

Dr. Burney, Samuel Wesley, and J. S. Bach's *Goldberg Variations*

Philip Olleson

Dr. Charles Burney's letter to Samuel Wesley of around July 15, 1810, concerning arrangements for a private performance for Burney of J. S. Bach's *Goldberg Variations* by Wesley and Vincent Novello illustrates both the warm friendship between Burney and Wesley and the lively interest that Burney developed in the music of Bach in the last years of his life. It is one of over twenty extant letters between Burney and Wesley from what was evidently a far more extensive correspondence which began in late 1799 and lasted until shortly before Burney's death in April 1814.¹ Many of the later letters are concerned with the promotion of Bach's music by Wesley and a group of his friends and professional colleagues which included Benjamin Jacob, C. F. Horn, A. F. C. Kollmann, Vincent Novello, Johann Peter Salomon, and William Crotch. They are thus key documents in the history of Bach reception in England, and are of particular value for the light they shed on the nature and extent of Burney's own involvement in the English Bach movement.²

Although the Library of Congress Burney letter is not a new find, its whereabouts were for many years unknown, and it was only with its acquisition by Hans and Rosaleen Moldenhauer that it became available for consultation by scholars. Its subsequent acquisition by the Library of Congress as part of the Moldenhauer Bequest has made its existence more widely known and has further increased its accessibility.

It was originally owned by Novello, to whom (as Novello's annotation states), Wesley had presented it in token of his part in the performance. It was subsequently owned by the leading British collector of music Julian Marshall, whose interest in Wesley may have stemmed from having been as a boy a chorister under Wesley's son Samuel Sebastian at Leeds Parish Church.³ In November 1875 it appeared in print in a brief article by Marshall in *Concordia*,⁴ a short-lived London music journal. Marshall's article was prompted by the interest aroused by the appearance earlier in the year in

Concordia of a selection of Wesley's letters to Jacob concerning the promotion of Bach's music in England.⁵ This was the first time any of these had been published; the complete collection appeared shortly afterwards in an edition by Wesley's daughter Eliza.⁶ Marshall subsequently incorporated the *Concordia* transcripts in a handsome volume of Wesley materials⁷ which was included with the over 450 volumes comprising the bulk of his collection of manuscript music which he sold to the British Museum in 1880-1881. The quotations of the letter in Lightwood's *Samuel Wesley, Musician*⁸ and in Scholes's *The Great Dr. Burney*⁹ presumably came from Marshall's *Concordia* article. The letter itself was sold along with other autograph letters from Marshall's collection at Sotheby's sale on June 26, 1884; the purchaser was W. H. Cummings, another leading British collector. It was not included in the sale of Cummings's own collection at Sotheby's on May 17-24, 1917, and it has not been possible to discover the identity of its later owners up to the time it was purchased by Hans and Rosaleen Moldenhauer. Its whereabouts were not known to Joyce Hemlow at the time of compilation of her *Catalogue of the Burney Family Correspondence*,¹⁰ and as she did not include letters known only from printed sources, it does not appear there.

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Burney's first meeting with Wesley had occurred during Wesley's childhood in the early 1770s, when he was one of the many distinguished musicians to whom Wesley had demonstrated his precocious talents. Thereafter, their paths did not cross again until early 1799, when a chance meeting at a dinner party led to the renewal of their acquaintance.¹¹ Contact between Burney and Wesley appears to have been initially sporadic, but the frequency of their letters and meetings increased dramatically following Wesley's discovery of the music of J. S. Bach some time in the spring or summer of 1807.¹² In the autumn of that year, in a letter now lost, Wesley wrote to Burney to inform him of his study of Bach and his almost religious enthusiasm for Bach's music;¹³ he may also have taken the opportunity to voice his disagreement with the harsh criticisms of Bach that Burney had made in his *General History of Music* and in his more recent article on Bach in Rees's *Cyclopaedia*.¹⁴

Wesley's letter led to one of the most celebrated events in the history of the English Bach movement. At Burney's invitation, Wesley visited him at his apartments at Chelsea College to play to him from the "very curious & beautiful Copy" of *Das wohltemperirte Clavier* which J. S. Bach's son Carl

Philipp Emanuel had presented to Burney on his visit to Hamburg in October 1772.¹⁵ Wesley, who by this time was thoroughly familiar with *Das wohltemperirte Clavier* and had made his own manuscript copy from the Nägeli edition of around 1800,¹⁶ was astonished to find that Burney's copy was only of Book I, and that it was so "full of *scriptural* Faults" as to make his performance from it difficult. Nonetheless, he was able by his playing to persuade Burney of the error of his former opinions and later reported to Jacob that Burney had "expressed his Wonder *how such abstruse harmony* and such perfect and enchanting Melody could have been so marvellously united."

