

Bach's *Goldberg Variations* - A survey of the piano recordings

by Ralph Moore

Let me say right away that while I am well aware that Bach specified on the title page that these variations are for harpsichord, I much prefer them played on the modern piano in what is technically a transcription and venture to suggest that Bach would have loved the sonorities and flexibility of the modern instrument, even though it inevitably involves essentially faking the changes of register available on a double manual harpsichord. I hardly seem to be alone in this, in that, just as every great cellist wants to engage with the *Cello Suites*, so almost every great pianist seems to want to record his or her interpretation of the *Goldbergs* for posterity and the public appetite for recordings and performances on the pianoforte seems undiminished. I have accordingly confined this survey to that category; doubtless more authentic accounts on an original instrument have great merit but they lie beyond my scope, knowledge and experience; I have neither the acquaintance with, nor appreciation for, harpsichord versions to attempt a meaningful conspectus of them; nor, indeed, do I have the recording on my shelves and leave that task to a better-qualified reviewer. Here, however, is a good collective survey of the harpsichord recordings from [The Classic Review](#) aimed at the average punter like me.

In common with many a devotee of this miraculous music, my own first encounter with it was via the second Glenn Gould recording when, many years ago, a cultivated girlfriend introduced me to it; it was love at first hearing (assisted, perhaps by my attachment to said lady, but that's another story...). Since then I have heard scores of piano versions, many of which are in my own collection, but as there are literally hundreds of recordings, I cannot hope to do more than consider a sampling including the most popular and celebrated. 33 recordings are assessed below; all except the first two mono recordings featuring Glenn Gould and Rosalyn Tureck's second recording were recorded in stereo or digital sound, but both of those earlier recordings by Gould have been processed into Ambient Stereo by Pristine, and Zenph has "re-performed" the first studio version in stereo (see below for an explanation). I should add that the mere exercise of listening to so many versions of this masterpiece constitutes a threat to the reviewer's sanity, marvellous though the music is and I shall now need to go into Goldbergitis-induced lockdown for a while.

I suggest that the *Goldberg Variations* is a work which comes as close as any to the idea of "pure music". Its opening aria is taken from the second Anna Magdalena notebook and thirty variations on the bass line of that tune follow, with every third variation being in canon form, the canon being based on progressively wider intervals. Its pattern is thus formal and academic, yet it is memorably melodic and encompasses an extraordinary emotional range, thereby forming a highly approachable gateway into baroque music for the general listener who might otherwise shy away from the genre. I find it hard to accept that a product of the Baroque, an artistic movement characterised by emotional extremes and excess, should require a performer to play safe and avoid "Romantic" touches. Bach evidently expected exponents of his music to elaborate and embellish the repeats, making judicious use of decoration and rubato - both within the bar and within the phrase - to enliven them. Its mood is predominately upbeat in that all but three of the variations are written in G major; the three in a more sombre G minor include what Wanda Landowska famously dubbed 'The Black Pearl', which for many forms the heart of the work and the *da capo* instruction to repeat the opening aria at its close confers a strange, haunting air of wistful finality upon it which punctures the ebullience and exuberance of so much which has gone before.

The origins of BWV 988 were long believed to be such as they are fancifully narrated in the biography of Bach by Forkel, who claimed that the work was composed by Bach for the young virtuoso keyboard player and composer Johann Gottlieb Goldberg to play as nocturnal entertainment for the insomniac Count Kaiserling. Modern scholarship has cast doubt upon the veracity of those reminiscences, which were published over sixty years after the publication of the work in 1741. It hardly matters whether or not the music was originally devised as some kind of soothing lucubration but it certainly isn't soporific

and a further consequence of the bestowal of his name upon a masterpiece by another, far greater composer has been, ironically, to ensure Goldberg's immortality.

Back in 1990, the Gramophone graciously assured us that, "The *Goldberg Variations* are less well suited to performance on the piano than most of Bach's keyboard works, but Andras Schiff (Decca) shows that they are acceptable and enjoyable, not least in his very different treatment of repeats, all of which he plays—within 73 minutes and on a single disc." I am relieved to learn that my taste for them performed on the piano is "acceptable" and even "enjoyable", but demur regarding the first two points, especially regarding Schiff's supposed pre-eminence in the field. I do agree, however, regarding the desirability of including the repeats and how to treat them; on the other hand, one of my MWI colleagues was exasperated ([review](#)) by Vladimir Feltsman's innovative approach to them, calling them "vapid and silly", whereas another enjoyed them ([review](#)), as I do – all of which goes to confirm that hoariest of clichés beginning *de gustibus*.

Another such divergence in taste is revealed by the discrepancy between my complete lack of appreciation for Schiff as a pianist in general, let alone in this one work, and his being a prime recommendation from the author of the survey of piano versions in *The Classic Review*. The pianist who features most often in the survey below is Tatiana Nikolayeva, doyenne of Russian Soviet Bach specialists. For me, she was the major discovery of this survey; to my shame, I was previously unacquainted with her pre-eminence as an interpreter of this work. We all have our lacunae, I guess, and I am delighted to have remedied that gap in my knowledge. She left no fewer than five recordings and I would normally dismiss the consideration of so many versions by the one artist as excessive and indeed superfluous - for this reason, I have discussed only two of Rosalyn Tureck's four, especially as I do not care for them - but Nikolayeva's are all so good that I felt obliged to do so. I have, however, also reviewed four by Glenn Gould, one being a recreation as mentioned above and thus again different from the original, while the other three are recordings of both historical significance and wide appeal. I have included both Lifschitz' recordings, too, given the extent of the gap between them.

Gould apart, the interpreters here mostly chose to include some, if not all, repeats, which I prefer, and which fills a CD nicely, and renders their recordings almost twice as long as the 39 minutes of Gould's first, famous studio version, shorn as it is of all repetition. Otherwise, indications of tempo and phrasing in Bach's original scores are few and a great deal is left to the taste and discretion of the performer, which happily legitimises a wide variety of interpretative stances. I find that Bach's music in particular lends itself to a surprising range of approaches, a phenomenon of which I first became aware when I first heard *Switched-On Bach* in the early 70s.

There have been many arrangements of the work, but I have no patience with reworkings such as Busoni's, which seem to me to be otiose given the perfection of the music in its original form. As a curiosity, I append my unappreciative review of Tzimon Barto's traversal of that Busoni version, while being perfectly aware that some will disagree vehemently with the reasons for my aversion to it.

