

## COMPOSER'S NOTES

### *Sustainable Tones 2.0: Explorations and Inventions in Trichord-derived and Tetrachord-derived 12-Tone Modalities*

For decades, from time to time, I have found myself interested in Schoenberg's method of 12-tone serial composition, and more than once I have attempted to create music that would resonate within me. Around Thanksgiving of 2021, I began to explore the contrapuntal possibilities of combining two combinatorial forms of a tetrachord-derived tone row.

I started with the tetrachord set class (0235); i.e., C, D, Eb, F. In the brief span of four days, I composed two new piano pieces that together would constitute the first and last movements of *Sustainable Tones*, "Romance" and "Fountain." In the days that followed, I began seeking a middle movement that would provide a relaxing contrast in tempo. After a month-long effort, I settled on the tetrachord set class (0257); i.e., C, D, F, G. Inspiration visited again, and I found "Tranquility."

In these three pieces, I discovered a means to create 12-tone music that resonates within me. At heart, this 12-tone music is governed by a sensitivity to the consonance-dissonance continuum, with intentional allusions to tertian harmonies, while exploring two-voice counterpoint within customary Schoenbergian limitations.

I realized at the outset of my creative endeavor that trichord-derived tone rows presented still more creative possibilities. Through much of 2022 my focus remained on tetrachord-derived tone rows. Still, from time to time, I dipped my toes in the trichord-derived 12-tone waters. Then, in late December 2022, a trichord-derived tone row, along with the principal melody of "Fairy Dust," came to me, based on the trichord set class (015); i.e., C, Db, F. Over the next two days, I found and created the complete piece.

The three-movement work, *Sustainable Tones*, had enjoyed a beautiful premiere in March 2022, performed by Agatha Wang. When I found "Fairy Dust," though, I had a strong sense that it belonged to this same set of 12-tone pieces. The result now is an expanded collection of four movements, deserving its own release: *Sustainable Tones 2.0*. Melody Quah's performance today features the premiere of "Fairy Dust."

What is it about these pieces that distinguishes them from other 12-tone compositions for piano? While I have cultivated a taste for dissonance, my ear and mind want to hear dissonance within the context of a comprehensible musical system characterized by directed melodic and harmonic motion toward a relatively more consonant and stable goal. As a composer, I am exploring various ways of constructing 12-tone modalities to compose 12-tone music that is clearly not "atonal." In many respects, this music exhibits simplicity and clarity that I think lend it accessibility.

A century ago, Arnold Schoenberg completed his *Suite for Piano*, Op. 25. For nearly half-a-century, I have been trying to come to terms with this music. Over the last two-and-a-half years, I have found a way to employ Schoenbergian 12-tone techniques in pursuit and fulfillment of a very different aesthetic goal. My explorations and inventions continue. **SH**

## Goldberg Variations BWV 988 by Johann Sebastian Bach (1741)

The Goldberg Variations was the fourth part of Bach's *Klavierübung*, a collection that included the six partitas, Italian Concerto, French Overture and German Organ Mass. In the first edition, this fourth part was entitled (in German), "Keyboard Practice, consisting of an Aria with diverse Variations for the Clavicymbal [harpsichord] with Two Manuals," and was known as such until the nineteenth century. Johann Nikolaus Forkel writes that the Variations were commissioned by the Russian envoy to the Dresden Court, Imperial Count Hermann Carl von Keyserlingk, for his resident harpsichordist Johann Gottlieb Goldberg: "On one occasion the Count gave Bach to understand that he would like to have some clavier pieces for his Goldberg, which would be soothing and rather cheerful in character, and which might raise his spirits somewhat during his sleepless nights. Bach thought that he would best be able to work with this wish by composing variations, work which he had hitherto regarded as thankless in view of the unchanging nature of the underlying harmony."<sup>1</sup> This seemingly trivial, anecdotal tale of the piece's conception is somewhat bewildering to many who view it as one of the pinnacles of musical achievement. Doubts have been cast, however, on the plausibility of this account, for it is highly unlikely that Bach wrote this demanding work specifically for the young harpsichordist, who would have been only twelve or thirteen at that time. Regardless, Bach did stay in Keyserlingk's house in Dresden in November 1741, allowing for the legitimacy of at least some part of the story.<sup>2</sup>

The foundation of the Variations is a 32-bar bass pattern, heard 32 times over the course of the 32 movements (30 variations framed by identical *Arias*). Additionally, every third variation is a canon, beginning with a canon at the unison (var. 3) and expanding to a canon at the ninth (var. 27). The characters of the variations range from dance-like or introspective to declamatory or virtuosic. The virtuosic variations (usually preceding a canon) are notoriously difficult to execute on the piano since the piece was originally composed for an instrument with two manuals. Thus, the pianist has to navigate intricate hand-crossings that require a precise choreography of finger and arm movement. Notable variations also occur at structural points of the work. For example, variation 16, written in a French Overture style, clearly delineates the halfway-point of the entire work; variation 25, a sorrowful minor variation with astonishingly chromatic harmony occurs approximately three-fourths through; and variation 30, the jubilant *Quodlibet* that quotes two folk-songs, serves as the concluding variation before the return of the *Aria*.

Bach program notes by Melody Quah

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<sup>1</sup> Johann Nikolaus Forkel. *Ueber Johann Sebastian Bachs Leben, Kunst und Kunstwerke*, Leipzig, 1802, p. 52.

<sup>2</sup> Christoph Wolff, preface to Johann Sebastian Bach, *Klavierübung IV: Goldberg-Variationen = Goldberg Variations: Aria Mit Verschiedenen Veränderungen, BWV 988*. 1. Aufl. Wien: Wiener Urtext Edition, 1996, 8.