

## CS Parker Ramsay transcript.mp3

[00:00:00] Which came first, the chicken or the egg? OK, how about this? The music or the instrument? I'm Colleen Phelps, and this is classically speaking. In music history, especially in JS Bach's lifetime, the same piece of music might have been played on a whole range of instruments. Maybe for practical reasons, or maybe because the composer wanted to reuse the same line of music more than once. For most performances of classical music, though, that practice is gone today. A violin sonata is for violin. A keyboard sonata is for keyboard, but for G.S. box music. The practice of transcribing playing it on a different instrument never really went away. Bach didn't write for banjo or mandolin, but that didn't stop Bela Fleck. Or Chris Thile. It also didn't stop Nashville born harpist Parker Ramsay when he recently put out his debut album containing just one piece of music. Bach's Goldberg Variations.

[00:01:11] On the front page of the piece it says, Clavier ubung, pardon my German, keyboard exercise. But that's not a keyboard that you play.

[00:01:20] No, it is not a keyboard that I play. But yes, I am playing it on a non-keyboard instruments, which is not unheard of with Bach generally. There are lots and lots of musicians who play Bach on all sorts of instruments.

[00:01:44] Have you heard from transcription haters, purists who would shake their head at the pieces being played on harp?

[00:01:53] Oh, lots, lots. And I love it. I love it. There's there's nothing better than making people mad when you do something that they don't necessarily understand or they refuse to understand. Yeah, I have. I've had people say, yeah, I don't really understand. It's more I've had people say, why would you do it on anything other than the harpsichord? And I think for me it's easy. It's because I've already done it on the harpsichord. I enjoyed it. And I think it's wonderful on the harpsichord, but it doesn't have to be just on an harpsichord.

[00:02:24] You're a keyboardist as well. So did you start by playing the Goldbergs on piano and then moving over, or did you work it out as a harpist first?

[00:02:33] So I played Goldbergs in high school on the piano as like every sort of nonserious, ambitious young musician does who plays the piano fairly proficiently. I played a few movements. I was on the organ and as an undergrad for voluntaries for services, because they're short and they're attractive and people recognize it and they go, oh, that's nice. And I would actually just sit down and start messing around with Goldberg and the harp. And I just found the more satisfying because all the things that I was trying to get out of the harpsichord, the harp could just do very, very natural. And after school was sort of deciding like, what do I really want to do to sort of take all the things I've done with my education? I studied history and Organ at Cambridge and Historic performance at Oberlin, and the modern harp at Juilliard and, I think really use them all at once, as well as making kind of an artistic statement.

[00:03:43] A little background. The Goldberg Variations were commissioned by one count, Herman Karl from Kaiserling, who often had trouble sleeping. Since he didn't have radios or Netflix in 1741 he actually hired a keyboardist named Johann Gottlieb Goldberg to play for him when he had a bout of insomnia.

[00:04:00] The count mentioned to J.S. Bach really like something nice to look forward to. And Gilbert plays When I Have a sleepless night. So Bach wrote a theme and 30 variations. The story goes that the count never tired of the set. He loved it so much, he gave back a golden goblet full of money as a thank you. No word on how Goldberg felt about playing it repeatedly at two a.m.. Now, this account, taken from a biography of Bach written in 1882, is probably pretty apocryphal, but it's definitely a fact that the Goldberg Variations were written for keyboard, so to play them on the harp Parker Ramsay had some figuring out to do so.

[00:04:50] I thought a transcription project would be the best one. And The Goldbergs was obvious because I played it on two or three instruments before and I loved it and I loved playing it on the harp when I tried it. So I just put my nose to the grindstone.

[00:05:04] Are the hands consistent? So is the right hand on what the right hand would be doing on a keyboard and the left hand do?

[00:05:10] Yes, it is. It is. It is the difference being that the harp is even simpler than a piano in the sense that your thumbs face the same direction.

[00:05:31] So that you really get that put your hands out in front of you like you're typing on a computer. Now wiggle your fingers will naturally want to be mirror images of each other so they'll move in opposite directions. So then face your palms toward each other and wiggle your fingers again. They'll move in the same direction now. That's the biggest difference.

[00:05:49] Plus, we had a complication is that the Pinkie's don't get used and so we only have eight fingers.

[00:05:54] Another issue is that anything chromatic needs fancy footwork because the harp uses pedals to change the pitch of the strings. And another is that Bach wrote the Goldbergs for not one keyboard, but for two manual harpsichord. That's one instrument with two keyboards.