(A few of the assessments below have previously been posted as individual reviews on MusicWeb and are either reproduced here in their original form or have been modified for the purposes of this survey.)

Selected Recordings

Glenn Gould; mono live June 21, 1954, CBC broadcast, Pristine (Ambient Stereo) (no repeats)

There are four extant recordings of Glenn Gould playing this masterwork: the two widely known and oft compared studio recordings of 1955 and 1981, the live Salzburg recital from 1959 and this lesser-known live radio broadcast made for CBC in 1954, for which Gould arranged to have 33rpm acetate discs made for his private use.

Two things must first be established: the sound, for all Andrew Rose's habitual wizardry in cleaning it up, stabilising it and applying the Ambient Stereo effect, remains quite poor; secondly, that in consequence, and given that it is closer in interpretative characteristics to the studio recording the following year, its historical and sentimental significance to Gould fans as his first known recording is probably as great as, if not greater than, its artistic worth.

Nonetheless, the ear very quickly adapts to the final result, one is so quickly swept up and along by Gould's technical brilliance and aesthetic invention. A palpable sense of joy and enjoyment pervades the whole enterprise – and for some a further bonus derives from the fact that Gould has yet to acquire his besetting habit of humming along with his playing; that quirk becomes apparent in the two appended Partitas recorded only three years later, which are of course also in considerably better studio sound and thus reveal the singing obbligato more (dis)obligingly.

The differences between 1955 and 1981 have been exhaustively analysed and debated; they are apparent even to the casual listener. In the case of comparison between the 1955 recording – whose remastering by Pristine I reviewed in December 2013 – and this one, the differences are subtler, but they are there despite the performances clearly being first cousins. Astonishingly, the playing here in the one-take broadcast is still virtually flawless without the benefit enjoyed in the studio of splicing takes, but even Gould cannot approach quite the velocity he apparently achieves in the fastest movements in 1955; he has to take things just a shade steadier to allow for the possibility of slips in a live performance and consequently the overall timing is some seven minutes slower. The fingerwork in Variation 5 is still phenomenal, as is the bravura of no. 14; the snap and clarity of the voices he articulates in contrapuntal conversation still astonish and the sheer, rambunctious energy of his playing is overwhelming. Yet he begins with a surprisingly relaxed statement of the Aria, its nonchalant application of rubato and dreamy phrasing serving to contrast vividly with the moto perpetuo propulsiveness of the following first variation and sounding more relaxed than the brisker, crisper account a year later. Similarly, the 'Black Pearl' is deeply still, tragic and reflective; Gould is as mercurially adaptive as ever.

True believers will be intrigued by and want to own this; the general listener who loves Gould might conclude that ownership of the two studio recordings is sufficient ([review](#)).

Glenn Gould; mono studio, 1955, Naxos, Sony; Pristine Audio (Ambient Stereo)

It is idle to attempt a detailed critical commentary on this iconic, landmark recording by the 22-year-old Glenn Gould. Most admirers will already own this, the alpha version, and also the omega of 1981, made just before his death at fifty. They are both essential listening to those who can tolerate Gould's vocalise and interpretative eccentricities; those who cannot will already know to leave this alone.

Most previous issues from Sony and Naxos have either supplemented the *Goldbergs* with some complementary pieces such as fugues or a Partita, or have paired the two recordings. Pristine choose here to leave the Variations unadorned at a mere 38 and a half minutes, Gould having chosen the first time around to ignore repeats. That might seem unduly parsimonious or reverential to some collectors. However, sound engineer Andrew Rose has marginally reduced some of the extraneous noises and enhanced the depth of the original, mono piano sound. It was in any case always good but here certainly sounds fuller in Ambient Stereo.

Unfortunately, as a corollary to that process, the thuds and thumps of the original have become more pronounced. I am not sure that I do not prefer the slightly drier ambience of my 1992 20-bit remastering from Sony; indeed, I have become so used to it that I fancy Gould's conception is better served by the slightly more distanced, mono sound.

In short, if you already own this in a previous Sony incarnation, I wouldn't rush to replace it with this from Pristine. Convert though I am to the Ambient Stereo re-mastering process, I do not think that on

this occasion I would recommend this Pristine issue over the one from Sony. But see the Zenph 'recreation' next below... ([review](#))

Glenn Gould; mono studio 1955, Zenph re-performance in digital stereo (no repeats)

NB: this is a recreation of the 1955 studio recording using technological wizardry, so is essentially the same recording, but...

I was sceptical and perfectly prepared to be disappointed in this Frankenstein's Creature of a recording, made possible by advanced technology and elegantly explained in layman's terms in the notes. However, I admit to being almost immediately won over by it, especially when I made passage-on-passage comparisons with the original, 1955, mono recording. First, all the hiss and GG's humming are of course absent, and the clarity of the sound picture, in both surround-sound and binaural stereo for listening on headphones, is stunning, especially in the latter incarnation.

Previous reviewers have chewed over the debatable ethics of the process but I can only assert that I thoroughly enjoy it and do not see that it is any real sense cheating to convert Gould's original artistry into this enhanced format; timings, dynamics and touch are all faithfully replicated with only the distractions excised. Those distractions can indeed become part of the listening experience once you have listened to the original often enough, and one can even become attached to them, but they remain superfluous to the music, nonetheless.

Rosalyn Tureck; mono studio 1957, HMV/EMI

Tureck, along with Gould – a very different performer – was something of a pioneer in this music. Perhaps there was a time when this heavy, portentous manner of playing Bach was considered spiritual and revelatory but to me this hissy, mono performance is narcoleptic rather than captivating. The plonking manner of the first variation is enough to make me reach for the off-button and long for Gould's exuberance – and really, it doesn't get any better. When a piano is pounded this heavily it doesn't so much imitate a harpsichord as simply tire the ear.

There are recordings which fulfil an important function in raising the music-listening public's awareness of the neglect of a great work and perhaps this might have done that had it not been for the meteor in the sky of Gould's first studio recording. The music is so great that it responds to almost any treatment and you might react with more enthusiasm to the calm deliberation of Tureck's manner, as sometimes its hypnotic mechanicalness can exercise a kind of spell over the listener, but for me it simply lacks spirit and finesse.

