



THE MAGAZIN FOR SERIOUS RECORD COLLECTORS

ISSUE JANUARY/FEBRUARY 2008

INTERVIEW

Burkard Schliessmann Articulates His Approach to Bach
BY JAMES REEL

Following pianist Simone Dinnerstein's fine new recording of Bach's *Goldberg Variations*, covered in the previous issue, now comes a quite different traversal of the score by German pianist Burkard Schliessmann. I interviewed Schliessmann about this project via e-mail.



Photograph: Matthias Heyde, Berlin

J.R.: Do you feel it's necessary to defend the decision to perform Bach on the piano, rather than the harpsichord? Do the *Goldberg Variations*, in particular, adapt well to the piano, or do they present certain difficulties?

B.S.: It's a profound deliberation and decision to perform Bach on the piano—or on harpsichord. One has to free oneself from the idea that the compositions of Bach are strictly bound to the instruments of the Baroque epoch. One has to remember that Bach himself used other keyboards than the harpsichord, such as the spinet and the clavichord, all instruments that have their own character and different handling and so have a decisive effect on interpretation. That means Bach himself didn't restrict performers to *one* instrument, *one* sound, and *one* manner to play his pieces. And lastly we have the great Bach with his compositions for the organ, which again is a complete other style in music, structure, and sound. Bach was a very versatile and complex, nearly multilayered composer, and I'm convinced, if Bach also had known the piano concert grand of today, he would have been fascinated by the richness of artistic possibilities. On the other hand, if one knows the historic background of interpretation of Bach, one has to confess that many readings of the text of the compositions in whole must be dependent on the style of harpsichord, spinet, or clavichord. Especially articulation and phrasing. These readings cannot directly be produced on a piano concert grand. One has to verify and reproduce these readings in another manner on a piano concert grand by pointing out the original meaning in a relative manner, but one that is convincing in relation to the new instrument.

To be concrete regarding the first part of your question: Even being a concert pianist, I don't find that it's necessary in the last sense to perform Bach in general on the piano concert grand. To play Bach in historic academic style absolutely has to be defended, and these interpretations surely have their absolute justification. But if you already make the jump to decide to play Bach on the piano concert grand, you have to do this with all the consequences. Then you have to play Bach not in the style you would on harpsichord, no, you have to play out the concert grand with all its possibilities; otherwise it wouldn't be convincing, because the piano totally would be undermined in its tonal variety.

In the case of the *Goldberg Variations* we are confronted with certain problems of realization on the piano concert grand: this piece really is conceived for a two-manual instrument in the original, and the crossing-over of both hands is well known for the enormous technical problems pianists have to bypass by keeping the pieces in tempo, especially the fast ones.

On the other hand, one has to realize that performing on the concert grand also is a great advantage in dynamic range, colors, and the independence of all voices. Giving each voice its own character in touch, dynamics, color, articulation, phrasing, and melodic line, you can build up a musical and artistic result that brings out a new tension, which lays itself like a net above the whole. Because of the rigidity of the sound of the harpsichord—sorry to all harpsichordists; it's no criticism of your wonderful instrument, but I'm sure you understand what I mean—this is not possible in interpretation on harpsichord. Here the music has other priorities to be wrung out, as already mentioned, the articulation and phrasing.

In view that the *Goldberg* is a piece from the late period of Bach, and all the voices are structured with such lightness, the whole interpretation of this piece of music has to have something well proportioned, and at the same time, something that is filled with a special kind of “matter of course.” Therefore I'm absolutely convinced that, to bring this out, interpretation on the piano can be much more affecting, interesting, and artistically more valuable than on harpsichord.

The *Goldberg Variations* have always enjoyed a special status, with pianists regarding them as a touchstone of their technical and interpretative powers. At stake are the ability to light up the work from within, a tightrope walk that at the same time describes a vast circle, starting out and returning to a state of apothecic stillness, the ability to find one's bearings within a particular concentration of inner and outer complexity, an inner and outer coherence and homogeneity that are all-embracing, the ability, finally, to produce an explosion of inner cells by reduced means and, hence, a particular sensitivity, sinewy tension, and color. The performer must play a game with particular devices, finding solutions to the problems posed by the work not in octave doublings and other playful expedients but in a tightly structured inner rigor and order. What is demanded is a particular form of internalization, of inner and outer lyricism. It is this that makes the *Goldberg Variations* so unique—and so demanding.

