

Víkingur ÓLAFSSON

PIANO

Thursday, February 8, 2024 | 7:30PM



2023/24 SEASON



Dear Friends,

Last season we had the privilege of presenting Víkingur Ólafsson's Princeton debut. Throughout the darkest points of the pandemic, his recordings became a real sense of solace for me, providing a sense of connection at the heart of his musicmaking. He is a brilliant programmer. His debut highlighted his remarkable ability to curate programs, making rare connections between pieces and bringing something special to every note.

His latest recording is the Goldberg Variations, and he has gone "full method," devoting the entire season to this monumental, endlessly inventive work. Once again, I have found myself immersed in his newest recording and have been dreaming about tonight's recital since his last appearance. I am so thrilled to welcome him back to Richardson Auditorium and to share his remarkable artistry with you once again.

To Bach and to Víkingur!

A handwritten signature in black ink, which appears to read "Marna Seltzer". The signature is fluid and cursive, with a long, sweeping underline.

Marna Seltzer
Director

Thursday, February 8, 2024 at 7:30PM • Richardson Auditorium, Alexander Hall
Pre-Concert Talk by Professor Emeritus Scott Burnham at 6:30PM

VÍKINGUR ÓLAFSSON Piano

JOHANN SEBASTIAN BACH (1685–1750)

Goldberg Variations, BWV 988 (1741)

Aria

Variation 1

Variation 2

Variation 3 (canone all'unisono)

Variation 4

Variation 5

Variation 6 (canone alla seconda)

Variation 7 (al tempo di giga)

Variation 8

Variation 9 (canone alla terza)

Variation 10 (fughetta)

Variation 11

Variation 12 (canone alla quarta)

Variation 13

Variation 14

Variation 15 (canone alla quinta: Andante)

Variation 16 (ouverture)

Variation 17

Variation 18 (canone alla sesta)

Variation 19

Variation 20

Variation 21 (canone alla settima)

Variation 22 (alla breve)

Variation 23

Variation 24 (canone all'ottava)

Variation 25 (Adagio)

Variation 26

Variation 27 (canone alla nona)

Variation 28

Variation 29

Variation 30 (quodlibet)

Aria da capo

Running time: approximately 75 minutes without intermission



About the Program

By Lucy Caplan © 2024 • Program Annotator

Lucy Caplan is Assistant Professor of Music at Worcester Polytechnic Institute and a winner of the Rubin Prize for Music Criticism.

Introduction

We live in what has been called the age of the “infinite scroll”: the screens of digital culture continuously offer new information: more news, more posts, more videos, more opinions, all presented in an endless, formless parade. The attention economy splits our attention into ever-tinier parts—offering the tantalizing prospect of perpetual novelty, but often at the cost of introspective, sustained engagement. This season, Víkingur Ólafsson has embarked upon a performance model that offers an alternative to this *modus operandi*. He is devoting nearly an entire year’s worth of performances to a single work: Bach’s Goldberg Variations. Having recorded the piece in 2023, he is touring it across Europe, the United States, Asia, and South America, ultimately offering nearly one hundred live performances.

“Bach is the ideal candidate for this depth of focus. His music—capacious in its quantity, monumental in its stature, precise in its architecture, marvelous in its beauty—is irresistible to completists.”

Bach is the ideal candidate for this depth of focus. His music—capacious in its quantity, monumental in its stature, precise in its architecture, marvelous in its beauty—is irresistible to completists. Ambitious soloists will take up the project of performing all his suites for cello, or all of his sonatas and partitas for violin, in one go. The German publisher Barenreiter offers a critical edition of all his compositions, which took more than five decades to produce and numbers more than one hundred volumes. The Netherlands Bach Society’s “All of Bach” project aims to make videos of each of his compositions available for free online to listeners around the world. Ólafsson’s project offers a related but distinct approach: rather than attempting to survey the entire of the composer’s output, he dives deep into one of Bach’s best-loved works, inviting listeners to join him in devoting their own full attention to a single—and singular—composition.