Maria Yudina; studio 1968, Melodiya

Devotees of Glenn Gould and folk of my generation who were first introduced to this extraordinary music by way of his exceptionally animated, wilful and percussive treatment will be astonished to discover that his mode was wholly anticipated by Maria Yudina. A favourite of Stalin who openly defied and rebuked Uncle Joe, escaped the Gulags and then outlived him, she is often uncannily like the "Canadian Werewolf" (as a friend rudely but half-admiringly calls him) in her fearless articulation of JSB's sinuous linealities.

She can miss the "still point" in the more reflective variations but the vitality of her interpretation is balm after the effete tinkling of such as Schiff. She is not the classically restrained patrician that Perahia becomes nor the youthful poet of Lifschitz but a formidably direct and concentrated communicator. She is a tad perfunctory in the slower, more reflective or wistful movements such as the famous 'Black Pearl' but there is an energy and certainty to Yudina's playing which is wholly absorbing. The quality of the 1968 Melodiya recording is excellent for its era.

Charles Rosen; studio 1969, Sony

This is a somewhat severe, no-nonsense account, impeccably musical but to my ears rather heartless and serious, admitting of no opportunity to stop and smell the flowers. Clarity and precision are admirable qualities and Rosen's dexterity in the penultimate variation is impressive despite a few suggestions of smudges whose occurrence is hardly surprising at the breakneck speed he adopts. Perhaps I am irretrievably wedded to too Romantic an affect in this work but I cannot help wishing that Mr Rosen would yield a little to rubato and moderate his percussive haste. To be fair, there are variations when Rosen employs a softer style and he never does the music a disservice but there is little mystery in the 'Black Pearl' and surely this music also demands more wit and warmth. The recording is correspondingly dry, clear and only very slightly hissy – perfectly good.

Wilhelm Kempff; studio 1969, DG

The unprepared listener will be surprised and even shocked by Kempff's minimalist approach here: for a start, he eschews the usual dotted notes of the melody in the opening aria, strips the ensuing variations of all ornamentation and inexplicably – unless it was to accommodate the space restrictions of vinyl -truncates the repeats, playing them A.A:B rather than A.A:B.B;. Surely one or the other is advisable, not a hybrid approach. To me, the da capo conclusion is devoid of poetry or immanence. He makes Charles Rosen seem positively indulgent. Like Rosen, he is a great – arguably much greater – pianist and his musicality and authority are not in doubt, but the hissy recording, the eccentricities of his approach to the repeats and the stumbles and mushy articulation in the flashy bits mean that for me this remains a lovable curiosity and not a prime recommendation. Some see this as an antidote to the eccentricities of Gould's way with this music but it is, in its quiet way, just as perverse and the lack of technical facility is a distinct drawback compared with Gould's pyrotechnic brilliance.

Tatiana Nikolayeva; studio 1979, Melodiya, Relief

Tatiana Nikolayeva was a great artist who lived through the hell of Stalin's tyranny and emerged from that crucible ennobled rather than hardened. Her playing does not have the steely brilliancy of Gould or Yudina but is suffused with warmth and humanity.

There are five recordings of her playing this work- always on a Steinway and either with some or all repeats - and all are recommendable. The middle three, made between 1983 and 1987, are live, but the first is studio-made for Melodiya in 1979. It is superb but not in the best sound, whereas the last, made in 1992, is also studio-made and digital but perhaps not so virtuosic, if still mightily impressive. Interpretatively, it doesn't matter too much which of her recordings you hear but some understandably favour the live, 1983 recording on the Classico label above all. Unfortunately, they are all currently either expensive and/or hard to find unless you download – but they are available on YouTube, too.

This first is in faintly papery, hissy, analogue sound – perfectly listenable. It is a free, dreamy, effortlessly executed performance, full of lightness and charm but also anchored by a very strong, emphatic left hand and absolute precision in the staccato runs and trills. Nikolayeva relaxes easily yet is capable of seamless gear changes up into energised, hi-octane execution and achieves an extraordinary depth of sonority in the bass register of her instrument.

This might be the first of the five recordings we can hear her in, but it is clearly the work of an artist who has already lived so long with these variations that playing them is as natural for her as it is for a tree to produce apples. That she loves the work is palpable in the range of emotion and variety of touch she brings to it.

Glenn Gould; studio 1981, Sony

I admit to being incapable of attempting an objective assessment of this most celebrated of recordings, (mal) imprinted by it as I am; as I explain, it was my introduction to the work and captivated me from first exposure. I am well aware of its peculiarities – the humming and crooning, the manic speeds and

the resistance to repeats except in the canons, every third variation – but I would still maintain that for the Bach neophyte and aficionado alike engagement with this recording is a thrilling experience. His percussive, mechanical brilliance is balanced by the palpable joy and élan of his playing – he is clearly – and all too audibly – having a great time and that delight is communicated to the listener. The sheer accuracy of his lightning-speed prestidigitation is a wonder in itself but that is not achieved at the expense of musicality. Love it or hate it, this will always be a classic.

Grigory Sokolov; live 1982, Melodiya

The playing here has a rhapsodic, improvisatory quality which is utterly beguiling; the interpolated trills and flourishes, beginning immediately even in the opening aria, seem to derive from the sheer joy and exuberance Sokolov experiences in playing this timeless music. His mechanical prestidigitation is a thing of wonder yet its percussive regularity is tempered and balanced by the whimsy of the pianist's phrasing in the lyrical sections. There is enormous variety of mood and approach within this concert; the fifth variation is the epitome of insouciant Romanticism, like a rippling brook, whereas in no. 8 Sokolov out-Goulds Gould for manic attack. The 'Black Pearl' is by contrast almost too restrained and hesitant, courting stasis. One accusation you certainly cannot level at Sokolov is that his interpretation lacks personality.

Unfortunately, the boxy, aggressive recording by Melodiya acoustic harkens back to another Russian (Soviet) style of recording, and the famed knowledgeable attentiveness of Russian audiences is belied by the inconsiderate hacks and sneezes which punctuate the playing. Such a pity that this most characterful, idiosyncratic and indeed fascinating account is marred by clangorous sound and Yahoos in the front seats.

András Schiff; studio 1983, Decca

Some years ago, a knowledgeable composer and keyboard-playing friend and I did some intensive listening to a range of recordings of the *Goldbergs*, acting, I suppose, as a kind of forerunner to this survey, and among the first to be jettisoned as dull was this celebrated version by András Schiff. Nothing about it or his playing subsequently has much shifted my response to him as an artist and I can only conclude that his refined, under-stated style, which he likes to call "parlando" (speaking manner) appeals to musical sensibilities different from mine, especially as it remains a prime recommendation from other critics.

