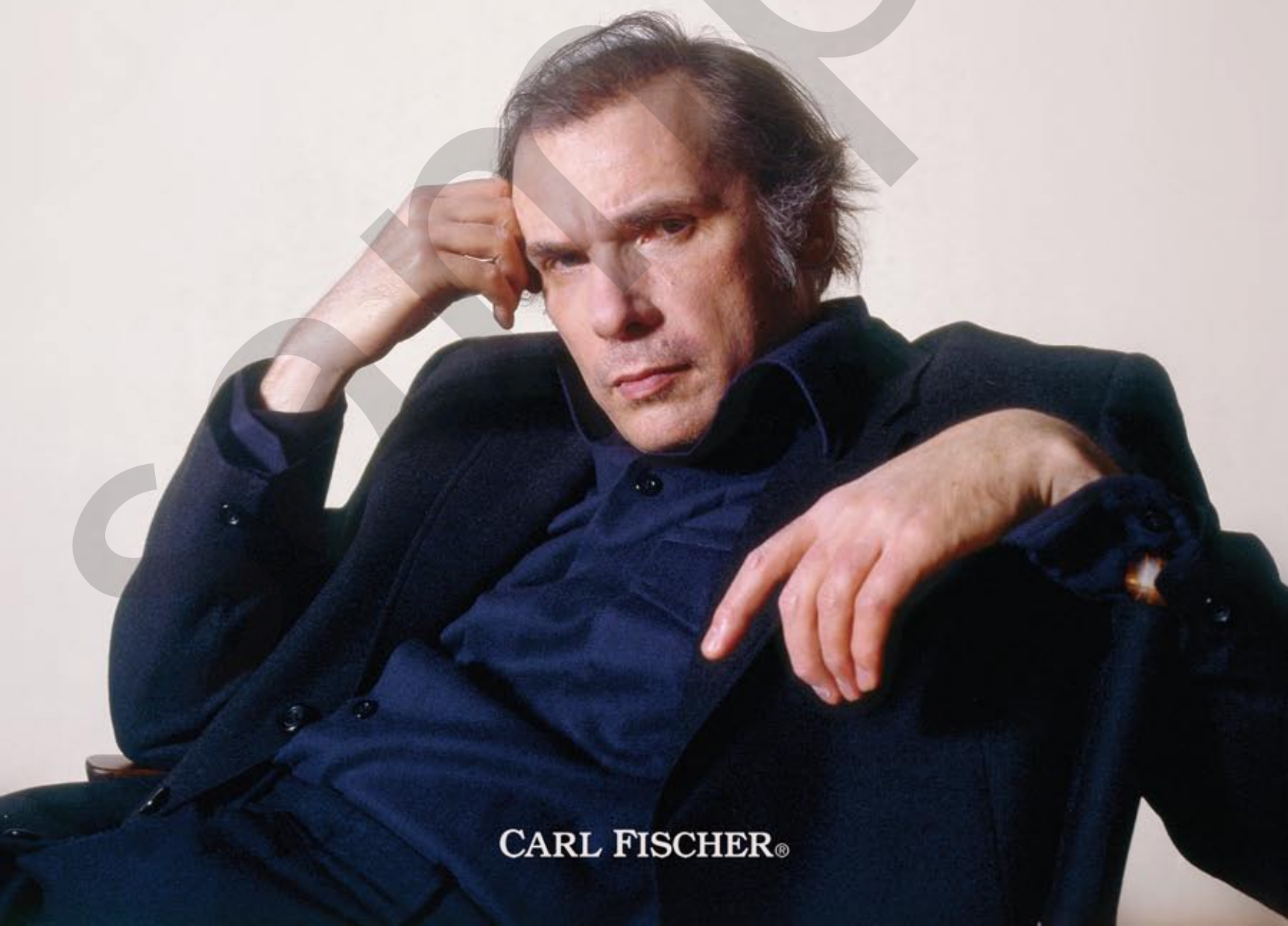


# Glenn Gould's Goldberg Variations

 THE Masters  
COLLECTION

*A Transcription of the 1981 Recording of  
The Goldberg Variations by Johann Sebastian Bach*

Transcribed and Edited by Nicholas Hopkins



CARL FISCHER®

## Introduction

### About Gould's Goldberg Recordings

Its two realizations—published a quarter-century apart—succinctly define his evolution, both as musician and as thinker, and, in the process, set something very like a historical precedent. Certainly, I can recall no comparable instance in which a great master, taking as his source the most influential and substantial of his youthful essays, re-creates it according to the technical and idiomatic lights of his maturity.<sup>1</sup>

