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The Bach-Busoni “Goldberg Variations”

In the preface to his edition of J.S. Bach’s *Aria mit 30 Veränderungen* [Goldberg-Variationen], BWV 988 (1915) for solo piano, Busoni called the piece the most “copious” and “ingenious” of Bach’s sets of variations. Yet, he believed the composition could not be performed successfully on the piano for 20th century audiences without adaptation. His edition, as he stated, set about to “rescue this remarkable work for the concert-hall.” Busoni’s modifications included shortening the piece from 30 to 21 variations, creating an overall sense of architectural form by grouping the variations into three main sections, and adapting the composition for the modern piano by changing time signatures, redistributing notes between the hands, altering rhythmic values, and even changing notes.

Scholars have mentioned Busoni’s adaptation of the “Goldberg Variations” in passing, while reserving more detailed analyses for his arrangement of the Chaconne from the Partita No. 2 for Solo Violin in D Minor, BWV 1004 and his edition of the *Well-Tempered Clavier*, BWV 846-893. This neglect can perhaps be attributed to the liberal way he adapts Bach’s “Goldberg Variations.” Yet, although not necessarily reflective of Bach’s intentions, Busoni’s edition of the “Goldberg” Variations” represents an important early attempt to resurrect this work in an age in which it was rarely performed. By contextualizing an analysis of Busoni’s edition and performances of the “Goldberg Variations” within a reception history of the piece, the essay contributes to ongoing discourse about the performance of Goldberg Variations in the early 20th century.