

Variations Down the Line: Rachel Fryer, piano. St Luke's Church, Brighton

On 10 September 2021, St Luke's Church, Brighton was the setting for the first live performance by pianist Rachel Fryer of 'Variations Down the Line'. Co-commissioned by JAM festival, who also hosted the online premiere, 'Variations Down the Line' is an enterprising project devised by Fryer and comprising Bach's *Goldberg Variations* interspersed with responses from five composers of the present day. The brief for each composer was to write three new variations, consisting of an example in free form (though based on Bach), a toccata and a canon. The composite work was presented in two halves, with Bach's opening Aria and variations 1-15, containing two of the new sets, in the first half of the concert, and then, after an interval, in the second half, Bach's variations 16-30, incorporating the three other new sets, all rounded off by a return to Bach's Aria.

Bach's *Goldberg Variations* was played entirely from memory in a refreshingly bright and crisply articulated account, playful in the lighter variations and thoughtful and searching in the more serious examples. Though individual variations, such as the gigue, the fugue, the expansive *Adagio* and the folk-like quodlibet received sharply defined characterisations, the music's over-arching structure was paramount in Fryer's interpretation, so there was always a feeling of forward movement. Bach's sense of fun was delightfully teased out of the toccata variations and there was an infectious sense of enjoyment in the pianist's intuitive approach to the music that transmitted successfully to the attentive audience. Tiny alterations in the repeated halves of each variation by means of extra decoration or subtle shifts in register and dynamics ensured the rendition was always engaging and invigorating.

Positioned between Bach's variations 6 and 7, Samuel Becker's three variations stuck closely to Bach's chords and bass line, capturing the spirit of the German master with a decidedly contemporary sensibility. With its slow dotted rhythms, the first of his variations had the majestic tread of a French Overture, presaging Bach's own variation 16. There followed what might be described as a meta-toccatina, exploiting the brittle, determined and incessant outpouring of rapid, punchy semiquavers associated with the form. In the style of a lilting Baroque dance, the last of Becker's variations was a strict canon at the second. Becker's contribution was well placed near the start of the *Goldbergs*, suddenly lifting the audience into a soundworld that was decidedly contemporary, yet still close enough to Bach in spirit and intent for the listener to grow accustomed quickly to the more modern idiom and accept it readily within the larger context, especially when interpreted with such polish and flair.

Wittily entitled 'Szenen am Bach', Julian Broughton's set was placed between Bach's variations 12 and 13. His first variation was a gentle, unhurried, and harmonically subtle 'Sarabande', which savoured the melodic qualities of Bach's original theme, unusually ornate for a variation subject, while exploring the outer edges of the keyboard. Deftly mercurial, the central 'Toccatina' began in intense mood but disturbed its own progress to grow more and more at ease with itself. The final variation showed its contrapuntal mettle, being mostly a canon at the interval of a fourth, but as in the previous toccata, the music interrupted itself with more liberating, freely imitative material. Rachel Fryer captured successfully the individual, fluent and essentially lyrical character of Broughton's music while ensuring it sounded entirely convincing within its Bachian framework.

Played between Bach's variations 18 and 19, Nicola LeFanu's variations followed Bach's binary structure of 16 bars plus 16 bars, each half repeated. The opening Prelude made effective use of the resonance of piano harmonics as Bach's harmonic ground was held silently in the bass while the pianist's right hand activated the harmonics. In the resonant acoustics of St Luke's, these ringing chords in the air were particularly ear-catching. The quicksilver Toccatina was swiftly dispatched with

considerable bravura. LeFanu's canon was at the seventh in the manner of a two-part invention, its second half turning into a canon by inversion. A judicious use of the piano's upper register with its heightened sense of clarity ensured this variation engaged the heart as well as the intellect.

Heard directly after Bach's variation no.21, Michael Finnissy's variations were based on a specific set of *Goldbergs* 19-21. The first used the textures from Bach's minuet (variation 19) with intricate cross-rhythms. The capering Toccata took its cue from variation 20's capricious subterfuges, with one part interrupting the other off-the-beat to subversive effect. The third variation explored the expressive power of Bach's no.21, with its wistful, fractured phrases. Fryer took in her stride Finnissy's technically challenging material, never making an issue of the music's virtuosic elements, especially in the fiendish toccata, but setting it perfectly within the overall musical conception.

Alison Kay's variations were interspersed with the Bach original which gave rise to them, so her supplicatory, bell-like first variation came before Bach's 'Aria' variation 24, upon which it is based. Kay took a modal approach to the aria, embellishing the melodic outline with wide-ranging ornamentation. Heard after Bach's variation no.25, Kay's Toccata used all the notes of Bach's original in the same order but varied by register, refashioning Bach's *Adagio* as an intensely fast movement. Hushed and withdrawn, Kay's 'Ghost canon', based on, and preceding, Bach's no.27, was written at the start of lockdown when the composer was unwell. It took Bach's original notes for each portion of the canon, ghosting the original, but constraining all the material in terms of intervals within that framework. In Fryer's responsive reading, the result was haunting and beautifully elusive, with an uncanny sense of both composers reaching out across the centuries to each another.

Hearing Bach's *Goldberg Variations* interwoven with the modern examples live in concert proved to be an inspiring juxtaposition and served to refresh and illuminate both musics. The warm applause which rewarded Rachel Fryer at the end of the evening was richly deserved, for she had given us nothing less than a *tour de force* of technical virtuosity and musicianship, with a performance notable for its meticulous long-term formal planning and convincing unification of widely disparate elements.

Paul Conway