I'm afraid I find it fleet, slick and superficial where others swoon. I find Schiff's treatment of the famous 'Black Pearl' to be perfunctory and soulless, as if he can't wait to finish it. The recording certainly holds interest from a musicological point of view, in that Schiff ornaments all the repeats interestingly, although I find some of it a bit fussy and even prissy and the twiddling versions of Variations 7 and 19 in a very high octave register sound trivial and even absurd. The prestidigitation of the penultimate version is impressive, however and of course, the none of the playing here is in any sense "bad" but I hear little of the magic I encounter in recordings made by young artists who were at an age similar to that of Schiff - here under thirty – such as Gould, Lifschitz, Derzhavina and Rana.

Tatiana Nikolayeva; live 1983, Classico

This was very positively [reviewed](#) for MWI by Don Satz back in 2004. I see no reason to elaborate upon what he so eloquently wrote and refer you to it for an account of the many virtues of Nikolayeva's playing; I would only qualify his dismissal of her other studio recording by saying that I still find it to be a thing of beauty.

In turn, his sole reservations concern the brittle quality of the piano in its upper register and what some might hear as the unyielding nature of Nikolayeva's playing, which is closer to Gould, Yudina and Koroliev than that last, gentler recording.

Otherwise, this is one of the top recommendations – if you can acquire it affordably.

Tatiana Nikolayeva; live 1986, BBC Legends

Humanity, humility and spirituality are the hallmarks of this performance which in many ways shares the same virtues as Nikolayeva's other recordings. The fact that there are a few more coughs and finger-slips here and the sound is a bit brittle inclines me to preferring marginally the earlier live recording from 1983 but her luminosity of tone, flexibility of phrasing and fluidity of rhythm are all her own, making her performances highly individual without being eccentric or self-regarding. She has absolutely no intention of reproducing anything remotely akin to the action of a harpsichord and is clearly innocent of period practice and some of her touches, such as her use of rubato and ritardandi at the end of variations are "old-fashioned" but the musicality of her execution is beyond reproach. The strength, assurance and certainty of her restatement of the aria which concludes the journey put the seal on a remarkable traversal of this timeless music.

Tatiana Nikolayeva; live 1987, Bluebell

This is the fourth of Nikolayeva's recordings and is a live performance in Stockholm. As in London the previous year, it is afflicted with a bit of coughing and some extraneous noise; on the other hand, the sound is fuller and richer – perhaps a little too much so; the piano is very reverberant.

Otherwise, more or less everything I say about her two other live recordings above applies here and I don't think it much matters which one you hear, especially as they are all relatively hard to lay your hands on. She was remarkably consistent – and consistently inspired. There the same passing, incidental flaws but the warmth, wisdom and intelligence of her reading is instantly seductive; if you love this music, you will perhaps start by sampling her playing then find it so seductive that before you know it you have listened to the whole recording.

Chen Pi-hsien; studio 1988, Naxos

This budget account by Taiwanese pianist Chen Pi-hsien has been politely – even well – received but it is essentially rather correct and faceless. It is also too closely recorded, so the listener might, at times, in the quieter passages, be bothered by the constant sniffing of the performer before each phrase. Repeats are inconsistently and only sporadically observed and ornamentation is sparing. It is very steadily played – perhaps more rhythmic variety would have been welcome, especially in the faster variations – but technically, the playing is very assured – sample the fleeting Variation 26 to have that confirmed - and I can see how this might form a welcome introduction to this endlessly beguiling music, as, sniffing apart, there is nothing about it to offend. On the other hand, there is no special reason to favour it over more penetrating and stimulating versions, either.

[Point of interest: this was the recording pirated by William Barrington-Coupe to be passed off as the work of his wife, Joyce Hatto, in the infamous plagiarism scandal.]

Daniel Barenboim; live 1989, Erato, Warner Elatus

This is a live recording and a rather muddy, reverberant acoustic, with a lot of intrusive ambient and audience noise – especially coughing, most irritatingly in the final, da capo aria - exaggerates the clangorousness of Barenboim's playing, which suggest liberal use of pedal. That is sufficient to disqualify this given the strength of competition but in addition, I find his manner in the slower variations rather inert and portentous, an impression not mitigated by his taking all the repeats unadorned, relying on some quite crude dynamic contrast for effect. Variation 25 does not work at all for me; I find it laboured and self-conscious.

Of course, there is some impressive pianism here - but not in the most testing variation, no. 26 - but ultimately the combination of the sound quality and the comparative lack of poetry in Barenboim's delivery does not make this a contender.

Vladimir Feltsman; live 1991, Nimbus

Drawn from a single live recital in the Moscow Conservatory in 1991, there isn't a single noise to be heard from the audience here apart from one brief cough in track 26 - perhaps partly because the recording is quite close but not overbearingly so - and the concentration and accuracy of Feltsman's playing over eighty minutes is equally a marvel. His rendering of the 'Black Pearl', Variation no. 25, is musicianship on the highest plain, while his virtuosity in the dazzling pyrotechnic movements such as Variation no. 14 is irreproachable - and thrilling.

In his notes he talks about how he was inspired as a teenager by Glenn Gould's famous first recording and you can certainly hear his influence - in fact, at 1'04" in Variation no. 26, we hear Feltsman very briefly emulate his hero by launching into a particularly fearsome repeat passage with a little vocalised whoop. Perhaps, too, we may hear Maria Yudina's influence over Feltsman's style; he plays with a similarly crisp, sometimes even percussive, articulation, intense forward momentum and real attack in the faster movements. He has rightly chosen to play all the repeats; here, he is in good company with some others of my favourite interpreters, Perahia, Lifschitz (in both his recordings) and the aforementioned Yudina, whereas Glenn Gould did only the repeats in the Canons, every third variation. The real innovation here is Feltsman's decision to seize upon the accepted improvisatory nature of Baroque music and implement not only subtleties of dynamics, articulation and ornamentation but also by "interswitching" voices by crossing his hands and changing the registers in the repeat sections. The resultant sonorities are sometimes a little startling, especially some twiddling and tinkling in a high register which I am not entirely sure sits well with the stately dignity of the music but it is certainly an arresting and unconventional aesthetic choice and remains far preferable to other measures such as the adoption of Busoni's arrangement, as Barto did in his unpalatable account (see the appendix).