This visit marked Burney's conversion to the Bach cause, and subsequent letters indicate Burney's continuing enthusiasm and the extent to which Wesley came to consult him for advice on how best to promote Bach's music by performances, lectures, and the publication of editions. By this time Burney rarely left his apartments, but Wesley kept him in touch with developments by letter, and he and his friends also took care to visit him and to give him private performances of their latest Bach discoveries. On one such occasion, in September 1809, Wesley (on the violin) and Jacob (on the piano) performed some or all of the violin sonatas, BWV 1014-1019, probably from a recently acquired copy of the Nägeli edition of around 1804.¹⁷

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The Library of Congress letter relates to another such performance. This time it was of the Goldberg Variations, BWV 988, a work evidently completely new to Burney, and which Wesley himself had probably only recently acquired.¹⁸ It is one of four extant letters which discuss the arrangements which had to be made, and from them it is possible to reconstruct the sequence of events that led up to the performance in Burney's apartments on July 20, 1810.

By the time of the first letter, from Burney to Wesley of June 27, 1810,¹⁹ it had been agreed that Wesley and Novello would visit Burney, and Burney had proposed a date in the following week. Wesley's reply is not extant, but it is evident from the subsequent correspondence that it contained the further suggestion that he and Novello should take the opportunity to give a performance of the *Goldberg Variations*. As Burney did not possess the

requisite two-manual harpsichord, Wesley proposed that he and Novello should play the *Variations* as a duet on two pianos, using Burney's Broadwood grand²⁰ and another similar instrument which they would have specially transported to Chelsea for the purpose. Burney initially turned down this suggestion on the grounds of lack of space in his apartments and fear of the damage that might ensue, suggesting that Wesley and Novello might instead like to find a suitable piano shop where they could play the *Variations*.

My dear Friend

Now my French Pocket is off my mind, I have time to think of your last plan of rehearsing the quips and jiddlers of the great S. B. to the best advantage, ^{and} ^{concerning} ^{with} I must have seem'd very cold (on spite of the heat of the weather) by the enumeration of difficulties that, at first, occurred to me for want of Room sufficient for 2 large instruments of equal force & magnitude: & Time, in one day, to do justice to, ~~the~~ and enjoy the effects of multi-tuned and ingenious accords — But, allowing the old adage, ^{with} you have quoted, to be just: that "second thoughts are best" — instead of sending you & Sig^r Novello to a P. F. maker's to find 2 Instrum^ts of equal magnitude, nicely tuned together; upon examining my little parlour, or sleeping room (in health & warm weather) I find, when unobstructed, that there w^d be sufficient space for 2 such first-rate grands to lie along side each other — & that when I thought of sending you & your Friend to a P. F. shop for trial of your 30th Concerto pieces (as the most hard, suspicious, & original productions of Haydn, Mozart, & Beethoven, are often said to be, by ignorant and vulgar Hearers) I never once thought of my sweet & precious self, to whom your performance w^d be as inaudible as the music of the spheres — for I never intend going into the open air again — But now, though I have caught a fresh cold, and have 2 decay'd teeth in my upper jaw, that give me a ^{great} acute twinge whenever I inhale fresh air; I beg, during the warm weather, your performance may be within my oblique ex-^{pectation} that I may acquaint the Ladies I shall meet wth (post obit.) ^{with} the wonderful wonders produced by the organ of the great S. B. have been played, as a game at all times, by the robust and indefatigable Messrs. Wesley and Novello.

Therefore send your Instrument, name your day or days, & your hour, before the end of the present month, & I hope nothing further will occasion a new procrastination of our promised pleasure. C. B.

Suppose we decimate the 30 Variations, & divide them into 3 Decades; performing 10 each, either if we like or dislike them much, each day? w^d will allow us time to breathe, digest, & judge.

