianist Glenn Gould's international career.

This particular recording is the culmination of a project by keyboardist Michael Tsalka, whose goal is to present performances that are not only well informed but also profoundly musical. I must say that in this interpretation, Tsalka has been singularly successful. The first thing I noticed was that this was a performance by somebody who loved and understood Bach's music very deeply indeed. Tsalka uses every resource at his disposal to put this across.

His tools in this instance are a pair of clavichords placed side by side - making this recording the first of its kind - both of which are based on late 18th Century instruments. Each one brings its own character to the table, the first being characterised by a dainty upper range and rich bass line, the second notable for its robust middle range, with upper notes that are solid and rounded. Tsalka explains - in the booklet, which is brief but very informative - that his deciding whether to play a variation on one instrument or the other was often a spur of the moment decision. I enjoyed the resulting spontaneity as it kept the music fresh at every turn.

The playing is wonderful throughout, the lines and phrasing crafted with a very high sense of musicianship. Each variation is invigorating in its approach and feels like a new piece. The playing and choice of instrument also provide us with a constant reminder of the underpinning bass line, creating a sense of unity over the disc as a whole. The performance is also a very intimate one, and its delicacy only serves to enhance this aspect.

The clavichords lack the clinical precision of a modern grand piano or the harpsichord, but to an extent this does not matter. This imprecision, though a blessing, could be thought at times to be a clever ruse - a more sceptical listener might say it is used to cover up potential mistakes. It also makes the performance

somewhat overly percussive in places: I found Variatio 23 suffering from this to the point that it disturbed the music. In addition I found some ornaments - particularly the trills - to be quite stiff; is this down to the instrument or the player? The imprecision of the instrument makes this difficult to determine. It also makes this disc something I wouldn't recommend to someone listening to the Variations for the first time. This is definitely for the more advanced listener. That is not to say that it is not a good recording; it is very good. However, the use of the instrument fills this recording with the kind of nuance that could ward off a first-time listener.

The debate rages over whether the Variations sound better on the piano or harpsichord. I believe this recording adds an interesting new angle - that of the clavichord. Do I believe it superior to either of the other instruments? No, but I believe it creates a new listening experience worthy of attention.

Jake Barlow

Pamela Hickman Comments - Music Critique & Blogger

Michael Tsalka performs Bach's Goldberg Variations on clavichord

Ever since Glen Gould's five recordings of J.S.Bach's "Goldberg Variations" on piano, his interpretations of them have been discussed endlessly. Then came Wanda Landowska's first performance on harpsichord in 1933. In the meantime, many, many more recordings have come onto the scene, played on all manner of historical- and less historical keyboard instruments - on organ, guitar, harp, marimba, flute and piano, string trio, orchestra, etc. All these performances attest to the fact that fascination with this one hour of almost constant G major music based on a much-used 32-note ground goes well beyond what the composer referred to on the title page as variations "composed for connoisseurs, for the refreshment of their spirits." Having previously performed them on harpsichord, chamber organ, square piano, fortepiano and modern piano, Dr. Michael Tsalka has now recorded the Goldberg Variations BWV 988 on two clavichords, taking the listener into a very different sound world. In his liner notes, Dr. Tsalka explains how he chose to alternate between the two instruments, both built by Sebastian Niebler (Berlin) - a clavichord of a "lyrical timbre", based on a 1796 instrument by Johann Christoph Georg Schiedmayer (Boston Museum of Fine Arts) and a more "robust-sounding" instrument based on South German and Swedish models from the late 18th century, such as those built by Christian Gottlob Hubert, Jacob Specken and Schiedmayer. "Some listeners might "This was not the case; quite a few decisions were taken in the spur of the moment, an intuitive response to the technical and expressive requirements found in each variation". The work was

recorded in Berlin in 2012, for the PALADINO label - PMR0032.

So why play the Goldberg Variations on clavichord? One reason is probably that a work as personal as the Goldberg Variations would surely have been played within the confines of the Bach home and the clavichord is indeed a house instrument of the time. Another reason would be that the clavichord is one of the most expressive, responsive and sensitive of keyboard instruments; the depression of the key strikes the string, thus offering variation of touch as well as the possibility to produce a form of vibrato. So once a key is struck, the sound needs continuous nurturing, demanding much skill and listening on the part of the player. As to the instrument's soft voice, easily masked by the most minimal of background sounds or even by the player's breathing, research has shown that the clavichords on which Bach played were not as weak in volume as those built in the early 20th century's revival of the instrument. But, most importantly, Johann Nikolaus Forkel, Bach's first biographer, wrote that the clavichord was Bach's favorite keyboard instrument, allowing him to "express his most refined thoughts".

Listening to this recording, one is embarking on a unique listening experience, one only to be compared with that of hearing the clavichord played at very close range. It presents an opportunity to tune into a timbre whose directness needs no cosmetic help in presenting Bach's wealth of ideas and use of several high Baroque forms. In the opening galant-style Aria, Tsalka not only plays with spontaneity, he offers the singing quality of the (vocal) aria as a message to the listener – that we are about to hear this instrument really "sing". We are then lured into the sound world of each variation, be it the embellished energy of Variation IV, the vivid harmonic coloring tugging at one's heart strings in the meditative Variation XIII, the uncompromising, confrontational power of tension in Variation XIV, Tsalka's acknowledging of Bach's quirky humor in Variation XIV or the probing, soul-searching process of (the minor) Variation XXV, its staggered voices and expressive dissonances played out by the artist with his own sense of wonder and discovery. I found myself not wanting to part from this movement. From here, Tsalka launches into the sweeping intensity of the final variations, a mammoth web of Bach's most sophisticated, complex and dense counterpoint. Rather than place a musical joke after these compelling variations, Dr. Tsalka chooses a direct, fresh and noble reading of the Quodlibet (Variation XXX). And, prior to the return of the Aria, how relevant it is that the recording technicians did not delete the sound of the artist inhaling in preparation of the final gesture: here was the Aria that had inspired the work, played by the artist with understatement and humility.

This is a recording to interest, surprise and delight listeners. Michael Tsalka's performance of the Goldberg Variations on two clavichords is articulate and brilliant, allowing for projection of Bach's counterpoint and subtly shaped inner

voices and bass lines, neither being lost in the complex textures. In playing that bristles with creativity and emotion, he makes fine use of both instruments' palette of colors.