Everything Feltsman does is intellectually and artistically sound and the result of profound reflection on his part. While this version of one of the great landmarks of Western classical music does not necessarily displace my favourites, I shall want to hear it from time to time, particularly to reassess my reaction to Feltsman's enhancements.

Tatiana Nikolayeva; studio 1992, Hyperion

This is the fifth and last of Nikolayeva's recordings and should have the advantage of digital sound. However, it is really rather strange and opaque, with too much reverberation and a consequent blurring of articulation which is not the fault of the player. It is not enough to dent my enjoyment but it's there; I really cannot account for the gaucheness of the sound engineering.

This is a highly relaxed and Romantic account; I love it. It was made only a year before her death and she is in her late 60's yet she is still in total command of the idiom; there is a naturalness and flow to her playing which are very beguiling. Her tone is exceptionally sonorous, like the pealing of bells, and the odd acoustic here in fact accentuates this. I have read elsewhere that her technique and delivery here indicate that she was in decline; I cannot hear much to support that observation beyond some slight loss of fluency in the fastest runs, with the exception of an oddly stilted Variation 22, the occasional similarly choppy passage elsewhere and perhaps some lack of energy in attack compared with her live performances, as, for example, in the opening to no. 8. Otherwise, this is a bold, powerful account which avoids extremes; she is without the mechanistic precision which characterises some versions which I nonetheless admire, such as those by Gould, Yudina and Koroliev but she is on the other hand simply so warm, human and natural. The penultimate two tracks are ineffably grand before a wonderfully contained and delicate reprise of the aria. Furthermore, unlike her previous recordings she takes all the repeats, so this runs to 80 minutes.

The relative imperfections in sound and execution mentioned above incline me to prefer one of her earlier versions but this remains a fine, unashamedly old-fashioned account by a great artist in her sunset years.

Andrei Gavrilov; studio 1993, DG

I do not warm to this recording, finding it frequently “academic” with more than “a touch of the Turecks” about it. Gavrilov clearly knows exactly what he is doing and has the technical command to execute it but that is what forms its drawback for me: it is deliberate and calculated, and many of the variations seem to suffer from the pianist wishing to impose an inflexible rhythmic unity upon them, whereas I prefer a freer, more expressive manner, thus the opening and closing statements of the aria are uninspiring – a fatal flaw - some variations are glib and hectic – no. 13 is particularly egregious in this regard - and others are sluggish; variation no. 25 plods and the ‘The Black Pearl’ drags. However, those who want a conception closer to that first devised for the harpsichord, might favour this. Articulation is deftly percussive – no. 5 is remarkably crisp and fleet – but sometimes the pulse and ornamentation are almost mechanical, in “sewing machine” style.

I readily concede that for those wanting a more authentically baroque style employed on a modern piano aping the original instrument for which the work was composed, this will serve ideally but I want to hear a more emotive rendition.

Ekaterina Derzhavina, studio 1994, Arte Nova, Sony

At the risk of becoming predictable, let me iterate an observation I have made in almost every survey I have undertaken, which is that almost inevitably a dark horse will emerge from the plethora of recordings I include in my conspectus – and this is it.

It has drive, propulsion and musicality – everything sounds just right; it exudes the kind of simplicity and concentration, without the least hint of self-consciousness or ego, that one associates with supremely dedicated artists immersed in the service of the music. Her approach is almost naïve in its unadorned straightforwardness. She takes all the repeats, plays with unfailingly pure, lucid tone and addresses the three darkest, minor movements with great emotional intensity. The ‘Black Pearl’ is sensual and soulful; Derzhavina caresses and moulds the phrasing lovingly, taking a few tasteful liberties in her decoration of the repeat.

She is certainly no slouch in the fast variations, either; her fluidity and evenness of touch are breath-taking – sample her dexterity in Nos. 5 and 14 – despatched immaculately at break-neck speed - or in the daunting No. 26, which holds no terrors for her, at least, and is despatched with Gouldian bravura – the switching of the moto perpetuo runs from the right to the left hand is performed with extraordinary assurance, even if just occasionally there are barely-discernible micro-stumbles in the rhythmic continuity.

Perhaps the only drawback here is that the recorded sound is a little dry and lacking in bloom.

Unfortunately, this CD is largely unavailable even though it was originally on budget issues from both Arte Nova and Sony Ultimate Classics.

Konstantin Lifschitz; studio 1994, Denon

Konstantin Lifschitz was an astonishing 17 years old when he recorded these variations, a year after his graduation recital of the same music at the Moscow Conservatory; he brings a joy and energy to them which simply make the heart sing. Yet he is not all whimsy and caprice; he is capable of a granitic steadiness of pulse when it is required, reflecting the influence of Glenn Gould, creating a sort of purposefulness that conveys his complete immersion in this work as a wholly cohesive sequence of interlinked ideas. There is nothing fey in his approach; he strikes the keys with the confidence and

certainty of youth. Indeed, just occasionally I could do with a little more restraint and understatement, particularly in the 'Black Pearl', but then it would not reflect the intrepidity and Romantic ardour of a young man in the plenitude of his powers. He observes all repeats except in that variation 25 and his tone throughout is unfailingly beautiful; as with all the best exponents of the *Goldbergs* he has a way of bringing out the independent voices in the counterpoint so that while the right hand sings like a peal of bells the left is commenting in baritone like a wise uncle.

By the time Lifschitz came to re-record the *Goldbergs* eighteen years later in 2012 (see below) the youthful exuberance of 1994 had morphed into a more mature and reflective mode; speeds became slightly less headlong, more momentary hesitations and refinements were in evidence and a generally cooler, more cerebral sensibility was manifest in his playing.

This gloriously extrovert and communicative interpretation joins the echelons of top accounts ([review](#)).

Rosalyn Tureck; studio 1998, DG

For some, Rosalyn Tureck was the doyenne of Bach playing. She left four recordings but for many others, none of them has worn that well; they are heavy and didactic to modern ears and the ornamentations sound self-conscious. Arid scholasticism is no substitute for emotional engagement and the ponderous delivery of the first variation sets the tone for the remainder of the cycle in a manner which, I am afraid, sounds almost laughable to my ears attuned to Gould's (admittedly sometimes frenetic) way with this music. The one from 1947 is the first commercial recording and the next is the studio versions made for HMV at Abbey Road; both are hissy mono. The third is live and this last was made when she was in her mid-80's and is inevitably lacking in any of the flair and flexibility to be found in those recordings made in her earlier. Her approach did not change much over forty years other than to become a caricature of her earlier manner. As with those preceding versions, a kind of mesmerising fascination may come from the cumulative effect of her concentrated steadiness and if you do like her style, then the great advantage here is the rich, full, digital sound – but it's not for me.