[00:06:10] And several of the movements actually indicates that you do the hands face.... You do opposite hands. Yeah. Split them up and you have opposite hands. And because the hands run into each other and you somehow and you have this wonderful sort of notion of like you having repeated notes, but they don't sound exactly the same because the strings are different. Lancs, they're coming from different parts of the harpsichord.

[00:06:34] But can you mimic that on a harp? Not really. However, you can make it sound different.

[00:06:45] A couple places they did some effects site I use and left hand harmonics in place to play some things up the octave to make a little bit cleaner hat, add some interest, because I was tired of excessive finger noise, for instance, with repeated notes. So if you play a piano and you make something loud, you go to the bottom of the instrument, right. You like crash around you just on a harp. It's going to go the loud part of the harp is at the very, very top. It's where the strings are short. It's where the tension is the tightest. And so some of the incredible clarity about the gold recreation's is that the cannons are extremely expressive and very colorful because the top three octaves of the harp are so different in color and vibrant that the ability to shade and voice and phrase is actually, I think, more easy than on the piano. In order to give Harpe its best shot, there are places, for instance,

Infuriation three, where I nerd's left hand up the octave or in the Overture movement, which is very variation 16, I dressed it up. The way it's written is that it's got a very kind of low bass line, a very frilly top line. Even on the harpsichord, it sounds kind of sparse. A lot of harpsichord, I know. Dress it up and fill that out and make it sound more orchestral. So I filled it out a lot and actually played with the ornamentation to make it more fitting for the harp. As with any ornament, you should have to ask, you know, and sort of decide why it's there, because it's with Bach, it's not there just because he liked it necessarily, it's usually gets some harmonica element to it. I think one thing about Bach is that no matter what instrument you play, there's something by Bach that's really unplayable and doesn't fit comfortably under the hands or the voice. As somebody who's sung Bach, I'm like, gosh, this feels like an organ line. Or I'm sitting and playing, you know, a prelude from one big organ preludes and fugues. I'm like, this is a concerto grosso that he has in his mind that he's like translated into the organ. It's beautiful, but it's really uncomfortable. The Goldbergs are easier on the harpsichord, but it's still a feat of stamina. Violinists and flutist both complain about the musical offering, even though the musical offering is supposedly written in a key. Easier for the flute. Everyone's just like now. It's actually one of his most difficult instrumental works ever. And then there he's a keyboardist and they're these continuo parts which kind of look like they work fine on the cello. They really. And then you try and play them on the keyboard and they're even worse.

[00:10:10] The keyboardists constantly returned to the work and and you read it to read reviews. Gosh. Back when Glenn Gould recorded it or of the significance of the 1955 Gould recording where the piece was so academic before that. And then he blew through it, made it a sensation. But then just now, long, long release himself playing it in two versions at once.

[00:10:38] Look, they have this huge stature that maybe you do not have for years going to think. That is because Glenn Gould, I think Glenn Gould was the first person in the recording era to really go to town with them. In the 50s and 60s, you know, when people like a Richter were doing recordings of cantatas and b minor masses and things in Munich, they'd have like a musicologist sitting in a recording booth saying, nope, can't do that. Nope, can't have that. Now, as we're correcting people on site, yes, it's very German. And of course, none of us do that these days. With the Goldberg Variations, where, like Glenn Gould was able to convince the world that this piece like is the best piece of music ever written. I'm not even convinced of that having played it. I think it's wonderful. I think I think it's a really wonderful piece. And I think it's going to gets my brain going and gets my fingers going. You know, it's not Beethoven three. It's not. Das lied von der Erde. It's not Rite of Spring. It is this funny little work that people are always puzzled was like, why is this getting under my skin? Or like, why do I feel like I want to pursue it? And it's a game to an extent. It's a it's a it's. It is a benchmark for a pianist. Harpists don't have music of that stature, and I have to say, this is like where my Glenn Gould Messiah Complex comes out is that, you know, I wants there to be works like this for the harp. I want people to see that the harp can command someone's attention for an hour or more in the same way a piano can or an organ can with a a cycle or a full Bach cycle. I would like nothing more than for a harpist to hate my recordings so much that they go out and learn it and recorded themselves even better.

[00:12:55] While he's not suggesting hiring a keyboardists like Goldberg to play for you in the middle of the night. Parker Ramsay does have ideas for changing the way concerts look. Find out how. After the break.

[00:14:33] We talked a bit about Glenn Gould in the first half. A pianist who really did bring the Goldberg Variations to the general public in the 1950s with a landmark recording that he then redid in the 1980s. And it sounded almost completely different. Gould said he rerecorded it because he saw the variations, a new as a cohesive piece, and that the relationship between each variation, each little episode was important. Parker Ramsay felt the same way and pointed out that in the digital age, when we can change tracks in our playlist at will, we may lose that cohesiveness.