This is my personal conviction of the *Goldbergs*. Therefore I personally favor the interpretation on piano concert grand with its richness of all emotional ranges, which, however, does not minimize the feats in history of the harpsichord-interpretations.

And last but not least: we know that the dedication of compositions to a particular instrument is to be seen relatively in Bach. Very often it was Bach himself who made transcriptions from certain works for other instruments, and, especially the cantatas and orchestral works often are based on the—for the Baroque-epoch so typically—style and manner of parody. Also, the greatest works, the *Art of Fugue* and *the Musikalisches Opfer*, only to name two, are not dedicated to a special instrument at all.

And regarding, for example, the organ works, it's interesting to learn that these works also can be well performed not only on historic organs, but also on great Romantic organs that lay bare their truth; whereas typical Romantic organ works, for example those of Reger, cannot be realized on a Baroque organ. Here you see the internal independence of Bach's compositions and how adaptable they lastly can be—and how modern at all times, epochs, and periods.

By this I find it absolutely defensible to interpret the *Goldberg* on the piano concert grand, whereas, however, one shouldn't ignore the historic and necessary style of the harpsichord.

J.R.: I see that you have a history of performing Bach on the organ. How does that color your approach to the *Goldberg Variations* on the piano—or does it not have an effect?

B.S.: Already at the age of 21 I played the complete organ works of Bach—and this by memory. As a child and youngster I had been taught by one of the last master-students of the legendary Helmut Walcha, and I completely had been affected by this style of insight into Bach and the internal structures. This method of regarding the independent coherence of all the voices gave me a special comprehension of Bach and his philosophy. Lastly one can say that I have been growing up with Bach, even to this day. If you understand the free organ works (preludes, toccatas, fugues), the chorales, and especially the trio sonatas, you have an insight into Bach that others don't have. Especially the soloistic and independent leadings of the three voices of the trio sonatas is artistically the major aim of an organist; and already the *Orgelbüchlein*, the part 5 of the Peters Edition, shows Bach in all his structural and emotional effects. Albert Schweitzer described the *Orgelbüchlein* as something where the tonal speech of Bach is unbeatable. The comprehension of the organ-Bach is an understanding of the counterpoint and the polyphonic structures, and the coherence of Bach himself.

***J.R.:* What qualities led you to choose the particular piano you used for this recording?**

B.S.: The piano I used is one of my own two Steinways. It's a very new instrument, only one and a half years old. I looked for it a very long time in Hamburg, and it's an instrument that fulfills all artistic demands to the highest degree: full sound; great length of tones, which is a prerequisite to realize the polyphonic structures, especially to point out the longer notes and organ-points; then a big elasticity and flexibility in the tonal palette, which is enormously important for underlining the independence of the voices, and which can bring out countless registrations, like on an organ. The mechanical lightness is so wonderful, which enabled me to realize the extreme virtuosity in the faster movements of the variations. The complete range of tone and voicing of the instrument is so plastic that the clarity of the polyphony is guaranteed at all times.

But, to bring out all these qualities, all terms have to come together. My piano technician, Georges Ammann from Steinway-Hamburg, is one of the best technicians all over the world, someone who collaborates with all major pianists. It's through his great experience that this instrument can be played out in its full range and possibilities. He really did a great job! Otherwise, it's my recording producer, Friedemann Engelbrecht, and my recording engineer, Julian Schwenkner (Teldex-Studio in Berlin, www.teldexstudio.de, which is renowned European wide), who worked on the really unique reproduction of my piano sound.

