Johann Sebastian BACH (1685-1750)  
[*Goldberg Variations*](http://www.musicweb-international.com/mwork_index/jsb_goldb.htm), BWV 988 (1741)  
Pavel Kolesnikov (piano)  
rec. December 16-18, 2019, St. Silas the Martyr, London  
HYPERION CDA68338 [79:30]

My most recent encounter with Bach’s Goldberg Variations was Lang Lang’s version on Deutsche Grammophon, all luxury presentation and ego I still shudder at his distortions of Bach’s score: you may wish to consult Ralph Moore’s [review](http://www.musicweb-international.com/classrev/2020/Sep/Bach-Goldberg-4819701.htm).  
  
Here, in contrast, is one of the most intelligent, humble young pianists in front of the public today, Pavel Kolesnikov. His respect for the score shines through every note; each ornament is tasteful and carefully considered. Vulgarity, it seems, is not part of his make up. Apparently, Kolesnikov's recording project came about because of a collaboration with dancer/choreographer Anne Teresa De Keersmaeker. We get the audio-only version offshoot, one might say, but what integrity, knowledge and profundity Kolesnikov brings! This sense of exploration is unsurprising when one considers Kolesnikov’s natural flair for progamming: try this [Wigmore recital](https://seenandheard-international.com/2020/01/superbly-executed-wigmore-hall-exploration-of-dawn-to-dusk-by-pavel-kolesnikov/) or, indeed, one at the London Piano Festival in 2016, where Couperin, unforgettably, met a magnificent Schumann Fantaisie.  
  
One can hear the excellence of Kolesnikov’s technique in Variatio I – and in the legerdemain of Variatio 5, for example – and admire how he differentiate the modes of attack between right and left hands in Variatio 2 to magical effect. The rhythm, too, is rock-solid. Kolesnikov uses the possibilities that a modern piano affords, but never seems out of style, and never blurs textures.  
  
He plays Variatio 3 faster than many interpreters, but it works through a light touch and the most inspired realisation of Bach’s voice-leading. By contrast, Variatio 4, in 3/8, is slower than one might expect, enabling a certain dignity. How feather-light Kolesnikov is in Variatio 7 Tempo di Giga, how clean the demisemiquaver ascents; how deliciously rendered the semiquavers in Variatio 19, too, and the witty staccato of Variatio 27 Canzone alla Nona. There is fun to be had here, as well: the catch me-if-you-can scales of Variatio 11 seem to set in motion trills that positively buzz. (He seems to relate this variation to Variatio 23, a rather nice link across time.) Kolesnikov’s articulation of the bass in the second part of Variatio 20 finds him and Lang Lang both, rightly, linking the last bass quaver of the bar to the first of the next through articulation; but how much more meaning it has under Kolesnikov’s fingers. This is one of many examples of the superiority of his recording.  
  
Structurally, Kolesnikov is alert to the smallest note-value. Variatio 9 Canzone alla Terza is a blissful oasis of peace. In the next Variatio, it is as if we enter a new chapter with the deliciously light Fughetta of Variation 10, with left-hand ornaments just as tight as right. Whenever Kolesnikov moves towards interior realms, it is always within the context of the whole, and this allows for more, not less, potency, as in Variatio 13. While he brings less grandeur to the Ouverture, Variation 17, than either of Hewitt’s Hyperion versions, its Affekt remains intact, as does that feeling of return as we reacquaint ourselves with the theme’s G major. He understands the ramifications of the so-called Black Pearl, Wanda Landowska’s term for Variatio 25. Because of his control elsewhere, he can reveal all the exploratory wanderings of the section, and he gives a performance which, more than any other I have heard, lays the variation’s fragility bare.  
  
Linking variations via dynamic works well, and so does raising an eyebrow, between Variatios 17 and 18; Kolesnikov thins 17 to the merest whisper. And what beauty he finds in Variatio 26 (a breakneck, breathless showpiece for Lang Lang).  
  
Any caveats? They are, of course, personal, and even come with caveats on the caveats. Perhaps just a touch more contrast between Variation 7 and Variation 8 – but I would not part with Kolesnikov’s ornaments in the latter for love nor money. And is Variatio 15 the Andante Bach asks for in the Urtext? It feels just a tad indulgent (a stimulating discussion on tempo in Bach can be found in [this article](http://www.pianosociety.com/pages/bachsnotationoftempo/).) Kolesnikov is laudably low on pedal; when it does come in obviously, as in Variatio 21, it offers colour, no more.  
  
When the final bars arrived in both of Lang Lang’s recent versions, it was effectively meaningless. He spreads the release across four discs, two performances, one live, one studio. With Kolesnikov, the trajectory from the Black Pearl via a noble Quodlibet has been carefully tracked. The Aria emerges itself as a cleansed, white pearl, pure, even holy. A miraculous performance.  
  
The recording itself comes from something of a dream team: the incredibly experienced Andrew Keener, he with the most expert of ears – I am trying to avoid the word ‘keenest’ – and Hyperion’s excellent, University of Surrey-trained engineer Dave Hinitt.  
  
This is a cherishable account of the Goldberg Variations, individual without point-making, ever respectful of the score. Fabulous booklet notes by Richard Wigmore crown a release fit for a king. And, after that Deutsche Grammophon release, it feels like some sort of restitution towards Bach has been made.  
  
Kolesnikov’s performance of the Aria is offered as a free download track by Hyperion. The site also houses Angela Hewitt’s two radiant recordings, one from [1999](http://www.musicweb-international.com/classrev/2000/june00/goldberg.htm), the other [2015](http://www.musicweb-international.com/classrev/2017/Mar/Bach_Goldbergs_CDA68146.htm).  
  
Colin Clarke

A release fit for a king.