In 1955, Glenn Gould, a twenty-two-year-old Canadian pianist unknown outside of his hometown of Toronto, signed an exclusive recording contract with Columbia Masterworks, following a successful debut in New York City in February of that year. Gould shocked the Columbia executives by proposing that his first recording should be Johann Sebastian Bach's Goldberg Variations, a relatively unknown work at the time that, as the executives feared, would promise little commercial success, especially when recorded on the piano. Eventually, all sides agreed to the project, and in an intense four-day period in June 1955, merely weeks after signing the contract, Gould recorded the piece. The analogue-recorded album<sup>2</sup> achieved an instant and startling success, earning an unheard-of level of sales for a classical album and launching the pianist's career. In effect, it became his signature recording.

Twenty-six years later, following a surprise retirement from the concert stage and an impressive catalogue of recordings, radio documentaries and television broadcasts, Gould astonished his fan base by deciding to record the Goldberg again. One reason was a true dissatisfaction with his erstwhile approach to the piece, as he candidly noted in a 1981 interview:

I could not recognize or identify with the spirit of the person who made that recording. It really seemed like some other spirit was involved, and as a consequence I was very glad to be doing it again...As I've grown older, I've found many performances, certainly the great majority of my own performances, are just too fast for comfort.<sup>3</sup>

Another reason, as he observed in the same interview, was since the 1955 recording his views on music perception and performance had changed dramatically, particularly with regard to tempo:

I have come to feel over the years that a musical work should have one pulse rate, one reference point. I would never argue in favor of an inflexible musical pulse, but you can take a basic pulse and divide it or multiply it, not necessarily on a scale of 2, 4, 8, 16 or 32, but often with far less obvious divisions, and make the result of those divisions or multiplications act as a subsidiary pulse for a particular movement or section of a movement.<sup>4</sup>

Both reasons, along with the then-recent advances in digital technology, stereo recording and Dolby noise reduction, were incentives enough to lure Gould back to the recording studio in New York City in the spring of 1981, at which time he re-recorded the Goldberg Variations. The album was released to critical acclaim in 1982 shortly before his death.<sup>5</sup> Both recordings, thus, form bookends to his career as performer and recording artist.

The citation at the opening of this section is an excerpt from Gould's essay on the song cycle *Das Marienleben* by Paul Hindemith, who composed the cycle in 1923, only to revise and rework it extensively in 1948 according to changing styles and tastes. Astonishingly, and certainly unknown to Gould at the time of this 1978 essay, his observations would correspond

1 "A Tale of Two Marienlebens," in *The Glenn Gould Reader*, ed. by Tim Page. (New York: Vintage Books, 1984), 151.

2 Columbia Masterworks, ML 5060.

3 Tim Page, Recorded interview with Glenn Gould, August 1982 (released as disc 3 of *A State of Wonder*, containing the 1955 and 1981 recordings of the Goldberg Variations).

4 Ibid.

5 CBS Masterworks, M 37779. The album was awarded a posthumous Grammy Award in 1982 for Performance of the Year and Recording of the Year.

of elaborate organizational schemes to unify them. This might suggest that these schemes were afterthoughts, once Bach realized how truly diverse the pieces were becoming. There is no evidence that Bach ever envisioned a complete, integral performance of all of the variations at one time—that seems to be a modern practice—yet these thorough structural systems and cycles might suggest otherwise. The piece is an extraordinary example of diversity bridled by unity, factors which undoubtedly contribute to the power and enchantment of the piece as a whole.

## About This Book

Any written transcription of a recording can only hope to convey its most fundamental details, with the understanding that many finer details cannot be adequately represented in notated form. This transcription of Gould's 1981 recording of the Goldberg Variations is no exception. While many crucial elements of Gould's performance may be found in these pages, various other features, such as his subtle application of rubato or his highly personal keyboard touch, cannot be adequately or reasonably notated, by nature of their complexity.

Each of the variations is presented in its original form on verso pages, accompanied by Gould's realization on recto pages, thereby allowing for ease of comparative analysis. The original forms, labeled "Original Version," were produced from the Bach-Gesellschaft Ausgabe edition (BGA) of 1853, the Hans Bischoff edition of 1883 and the Ralph Kirkpatrick edition of 1938. The *Handexemplar*, Bach's personal copy of the first engraved edition, was likewise used for this purpose, yet the editions produced by the Neue Bach-Gesellschaft Ausgabe (NBGA) of 1977 and Henle of 1979 could only be consulted, due to copyright restrictions. Discrepancies amongst these editions are noted in the Critical Notes on pp. 45–47.

