



Claudio Arrau

Bach: Goldberg Variations



"One of the first major works Claudio Arrau recorded for RCA following the Carnegie Hall triumph in February 1941 that brought him his great American acclaim was the Bach Goldberg Variations. It was a natural choice. Arrau had won fame as a Bach exponent . . . and RCA needed the Variations in the catalog. But as fate would have it, it was never released. World War II was raging when Wanda Landowska arrived in New York as a refugee. To reestablish the reputation she had gained in America in 1924 and for much-needed funds, she gave a New York concert devoted to the Goldberg Variations. She then wanted to [re-]record the work. RCA asked Arrau if he would postpone his Goldbergs in favor of Landowska's on the harpsichord. He readily consented, not only because he admired Landowska's Bach enormously but also because at the time he was beginning to think that Bach's keyboard works really belonged to the harpsichord. A few years later Arrau signed a long-term contract at CBS; RCA, having the Landowska success on its hands, saw no reason for the release of his recording, so it lay in the archives until now."

- *Friede Rothe* (manager and lifelong friend), 1988

This ground-breaking recording might have changed the course of recording history had it been released at its time of recording in 1942. Claudio Arrau's first full recording – including all repeats – of J. S. Bach's Goldberg Variations has all the hallmarks of a classic performance, and would surely have been the launchpad for the world-wide career he went on to enjoy. Meanwhile might a certain Glenn Gould have been less likely to come to global attention with his interpretation of the variations the following decade? It's an unanswerable question, of course – we don't know how Gould's own early interpretations might have been affected by Arrau's, nor do we know whether the presence of the Arrau would have pointed Gould's record company in a different direction for their young protegee.

When the Arrau recording finally emerged in 1988, some 46 years after its recording, it certainly raised eyebrows. Here was a recording which even in the late eighties sounded surprisingly contemporary in its execution: "On first listening, it's rather surprising how 'modern' this performance sounds. There are some hints of 19th-century romanticism that can be heard in other early Bach studio recordings, and consistent tempo choices that make the performance flow from start to finish. All of the Arrau hallmarks are omnipresent, including his sometimes rigid handling of fast-paced elements, or his tendency to get slow and heavy as a device to emphasize 'depth of feeling'" (Tal Agam, *The Classical Review*, 2018)

One thing which didn't immediately wow was the recorded sound – Edward Strickland, writing in *Fanfare* in 1988, suggested that unlike the performance, "the sound, however, is distinctly uncontemporary". I've not heard that first issue, and though I've no doubt it's been improved on over the last three decades, there was certainly still room for improvement, hence this Ambient Stereo XR-remastered Pristine release. There is some variability in quality between the variations, particularly in the upper registers, which I've tried to even out as much as possible, and the opening *Aria* is of distinctly lower fidelity than what follows. Nevertheless the years fall away as you listen to this version, which surely gets us considerably closer to the sound of Arrau's Steinway than ever before.

Andrew Rose

PAKM 086

claudio arrau
bach: goldberg variations



studio recording, 1942

arrau

j. s. bach: goldberg variations, bwv 988

1. Aria (4:59)
2. Variatio 1. a 1 Clav (1:47)
3. Variatio 2. a 1 Clav (1:28)
4. Variatio 3. Canone all'Unisono. a 1 Clav (1:54)
5. Variatio 4. a 1 Clav (1:06)
6. Variatio 5. a 1 ô vero 2 Clav (1:33)
7. Variatio 6. Canone alla Seconda. a 1 Clav (1:38)
8. Variatio 7. a 1 ô vero 2 Clav. al tempo di Giga (1:38)
9. Variatio 8. a 2 Clav (1:50)
10. Variatio 9. Canone alla Terza. a 1 Clav (2:14)
11. Variatio 10. Fughetta. a 1 Clav (1:21)
12. Variatio 11. a 2 Clav (1:45)
13. Variatio 12 a 1 Clav. Canone alla Quarta in moto contrario (3:53)
14. Variatio 13. a 2 Clav (5:20)
15. Variatio 14. a 2 Clav (2:09)
16. Variatio 15. Canone alla Quinta. a 1 Clav.: Andante (4:14)
17. Variatio 16. Ouverture. a 1 Clav (2:53)
18. Variatio 17. a 2 Clav (1:59)
19. Variatio 18. Canone alla Sesta. a 1 Clav (1:11)
20. Variatio 19. a 1 Clav (1:03)
21. Variatio 20. a 2 Clav (2:00)
22. Variatio 21. Canone alla Settima (3:05)
23. Variatio 22. a 1 Clav. alla breve (1:22)
24. Variatio 23. a 2 Clav (2:02)
25. Variatio 24. Canone all'Ottava. a 1 Clav (3:21)
26. Variatio 25. a 2 Clav. adagio (8:30)
27. Variatio 26. a 2 Clav (2:08)
28. Variatio 27. Canone alla Nona. a 2 Clav (1:56)
29. Variatio 28. a 2 Clav (2:26)
30. Variatio 29. a 1 ô vero 2 Clav (2:10)
31. Variatio 30. a 1 Clav. Quodlibet (1:41)
32. Aria da Capo (2:25)

Claudio Arrau, piano

XR Remastered by **Andrew Rose**

Cover artwork based on a photograph of Claudio Arrau

Recorded by RCA Victor in New York in 1942, first issued in 1988

Total duration: 79:01

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