

Bach: Goldberg Variations BWV 988 / Gunther Rost



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Label: [Oehms](#) **Catalog #:** 636 **Spars Code:** n/a
Composer: [Johann Sebastian Bach](#)
Performer: [Gunther Rost](#)
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Recorded in: Multi
Length: 0 Hours 45 Mins.

This is a hybrid Super Audio CD playable on both regular and Super Audio CD players.

BACH Goldberg Variations • Gunther Rost (org) • OEHMS 636 (Hybrid multichannel SACD: 44:54)

This recent recording of Johann Sebastian Bach's *Goldberg Variations* (BWV 988) is played on a modern (2005) pipe organ by highly skilled organist Gunther Rost and released in 2009 on the Oehms label. This is something to savor time and again. If you, like me, are of the opinion that Bach's works needn't be played only on the instruments he wrote them for, you'll love this. If you disagree, you condemn yourself to listening to this work only on the harpsichord—which would mean Ralph Kirkpatrick (or lesser-known artists)—and never listening to Glenn Gould's interpretation on the modern piano, a reading many feel is definitive. Bach himself transposed certain pieces for instruments other than those for which they were initially intended, so the purist position has slim footing. Moreover, this recording introduces elements to the music that neither the harpsichord nor the piano can touch: the power and grandeur of an organ at full cry, and the eerie (some say mystical) quality of the organ at *ppp*. The recorded sound is quite excellent (detailed, airy, clean), and the 5.1 (wider, deeper) surround sound simulates a spaciousness much larger than my listening room.

The organ was built for l'Église Saint-Louis-en-l'Île, Paris (The Church of Saint Louis on The Island), by Bernard Aubertin in Courtefontaine, France, 2005. The builder used many modern materials and techniques of manufacture to achieve an "old sound." Having attended a few lunchtime free concerts while in Paris, I might say Aubertin's latest organ sounds similar to the Grand Orgue de l'Église Saint Sulpice, in person or on recordings of similar music played by Marcel Dupres (Bach, Preludes and Fugues, Mercury, LP SRI 75046), an organ that was for a century acclaimed as the greatest organ in Europe (by the French). By today's standards, including modern acoustic measurements of echo and decay, Saint Sulpice seems too big a room, and rapidly occurring notes are blurred by its too-oo lo-o-ng decay-ay. One has to sit up close to hear inner voices, which disenfranchises 80 percent of the audience, I'd guess. In this instance, the old bromide, "They don't make 'em like they used to," proves paradoxically true. They make 'em better. The organ at Saint Sulpice may sound better on recordings than in person. This recent recording of the new organ at Saint-Louis-en-l'Île captures all that this new, yet "old sounding" instrument is capable of in its home, with all the chuffing, the stops' pushing and pulling, and the deep bass that seems majestic when recorded in a church that allows large acoustic wave fronts to develop. This organ gives new meaning to "science and technology in service of the music."

Gunther Rost starts at a modest pace, then pushes the tempo to achieve an exhilarating acceleration. In later sections, he is able to sustain slow passages that bring Bach's religious mysticism to mind. Rost is fleet enough to take the fast variations at whatever pace is required. I think the limiting factor is the pedal tones, how quickly they can begin and end a deep note. I'm certain they are not as fast as a piano, say. Rost is quite able to draw out whatever is in the music; fast or slow, loud or soft, his technique seems to know no limit, though he might be a tad too conservative for some. Bach would have enjoyed playing duets with Rost, *je pense*. This, then, is an album that presents the *Goldbergs* on an instrument not usually associated with them. The new, old-sounding Aubertin pipe organ suits the technique of Gunther Rost. The recorded stereo and surround sound love the instrument in its venue. And the organ brings out some new dynamics in the music, which might better define the soul of J. S. Bach. Enthusiastically recommended.

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