As we all know, the singularity in the art of Bach is the fusion of both levels and lines, the horizontal and vertical line. It's a real wonder to see that the creation and forming of the horizontal line, the polyphonic structure, also results in this perfect, beautiful vertical line, the harmonic line. As we also know, Bach already used the full harmonic range and radius as no composer before him. My artistic aim of course is to point out the horizontal line in soloistic manner in a dynamically elastic way, but in the same breath to form the harmonic line in a bright field of color (I would call it "harmonic articulation"), to achieve a particular atmosphere of emotions and moods, drama, velocity, vividness, and so on. As we can imagine, these are high demands on an instrument. The instrument I found gives me these prerequisites, because the clarity on one side delineates the polyphonic structure, but these lines also are blending to a "compact sound," by which it's possible to realize and verify the harmonic articulation I have described. One can be lucky to find an instrument with both qualities.

***J.R.:* Do you regard yourself as a "Romantic" pianist? Do you approach Bach backward, starting from the Romantic era or perhaps from our own time, or do you try to approach Bach fresh, as a "clean slate," unaffected by later musical developments?**

B.S.: As a pupil of Shura Cherkassky, Bruno Leonardo Gelber, Poldi Mildner, and Herbert Seidel, I'm profoundly a representative of the great hypervirtuosic Romantic epoch. Perhaps you know that I played—and still do (!)—all the major works from this repertoire. But as already mentioned, my roots also go back to Bach and this special style of interpretation, where I'm also at home. In this special field of tension I also see many of the major composers and works in the Romantic tradition. It was no less than Schumann himself who said that great

music finds all its combinations in Bach. Indeed, Schumann also builds up his works in polyphonic style, and even in his orchestral scores and symphonic movements he is a counterpointer. As Romantic and modern his work must have seemed to people of his era and lifetime, in main he was a classicist. That means that—and only to name one typical Romantic composer—Schumann cannot be understood without Bach.

However, to approach Bach backward, from the Romantic era or even from our own time, would be a failure and not the right way, because to bring out Bach in his right stylistic strength you have first to understand him in the Baroque era (and you also must have studied all the fine and sensitive differences in the performance of ornaments, trills, and so on), but that doesn't mean that Bach couldn't be romantic. Not at all! On the other side, I'm very skeptical in approaching Bach as a clean slate. To understand Bach, one has to be at home in the whole literature of art and interpretation; one must have great experience in performing the complete literature, from Bach until the early avant-garde. I'm absolutely convinced that only by this deep knowledge one can feel the all-embracing range of effects that are compressed in Bach and his music—and how later generations have been inspired. Only by this experience you can give the Bach interpretation a new balance and tension. In the case of the *Goldberg Variations* we are confronted with these all-emotional effects, and I'm also skeptical whether this all-embracing range can be touched by much too young players, on harpsichord as well as on piano. Knowing the true worth of this condensed and nearly welded-in polyphonic structure and singular musical architecture, one ultimately knows that it is impossible to play with the variations, meaning to change voices, or make doublings. Then the music itself would be robbed of its true worth and sense, which can only be revealed by bringing out the embedded simplicity, which however is transformed to an electrified, heated atmosphere. One has to respect the internal strength.

Bach really cannot be seen, understood, and interpreted from an isolated point. Bach has to be explored as part of something complete, unique, of a universe.

J.R.: In your biography, there is a statement that you find that Chopin has been influenced by Bach. Would you discuss this, especially as the *Goldberg Variations* may relate to the question?

B.S.: Chopin absolutely was influenced by Bach. We know that before Chopin himself performed in concert, he didn't play anything other than Bach. His own Preludes are a reference to the *Well-Tempered Clavier* of Bach, and all Chopin's students had to play Bach. In whole, Chopin admired Bach most of all composers, and it was nothing less than the *Well-Tempered Clavier* itself that was his musical diary. I also have said that Chopin is the crowning and climax of piano-playing. It's something so unique, all-affecting in emotionalism, musical architecture, and structure, that all past giants are present in it: Bach and Mozart. Chopin's elegance is so singular, that again you need much experience to convey his music in the real and original style. The question of rubato is very sensitive: It's nothing arbitrary, but much more something well calculated and well proportioned, something that is integrated in the classical strength of form, which is constructed on the profound knowledge of the polyphonic and contrapuntal structures of Bach and Mozart.

Whether the *Goldbergs* may relate to this question? Absolutely! I again want to mention a certain and special term: *jeu perlé*. Without this you can't play Chopin, you can't play Mozart, and lastly absolutely not the *Goldbergs*. Again we return to the theme of my piano concert grand:

if the piano cannot bring out this character, you are totally lost. In conclusion: all is in the same breath, and all is part of a big coherence. Therefore, interpretation also is a question of experience.

