Joanne Kong, harpsichord

APRIL 1, 2001, 3:00 P.M.
CAMP CONCERT HALL
BOOKER HALL OF MUSIC
Goldberg Variations

Johann Sebastian Bach
(1685-1750)

Joanne Kong, harpsichord
Joanne Kong is the recipient of numerous national and international honors, and is particularly known for her versatility as a harpsichordist, pianist, and chamber musician. With a specialty in the music of Johann Sebastian Bach, she has been a featured soloist in the Los Angeles Bach Festival, Oregon Bach Festival, New York Bach Aria Festival, Houston Harpsichord Society Recital Series, and she has received critical acclaim for her interpretations of the Goldberg Variations and Well-Tempered Clavier. She was the fourth place winner in the 1983 J.S. Bach International Piano Competition, and other honors include the 1972 National Prize in the Baldwin Piano Competition, a fellowship to perform at the 1974 American Academy of the Arts in Europe, two Performance Awards as harpsichordist in the 1978 Young Musicians Foundation auditions, and the Grand Prize in the 1985 International Piano Recording Competition. Dr. Kong is currently the Director of Accompaniment at the University of Richmond, and her many collaborations with artist performers include the Shanghai String Quartet and cellist James Wilson. This year she will be recording a 2-CD set of the Goldberg Variations on harpsichord and Beethoven’s Diabelli Variations on the piano, for release in 2002 on the BRIOSO label. The project will be funded in part by a Faculty Research Grant from the University of Richmond.
had the gift been a thousand times larger, their artistic value would not yet have been paid for.” This is the only evidence stating that Keyserlingk commissioned the work, and some historians question the story due to the lack of a dedication to the count, which would have been the custom of the day. There also continue to be conflicting opinions as to whether even the prodigious 13- or 14-year-old Goldberg could have met the technical and contrapuntal challenges of the work.

The variations were first published in Nuremberg in 1741-1742 as the fourth part of the Clavier-Übung, with the modest title of “Keyboard practice, consisting of an Aria with different variations for the harpsichord with two manuals. Prepared for the enjoyment of music lovers…” Bach indicates for each variation whether it is to be played on one keyboard (a 1 Clav.), two (a 2 Clav.), or either way (a 1 o vero 2 Clav.). The aria appears in the second Anna Magdalena notebook (1725), but recent research of the script suggests that Bach inserted it around 1740, hence the current belief that Bach probably composed the theme specifically for these variations. In binary form, the aria is in G major, 3/4 time and in the rhythm of a sarabande, with a highly ornamented melodic line.

However, it is the harmonic outline of the aria, rather than its melody, that is maintained and used as a foundation for development throughout the variations; hence Bach’s compositional technique is in line with that of the chaconne or passacaglia.

Throughout the course of the work, there is a repeated pattern of two variations in free style followed by a canonic variation. The canons (variations 3, 6, 9, 12, 15, 18, 21, 24, 27) feature imitation at intervals from the unison (variation 3) successively to the ninth (variation 27), and are masterful examples of canonic technique. The two variations preceding each canon consist for the most part of a “character piece” followed by a virtuosic piece with rapid figuration and hand-crossing to be performed on two manuals. The character variations display a wide variety of styles, some of which use dance patterns. These include a polonaise (1), passepied (4), gigue (7), four-voice fughettas (10 and 22), florid slow movements (13 and 25), allemande (21), and a French over-
Bach surprises the listener with a quodlibet, where two popular melodies occur simultaneously:

“Ich bin so lang nicht bei dir g’west.
Ruck her, ruck her, ruck her.”

and

“Kraut und Rüben haben mich vertrieben.
Hätt’ mein’ Mutter Fleisch gekocht,
so wär ich länger blieben.”

These translate as:

“I’ve not been with you for so long.
Come closer, closer, closer.”

and

“Beets and spinach drove me far away.
Had my mother cooked some meat,
then I’d have stayed much longer.”

This mixing together of folksongs was a favorite pastime of the Bach family at festive gatherings, yet here the composer maintains the intricate, artful combination of contrapuntal lines that pervades the entire set of variations. This joyful sublimation of Bach’s harmonies is followed most befittingly by the return of the Aria, which, in the words of Ralph Kirkpatrick, “falls like a benediction....And even beyond the scope of the emotions that have been aroused, the effect of the whole is one of boundless peace, in which one returns cleansed, renewed, matured to the starting point, which seen a second time seems so transfigured in the light of this traversed spiritual journey.”

---Notes by Joanne Kong