

COUNTERPOINT IN THE GOLDBERG VARIATIONS: A COMPARATIVE STUDY

Mark Anson-Cartwright  
Queens College & The Graduate Center, CUNY  
[mark.ansoncartwright@qc.cuny.edu](mailto:mark.ansoncartwright@qc.cuny.edu)

Presented at MTSNYS Annual Meeting  
Ithaca College, 6 April 2024

Example 1. Fundamental bass of the Goldberg Variations, showing alternatives in second half  
(Reproduced from Williams 2001, p. 36)

The image displays four staves of musical notation for basso continuo, arranged vertically. Each staff begins with a bass clef, a key signature of one sharp (F#), and a common time signature. The notation consists of quarter notes and rests, with some notes having stems pointing up and others down. Below each staff, a harmonic progression is indicated by Roman numerals and sharps (#). The first staff shows a progression of I, IV, V, I, II, V, I. The second staff shows a progression of I, IV, V, II, I, IV, V. The third staff shows a progression of I, IV, V, I, II, V, I. The fourth staff shows a progression of I, IV, V, II, I, IV, V. The notation is written in a clear, handwritten style.

Example 2. Goldberg Variations—Opening bass line (selected variations)

Var. 2



Var. 4



Var. 5



5



Var. 8



5



Var. 12



5



Example 3. Goldberg Variations—Contrapuntal models for mm. 1–8  
Not included: Var. 8, 10, 14, 26, 27

Aria, Var. 1, 12, (15), 16, 24, 29, 30

Ia

Var. 4, 7, 13, 20

Ib

Var. 3, 5, 11, 17, 19, 23, 28

II

Var. 6

III

Var. 9

IV

Var. 18

V

Example 3, continued. Contrapuntal models (mm. 1–4 only)

Var. 2

VIa

Musical score for Var. 2, VIa part. The score consists of two staves. The top staff is in treble clef, G major (two sharps), and common time. The bottom staff is in bass clef, C major (no sharps or flats). The music shows a series of eighth-note patterns with various slurs and grace notes.

Var. 21

VIb

Musical score for Var. 21, VIb part. The score consists of two staves. The top staff is in treble clef, F major (one sharp), and common time. The bottom staff is in bass clef, C major (no sharps or flats). The music features eighth-note patterns with slurs and grace notes.

Var. 22

VIc

Musical score for Var. 22, VIc part. The score consists of two staves. The top staff is in treble clef, G major (two sharps), and common time. The bottom staff is in bass clef, C major (no sharps or flats). The music shows eighth-note patterns with slurs and grace notes.

Var. 25

VII

Musical score for Var. 25, VII part. The score consists of two staves. The top staff is in treble clef, F major (one sharp), and common time. The bottom staff is in bass clef, C major (no sharps or flats). The music features eighth-note patterns with slurs and grace notes.

Example 4. Goldberg Variations—Contrapuntal models for measures 9-16

(Note: Most of the variations shown here are of the “toccata” type, with hand-crossing.)

v. 1

v. 5

v. 8

v. 11

v. 13

v. 14

v. 17

Example 4, continued—Contrapuntal models (mm. 9-16)

The musical score consists of three staves of music, each with a key signature of one sharp (F#) and a common time signature. The first staff (top) starts with a RH (right hand) eighth note followed by a LH (left hand) eighth note. The second staff (middle) starts with a LH eighth note followed by a RH eighth note. The third staff (bottom) starts with a LH eighth note followed by a RH eighth note. Arrows point from the RH and LH markings to specific notes in the music. Measure 23 begins with a LH eighth note followed by a RH eighth note. Measure 26 begins with a RH eighth note followed by a LH eighth note.

Example 5. Goldberg Variations—Contrapuntal models for measures 17-24

The musical score consists of six staves of music for two voices, labeled Aria, v. 1, v. 4, 5, 7, 10, 13, 19, v. 11, v. 14, and v. 17. The music is in common time and G major (indicated by a treble clef and a key signature of one sharp). The vocal parts are written on a single staff with a brace between them.

- Aria:** Measures 17-24. The vocal parts are mostly sustained notes (open circles) on the first and third beats of each measure.
- v. 1:** Measures 17-24. The vocal parts begin to have more rhythmic complexity, with eighth-note patterns appearing in the second and fourth measures.
- v. 4, 5, 7, 10, 13, 19:** Measures 17-24. The vocal parts continue to develop, with more sustained notes and eighth-note patterns.
- v. 11:** Measures 17-24. The vocal parts show a mix of sustained notes and eighth-note patterns, with some sixteenth-note figures in the bass line.
- v. 14:** Measures 17-24. The vocal parts feature sustained notes and eighth-note patterns, with some sixteenth-note figures in the bass line.
- v. 17:** Measures 17-24. The vocal parts show a mix of sustained notes and eighth-note patterns, with some sixteenth-note figures in the bass line.