The drawback to this arrangement, as Burney subsequently recognized, was that he himself would have no part in it, as he had made up his mind never again to go out "into the open air." On reflection, he decided that his desire to hear the *Variations* outweighed any worries about damage to his apartments,

and that there would after all be enough room in his parlor, "when unbelittered," for two grand pianos. The Library of Congress letter records this change of mind:

My dear Friend

Now my French Packet ²¹ is off my mind, I have time to think of your last plan of rehearsing the quips and quiddities of the great S.B. to the best advantage, concerns w^{ch} I must have seemed cold (in spite of the heat of the weather) by the enumeration of difficulties that, at first, occurred to me for want of Room sufficient for 2 large instruments of equal force & magnitude; & Time, in one day, to do justice to, and enjoy the effects of such learned and ingenious arcana--But, allowing the old adage, w^{ch} you have quoted, to be just: that "second thoughts are best"--instead of sending you & Sig^r Novello to a P.F. maker's to find 2 Instrum^{ts} of equal magnitude, nicely tuned together; upon examining my little parlour, or keeping room, (in heal[t]h & warm weather) I find, when unbelittered, that there w^d be sufficient space for 2 such first-rate Giants to lie along side each other--& that when I thought of sending you & your Friend to a P.F. shop for trial of your 30 very *comical* pieces (as the most learned, ingenious, & original productions of Haydn, Mozart, & Beethoven, are often said to be, by ignorant and vulgar hearers) I never once thought of my sweet & precious self, to whom your performance w^d be as inaudible as the music of the spheres--for I never intend going into the open air again--But now, though I have caught a fresh cold, and have 2 decayed teeth in my upper jaw, that give me a very acute twinge whenever I inhale fresh air; I beg, during the warm weather, your performance may be within my obtuse *ear-shot*, that I may acquaint the Larv[a]e I shall meet wth (post obit.) how the wonderful wonders produced by the pen of the great S.B. have been played, as a game at *all fours*, by the zealous and indefatigable Mess^{rs} Wesley and Novello.

Therefore send your Instrument, name your day, or days, & your hours, before the end of the present month, & I hope nothing sinister will occasion a new procrastination of our promised pleasure.

C. B.

Suppose we decimate the 30 variations, & divide them into 3 Decads; performing 10 once, or twice, if we like or dislike them much, each day? w^{ch} will allow us time to breathe, digest, & judge.

Now that Burney had given his agreement, the arrangements for the transport of the piano could be put in train. In his reply,²² Wesley readily accepted Burney's suggestion that he and Novello should visit Burney three times, while demurring at his plan for the "decimation" of the *Variations*:

With regard to your Plan of Decimation I cannot but think that as it is always a cruel one in the military Sense, so it would be partly, in our small musical Regiment of 30.- The whole Series will not employ much more than *one* Hour to prevade, & I must say, that I fear a considerable Degree of the immediate Contrast between the several Sections, would be diminished by a Chasm.-As the Variations are all upon *one* Theme, & that Theme is every where felt throughout, at least as strongly as the Characteristic Letter in a Greek Verb, there is no Probability of *your* letting any Part of them run to Waste.-However, the Permission to attend you *thrice* instead of once is a Temptation outweighing my Objections, & therefore you shall have just as few or as many of these queer *Chunes* (as we say in Bristol) as you may find palatable.

By the time of Burney's reply to Wesley and Novello two days later,²³ the delivery of the piano had been ordered for the following day, and all that was left was to make the final arrangements. Burney characteristically caps Wesley's representation of the accent of his native Bristol ("Chunes"), by adding his mimicry of the accent of his own native Shrewsbury ("Waryations," "gemmen") and an imitation of a German accent ("shtill petter auch coot"):

If you c^d send your Lumber-d[a]y Instrum^t sooner than 10, to-morrow morn^g I sh^d be right glad; that it may be tuned in unison with mine: for if its pitch sh^d be altered, the 2 Giants will not remain in perfect friend^p an hour. While the weather continues warm, I had rather wait on ye at 11, than 12 or 1-I am now entirely for the performance of the 30 Waryations *de suite*: as you two virtuous gemmen, doubtless, are so *parfet* in all these pretty *chunes*, that you'll go on as swimming from beginning to end, as if wind and tide were both strongly in your favour. I think the forti, i.e. fortés, may begin to storm these works of Engineer Bach, before 12. And if we have any time to spare, after being played over, we can *talk* them over-or (what wd be shtill petter auch coot) if little i were to say *bis* there might, may-hap, be time for a Da Capo. So *fin Dimani*, at least, God bless ye!

