

# PHILADELPHIA CHAMBER MUSIC SOCIETY

a life more beautiful

PREVIEW  
NOTES

Víkingur Ólafsson, piano  
Friday, January 26 – 7:30 PM  
*Perelman Theater, Kimmel Center*

## **PROGRAM**

***Goldberg Variations, BWV 988***

**Johann Sebastian Bach**

***Born: March 31, 1685, in Eisenach, Germany***

***Died: July 28, 1750, Leipzig, Germany***

***Composed: 1741***

***Duration: 65 minutes***

In November 1741, Bach made the hundred-mile trip east from Leipzig to Dresden to visit an old friend, Count Hermann Keyserlingk, the Russian ambassador to the Saxon court. Keyserlingk's court harpsichordist was the 14-year-old Johann Gottlieb Goldberg, who at age 10 had been a student of Bach. There are several stories as to what happened next, all impossible to confirm. One is that Keyserlingk commissioned a work for his young harpsichordist and gave Bach a goblet full of gold coins in payment. Another is that Keyserlingk was an insomniac who specified that he wanted a piece that Goldberg could play to him as he went to sleep. What is certain is that the following year Bach published a work he called simply *Aria with Thirty Variations*, composed for two-manual harpsichord. The score bore no dedication, nor any mention at all of Keyserlingk or Goldberg. But Bach did give the count a copy of this music, and the conclusion is that this is the piece that had been requested in Dresden. By a process of (perhaps random) association, one of the greatest works ever written immortalizes a 14-year-old harpsichord player, and we know this music today simply as the *Goldberg Variations*.

As András Schiff wrote in the liner notes for his live recording of the work: “ ‘Aller guten Dinge sind drei’ – All good things are three, thus the 30 variations are divided into ten groups of three. Each group contains a brilliant virtuoso toccata-like piece, a gentle and elegant character piece, and a strictly polyphonic canon. The canons are presented in a sequence of increasing intervals, starting with the canon in unison up until the canon in ninths. In place of the canon in tenths we have a quodlibet (what pleases), which combines fragments of two folk songs with the ground bass. The tonality remains G major for the most part, with shadows of tonic minor in three variations (Nos. 15, 21, & 25).”

After the huge success of *Johann Sebastian Bach* (2018), Víkingur Ólafsson has recorded the composer's monumental *Goldberg Variations*. The album comes out on Deutsche Grammophon on October 6, 2023. In the accompanying booklet, he reflects on the performance decisions he had to make in the studio when it came to creating a definitive version of a work he'd dreamt of recording for 25 years. “At least to me, the *Goldberg Variations*' genius lies not in the general, but the specific,” says Ólafsson. “As each variation unfolds, one must be wholly gripped by its individual drama and affect, drawn into its own marvelous little microcosm and filled with the joy of discovering it.”