

CD Review**Harpist Parker Ramsay plays
Goldbergs in King's College Chapel**

by Daniel Hathaway



Johann Sebastian Bach's *Aria with Thirty Variations*, nicknamed (not by the composer) after Johann Gottlieb Goldberg, the harpsichordist who was retained to play them on command for an insomniac patron, have been adapted by performers for many other

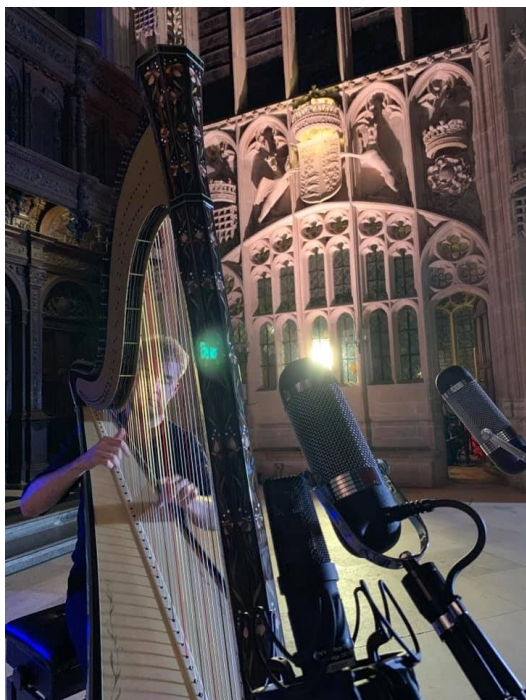
instruments — most notably for the piano and most famously by Glenn Gould.

Joining a long list of arrangers, Parker Ramsay has now transcribed the Variations for the modern pedal harp, an instrument for which he holds a master's degree from Juilliard, in addition to a degree in history from Cambridge University, plus a master's in historical performance (organ and harpsichord) and an artist diploma (organ) from Oberlin.



Ramsay returned to his undergraduate haunts to record the Goldbergs in Henry VI's wonderful chapel at King's College, Cambridge, where he was the first American to serve as organ scholar. *Bach: Goldberg Variations* was released on September 18 on King's own label.

Because the Variations are specifically designed to be performed on a double-manual harpsichord, pianists have to make accommodations to realize them on a single



keyboard. Translating them to the harp, which involves all those pedals that change the pitches of the strings, makes the task even more complex. That it can be done, and done so well, is a testament both to Parker Ramsay's ingenuity and his splendid technique.

The harpist has taken on even more challenges in deciding to record in King's Chapel, where the acoustic is super friendly to choir and organ, but allows undamped strings of the harp to continue to ring, creating a sonic nimbus that complicates harmonies and fuzzes textures.

Ramsay takes this into consideration in his choice of tempos and dynamics. Some variations, like the opening and closing Aria, are spacious and laid-back, and a number of others are gentle and quietly voiced.

The harpist introduces mild *inégalité* to some melodic lines, produces fluent, diaphanous runs, and brings inner voices nicely to the foreground.

When we hit dead center of the work with the French Overture, Ramsay isn't afraid to glissando shamelessly into big chords, an effect offset by his chaste playing of counterpoint in the fugue.

The minor key variations nearly stop time in its tracks. The elaborate coloratura of No. 25 is emotional and touching — and



calls for some complicated pedal changes (click the image above to see what Ramsay has to do with his feet here).

The totality of the harpist's playing is so elegant that Variation 30 — the *quodlibet* or mashup of two folk songs that allude to how long it's been since we heard the Aria — loses a bit of its earthy humor. A small price to pay.



The CD, which comes with album notes by Tim Page and Burkhard Schwalbach, is cleanly recorded and manages to localize the sound of the harp in the vast space of King's Chapel.

Parker Ramsay has written, “I wanted to show the world that the harp is an instrument of beauty, sincerity and transcendence, standing alongside the keyboards and string instruments as a worthy vehicle for the music of J. S. Bach.” As another Cambridge grad, Christopher Smart, wrote in a [hymn](#), “Determined, dared, and done.”

Published on ClevelandClassical.com September 22, 2020

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