There are no retrospective references in the correspondence to the performance of the *Variations*. What in the end was evidently a single visit on July 20 appears to have been a great success: Novello's annotation to the letter refers to:

the very pleasant meeting we had together at the Doctor's apartments in Chelsea Hospital, when I played the whole of the "30 Variations" by Sebastian Bach, as Duetts with Sam Wesley, to the great delight of Burney, who acknowledged to us both, that he had formed a very inadequate opinion of Sebastian Bach's fertility of invention and versatility of style, till he had heard our performance of those extraordinary specimens of counterpoint, called the "30 Variations.["]

¹ Burney's letters to Wesley will appear in volumes 3 and 4 of *The Letters of Dr. Charles Burney*, 4 vols., ed. Alvaro Ribeiro, SJ (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1991-), vols. 2-4 in preparation; Wesley's letters to Burney will be published in *The Letters of Samuel Wesley: Professional and Social Correspondence, 1792-1837*, ed. Philip Olleson (Oxford: Clarendon Press, in preparation).

² On the English Bach movement, see F. G. E[dwards], "Bach's Music in England," *Musical Times* 37 (1896): 585-87, 652-57, 722-26, 797-800; Robert Pascall, "Ein Überblick der frühen Bach-Rezeption in England bis zirka 1860," in *Johann Sebastian Bach: Beiträge zur Wirkungsgeschichte*, ed. Ingrid Fuchs (Vienna: Verband der wissenschaftlichen Gesellschaften Oesterreichs, 1992), pp. 147-65.

³ Arthur Searle, "Julian Marshall and the British Museum: Music Collecting in the Later Nineteenth Century," *British Library Journal*, Vol. II, no. I (Spring 1985): 67-87. See also A. Hyatt King, *Some British Collectors of Music, c.1600-1960* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1963), pp. 64-66; Malcolm Turner and Arthur Searle, "The Music Collections of the British Library Reference Division," *MLA Notes* 39 (March 1982): 499-549, especially 524.

⁴ *Concordia: A Weekly Journal of Music and the Sister Arts* (November 20, 1875): 476-77. Published by Novello & Co. as a weekly companion to *The Musical Times* and edited by Joseph Bennett, it ran for fifty-two issues between May 1, 1875, and April 22, 1876.

⁵ *Concordia*, May 29, June 5, June 26, 1875; a further letter appeared in the December 18 issue. The appearance of the letters in print followed their recent purchase by Novello & Co. at Sterndale Bennett's first sale at Puttick and Simpson's on April 26, 1875. They are now at the Royal College of Music, MS 2130.

⁶ Eliza Wesley, ed., *Letters of Samuel Wesley to Mr. Jacobs, Organist of Surrey*

Chapel, Relating to the Introduction into This Country of the Works of John Sebastian Bach (London: Partridge, 1875); facsimile edition with Introduction by Peter Williams, *The Wesley Bach Papers* (London: Novello, 1988) (hereafter *Bach Letters*).

⁷ The British Library, London (hereafter BL), Add. MS 31764.

⁸ James T. Lightwood, *Samuel Wesley, Musician: The Story of His Life* (London: Epworth Press, 1937), pp. 131-32.

⁹ Percy A. Scholes, *The Great Dr. Burney: His Life, His Travels, His Works, His Family and His Friends*, 2 vols. (London: Oxford University Press, 1948), vol. 2, pp. 217-18.

¹⁰ Joyce Hemlow with Jeanne M. Burgess and Althea Douglas, *A Catalogue of the Burney Family Correspondence 1749-1878* (New York: The New York Public Library; and Montreal and London: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1971).

¹¹ See Burney to Christian Ignatius Latrobe [ca. February 5, 1799] The James Marshall and Marie-Louise Osborn Collection, Yale University Library, New Haven, Connecticut (hereafter Osborn); Latrobe to Burney, February 7, 1799 (Osborn). I am grateful to Dr. Alvaro Ribeiro, SJ, for alerting me to the references to Wesley in these letters.

¹² In his manuscript *Reminiscences* of circa 1836 (BL, Add. MS 27593, quoted in Edwards, "Bach's Music in England," p. 653), Wesley states that he had first been introduced to Bach's music by the violinist and composer George Frederick Pinto, who lent him a copy of *Das wohltemperirte Clavier*. He gives no date for this event, but Pinto died on March 23, 1806. It would appear from Wesley's letters, however, that his effective conversion to the Bach cause did not take place until well into 1807.

¹³ Details of the contents of this letter, of Burney's reply (also lost), and of Wesley's subsequent visit to Burney are given in Wesley's long letter to Jacob of September 17, 1808 (*Bach Letters*, 1-5), on which this and the following paragraph are based.

