

## **Note for the Recording of Jozef Koffler's arrangement of Bach's Goldberg Variations**

The Goldberg Variations were still largely unfamiliar to the musical public when Józef Koffler completed his extraordinary arrangement in 1938. His fellow Pole, Wanda Landowska, had made the first recording of the work five years earlier, although her steel-framed harpsichord was very different from anything Bach would have known. Claudio Arrau's historic 1942 version for piano was yet to be released, likewise Glenn Gould's 1955 album, which finally secured the Goldberg Variations' place in the repertoire, and Gould's in the firmament of great piano virtuosi. Sixty years on, the Goldberg Variations are ubiquitous. Bach's encyclopedic marvel of digital gymnastics and musical invention is regularly performed and recorded, and there are well over 200 versions in the catalogue, not to mention hundreds more online.

The majority of these recordings are of course for piano, and as most pianists (and all harpsichordists) acknowledge, adapting the Goldberg Variations for the piano is, by definition, something of a transcription. Originally intended for a two-manual harpsichord, Bach's aria and thirty variations need to sound perfectly idiomatic on a *single* keyboard, and this calls for all sorts of decisions, revisions, fingering adjustments and hidden compromises. Then there are all the elements that distinguish the modern piano from the harpsichord: its dynamic range, sustaining power, and its capacity to produce all manner of articulations and sonorities. The serious pianist has to consider all these elements in learning the work.

But adapting the Goldberg Variations for chamber orchestra — flute, oboe, cor-anglais, bassoon and strings in Koffler's scoring — is an infinitely more complex challenge: myriad options which open doors to endless colouristic possibilities. This process, intrinsic to the transcription of Bach's music, attracted Arnold Schoenberg (his transcription for orchestra of the organ Prelude & Fugue in E flat major, BWV 552 for example) and Anton Webern (the 6 voice fugue from *The Musical Offering*, BWV 1079), as well as Max Reger, Gustav Mahler and Sir Edward Elgar, among many others. Koffler's decision to arrange the Goldberg Variations was doubtless born of a similar fascination with, and love of Bach's music, but as a Jewish composer who was obliged to stifle his creativity under Stalin, while Hitler's executioners bayed just over the horizon, political circumstance also played a major role in his decision.

Born in 1896 in Stryi, Galicia, a small town some 40 miles south of Lwów (then part of the Austro-Hungarian Empire now Lviv, Ukraine) Józef Koffler was the son of Hersz Koffler, a businessman, and Rebeka Schoenfeld. At their insistence he began a law degree, though he also studied composition with the organist and conductor

Herman Grädener. A year later, when it became clear that music was his inevitable calling, Koffler began courses in musicology at the University of Vienna, where he studied under Robert Lach, Egon Wellesz and Guido Adler, who later oversaw his doctoral dissertation “*On the Orchestral Colours in the Symphonic Works of Mendelssohn-Bartholdy*”.

Interrupting his studies in 1916, Koffler served in the Austrian army during WWI, and in the Polish army when the country's borders were secured after its independence in 1918. In 1924 the Conservatory of the Polish Music Society in Lwów hired Koffler to teach composition and music theory, and in 1928 he was appointed professor of harmony and atonal composition, the only position of its kind in the country.

Koffler's friendship with Alban Berg in Vienna, and his correspondence with Arnold Schoenberg, encouraged his fascination with serial composition, and, together with Karol Szymanowski, Koffler emerged as a principal figure in the Polish avant-garde. Although he was the first Polish composer to advocate for Schoenberg's revolutionary twelve-tone system, its embrace did not exclude different musical vocabularies. But it was principally outside his own country that Koffler enjoyed success, his works presented by the International Society for Contemporary Music (ISCM) at festivals in Oxford, London and Amsterdam. At home, Polish audiences generally greeted his works with bewilderment, and conservative reviewers were merciless in their criticism of his musical language. (Koffler himself enjoyed a parallel career as a music journalist; a tireless advocate for new music, he edited the journal *Orkiestra* for 13 years and contributed to several others.)