Example 5, continued. Contrapuntal models (mm. 17-24)

The musical score consists of three staves of music, each in common time and major key (indicated by a 'C' with a sharp sign). The first staff (top) starts with a half note, followed by a quarter note, then a series of eighth notes connected by slurs. The second staff (middle) starts with a quarter note, followed by a series of eighth notes. The third staff (bottom) starts with a half note, followed by a quarter note, then a series of eighth notes. Arrows point from specific notes in the top staff to corresponding notes in the middle staff, illustrating a contrapuntal relationship between the two voices.

v. 20

v. 23

v. 26

Example 6. Goldberg Variations—Contrapuntal models for measures 25-32

The musical score consists of six staves of music for two voices, arranged in three pairs of two staves each. The top staff in each pair is in treble clef, and the bottom staff is in bass clef. The key signature is one sharp (F# major). The time signature is common time (indicated by 'C'). The music is divided into measures by vertical bar lines.

- Aria:** The first staff shows a simple harmonic progression with sustained notes. The second staff follows with a more complex melodic line.
- v. 1:** The first staff begins with a sustained note. The second staff features a descending melodic line with eighth-note patterns.
- v. 5:** The first staff has a sustained note. The second staff shows a more intricate melodic line with eighth-note patterns.
- v. 11:** The first staff has a sustained note. The second staff shows a melodic line with eighth-note patterns and some grace notes.
- v. 14:** The first staff has a sustained note. The second staff shows a melodic line with eighth-note patterns and grace notes.
- v. 17:** The first staff has a sustained note. The second staff shows a melodic line with eighth-note patterns and grace notes.

Example 6, continued. Contrapuntal models (mm. 25-32)

The image displays three staves of musical notation for piano, arranged vertically. Each staff begins with a treble clef and a key signature of one sharp (F#). The first staff, labeled 'v. 20', consists of eight measures. The second staff, labeled 'v. 23', also consists of eight measures. The third staff, labeled 'v. 26', consists of eight measures. Measure 26 concludes with a double bar line and repeat dots at the bottom.

v. 20

v. 23

v. 26

LH

RH

Example 7. Quotation from Tovey, "Bach: 'Goldberg Variations,'" in *Essays in Musical Analysis: Chamber Music* (London: Oxford University Press, 1944), p. 30.

For example, the following passage in the twenty-first variation:

Ex. 1



with its strange skips of 7ths at \*, \* and its still stranger harmony at the second of the two skips, may easily be mistaken by a prejudiced mind for a sacrifice of musical sense to the exigencies of a mechanical 'canon in the 7th'. How false such an idea really is may be seen from the fact that the passage could easily be altered, as follows:

Ex 2



Compare Variation 21, mm. 14-15:



Example 8. Original variation on the Goldberg bass, by M. Anson-Cartwright

The musical score consists of four staves of music, each with a treble clef and a basso continuo staff below it. The key signature is one flat throughout. The music is in 2/4 time.

- Staff 1:** Treble clef, basso continuo staff below. Measures 1-6. The treble part features eighth-note patterns with grace notes and slurs. The basso continuo staff has sustained notes.
- Staff 2:** Treble clef, basso continuo staff below. Measures 7-12. The treble part continues with eighth-note patterns. Measure 12 ends with a repeat sign and a double bar line.
- Staff 3:** Treble clef, basso continuo staff below. Measures 13-18. The treble part shows eighth-note patterns with grace notes and slurs. Measure 18 ends with a repeat sign and a double bar line.
- Staff 4:** Treble clef, basso continuo staff below. Measures 19-24. The treble part features eighth-note patterns. Measure 24 ends with a repeat sign and a double bar line.

## Bibliography

- Breig, Werner. “Bachs Goldberg-Variationen als zyklisches Werk,” *Archiv für Musikwissenschaft* 32 (1975): 243–265.
- Gosman, Alan. “Canonic Threads and Large-scale Structure in Canons,” *Gamut: Online Journal of the Music Theory Society of the Mid-Atlantic* 5/1 (2012) <https://trace.tennessee.edu/gamut/vol5/iss1/6>
- Jones, Richard D. P. *The Creative Development of Johann Sebastian Bach, Volume II: 1717–1750*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013.
- Mellers, Wilfrid. *Bach and the Dance of God*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1980.
- Müller-Blattau, Joseph. “Bachs Goldberg-Variationen,” *Archiv für Musikwissenschaft* 16 (1959): 207–219.
- Schulenberg, David. *The Keyboard Music of J. S. Bach*. 2<sup>nd</sup> edn. New York: Routledge, 2006.
- Tovey, Donald Francis. “Bach: ‘Goldberg Variations.’” In *Essays in Musical Analysis: Chamber Music*, ed. Hubert J. Foss. London: Oxford University Press, 1944. [This essay was written in 1900.]
- Williams, Peter. *Bach: The Goldberg Variations*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001.
- Wolff, Christoph. “Bach’s Handexemplar of the Goldberg Variations: A New Source,” *Journal of the American Musicological Society* 29 (1976): 224-241.
- Yearsley, David. *Bach and the Meanings of Counterpoint*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002.
- Zenck, Martin. “‘Bach der Progressive’: Die Goldberg-Variationen in der Perspektive von Beethovens Diabelli-Variationen,” *Musik-Konzepte* 42 (1985): 29–92.