¹⁴ *A General History of Music, from the Earliest Ages to the Present Period*, 4 vols. (London, 1776-89), vol. 3, p. 110, and vol. 4, pp. 594-95; modern ed., ed. Frank Mercer, 2 vols. (London: Foulis, 1935; repr. New York: Dover, 1957), vol. 2, pp. 96, 954-55; "Bach, Sebastian," in *Cyclopaedia: or, Universal Dictionary of Arts, Sciences and Literature*, ed. Abraham Rees, 39 vols. (1802-19), vol. 3, section 2, part 6, unpaginated (1804). For Burney's contributions to Rees's *Cyclopaedia*, see Roger Lonsdale, *Dr. Charles Burney: A Literary Biography* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1965), pp. 407-31, and his "Dr. Burney's 'Dictionary of Music,'" *Musicology* 5 (1977): 159-71.

¹⁵ See also Hans-Günter Ottenberg, trans. Philip J. Whitmore, *C. P. E. Bach* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1987), pp. 145-46; Lonsdale, op. cit., p. 118.

¹⁶ BL, Add. MS 14330. See also Wesley to Crotch, November 25, 1808 (Norwich, Norfolk Record Office MS 11244, T 140A, quoted in Lightwood, op. cit., pp. 127-28): "the Zurich edition, from which I made my MS. copy is *the only one*, on which any tolerable Dependence can be safely placed."

¹⁷ It was originally intended that Salomon should play the violin part, and Wesley the keyboard part. The change of plan was presumably because of Salomon's nonavailability: see Wesley to Jacob, September 4 [1809] (*Bach Letters*, pp. 31-32); Wesley to Burney, September 4, 1809 (Osborn); Wesley to Jacob, n.d. [September 1809] (*Bach Letters*, pp. 43-45).

¹⁸ There were two recent editions of the *Goldberg Variations: Trente Variations Fuguées pour Clavecin ou Pianoforte* (Zurich: Nägeli, [1800?]) and *Exercices pour le clavecin* (Vienna and Leipzig: Hoffmeister, [1803]). It would appear from Wesley's references to the "Thirty Variations" that it was the Nägeli edition that he knew. Wesley's own manuscript copy (BL, Add. MS 14334, ff. 59-81) was probably used at, and may have been made for, the performance in Burney's apartments.

¹⁹ BL, Add. MS 11730, f. 33, quoted in Scholes, op. cit., vol. 2, p. 217.

²⁰ This was the six-octave instrument included in the sale of Burney's library on August 8, 1814, and described in the catalog as a "*very capital grand piano-forte, by Broadwood, with additional Keys, treble and bass, having 6 octaves, in handsome mahogany case*" (see *Catalogue of the Music Library of Charles Burney, sold in London, 8 August 1814* [BL annotated copy, Pressmark S.C. 1076(1)], facsimile ed. with an Introduction by A. Hyatt King (Amsterdam: Frits Knuf, 1973), p. 40). It was evidently a replacement for the instrument made for Burney in 1777 by John Joseph Merlin, for in his will of January 12, 1807, he described it as "my large Piano Forte with additional keys at the top and bottom, originally made by Merlin, with a Compass of six Octaves, the first that was ever constructed, expressly at my desire, for duets à Quatre Mains, in 1777," and later as the instrument made "by Broadwood in the Merlin case." Burney also included in his will his "small Piano Forte made by Broadwood, with additional keys in the Treble, an excellent instrument for a small room." This was presumably a square, and if he still possessed it in 1810, it would have been considered insufficiently powerful to balance his grand piano. For Burney and Merlin, and for Burney's will, see Scholes, op. cit., vol. 2, pp. 202-4, 260-73. Burney's grand is thought to be no longer extant: see Martha Novak Clinkscale, *Makers of the Piano 1700-1820* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993), p. 46.

²¹ A letter from Burney to his daughter Mme. d'Arblay in Paris (Osborn: see Hemlow, *A Catalogue of the Burney Family Correspondence*, 58, where it is dated [post May 5, 1810]), the delayed despatch of which had evidently caused Burney problems because of wartime conditions. For Mme. d'Arblay's reply of September 16, 1810, see *The Journals and Letters of Fanny Burney (Madame d'Arblay)*, ed. Joyce Hemlow et al., 12 vols. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1975), vol. 6, pp. 58-90. I am grateful to Fr. Ribeiro for explaining this allusion.

²² Wesley to Burney, July 17, 1810 (Osborn).

²³ Burney to Wesley and Novello, July 19, 1810 (BL, Add. MS 11730, f. 35), quoted in Lightwood, *op. cit.*, p. 133; and Scholes, *op. cit.*, vol. 2, pp. 218-19.