Evgeni Koroliev; studio 1999, Piano Classics

Kirk McElhearn [reviewed](#) this glowingly for MWI back in 2003 when it appeared on Hänssler Classic. It was then licensed to Piano Classics in 2011.

There are certainly similarities between Gould's and Koroliev's fierce, even relentless prestidigitation and the percussive quality of their execution; both seem to want to remind the listener that the score was presumably originally written for a harpsichord or perhaps Bach's clavichord, so the linear quality of the music takes precedence over tonal coloration. The effect is one of great clarity and concentration; the inclusion of all the repeats challenges the listener's concentration, too, but I cannot say that I am ever aware of any longueurs in Koroliev's playing, especially as he treats those repeats so imaginatively, such as in the repeat in no. 18, in which he plays the right-hand treble line an octave higher than usual. His tempi are elastic despite the drive of his playing, with highly expressive application of rubato – and there is always a great sense of flow and cohesion to his style. The comparative leisureliness of his reading, which stretches to 85 minutes and therefore spills over onto a second disc, is only partly due to the repeats, as although variations such as the 'Black Pearl' are wonderfully expansive and Romantic, those such as nos. 14 and 20 are breath-taking in their headlong exuberance.

The sound is admittedly over-reverberant but remarkably present and vivid. There is a typographical error in the track listing carried over from the original Hänssler issue, whereby the longest Variation, no. 25, the 'Black Pearl', is designated a 1:09 when of course it is 11:09.

My problem with recordings of this timeless masterpiece is that my favourite is always the one I am currently listening to, but I am confident that this is one of the very finest. Perhaps only the recording quality compared with the very finest competitive digital issues and the possibility that you might prefer something more reflective would prevent this from being a top choice.

Angela Hewitt; studio 1999, Hyperion

In her first recording here, Angela Hewitt provides a clean, clear crisp account of the *Goldbergs* with no eccentricities of tempo or ornamentation – indeed, her choices of how to embellish the repeats are notable for their simplicity, relying mainly upon dynamic and phrasal variety rather than any elaboration of figures to enliven them. There is plenty of verve and lightness in her delivery; she communicates delight without perhaps generating the special intensity some other pianists achieve. Certainly, the energy of her attack on the first variation takes the listener by surprise but by and large, the overall effect is one of good taste and decorum. She is generally steady but here are little injections of *accelerando* and *rallentando* which can sound a little applied, especially as in the second longest variation, no. 13. The grandest, no. 16, is arresting, if rather choppy in phrasing and while I marvel at Hewitt's prestidigitation in the penultimate variation, she doesn't sweep me along like Gould or Lifschitz, the *Quodlibet* sounds rushed and the return to the aria doesn't somehow sound like the "event" it should be.

This remains a thoroughly dextrous, musical and reliable version which gives much pleasure but it is without the special marks of distinction which single out the most memorable performances.

Murray Perahia; studio 2000, Sony

In the same listening-session when my friend and I found Schiff wanting, we agreed that this performance was our clear favourite alongside the more idiosyncratic interpretations of Glenn Gould. However, both Gould's recordings - the marvellously frenetic and unstuffy 1955 version and the more reposeful and even mystical account from 1981 - might perhaps be considered more as fancy-dress for party-going rather than everyday wear and as much as I would not want to be without either of those life-affirming discs, Perahia's account is more one to live with. When I embarked upon this survey, it had been a while since I had revisited this recording and I was worried that I would not find it as interesting as I had remembered but on reacquaintance, its absolute rightness struck me afresh.

Perahia extends these variations to 75 minutes by observation of the repeats and invests them with a variety and colour which some period purists apparently find objectionable. He brings real *joie de vivre* to this recording; this is no reverential interpretation. Too many players give the listener the equivalent of viewing the *Goldbergs* as a museum piece through a glass case rather than experiencing the music as a thrilling spiritual journey which ends in the repose of the transcendent "still point" provided by Bach's return to the arietta with which he opened the work.; Perahia's traversal of these variations is life-enhancing, from his filigree prestidigitation in fast movements, to the wise and humane contemplation in the 'Black Pearl' variation, to the grace of his phrasing and the subtlety of his pedalling. His left hand is very emphatic but this performance sings, flows and dances and there is never too much plonking on the downbeat; instead, Perahia varies emphases subtly. Every variation sounds as if it has been thought through such that it unfolds organically. The piano tone is so rich and bell-like, beautifully recorded indeed, the sound engineering is the finest for a piano recording that I know. Some reviewers complain that we can hear Perahia's fingernails clicking on the keys, which I take more to be testament to the clarity of the recording. While I do object to stertorous breathing or obtrusive sniffing, I don't think a few clicks are distracting.

This is not a "safe" interpretation – it is instead a clear top recommendation.

András Schiff; live 2002, ECM

In his [review](#) of this recording for MusicWeb back in 2004, John Portwood declared that it left him "cold and disappointed" for reasons of its excessive speed and shallowness. As a declared non-fan of Sir András, I cannot demur from that judgement. Just as I found Schiff's first recording twenty years earlier to be dull and routine, I find no special virtue in this live performance made in 2001 in Basel, but this time more for reason of his unseemly haste and lack of emotional engagement. I hear no "spiritual" dimension in his playing; the ornamentations are glib and cosmetic, and Schiff's playing is largely pedal-free and uninflected. "Brisk efficiency" is essentially the watchword in this second account; there is little dynamic subtlety and no distinction of phrasing. Even the supposedly slow variations sound perfunctory; no. 15 is risibly brusque and the 'Black Pearl' is jerky, lacking a true legato. The centrally-placed Overture is similarly spasmodic and does not mark the still point in the cycle that it should. The last two variations – no. 29 and the Quodlibet - are rattled off at breakneck speed, which is superficially impressive but blatantly unmusical, and Schiff's impatient delivery of the concluding da capo aria admits of no hint of mystery of imagination.

Jenő Jandó; studio 2003, Naxos

Having made many prize-winning recordings exclusively for Naxos, Jenő Jandó is familiar to many a collector, especially those on a budget and here he is tackling a monument in the piano repertoire. As much as I have admired this most recorded of pianists in other works, I cannot say that I am much struck by this effort; his performance seems metronomic and peremptory, with little use of pedal, a lack of tonal variety, blurred inner voices and a repetitive approach to his ornamentation of the repeats which involves trilling the top line. He often sounds excessively heavy-handed to me and the playing is even clumsy. There is little sense of tragedy in his playing of the melancholy variations such as the 'Black Pearl'. Sorry; no.