Koffler's security became increasingly fragile once the Soviet Union annexed eastern Poland in September 1939. His appointments as professor at Lwów's Mykola Lysenko Conservatory, and as Secretary of the Composers' Association of the Soviet Ukraine, provided temporary stability. But in 1940, a plenary session of the Union of Soviet Composers accused Koffler of “formalism” — a well-worn charge that implied that his works were indebted to the Western avant-garde and insufficiently populist. Koffler publicly disavowed serialism and grudgingly began to compose in the politically mandated and more accessible socialist realist style. Compromise was difficult however, and his *Joyful Overture*, a celebration of the Red Army's invasion of Poland (1941) failed to redeem him — “[the overture] radiates coldness and erudition” wrote the critic Akwiljew.

The arrangement of the Goldberg Variations provided Koffler with a creative outlet at a remove from actual composition. The project was also a natural sequel to his *Händeliana*, a cycle of 30 variations (now lost) based on Handel's Passacaglia from

the Keyboard Suite HVW 432, and his Little Suite (*Mała suita*) after J.S. Bach, a selection of dance movements drawn from the Anna Magdalena Book (c.1937).

In June 1941, in violation of Germany's non-aggression pact with the Soviet Union, Hitler launched Operation Barbarossa, a massive land and air invasion involving over three million soldiers. By month's end the German army had reached Lwów, and Koffler, his wife Rosa and their young son Alan were moved 200 miles west to the Wieliczka ghetto near Kraków. When the ghetto was liquidated in August 1943 — the majority of its population transported to the Belzec extermination camp — the Kofflers managed to escape to Krościenko Niżne (now a part of Krosno) where the parish organist, a former Koffler student, hid the family. In the Spring of 1944 the Kofflers made their final move to a room in nearby Krościenko Wyżnem.

Many years later a local resident recalled their arrest: “I remember how the Gestapo came to pick them up [...] They surrounded the house, captured them, and led them away like criminals; and they went along, weeping, for they certainly knew what awaited them. I do not know what happened to them after that.” The Koffler family was almost certainly shot shortly after their arrest.

Like so many of the composers killed or exiled as a result of WWII, Koffler faded into obscurity. He had destroyed his early works, and several more were lost during the war. Until recently, those that had survived remained unexplored and unperformed. However the last decade has seen something of a Koffler revival, with release of Piano Concerto, op. 13, the Second Symphony, op. 17 and the String Trio, op. 10. His manuscript of the Goldberg Variations was discovered in Berlin in 1993 but remains little known outside Poland.

Koffler takes a very different approach from the usual, rather literal way in which Baroque works are transferred from one medium to another. Thematic material is segmented and tossed from instrument to instrument, creating interactions, imitative patterns and relationships that are both novel and unpredictable. The string writing is likewise of his time. Soloists emerge from the string ensemble to engage with solo winds and the full string complement is used to reinforce dramatic moments. Figures that are native to the keyboard are cleverly reimagined so they sound wholly appropriate in their new instrumentation. The product of Koffler's care, technique and imagination is far removed from Baroque practice, and far more interesting and compelling than the usual rebottling. However, given that the performance of Bach's music has changed so radically since Koffler's day, when Baroque music, indeed all music, had something of a Romantic essence to it, how does a present-day ensemble of young virtuosi actually realize the work?

In the same way that pianists are obliged to compromise in their performance of the Goldberg Variations, so too must the players of Koffler's arrangement. To perform Koffler's score in an historically "authentic" manner would be wholly inappropriate; recreating the playing style of the 1930s equally so. Performers need to find a middle path. In preparing the Koffler arrangement for performance, Trevor Pinnock responded to the dilemma: "Of course there's not the 'one way' to play Bach, and the challenge for a musician today is to decide how much to play with what we know of the style of 1930s playing — it seems to me we have to be true to Koffler as well as true to Bach and true to ourselves."

Simon Wynberg

Josef Koffler's biographical detail is drawn from the pioneering work of Professor Maciej Gołab of the Universities of Warsaw and Wrocław.