Various notational practices in the *Handexemplar*, and the BGA, Bischoff and Kirkpatrick editions have been modernized according to changes in these practices. The three clefs used by Bach in the *Handexemplar* (treble, bass and alto) have been restricted to treble and bass only, with various alterations made in clef placement to enhance readability. (Kirkpatrick acknowledged the same type of alteration.) Likewise, the division of voices between the hands, often notated arbitrarily in the *Handexemplar* and many baroque manuscripts in general, has been arranged to allow for ease of performance on a keyboard, issues that were, of course, addressed in differing ways in each of the subsequent editions. Moreover, courtesy accidentals have been introduced in various instances. While no true Urtext edition of the Goldberg Variations is feasible, given that Bach's manuscript is lost, it is quite possible to arrive at an edition that closely represents Bach's intents, with notational practices updated for the modern performer.

The pages that feature Gould's performance, labeled "Gould's 1981 Version," transcribe various elements of this recording, such as tempos, dynamics, articulations, execution of ornaments and pauses between variations, into notated form. The audio CD, produced in 1990 by CBS Masterworks, was used for this purpose. Shortly after Gould completed the audio recording, he recorded the entire Goldberg Variations on a studio video, directed by Bruno Monsaingeon.<sup>13</sup> We are most fortunate for this video; the clear, close-up shots of Gould at the piano provide a wealth of details on his fingerings and pedalings in many, though not all, of the variations. Regrettably, no such video was made for the 1955 recording.

<sup>13</sup> Bruno Monsaingeon, "The Goldberg Variations" (film), (*Glenn Gould Plays Bach*, 3; CBC-Casart co-production, 1981).



### Strict Tempo and Tempo Rubato

Many of Gould's recordings display an impressive control over an unwavering tempo, with few deviations; his command of strict tempo was all the more impressive given that he did not own a metronome. However, when the musical context warranted it, he was not averse to introducing some form of rubato, some give-and-take in the musical time, generally in the interests of enhancing musical expression, articulating sections or emphasizing motives. But the context had to demand its application. Speaking in a 1980 interview of performances of nineteenth-century piano music, he noted, "I don't think it's necessary to play with that kind of rubato, unless the rubato has in itself an almost, I don't want to say mechanical element, but unless it is clearly part of the structural plan. Simply to impose it out of the conviction that the piano can do it, and therefore why not, to me makes no sense at all."<sup>31</sup>

Gould introduced rubato in various instances in the 1981 recording, certainly more than in the 1955 recording. His well-controlled rubato takes the form of momentary hesitations; they are not *rallentandos* that gradually slow the tempo—these are commonly reserved for the ends of variations—but moments in which time is suddenly suspended and then suddenly restored. In this regard they are not rubatos in the strictest sense of the term, for time is not stolen or borrowed. The hesitations can be especially effective for projecting musical expression, as in the Aria and the Aria da capo, both of which feature several instances in which time lingers on certain pivotal passages. They can also be motivic, as in Variation 21, in which the hesitation on the opening three-note figure is repeated in such a way that the listener accepts the hesitation as a structural motive, one that is readily audible.

In this edition, instances of tempo rubato are notated by the term "hes." (for "hesitation"), the duration of which is demarcated by a bracket.

### Gould's Dynamics and Articulations

I have never been fond of exploiting the dynamic potential of the piano. I use almost no pedal at all, and as an old organist I tend to see everything as it relates to the bass line.<sup>32</sup>

I happen to adore the cleanliness, the clarity of texture that one gets when the prevailing touch is of a *détaché* nature. But in addition, when into that prevailingly *détaché* sonority, in which virtually every note comes equipped with its own space separating it from the note that follows it, there is injected a legato element, then there's something quite moving that happens, a kind of emotional sweep that the music does not have if the prevailing assumption is that the piano is a legato instrument, and the slicker the sound the better.<sup>33</sup>

### Dynamics

Dynamic indications in Bach's music are restricted to alternations of *forte* and *piano*, the former being the general dynamic, the latter a special effect. They occur only intermittently in his keyboard works and as such demand attention on the part of the performer. Part 2 of the *Clavierübung* is unique, in that its two pieces, the Concerto in the Italian Style and the Overture in the French Style, feature such indications in profusion, suggesting that this part of the collection focuses specifically on keyboard practice of dynamic control; the opening Prelude (for organ) of Part 3 does the same. However, no such indications may be found in the six Partitas of Part 1 or the Goldberg Variations of Part 4.