Nicholas Angelich; studio 2010, Virgin Classics

An oddly mannered, inert delivery of the opening aria with exaggerated pauses does not augur well for this recording; rather than suggesting rapt concentration it is soporific. Things look up in the first variation but I find Angelich's left hand to be very heavy and the variation following that evinces what I can perceive only as a further miscalculation, which is too much rhythmic rigidity – and that persists throughout. I hear the final variation, the Quodlibet, as plodding and dull and although Angelich eschews all rubato, he invariably applies rallentando at the end of the first run-through before the repeat, which emerges as something of a tic; however, those who look for a more uniform rhythmic sense to confer unity on the cycle might prefer that consistency.

On the other hand, some variations, such as no. 9, are played with poetic delicacy and as his despatching of the fast movements confirms, Angelich has the technical command to encompass all the demands here. no. 29, for example, is expertly despatched - but without the exuberance I hear in more animated versions. I have admired him in live performance and in different repertoire but in the end I find this account austere and understated, so this recording does not fulfil many of the criteria I set for a memorable account of this music.

Konstantin Lifschitz; live 2012, Orfeo

Obviously, the main point of interest here for many will be a comparison between this recording and the famous one made eighteen years earlier by the same artist when he was only seventeen years old. While such comparisons are inevitable and indeed fascinating, a point by point comparative analysis might well obscure the merit per se of this live recital; both are superb but inevitably different given the passage of time.

Lifschitz is no longer an enfant terrible but despite not yet being forty he is now a distinguished Professor of Piano and a Fellow of the Royal Academy of Music. He has played these variations worldwide many times since that landmark, prize winning recording for Denon and it would be

surprising if his current interpretation had not conformed to the expected pattern of morphing from the youthful exuberance of 1994 into a more mature and reflective mode - and that is indeed just what has happened: speeds are now slightly less headlong, more momentary hesitations and refinements are in evidence and a generally cooler, more cerebral sensibility is manifest in his playing.

Not that his virtuosity is any less; Glenn Gould's percussive style is still clearly an influence and the mechanical brilliance of the runs and speed of hand crossovers are as breath-taking as ever; in fact the penultimate Variation 29 is even faster here, the touch lighter and the execution more even, as are the trills in the preceding track. On the other hand, the young Lifschitz took Variation 20 in a more assertive, helter-skelter way which constituted a tour de force but is not perhaps as musical as the older artist's version. Another noticeable development is that the predominately cerebral and stately variations in the second half of the thirty are given decidedly more space and time; for many listeners, less impetuosity will equate to greater profundity.

The celebrated 'Black Pearl', Variation no. 25, seems to have undergone the greatest revision, however: it is here played much faster but its timing is considerably longer as Lifschitz includes the repeats which he omitted - in this movement only - first time around. It is more dynamic, less dreamy and thus more dramatic, in keeping with his overall approach in this later recording; it is almost as if the earlier version was a solo meditation while here we are hearing a dialogue between the lower, "masculine" left hand and the higher, "feminine" right.

The sound is excellent, with almost no audience noise apart from someone once dropping a clanger and a very minor bit of coughing.

Both recordings maintain a place of honour on my shelves, for the fluid, Romantic ardour of the first and the patrician mastery of the second; I would not care to choose between them ([review](#)).

Jeremy Denk; live 2013, Nonesuch Records

This is a delicate, shapely, very musical traversal of these variations, devoid of grandstanding or ego – and therein, for some, will lie the rub, insofar as it lacks personality, being more intent on momentum.

I quite like the pace and propulsion of his execution of the faster variations, ornamented with impeccably crisp trills, although every so often I wish he would let the music breathe a little more. I don't want to overstate my reservations as Denk is such a fine pianist and his fluency, such as in Variation no. 5, for example, is startling, but his tempi are often so fast as to render the contrapuntal lines garbled. There is plenty of lightness and spring but the emphasis on perkiness detracts from the pathos inherent in the music, so Variations nos. 7 and 8, for example, begin to sound glib and the helter-skelter no. 14 faintly absurd, where somehow Gould gets away with it, bringing a greater sense of fun to almost equally frantic proceedings.

The supposedly reflective, ruminative no. 15 is simply too rushed to make its proper effect and the mystery of the 'Black Pearl' goes for nought. The ornamentations, too, are to my ears just a little precious in their curlicued precision; I would like a little more swagger and daring rather than percussive, mechanical efficiency. In the end, too much of the poetry is lost for this to make the cut.

Angela Hewitt; studio 2015, Hyperion

In this second studio recording, made sixteen years later after her first, instead of a Steinway, Angela Hewitt employs a Fazioli 308 piano which, she claims, is more flexible to the touch. She also maintains that its lighter action and lucent, bell-like tone allow her greater contrast and more expressive freedom in her playing. Certainly, this later version is clearly more extrovert; the music dances engagingly under her hands and she brings more weight to the bolder variations this time around, despite the Fazioli

being an altogether less massive-toned instrument than the standard concert grand. However, to my taste her manner is occasionally excessively staccato, almost as if she were imitating a harpsichord. Her dexterity is never in doubt, but she does not emulate the pyrotechnic brilliance of more demonstrative performers and the effect of the showpieces is rather small-scale.

I greatly respect Hewitt as an artist – as indeed I do every pianist considered here – and if you are among her many admirers, I would recommend this as the more desirable of her two releases, especially as its sound is superior to the first Hyperion recording, but for all her virtuosity, I cannot say that she is especially individual or indeed as engaging as my preferred interpreters of this work. My response to her playing here thus remains similar to my reaction to her first recording: esteem but not love.

