



Johann Sebastian Bach: Goldberg Variations

aud 20.035

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American Record Guide (Bradley Lehman - 01.05.2018)

Kemal Cem Yilmaz spends most of his time in Germany and his native Turkey. This is his debut solo recording. His interpretation is forthright. It sounds like he is going mostly for a solemn serenity and achieving it. He takes about 20% of the repeats: Variations 2, 4, 6, 10, 11, 19, and the second half of 16. Variations 7, 9, 13, 15, 25, and the Aria are remarkably slow. 25 is so slow that it lasts 6:28 without repeats. Variations 26 and 29 project more joyous character, rivaling the blistering speed in Glenn Gould's 1955 recording. Yilmaz plays main-note trills (instead of starting from the upper note) and there is a mis-learned note in Variation 6, but everything else sounds conventionally pianistic and well prepared. The booklet doesn't say much except that Yilmaz humbly reveres Bach. I respect albums that are made as well as this, but I'm not excited about them.

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BACH: Goldberg Variations
Kemal Cem Yilmaz, p
Audite 20.035—55 minutes

Ji-Yong Kim, p
Warner 57193—60 minutes

with *Aria Variata; Aria with Variations S 991*
Elisabetta Guggelmin, hpc
Onclassical 17111—71 minutes

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Ji-Yong Kim is a young Korean pianist who prefers to go by the single name of "Ji." The album's front cover has "BACH" printed over a caricature of B, and the back has "JI" printed over a caricature of Bach. The package doesn't say that he plays piano.

This is B's debut recording as a soloist, but he was already notorious several years ago for a television commercial for a smartphone operating system. He played some of a Beethoven sonata on a special piano where all the keys were tuned to middle C. But his musicianship deserves attention.

This is a young man's extraverted interpretation. It is in no way boring. On the repeats, and sometimes also the first time through, it freely adds bursts of spontaneous-sounding notes. He calls it "jazz" in the booklet, but it doesn't sound like either jazz or Baroque ornamentation. It's convincingly musical and enjoyable, regardless of what one might call it. His tempos tend to be fast. He's out to shake up the world of classical music with capriciousness. It works. The music can stand this bold adventure. I won't spoil the fun-house by telling you where the weirdest distorting mirrors are. The performance sounds wildly intuitive and extemporaneous, but two pages in the booklet show that he painstakingly assembled this from about 300 takes.

Guggelmin plays harpsichord. Her program gives us all three sets of Bach's harpsichord variations conveniently on a single disc. (There are also some chorale-based variations for organ.) The strongest performance here is the *Air Varied in the Italian Manner*, S 989. It has ten variations. She gives the piece a natural flow and plenty of excitement. This might be a sufficient reason to buy the album. Another plus is the obscure set of variations, S 991, a piece that is hard to find elsewhere. Bach left it as a small fragment. There are two variations, but only the right-hand part. Someone must make up appropriate things for the left hand to do. The solution here (composed by the album's producer!) is too conservative and dull, merely copying bass notes from the statement of the theme. Bach and his students surely would have worked out something more enterprising and rhythmically interesting. I have found only two earlier recordings of this incomplete piece. Isidore Ahlgrim's harpsichord performance from the early 1950s is not back on the market yet. Hanssler's set of the complete Bach works has this piece played well on clavichord by Mario Videla (Volume 43 of the set, not reviewed). So, this is the place to get these short variations on harpsichord.

Guggelmin is a player who follows instructions very well but seems reluctant to take creative risks with the music. I had similar disappointment in her surface-oriented set of Jacques's music (M/A 2018). There is nothing "wrong" with her perfect execution of all the notes in the Goldberg Variations, but the performance is bland. It's clean, but the music could sound more playful and surprising, as we get from B. The Hensch-style harpsichord sounds fine, but the D-sharps are tuned distractingly too high in the Goldberg Variations. The repeat structure in this performance creates some unfortunate imbalances—she takes the repeats only when Bach troubled to write out first and second endings. This gives us the architectural absurdity of the very long Variation 25 having repeats (along with Variations 2, 4, 6, and 16), taking more than six minutes by itself, but too-short variations elsewhere. Five of them are shorter than a minute. It's as if every note written by Bach is sacrosanct and must be delivered at least once, overlooking the meaning and direction of the longer phrases.

Salter, who plays harpsichord and piano, makes the Goldberg Variations here in the past two years. Despite their excellence of execution, none of these three new recordings displace older favorites mentioned in those reviews.

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