J.S. Bach, *Goldberg Variations*, BWV 988 (1741)

The *Goldberg Variations* were originally published with the simple title “Aria with diverse variations.” (Later, they became associated with the teenage harpsichord prodigy Johann Gottlieb Goldberg; a popular but apocryphal story suggests that Bach wrote them at the behest of Goldberg’s employer, Count Keyserlingk, who wanted Goldberg to play gracious music for him when he had trouble sleeping.) The opening aria unfolds over a bass line of thirty-two bars in length; the work as a whole has a corresponding thirty-two parts, consisting of the aria, thirty variations, and a closing restatement of the aria. Scholars differ on how to interpret the organization the variations: some hear a perfectly symmetrical structure of two sets of fifteen variations; others hear three sets of ten; and still others hear ten sets of three, each of which concludes with a canon. Regardless of which model one prefers, though, it is clear that on the level of structure, the piece is about as conceptually distant from the entropy of the “infinite scroll” as one can get. Given its impeccably organized yet patently complex design, it has been likened to an encyclopedia, a Rubik’s Cube, and even the “Martha Stewart of Variations.”

Bach’s aria is both warm and regal. Evoking a sarabande in its melodic emphasis on the second beat of each bar, it is restrained at first, with a repeated descending gesture that adds a slight melancholy to its generally amiable tone. The second half of the aria flows more easily, with additional sixteenth notes filling in each beat of the bar.

It is not the melody of this aria, but rather its bass line, which is the foundation of the variations that follow. First, Bach offers two dances: the first in a bounding triple meter, the second in a more stately duple meter. The third variation is a canon which stages a cordial, almost playful conversation among its voices. The next two variations shift the focus away from melody and toward the immense breadth of sonic effects that a virtuosic performer can convey on the keyboard; the next canon comes almost as a respite from the busy vibrancy of its predecessors.

Variation 7, a lilting piece in 6/8 time, features elegant dotted rhythms and elaborate ornamentation. It is followed by two more cerebral pieces, neatly structured and somewhat more reserved in affect. In Variation 10, Bach reminds us of his mastery of the fugue with a classic, compact example of the form. It is followed by two more expressive variations, whose winding, stepwise melodies pile atop one another with increasing complexity. Variation 13 returns to the sarabande-like serenity of the opening aria, albeit with far more ornamentation in its intricate melodic line. The galloping energy of the next

variation ushers in Variation 15, a solemn, expansive meditation which signals that we have reached the halfway point of the work as a whole.

After the diaphanous conclusion of the fifteenth variation, the second half of the Goldbergs begins, appropriately, with a variation styled as an overture, bringing us back down to earth. The next several variations bustle with energy: each is entirely distinct in style and affect, but they share the qualities of concision and vivacity. But when we reach Variation 21, we are in for a shock: there is an abrupt shift to a minor key, and snaking chromatic harmonies inch us farther and farther afield from the piece's governing bass line. Order is restored in Variation 22, by way of rigorous four-part writing. The next two variations are a study in contrast: first unbridled joy and momentum, then understated elegance.

No doubt the most admired of the entire set is Variation 25, known as the "Black Pearl." Nearly five times as long as many of the other variations, it marks another rare return to minor, and evinces a quality of rhapsodic introspection, with large intervals stretching upward like unanswered questions. The next variation is more assured, but then there is a return to ambiguity, with Variation 27 offering a canon that seems to abandon the bass line entirely. Next is a study in contrasts: first a variation abuzz with trills, then another replete with chords and arpeggios. For his final variation, Bach offers a quodlibet, or medley of popular melodies—as if signaling that we are about to leave the self-sustaining world of this piece and return to our quotidian lives.

But first, he lets us stay just a bit longer, for a final restatement of the aria. It is unchanged, but it is impossible not to listen to it differently after having borne witness to the incredible transformations that have emerged from its bass line. Closing the circle, Bach signals that his work is finished, and we can now turn our energies elsewhere. Sustained attention to this music becomes a form of sustenance: at the conclusion of the piece, the listener is left with a feeling of fullness and nourishment, a sense of true completion.