The absence of dynamic indications in the Goldberg Variations must have delighted Gould, for it allowed him the opportunity to realize all dynamic nuances on his own terms. That is not to say, however, that he made extreme choices or stylistically inappropriate applications of

<sup>31</sup> "Creative Insights from a Controversial Classical Pianist: Gould in Conversation with Jim Aikin," in *The Art of Glenn Gould*, 264.

<sup>32</sup> "The Artist Speaks for Himself: Gould in Conversation with Bernard Asbell," in *The Art of Glenn Gould*, 189.

<sup>33</sup> "Creative Insights from a Controversial Classical Pianist: Gould in Conversation with Jim Aikin," in *The Art of Glenn Gould*, 262.

## Gould's Ornamentation

One of the most important accomplishments of the Kirkpatrick edition of the Goldberg Variations was the scrupulous attention to detail that Kirkpatrick gave to ornamentation. He was harshly critical of modern misinterpretations of baroque ornamentation resulting from "... the erroneous traditions inherited from the nineteenth century and maintained by aggressively ignorant musicians and writers,"<sup>36</sup> and sought to correct this problem by drawing on information from historical sources, thereby making an important, even visionary contribution to the later authenticity movement. One source was Bach's own table of ornaments in the *Clavier-Büchlein für Wilhelm Friedemann Bach*, in which Bach wrote out thirteen ornaments commonly found in his music. Other sources included treatises by C. P. E. Bach, Quantz and Marpurg. Additionally, Kirkpatrick realized every ornament in his edition (although he was not always sensitive to tempo and the character of the music), from which Gould's understanding of baroque ornamentation most likely originated.

Gould may have been somewhat cavalier in his interpretation of ornaments in the 1955 recording, but he was far more concerned with correctness of execution in the 1981 recording. Ornaments in the earlier recording are oftentimes executed with astonishing quickness, perhaps as a means to showcase his technical prowess. The later recording may take this approach on occasion, but more often demonstrates forms of ornamentation that are correctly influenced by tempo, harmony and musical character; moreover, they tend to be cleaner and clearer in execution. The following example shows how the turn in m. 6 of the Aria is performed in the 1955 recording, along with its execution at a much slower tempo in the 1981 recording:



Example 4

The turn is generally considered one of the least problematic of baroque ornaments, for which reason it remained a popular ornament well into the nineteenth century. It is customarily a four-note ornament, as Gould performed it in the 1981 recording and as Kirkpatrick notated it in his edition. In the 1955 recording, however, the turn is incorrectly performed as a five-note unit, beginning on the principal note rather than the upper auxiliary. Although its sound is brilliant, its realization is incorrect.

The majority of the ornaments in the 1981 recording is executed on the beat in proper baroque fashion (as Kirkpatrick advised), with rare instances of an ornament preceding the beat (e.g. the mordent in m. 23 of Variation 8 and the grace note in m. 4 of Variation 13). Additionally, many ornaments in this recording are measured rhythmically, with careful alignment between parts. This is especially the case with trills, which were often performed breathtakingly fast in the 1955 recording, to be replaced by measured patterns with strict rhythmic alignment in the 1981 recording (for example, the right-hand trills in mm. 1 and 4 of Variation 14). His measured interpretation of trills and of ornaments in general might have been influenced by Tureck, who observed that trills in early music "are almost always measured."<sup>37</sup>

<sup>36</sup> Ralph Kirkpatrick. *The Goldberg Variations*, x.

<sup>37</sup> Quoted in Kevin Bazzana. *Glenn Gould: the Performer in the Work*, 231.

inspiration-sappers that many people think they are.”<sup>61</sup> It seems, as he noted above, that his obsessive pursuit of clarity originated with the microphone. Or perhaps the pursuit originated previously, and the microphone proved to be an indispensable utility in that pursuit. Either way, recording technologies opened new vistas for Gould as a performing artist yet, in so doing, could harshly expose even the slightest blemish or inaccuracy in his playing, particularly with the development of digital technology. A great burden was thus placed on him as a performer, and it is no wonder that he demanded countless refinements to his instruments.

Gould was pleased with the 1981 recording of the Goldberg Variations, in particular the clarity offered by the digital technology and the newly developed Dolby noise-reduction system. In a 1982 letter to Mel Hynde of Sony Canada, he noted:

I asked Ray Roberts to drop off a copy of “The Six Last Haydn Sonatas”—my first release utilizing the Sony system. (Around the end of next month, a new version of Bach’s “Goldberg Variations” is being released and I’ll see that you get a copy of that as well.) I think the clarity and immediacy of the sound, on both discs, is quite remarkable and I hope that you share my enthusiasm for the digital result.<sup>62</sup>

The optimistic tone of this letter and his evident satisfaction with the new recording technologies suggest that many more recordings would appear. Regrettably, that was not to be the case. Yet his exceptional catalogue of recordings shows that by assimilating all that the developing technology had to offer, Gould made a highly unique and influential contribution to piano performance in the twentieth century.