J.R.: What past pianists, if any, have most deeply influenced your concept of the Goldberg Variations, and in what specific ways?

B.S.: To approach Bach, one has to realize that 100 years after Bach's death, Bach and his music totally had been forgotten. Even while he was still alive, Bach himself believed in the polyphonic power and the resulting symmetric architectures of well-proportioned music. But this had been an artificial truth—even for him. Other composers, including his sons, already composed in another style, where they found other ideals and brought them to new solutions. The spirit of the time already had changed while Bach was still alive. A hundred years later, it was Mendelssohn who about 1850 discovered Bach anew with the performance of the *St. Matthew Passion*. Now a new renaissance began, and the world learned to know the greatness of Bach. To become acquainted with Bach, many transcriptions were done. But the endeavors in rediscovering Bach had been—stylistically—in a wrong direction. Among these were the orchestral transcriptions of Leopold Stokowski, and the organ interpretations of the multitalented Albert Schweitzer, who, one has to confess, had a decisive effect on the rediscovery of Bach. All performances had gone in the wrong direction: much too romantic, with a false knowledge of historic style, the wrong sound, the wrong rubato, and so on. The necessity of artists like Rosalyn Tureck and Glenn Gould—again 100 years later—has been understandable: The radicalism of Glenn Gould pointed out the real clarity and the internal explosions of the power-filled polyphony in the best way. This extreme style, called by many of his critics refrigerator interpretations, however really had been necessary to demonstrate the right strength to bring out the architecture in the right manner, which had been lost so much before. I'm convinced that the style Glenn Gould played has been the right answer. But there has been another giant: it was no less than Helmut Walcha who, also beginning in the 1950, started his legendary interpretations for the DG-Archive productions of the complete organ-work cycle on historic organs (Silbermann, Arp Schnitger). Also very classical in strength of speed and architectural proportions, he pointed out the polyphonic structures in an enlightened but moreover especially *humanistic* way, in a much more smooth and elegant way than Glenn Gould on the piano. Some years later it was Virgil Fox who acquainted the U.S. with tours of the complete Bach cycle, which certainly was effective in its own way, but much more modern than Walcha. The ranges of Bach interpretations had become wide, and there were the defenders of the historical style and those of the much more modern romantic style. Also the performances of the orchestral and cantata Bach had become extreme: on one side, for example, Karl Richter, who used a big and rich-toned orchestra; on the other side Helmut Rilling, whose Bach was much more historically oriented.

I myself represent the style of a Bach who was a human being with all his heights and depths, who knew life very well. My Bach is the experience of my playing the whole literature; and filling the different voices with their own life, vitality, vividness; it's the independent speaking-until-singing of the different voices; and lastly it's a balance between pianistic virtuosity and something chamber-music-like.

I had been fascinated by Gould in his explosive emotionality, which really is part of my own conception, even if today I have the possibility of another interpretation, as explained; but there are two versions that I also admire very much: those of Perahia and Hewitt. But in answering your question: no interpretation has influenced me; moreover is my interpretation influenced by my knowing not only the whole literature, but also by my knowing the organ-Bach and his unlimited colors. And this richness is, so I hope, what I give to my listener. It's an all-embracing conception of life.

We still have to mention giants like Wanda Landowska and Marie Claire Alain, who were a great influence on the Bach interpretations, but not to *me*.

J.R.: The *Goldberg Variations* are highly structured; how do you balance the need for structure, or musical architecture, with your desire for a performance to seem intuitive, spontaneous, or subjective?

B.S.: As so often I have pointed out, intuition is a level of the highest range. In details, I don't have to think or to worry about the realization of my interpretation; no, it's something that spreads out of my artistic all-compassion. Probably I have to be sorry for it, but this is my deepest artistic conviction for the rightness of an interpretation—interpretation as a summary of something unique and whole, not of a combining of details. Intuition is a level that includes all levels of emotion, intelligence, structure, and architecture. And I'm also confronted with the question of poetry and poesy, something that is so often neglected in Bach, especially, and again I'm sorry for my criticism in the historic style of interpretation.