About *the* Artist




VÍKINGUR ÓLAFSSON, Piano

Icelandic pianist Víkingur Ólafsson has made a profound impact with his remarkable combination of highest level musicianship and visionary programs. His recordings for Deutsche Grammophon—*Philip Glass Piano Works* (2017), *Johann Sebastian Bach* (2018), *Debussy Rameau* (2020), *Mozart & Contemporaries* (2021) and *From Afar* (2022)—captured the public and critical imagination and have led to career streams of over 600 million.


In October 2023, Ólafsson released his anticipated new album on Deutsche Grammophon of J.S. Bach's Goldberg Variations. Ólafsson has dedicated his entire 2023/24 season to a Goldberg Variations world tour, performing the work across six continents throughout the year. He brings Bach's masterpiece to major concert halls, including London's Southbank Centre, New York's Carnegie Hall, Wiener Konzerthaus, Philharmonie de Paris, Tokyo's Suntory Hall, Harpa Concert Hall, Walt Disney Hall, Sala São Paulo, Shanghai Symphony Hall, Tonhalle Zürich, Philharmonie Berlin, Mupa Budapest, KKL Luzern and Alte Oper Frankfurt, and, of course, Princeton University Concerts.

Now one of the most sought-after artists of today, Ólafsson's multiple awards include Opus Klassik Instrumentalist of the Year (2023), Opus Klassik Solo Recording Instrumental (twice), CoScan's International Nordic Person of the Year (2023), the Rolf Schock Prize for Music (2022), Gramophone's Artist of the Year (2019), and Album of the Year at the BBC Music Magazine Awards (2019).

A captivating communicator both on and off stage, Ólafsson’s significant talent extends to broadcast, having presented several of his own series for television and radio. He was Artist in Residence for three months on BBC Radio 4’s flagship arts program, Front Row—broadcasting live during lockdown from an empty Harpa concert hall in Reykjavík and reaching millions of listeners around the world. Ólafsson made a spectacular Princeton University Concerts debut last season with a program of Mozart and his contemporaries. We are so pleased to have him back.



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Local **Dance for PD® Participants**
Music by J.S. Bach performed by **Joshua Roman**, Cellist

Sunday, March 3, 2024 • 3PM Richardson Auditorium, Alexander Hall

Related Events:	Book Club Discussions hosted by the Princeton Public Library Wednesday, February 28, 10:30AM & 7PM	Documentary Screening and Talkback hosted by the Princeton Garden Theatre Monday, March 4, 7PM
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TICKETS: puc.princeton.edu | 609.258.9220
\$15 General \$10 Students, free to Princeton students through Passport to the Arts



SUPPORT US

Supporting Princeton University Concerts is critical to our future. Ticket sales cover less than half of the cost of presenting the very best in world-class music. Remaining funds come, in part, from our generous endowment, left to PUC by the Ladies' Musical Committee in 1929. We remain eternally grateful for the support of the Philena Fobes Fine Memorial Fund and the Jesse Peabody Frothingham Fund.

Other support comes from donors like you. We are grateful to the individuals whose support at all levels ensures that musical performance remains a vital part of Princeton, the community, and the region.

If you wish to make a donation to Princeton University Concerts, please call us at 609-258-2800, visit puc.princeton.edu, or send a check payable to Princeton University Concerts to: Princeton University Concerts, Woolworth Center, Princeton, NJ 08544.

THANK YOU!

We are deeply grateful for the support we have received and thank all of our donors and volunteers. The list below acknowledges gifts of \$100 or more, received between May 1, 2023 and January 15, 2024. If you see an error or would like to make a change in your listing, please contact the Concert Office at 609-258-2800.