## Notes on the Pieces

### Aria

The performance of the Aria on the 1981 recording is a call to attention. Its remarkable slowness calls attention to the establishment of the Ur-tempo of 60 (approximated at 66) that would become the determining tempo of all of the other pieces. This, however, is not the same 60 of the 1955 recording but is a tempo that is twice as slow, with the eighth note instead of the quarter note as the unit; this difference in tempo, in fact, is the greatest in the two recordings. It is a patient, deliberate tempo that explores clarity of voicing and of ornamentation, a tempo whose extreme slowness demands absolute control for a successful presentation. Moreover, Gould’s choice for this dramatic change of tempo could have been a way to call attention to the novelty of this recording and to distance himself from the recording made twenty-six years earlier. It is noteworthy that the tempo is similar to Tureck’s tempo of the Aria on her 1957 recording of the Goldberg Variations.

However, Gould’s performance does not deliberate over the bass line that appears in various shapes and forms in each of the following variations. With the exception of the left-hand passage in mm. 27–31, his interpretation of the Aria could be described as “right-handed,” with little prominence given to the bass line. It is ironic that he was critical of Bach’s disregard of the Aria’s thematic materials, but offered an interpretation that focused primarily on the disregarded materials, at the expense of what Bach retained.

In terms of ornamentation, Gould omitted the right-hand mordents in mm. 8 and 19 and modified the execution of the prepared trill in m. 12, all of which were performed similarly in the Aria da capo. As noted previously, the turn in m. 6 was correctly executed as a four-note unit. The arpeggio in m. 11 was performed as a downward arpeggio, as Kirkpatrick suggested, as Gould performed in the 1955 recording and as Tureck played in her 1957 recording (meaning, she similarly used the Kirkpatrick edition). However, an upward execution would be preferable, given that the G at the top of the arpeggiated chord is the note that belongs to the melodic line

61 Elyse Mach. *Great Contemporary Pianists Speak for Themselves*, 91.

62 *Glenn Gould: Selected Letters*, 249.

# Aria mit verschiedenen Veränderungen

(Aria with Thirty Variations, "Goldberg Variations," BWV 988)  
for Keyboard

JOHANN SEBASTIAN BACH  
(1685–1750)

Aria  
(for One Keyboard)

5

9

13

# Aria mit verschiedenen Veränderungen

(Aria with Thirty Variations, "Goldberg Variations," BWV 988)  
for Keyboard

JOHANN SEBASTIAN BACH  
(1685–1750)

## Aria

The musical score is written for a keyboard instrument in G major (one sharp) and 3/4 time. The tempo is marked as ♩ = 66. The score is divided into four systems, each with a measure number in the left margin: 1, 5, 9, and 13. The first system (measures 1-4) begins with a piano (*p*) dynamic and a *una corda* instruction. The second system (measures 5-8) includes mezzo-piano (*mp*) and piano (*p*) dynamics. The third system (measures 9-12) features mezzo-piano (*mp*) dynamics. The fourth system (measures 13-16) includes piano (*p*) and pianissimo (*pp*) dynamics. The score contains various musical notations such as slurs, accents, and dynamic markings. A large, faint watermark is visible across the page.



17

Musical notation for measures 17-19. Treble clef has a key signature of one sharp (F#) and a common time signature. It features a melody with eighth and sixteenth notes, some beamed together, and a few trills. The bass clef provides a harmonic accompaniment with quarter and eighth notes.

20

Musical notation for measures 20-22. The treble clef continues the melodic line with various note values and trills. The bass clef accompaniment includes some rests and moving lines.

23

Musical notation for measures 23-26. Measures 23-24 show a more active treble line with sixteenth notes. Measures 25-26 show a change in the bass line with more frequent notes.

27

Musical notation for measures 27-29. Measures 27-28 feature a very active treble line with many beamed sixteenth notes. The bass line remains relatively simple with quarter notes.

30

Musical notation for measures 30-32. Measures 30-31 continue the active treble line. Measure 32 concludes the section with a final chord in the treble and a sustained note in the bass.

17 *mp* *mf* *mp mf*

Ped.

20 *Ped.* *Ped.* *Ped.* *Ped.* *Ped.*

23 *f* *pp* *p* *a tempo* *bes.*

*rall.* *Ped.* *Ped.* *Ped.* *Ped.*

27 *mp* *mf poco dim.*

30 *poco rall.* *pp* *segue*

*Ped.*