[00:15:11] We talk about the Goldbergs like as a whole, but we don't have a very good way of talking about what it means to listen to the piece in real time, what it means to see the relation between variation one and then variation to the variation generation three and sort of have a sense of what engines are turning to that. Bach is leading you along because the piece is meant to be performed in a certain order. Presumably that's. I don't think that's a wild assumption. I don't. I really don't. I think that, as with any work, a body like it starts at one place, ends and another. But as Bach is using the same chord progression over and over, there are places where it's very obvious that he's taking elements from one variation and using them in the next and says instead of seeing them as these three highly individualized variations where you can go. I in that variation, the way he doesn't, this tempo and click like variations 17 of my itunes playlist. You know, I could see that there is a wonderful relationship between Variation 17 in the fugue in the overture. Which came before it because the left hand goes to (sings). And that is an incredibly important part of the fuge that comes before, because after the first little song that goes (sings) right? it goes (sings) in thirds. And my mind is like, huh. He's taking elements between the variations. You know, how how do they relate to each other. Are they an important signpost for the listener? Once upon a time, maps do not show you like what things look like, like supposedly from outer space. A map used to be extremely long scrolls, a parchment that would give you signposts. This isn't necessarily historical performance. But considering an alternative view of how people back then thought about music and thought about signposting.

[00:17:51] Intent is an interesting thing in music, especially really old music. Consider a concert performance of the complete Goldberg Variations. Now that you know, their original intent was to help someone go back to sleep. It doesn't make much sense. This is especially an issue for early music concerts where you sit and watch it all uncommon. So to do a historically informed performance, there's a lot of pressure to get it right. Like it would have been done, but somehow in a different setting.

[00:18:19] I don't have a very purist notion of historical performance at all. Much to the ire of my community. I prefer to engage with the history of music by looking at the history of ideas and looking at how people wrote letters, how people traveled, how people read. Yeah. And how they, I guess, consumed music as as a piece of culture. A piece of art. I don't know. I prefer to take a broader view of how people thought about ideas and culture and art back then to uncover or ice and even uncover hypothesize about what a piece of music might have meant to them, that they were probably only hearing once and was probably a gem.

[00:19:03] Parker is playing on live in Studio C. here with his friend Arnie Tanimoto on Viola da Gamba. They've brought this duo to museums at old houses for more intimate concerts.

[00:19:14] Yes, the pressure is historical performance are again, the stakes are so low because a lot of a lot of this music you can't really program in concert performance. And if

you are going to be preprogramming it alongside things like Rameau, because you're not going to fill out even the small hall like Carnegie Hall playing Byrd on the harpsichord because Byrd did not intend for like two and a half hours of Byrd to be played on the harpsichord all at once with people sitting on a stage in a room. That's just not how music was consumed back then. I mean, it's not how music is consumed now. And we can be more creative, as you know. Of course, we love the thrill of performing on stage. But it's not possible.

[00:20:07] I'm waiting on the return of tafelmusik.

[00:20:12] My God. Yeah.

[00:20:15] So many concerts. I would have enjoyed more if I could eat and drink during that.

[00:20:19] It's like they're they're culturally part of a different way in which people can. Again, people consume music in different way, which has consumed more socially. I mean, in my mind, with older music, especially the baroque era. What an audience is. The idea of like holding an audience means that you just have people gathered together. There are people who are singing. There are people who are dancing. There are people who are exchanging instruments.

[00:21:02] As we consider a future from music making post pandemic, maybe it's time we historically inform our audiences. In addition to our technique for the seeding becomes less formal, the crowd size more intimate. We remember that while the music we make is indeed beautiful and otherworldly. The audience is right here and the point is less the notes and more in the gathering itself.

[00:21:46] There's more to this interview on our new web site. Nashville classical radio dot org. Hear from Parker Ramsey on how harp is the family business and about the experience of attending Cambridge as a history student and an organ scholar. Ramsay released his recording of the Goldberg Variations on the King's College label, and it's available now. Other music in this episode included Glenn Gould's 1955 and 1981 recordings, as well as Helmet Wallfisch on harpsichord and Ramsay's performance on Live in Studio C with Arnie Tanimoto. Classically speaking is a production of Nashville Public Radio, the show was edited by Anita Bug and mastered by Carl Pedersen. I'm Colleen Phelps, asking you to leave a review on your favorite podcast app. It's the best way to spread the word that you've got a backstage pass to classical music. Classically speaking.