Igor Levit; studio 2015, Sony

There has been a trio of superb new recordings in recent years and Levit's is among them, alongside Tharaud and Rana. He has a lovely, singing tone the smoothest legato and brings great clarity to the counterpoint; furthermore, I really enjoy his swift, trilled ornamentations mid-phrase, which are witty without being obtrusive. It is actually quite difficult to write about a great performance when everything is done right, as per here. The whole arc of these variations seems right and the da capo aria which concludes them carries that sense of timeless, poignant finality, yet beckons the listener to start all over again, so satisfying is the experience of travelling Bach's road. There is no impingement of "performer ego" here, just joyous music-making. Levit is perhaps more in the Romantic school of Perahia and Rana than the sparer, neo-classical style of Tharaud; he is not averse to fleeting hesitations, pauses and agogic accents but they are sparingly applied. This is the energised playing of a young man in his prime, similar in thrust to Gould's first recording. As with all modern pianists, his technical acumen at speed, as in Variation 29 is remarkable – almost scary – but equally his slow playing of the melancholy core of the cycle, no. 25, is suffused with an essential dark mystery which leaves the listener hanging, the air pregnant with unanswered questions – magical.

To cap it all, Sony has given Levit impeccable digital sound, capturing his luminous playing perfectly. This goes to the top of the pile.

Alexandre Tharaud; studio 2015, Erato

I had not encountered this artist before embarking on this survey but I am very impressed. This is a serious, concentrated account but it is not heavy or without sparkle and its sensibility is deeply poetic without being ostentatious. Rhythmic and tonal nuance are at the heart of Tharaud's playing; its naturalness beguiles the ear so completely that, as with all great performances of this music, the listener is immediately swept up by the rightness of his choices of temp. colour and affect.

I remark above upon the lack of self-aggrandisement here yet, both simultaneously and paradoxically, the opening of the overture Variation 16 could hardly be more stately-Baroque or grandly Romantic and the sonority of Tharaud's playing is striking – enhanced by the depth, clarity and perfect balance of the recorded sound. Ornamentation is discrete and tasteful – very "period" in feel, being taut, tight trills and he plays some variations very fast, flawlessly, and with enormous élan. To complement that brilliance, the 'Black Pearl' is played with a simple dedication and a singing, legato line which bespeaks profound emotion.

Apparently, the pianist took a year out to prepare for this recording and had the luxury of making two complete takes of the cycle from which to select and edit; the result is perfection. My only reservation is that Tharaud does not especially bring out the wit or exuberance of the livelier variations but I find the quality of the pianism and musicianship entirely absorbing.

Beatrice Rana; studio 2016, Warner

This was first very warmly received twice on this site ([review](#) ~ [review](#)) and was David Barker's MWI's "Recording of the Month" before being declared the 2017 "Recording of the Year", so any further encomium from me is surely superfluous. I will merely add a few words endorsing my colleagues' enthusiasm. The dreamy, languid opening aria displays Rana's luminous tone and delicate, lyrical sensibility which contrast so vividly with the supple strength and vigour of her execution of the first variation. Her trills sparkle and momentary, her agogic hesitations are entrancing, as are her neat, deft and unobtrusive ornamentations. Her playing is perhaps more in Sokolov's romantic vein; everything is graceful and fluid and the knuckle-crunching Variation 14 is despatched almost with contempt. Her control of dynamics can be most readily appreciated by an audition of Variation 19 and nos. 5 and 31 bear witness to her flawless technical proficiency. I could go on but there is no point; this is a miraculous recording, extraordinary in an artist so youthful.

Recommendations

If you have waded through this survey – or perhaps wisely skimmed and skipped to the end – you will have worked out that for this work I am much more drawn to pianists who are rash, brash and flash rather than those of the fleet, effete and discreet variety – but nor do I like the "saggy-waggy elephant" style. I have already confessed to being irretrievably wedded Glenn Gould's recordings but I am in good company there and they must feature in my prime choices. I cannot, however, subscribe to the Schiff Admiration Society – for me, he belongs firmly in the underwhelming category - nor do I worship at the shrine of the "High Priestess of Bach", Rosalyn Tureck. They are still there for those who love them and good luck to their acolytes. The best in the historical and live categories were fairly easy to nominate but there are so many great studio versions as to defy any definitive recommendations; we are happily awash with superlative accounts by world-class pianists and my shortlist of recommended modern recordings below is tentative and personal, but at least provides a selection from which you may choose according to your own taste. If I were pushed to choose but one modern recording, it would be either Levit or Rana – interestingly, among the most recent in this survey, which is rarely the case when I do a survey; so often I find myself returning to venerable gramophone classics. However, if you are a *Goldbergs* addict like me, you will surely want to own in addition to that modern, digital recording at least one recording by each of Gould and Nikolayeva.

Historical mono: Gould 1955 in the Zenph recreation

Live: Lifschitz 2012; Nikolayeva 1983, 1986, 1987

Studio: Gould 1981; Lifschitz 1994; Perahia 2000; Levit 2015; Tharaud 2015; Rana 2016

Ralph Moore

Appendix:

Tzimon Barto; studio 2014, Capriccio

Despite admiring its striking presentation, I was instantly irritated by this Capriccio release when I found that no overall timing was provided for the *Goldberg Variations*; why not? A few minutes poring over the miniscule typeface with a calculator provided me a figure of 55:56.

While knowing Barto's reputation for controversial interpretations, I much enjoyed his innovative recording of Rameau's piano music, "A Basket of Wild Strawberries", while nonetheless acknowledging that its freedom would not appeal to more traditional, conservative tastes; this recording, however, is something else again. The important thing to note here - and it is indicated in minuscule type on the back cover - is that Barto plays the edition by Ferruccio Busoni (1866-1924) which is really a revision so radical that modern listeners would hardly recognise it as an edition as such but more of a free re-write. The mannered hesitations and arbitrarily applied rubato immediately apparent in the opening aria set off alarm bells and they set the pattern for Barto's reproduction of Busoni's intentions throughout. I say "throughout", but in truth my patience was so sorely taxed ten after fifteen minutes

of his shenanigans that I had completely lost interest and broke one of my cardinal reviewing rules of listening to a recording several times before converting my thoughts into written words and I have no desire to listen to this version again.

I can hear no musical rationale or internal logic to Barto's constant pulling about of tempi combined with a peculiarity in the dynamics arising from his sudden, unaccountable diminutions in volume. There is little point in my citing specific examples of Barto's manner as it is consistent through all thirty-two tracks. This wilful treatment betrays Baroque sensibilities and does little to enhance the integrity of music which demands a steady pulse and a sense of momentum rather than a persistent insistence upon reining in and alighting from the carriage in order to smell the flowers.

I shall return to one of the modern piano recordings recommended above and leave this thoroughly perverse version to those who like it. However, those of a musicological bent might be interested to hear what Busoni thought it appropriate to do to Bach's masterpiece to make it "palatable" for concert audiences a hundred years ago.