

Johann Gottlieb Goldberg is generally remembered today on account of the so-called Goldberg Variations, although this set of variations by Johann Sebastian Bach was actually entitled “Aria with diverse variations”. However, it is unjust to reduce the merits of Bach’s pupil, who died at the age of 29, to his role as harpsichordist of Count Hermann Carl von Keyserlingk (1696–1764), for Goldberg’s chamber music surpasses the average compositions of his time to such a degree that the Trio Sonata in C major was long considered to be a work by his teacher (BWV 1037).

Johann Gottlieb Goldberg (sometimes Golberg, Gollberg or Goltberg) was baptized on 14 March 1727 in the Protestant Marienkirche in Gdansk, probably only a few days after his birth as the son of the well-known lute and violin maker Johann Goldberg. We lack more information on his youth and education, but he may well have been tutored first by the local capellmeister Johann Balthasar Christian Freisslich (1687–1764), before Keyserlingk discovered him and arranged for him to move to Dresden, where he apparently became a student of Wilhelm Friedemann Bach. No later than 1742, at the age of fifteen years, he was in Leipzig, where he was “one of the most excellent pupils of the great Seb. Bach in composition and on the keyboard”, according to testimony given by Ernst Ludwig Gerber in 1790. In 1791, Johann Friedrich Reichardt reported, “Of his immense skill wonderful things are told: he is said to have played the most difficult things easily and fluently not only at sight, but also with the page upside down. [...] He was engaged in music day and night and didn’t concern himself with anything else.” Johann Wilhelm Hertel as well, who met Goldberg in Berlin 1747/48, admired his sight reading: “Never was anyone more adept at playing à livre ouvert, for which reason he was called the Notenfresser (Music Glutton).” In the New Historic-Biographical Encyclopedia of Musicians, published in 1812, Gerber ended his report on Goldberg, which he had based upon Reichardt, with the phrase, “For the rest, he was melancholic and extremely obstinate.”

In 1751 he became a chamber musician in Count Heinrich von Brühl’s (1700–1763) ensemble in Dresden as the successor of Gottlob Harrer

(1703–1755), who had become the choir director at St. Thomas in Leipzig after Bach’s death in 1750. Goldberg may have composed his harpsichord concertos for the Brühl ensemble. In 1805, Reichardt wrote in his autobiography, published in the Berlin Musical Journal, that Goldberg “had led a most strange, stubborn life in the house of the Minister Count Bruhl.” Here he died of tuberculosis, and was buried in St. John’s Cemetery on 15 April 1756.

Goldberg is said to have destroyed most of his compositions; others are now lost. In the Breitkopf Catalogue of 1763 the following collection was offered. “VI. Sonate a Flauto Violino, ed a 2. Violini coll Basso, di Goldberg, Mus. di S. E. il Comte de Brühl.” while in the 1761 catalogue there were reported to be “Goldberg, Musico di S. E. il Conte de Brühl, VI. Sonate à Flauto Traverso, Violino e Basso, a 3 thl.” Of these six trio sonatas, the two for flute and violin have not survived, while the four for two violins and basso continuo are preserved in parts in the Berlin State Library - Prussian Cultural Heritage (shelf marks: Mus. ms. 7921/1–4). This library also owns the first Sonata in C Major, which has also been attributed to Bach, in a score with figured bass, originally in the Amalien-Bibliothek (Am. B. 514). There are contemporary arrangements for violin and obbligato harpsichord of the sonatas in C major and g minor (Mus. ms. 7921/5–6). Thus all the main sources are kept in Berlin.

All the sources are copies in which phrasing and bass figures often reveal a careless lack of understanding. For the present edition, parallel passages and other sources, when available, were consulted to resolve ambiguities. Analogy allowed the supplementation of some slurs and articulation marks.

The a minor Sonata has survived in the unique source, Mus. ms. 7921/4, as a set of parts, the cover of which reads as follows (without shelf mark and library stamp): *nom: 3* No. 4. | No. 4 | Trio. | Violini | col | Basso. | Sig^e Goldberg.

In the bass part two notes were corrected: Adagio, bar 3, the 7th note reads b in the source instead of a; in the Allegro assai, bar 104, the second note is c in the source instead of A.