The work which nowadays we refer to simply as the ‘Goldberg Variations’ was originally published in 1741 as the fourth part of Bach’s monumental Clavierübung under the much lengthier title: “Keyboard practice, consisting of an aria with diverse variations for the two-manual harpsichord”. The more popular title came later and owes its existence to the writings of Forkel, Bach’s earliest biographer. The story goes that Bach wrote these variations for his young student, Johann Gottlieb Goldberg, who was at the time working in the services of Count Keyserlingk and, it would seem, was often called upon to provide musical diversions well into the night when his employer’s insomnia became too much. Those who doubt the basis of Forkel’s anecdotal recollections relating to the genesis of this extraordinary work have pointed to the unlikelihood of the thirteen-year old Goldberg being able to actually play the variations, although we do know that he went on to become a celebrated keyboard virtuoso. One thing we can be sure of however is the fact that J. S. Bach did visit the court in Dresden in 1741 at the invitation of Count Keyserlingk and, whilst BWV 988 may well have been composed before such a visit, it is entirely plausible that on this occasion Bach presented a special copy of the work to the Count.

Whatever the impetus behind the composition of such a massive set of variations, Bach was revisiting a form that he had not explored for some considerable time. Perhaps when Bach decided once again to embrace the tradition of the encyclopaedic variation set (a tradition reaching well back into the sixteenth century) he was primarily fascinated by the pedagogical benefits of such an undertaking. What better way for a composer to exhibit his compositional prowess whilst offering along the way insights into all manner of compositional techniques and innovative developments in keyboard technique? There are of course many aspects of the work that continue to fascinate and astound performers and listeners alike but perhaps the single most important achievement of the ‘Goldberg Variations’ in purely compositional terms is the remarkable multiplicity of styles and forms surveyed by the composer over the course of the thirty variations. In fact, given the scale and sheer audacity of the work, it’s almost as if Bach set himself the challenge of showing that almost any genre – including the most complex of contrapuntal forms such as canon and fugue – can be realized above a simple recurring underlying harmonic structure.

The underlying structure in question is of course that of the aria, which takes the form of an exquisitely beautiful sarabande. The graceful and flowing melody of the right hand almost seems to disguise the fact that it is the harmonic progression underneath which is the integral feature of the whole set. One can be
forgiven for not grasping the full potential of this bass line upon first hearing – especially given the pleasant distraction of the right-hand melody – due to its sheer length. Thirty-two bars employing one principal change of harmony per measure (sixty-four if you count the repeats) constitute the underlying harmonic theme – far longer than most variation set bass lines. Four descending bass notes lead us quickly to the dominant chord of D major and commentators have been quick to find precedents for such a simple idea in the works of others such as Johann Christoph Bach and Handel. However the real beauty of invention lies in the scale of the bass line – a binary structure built upon two perfectly balanced sections of sixteen measures.

In terms of the variations themselves three different cycles appear to be running throughout the course of the work. First of all there are the character pieces (consisting of dance forms and cantabile arias) followed by the virtuoso variations (revealing the likely influence of Domenico Scarlatti’s recently-published Essercizi) employing all sorts of highly original keyboard techniques, and then the sequence of canons that neatly frame each group of three movements. This pattern is almost entirely consistent with the exception of the first and last three variations (leaving the overall symmetry of the work completely intact). There is also a strong binary structure to the work (mirroring the theme itself) with an important hiatus occurring after the fifteenth variation before the exuberant French Overture (Variation 16) opens the second half of the work.

In many ways the cycle of nine canons forms the backbone of the Goldbergs and what makes them so intriguing is the fact that the interval of canonically imitation increases by one step each time. The first canon is instantly recognizable as such with its imitation at the same pitch (canon at the unison), but as we move progressively through the canon at the second, canon at the third etc. the canons begin to create unusual – often mesmeric – sound worlds which at times might seem to verge on the austere. The level of complexity in terms of the chromatic voice leading in some of these canons is quite simply breathtaking.

From the most introverted and hauntingly beautiful variations (Variation 25) to the most exuberant and extroverted displays of virtuosity (Variations 28 and 29) the Goldbergs are as rich in variety as it is in innovation. One of the most surprising and delightful features of the work is the Quodlibet (Variation 30) that occurs just before the return of the aria. The evocative title denotes what is essentially nothing more than a light-hearted and entertaining nonsense piece, of the type improvised by the Bach family at their annual gatherings. Here the texture almost gives way under the weight of invention, containing no less (and perhaps even more) than six distinct melodic fragments woven into a sort of musical patchwork quilt. Two of these melodies are known to have been popular folk songs and the texts are intriguing. The first of these, Kraut und Rüben, formed the basis of Buxtehude’s thirty-two part partite entitled La Capricciosa, giving perhaps some insight into the extent to which Bach revered this earlier variation set and the music of his old mentor.
Kraut und Rüben
haben mich vertrieben,
hätt mein' Mutter Fleisch gekocht,
so wär ich länger bleiben

Cabbage and beets
have driven me away;
had my mother cooked meat
I might have stayed longer.

The second folk tune used in the Quodlibet worthy of mention appears to have belonged to a tune used as the final dance at a wedding party and it has been described as a sort of wanderer's melody. The text seems entirely appropriate – indeed beautifully poetic – at this climactic point in the work just before the return of the graceful aria.

Ich bin so lang nicht bei dir g'west
I have been away from you for so long a time