Let's take a look at the 25th variation of the second part. Here Bach meets us in his highest and deepest personal and human form: it's like in the *Art of Fugue* in the unfinished fugue No. 20, where Bach confronts us with his personal signature. It was he himself, who, after he had been occupied during his whole life with symbols, with numbers, with the mastering of structural and formal problems and renewals, now he saw himself confronted with a personal view into mirror. He now shows us a human being in his whole conception of life. The composer of "Come, oh sweet death" now is confessing, "Oh sweet death, how bitter is your prickle." In Contrapunctus 20, bar 193, one feels this tragedy through the four chromatic tones, which are placed like a tragic breath of faith. The heartbreaking modulations from bar 210 until the end demonstrate the horror of death. By this we also are confronted in the 25th variation of the *Goldbergs*. Look at my time: more than nine minutes. I need this time to demonstrate this mood in its endless richness in the form of a geographic panorama. It has something of the aspect of standing still. But also another variation, the 21st, is a herald of this tonal speaking, and the 15th variation ends in visionary burning.

Many want to try to see in the 25th variation the nearness of Schoenberg, and by doing this they interpret this wonderful piece in a way that is academic, dry, rigid, motionless, and colorless. I fear this is the wrong insight and approach to the real and inner content of this piece, because by this it will totally lose its three-dimensionality. I'm convinced that it's a very subjective, elastic, and confessional piece of Bach, as is the 20th Contrapunctus of the *Art of Fugue*.

The *Goldberg Variations* are, as explained in my booklet-text, in short, music that observes neither end nor beginning, music with neither real climax nor real resolution, music that, like Baudelaire's lovers, "rests lightly on the wings of the unchecked wind." Gould is referring here to the circular design of the work, a circularity whose development is polarized,

inspired, and fed by more and more new energy fields. The result is a universe that in its significance resembles the alpha and omega of music in general, music that evolves out of nothing and disappears back into nothing as if in a state in which time stands still.

The interpretation reflects my deepest respect for the major composition of the musical literature. It's the result not only of working nearly eight years on it; it's much more the result of my lifelong occupation with music and arts themselves. And in the surround-version you find the lucky result of a combination of all parameters: truth and verity of the excellent acoustic possibilities of the studio-hall, my Steinway, my technician Georges Ammann, and, in special manner, Teldex-Berlin.



BACH *Goldberg Variations* • Burkard Schliessmann (pn) • BAYER 100326 (2 Hybrid multichannel SACDs: 82:51)

Most of Burkard Schliessmann's interpretation of the *Goldberg Variations* calls to mind Alexander Pope's line "eternal sunshine of the spotless mind"—a reference not to ignorance (nor to the memory erasing at the center of the movie by that title), but to innocence. For the most part, Schliessmann presents this as music of optimism and joy, the exact opposite of much of Simone Dinnerstein's recording, reviewed in the previous issue. Oh, Schliessmann does know when and how to get serious, as in the extended (though not distended) traversal of the 25th variation (discussed in the accompanying interview). Yet even here, the playing is not self-consciously weighty; he doesn't try to make Bach sound like Beethoven.

Schliessmann sets a measured pace in the Aria, feeling his way through little hesitations that create the impression that he's improvising the music as he plays. But his overall approach is much sunnier, thanks mainly to his almost bouncy non-legato touch. Consider the seventh variation, which is remarkably playful, even a bit rustic.

This is being issued as an SACD, but I heard only an advance copy in conventional two-channel audio, with a very well rounded, almost pearly reproduction of the instrument.

If you want a highly pianistic *Goldberg* that makes the final variation sound like the "Great Gate at Kiev," you're better off with the likes of João Carlos Martins (if you can still find his recording). But if you want something more in the tradition of Glenn Gould's first recording, minus some of the peculiarities but plus the repeats, Schliessmann's account is highly satisfactory.

BACH GOLDBERG – VARIATIONS
BURKARD SCHLISSMANN , piano
BAYER-Records BR 100 326
2 SACD
Dist.: QUALITON

Recorded by TELDEX – Berlin

teldex
Studio Berlin