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Planned gifts made to Princeton University Concerts carry on the vision of an extraordinary group of ladies who founded the series. We are grateful to the individuals below who will continue this legacy and will help shape the series' future for years to come. To inquire about planned giving opportunities, or if you have already included Princeton University Concerts in your plans, please contact Marna Seltzer in the Princeton University Concert Office at 609-258-2800.

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Princeton 2024

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The first concert in what is known today as Princeton University Concerts was presented on October 29, 1894, thus establishing one of the oldest continuous series of musical events in the country. From 1894 to 1914, the “Ladies Musical Committee” presented concerts by the Kneisel Quartet. After 1914, the programs diversified. In 1929, the Ladies Committee became the Princeton University Concerts Committee—a town and gown group of interested and knowledgeable music lovers—which has guided the University Concerts to date.

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PRINCETON
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CONCERTS

23/24

SEASON



< **GOLDA SCHULTZ**
Soprano

CONCERT CLASSICS

Thursday, October 12, 2023 | 7:30PM
CHANTICLEER VOCAL ENSEMBLE*

Thursday, November 2, 2023 | 7:30PM
DANISH STRING QUARTET

Wednesday, January 24, 2024 | 7:30PM
HÉLÈNE GRIMAUD* Piano

Thursday, February 15, 2024 | 7:30PM
ISABELLE FAUST Violin
JEAN-GUIHEN QUEYRAS Cello
ALEXANDER MELNIKOV Piano

Thursday, March 7, 2024 | 7:30PM
HAGEN STRING QUARTET

Wednesday, April 3, 2024 | 7:30PM
JONATHAN BISS Piano
MITSUOKO UCHIDA Piano

Monday, April 8, 2024 | 7:30PM
GOLDA SCHULTZ* Soprano
JONATHAN WARE* Piano

Thursday, May 2, 2024 | 7:30PM
DORIC STRING QUARTET*

PERFORMANCES UP CLOSE

Sunday, October 8, 2023 | 3PM & 6PM
DREAMERS' CIRCUS* Violin, Cittern, Accordion

Thursday, October 26, 2023 | 6PM & 9PM
THÉOTIME LANGLOIS DE SWARTE* Baroque Violin
JUSTIN TAYLOR* Harpsichord

Wednesday, November 8, 2023 | 6PM & 9PM
JEAN RONDEAU* Harpsichord

Thursday–Sunday, January 18–21, 2024
MAHLER CHAMBER ORCHESTRA in virtual reality

RICHARDSON CHAMBER PLAYERS

Sunday, February 22, 2024 | 7:30PM: *Les Six*
Sunday, March 24, 2024 | 3PM: *A French Afternoon*

SPECIAL EVENTS

Thursday, February 1, 2024 | 7:30PM
BRAD MEHLDAU Piano

Thursday, February 8, 2024 | 7:30PM
VÍKINGUR ÓLAFSSON Piano

HEALING WITH MUSIC

Wednesday, November 15, 2023 | 7:30PM
SULEIKA JAOUAD* Writer
JON BATISTE* Musician
Healing from Cancer through Music

Sunday, March 3, 2024 | 3PM
DANCE FOR PD® A Mark Morris Dance Group Program
Exploring the intersection of music, dance, and Parkinson's Disease.

Wednesday, April 24, 2024 | 7:30PM
JONATHAN BISS Piano
ADAM HASLETT* Writer
Anxiety, Depression, and Music

ALL IN THE FAMILY

Featuring *The Chamber Music Society of Lincoln Center*

Saturday, October 14, 2023 | 1PM & 3PM
CMS KIDS sensory-friendly program for ages 3–6

Saturday, March 16, 2024 | 1PM
ADVENTURES IN CHAMBER MUSIC for ages 6–12

AND THERE'S MORE...

Join us for concert-related events, many of them free: **Live Music Meditation, Do-Re-Meet Social Events, Movies at the Garden Theatre, Book Groups at the Princeton Public Library, Embroidery Circles, Dance for Parkinson's Disease Classes**, and more.

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