UC Berkeley Osher Lifelong Learning Institute
COURSE SYLLABUS

Bach's Muse: The Goldberg Variations

Instructor: Lowry Yankwich, lowryyankwich@gmail.com
Schedule: Wednesdays, October 14 through November 4, 2026, 1-3pm (4 sessions total)

Location: Golden Bear Center, Suite 365 (in person). Course will also be livestreamed and recorded.

COURSE DESCRIPTION

What is the nature of creativity? How does limitation spark generation? What does 250 year-old music have to do with John Coltrane? In this class, we will explore these questions and more through J.S. Bach's keyboard masterwork, the "Goldberg" Variations. Together, we will ask what makes the piece tick—how Bach took a simple idea and ran with it to conjure thirty different worlds. Students will dive into the music and its history, unpacking key musical elements, while also learning about the context in which Bach wrote the music—the Baroque era, and Bach's own rocky life course. Then, we'll follow the piece into the present, where it continues to inspire artists around the globe. Students similarly inspired will have the opportunity to create their own variation in any medium. Open to all.

PREREQUISITES

There are no prerequisites for this class – the course is open to musicians and non-musicians alike and assumes only an openness to learning about Bach and his music, not any prior knowledge.

COURSE CALENDAR

Week 1 – Origin Story: The Baroque Era and the *Goldberg* Myth

Topics: Bach's early years and musical influences; introduction to the *Goldberg Variations*, including their structure, and the tale behind why Bach wrote them.

- In advance, I recommend listening to the following. **See "Listening," below for suggested recordings.**
    - Bach: *Goldberg Variations,* "Aria" and Variations 1-9, BWV 988.
    - Buxtehude: Fugue in C Major ("Jig Fugue") BuxWV 174, performed by Søren Gleerup Hansen and available on Youtube.

Week 2 – Faith and Fireworks

Topics: Bach's prowess as a musician and an improviser; links to contemporary jazz; role of faith in Bach's composition.

- **Before class, listen to:**
    - *Goldberg Variations* 10-15.

    - Jeff Scott, *Passion for Bach & Coltrane*, "Variation 13," available on Spotify.
    - Yunchan Lim, Ricercar from *The Musical Offering*, BWV 1079 (available on Youtube)
- **Further listening (optional):**
    - Jazz
        - Jacques Loussier Trio, *Goldberg Variations* 1-9 (available on Youtube)
        - Dan Tepfer's *Goldberg Variations/Variations*, performed at Wigmore Hall (available on Youtube)
    - More Bach
        - Netherlands Bach Society, Ricercar from *The Musical Offering*, BWV 1079 (harpsichord) (available on Youtube)
        - Netherlands Bach Society, Cantata Wachet auf, ruft uns die Stimme, BWV 140 (available on Youtube)

Week 3 – Tragedy and Inspiration

Topics: Bach's experience of loss, and the role of his music as a source of solace and inspiration for others across centuries.

- **Before class, listen to:**
    - *Goldberg Variations,* 16-25
        - Variation 25 is often considered the heart of the Goldbergs. For that reason, I highly recommend listening to multiple interpretations of this key part of the piece.
    - Eric Motley, "My Unlikely Friendship with Ruth Bader Ginsburg," (available on NYTimes.com)

- **Supplementary reading and listening:**
    - Netherlands Bach Society, "Actus Tragicus," BWV 106 (available on Youtube)
    - Jascha Heifetz, Chaconne, Partita No. 2 in D Minor, BWV 1004 (available on Youtube)

Week 4 – At Play

Topics: Bach's lighter side, and how mirth and play show up in the Goldbergs and other works by Bach. Guest speaker Anne Bellas, an art quilter from Nantes, France, will join remotely to discuss her work creating 32 quilts inspired by the variations. Explore her work and portfolio here.

- **Before class, listen to:**
    - *Goldberg Variations* 26-30 and final Aria

        - I specifically recommend listening to Glenn Gould's 1955 recording of variations 26-30 (see below for more information)
    - Netherlands Bach Society, *Coffee Cantata*, BWV 211 (available on Youtube)
- **Supplementary material:**
    - Interview with Jovani Furlan, NYC Ballet, on dancing to the Goldbergs (available on Youtube)

LISTENING

Many artists have recorded the *Goldberg Variations*, and I would encourage you to listen and compare multiple. Below are a number of high-quality recordings available that I recommend. If you're looking for a place to start, try Ólafsson's or Schiff's versions. Each recording contains a hyperlink to access the recording directly.

- Vikingur Ólafsson, 2023 (available on Spotify) – A recent recording by a respected modern Bach interpreter.
- Andras Schiff, 2017 (available on Youtube) – Another recent recording by a highly respected interpreter, with the benefit that it includes video.
- Mahan Esfahani (available on Spotify) – A recent, high quality recording on harpsichord by a dynamic young harpsichordist.
- Kimiko Ishizaka, 2014 (available on Youtube) – Recording with score accompaniment for those who want to follow along while listening.
- Simone Dinnerstein, 2007 (available on Spotify) – A revelatory recording with a very different, empathic approach. This recording launched Dinnerstein's career.
- Glenn Gould, 1981 (available on Youtube) – A legendary, idiosyncratic recording with accompanying video. This recording was completed shortly before his death at age 50. Gould's first recording of the piece, in 1955, launched his career and is vastly different (available on Spotify).
- Wanda Landowska, 1999 (available on Spotify) – An influential early recording by the Polish-French harpsichordist.

FURTHER STUDY

For a portrait of Bach's life, character, and overviews of his musical output, I highly recommend John Eliot Gardiner's book, *Bach: Music in the Castle of Heaven*. I also recommend listening to my podcast, *30 Bach*, exploring key themes from the course in greater detail with artists and devotees around the world. The podcast is available on Spotify.