

WIGMORE HALL

Wednesday 11 October 2023
7.30pm

Byrd Compared

Phantasm

Laurence Dreyfus treble viol, director • Emilia Benjamin treble viol • Jonathan Manson tenor viol
Heidi Gröger bass viol • Chris Terepin bass viol • Markku Luolajan-Mikkola bass viol

William Byrd (c.1540-1623)

Fantasia a6 (II)
In Nomine a4 (I)
Christe qui lux es a4 (I)
Browning 'The Leaves Be Green' a5
Christe redemptor omnium
In Nomine a5 (III)
Christe qui lux es a4 (III)
In Nomine a5 (II)
From *Missa a4*
Kyrie • Sanctus
Fantasia a6 in G minor (III)
Pavan and Galliard a6

Interval

Johann Sebastian Bach (1685-1750)

Ricercar a3 from *The Musical Offering* BWV1079 (1747)
Fughetta super 'Allein Gott in der Höh sei Ehr' BWV677 (pub. 1739)
Sinfonia No. 9 in F minor BWV795 (c.1720, rev. 1723) *transcribed by Peter Ballinger*
Fuga super 'Jesus Christus unser Heiland' BWV689 (pub. 1739)
The Well-tempered Clavier Book II, Fugue No. 23 in B BWV892 (c.1740)
Christe, aller Welt Trost BWV673 (pub. 1739)
Vater unser im Himmelreich BWV737 (before 1710)
The Well-tempered Clavier Book II, Fugue No. 5 in D BWV874 (c.1740)
Kyrie, Gott heiliger Geist BWV671 (pub. 1739)
Aus tiefer Not schrei ich zu dir BWV686 (pub. 1739) *transcribed by Peter Ballinger*
Ricercar a6 from *The Musical Offering* BWV1079 *transcribed by Peter Ballinger*
All Bach works except where indicated are transcribed by Laurence Dreyfus

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In 'Byrd compared' Phantasm presents the complete consort music of **William Byrd** (c.1540-1623) in a triptych of three programmes heard next to compositions by other singular spirits such as JS Bach, Dowland, Jenkins, Lawes and Purcell. (Byrd's consort songs also figure in the second recital.) Like Byrd, these were composers who sought new approaches to musical expression while remaining true to the highest standards of contrapuntal technique.

Byrd's instrumental music, no less than his repertoire for voices, confronts us with a portrait of one of the most acute thinkers of the Elizabethan Age. Composed over some 40 years, Byrd's consorts embrace a wide range of genres: devotional hymn settings, mystical *In Nomines* – rhapsodies on a snatch of sacred vocal music by John Taverner – sets of variations on popular ballads such as 'The leaves be green', freely imagined *Fantasias*, and stylised courtly dances such as Pavans and Galliards. In all these works one recognises a unique compositional personality anxious not to repeat himself.

Byrd's experimental impulse can be felt in every genre in which he worked. His two *Fantasias*, for example, start with grave melodies found in sacred vocal anthems before shifting gears to dance the pavan and galliard at a jolly court entertainment. And if that weren't enough of a jolt, the *Fantasia a6 (III)* even dares quote a strain of 'Greensleeves' in a clever game of 'name that tune'. Freed from the written word, Byrd's fantasies echo the formulation of Thomas Morley, who noted in 1597 how 'more art may be shown [in these works] than in any other music because the composer is tied to nothing, but may add, diminish, and alter at his pleasure'. Pleasure strikes the right key here, for Byrd shows how the most inventive musical counterpoint embraces sensuous enjoyment without the slightest note of contradiction. As Thomas Hoby pointed out in 1561 (in a translation of Castiglione's *Book of the Courtier*) 'the music of a set of viols doth no less delight a man, for it is very sweet and artificial'.

This is not to pay short shrift to Byrd's deeply serious side. As noted by Henry Peacham in 1622, the composer's natural disposition leaned toward 'Gravitie and Pietie', and this discernible veneration of the spiritual realm is evoked even when words are missing. Byrd's meditative instrumental hymns are all in this vein as are the opening passages of his *In Nomines*, although these subsequently quicken into swirling visions of religious ecstasy, a feature suited to instruments. As for texted sacred works, consorts in an age of music for 'voices and viols' might well have attempted them, and as we 'sing' through the four-voiced Mass, it's worth pondering the risks of attending clandestine Catholic rites performed in a recusant chapel of the 1590s, such as at Ingatestone Hall in Essex where Byrd was a frequent visitor.

The comparison of Byrd with **JS Bach** reveals some surprising affinities. Yet another deeply devout man wielding an unparalleled command of counterpoint, Bach

too treated imitative polyphony as a hard-won discovery of a divine order won only the struggles of a fallible and innately sinful human being. And in their quest to approach for godly perfection, both composers also seek out new combinations of harmonies and styles, though never pursuing novelty for its own sake. The goal instead is a revelation of music's deepest secrets.

Since the English consort repertoire of the 16th and 17th centuries is so much at home in coordinating independent polyphonic voices, there is an advantage in transcribing Bach's most profound polyphony for a viol consort, an ensemble so adept at weaving the intricate strands of the contrapuntal web. Reconfigured as the impassioned dialogues of chamber music, polyphony originally for organ or harpsichord now charts these musical interactions in surprisingly intimate ways, allowing for a more even-handed juxtaposition of these two composers.

Most of the Bach works chosen for this programme were written in the 1730s and 1740s, so pieces from the composer's maturity. In the two *Ricercars* from *The Musical Offering*, the first stems from an improvisation Bach offered to Frederick the Great when handed a 'royal theme' most likely concocted by the composer's second eldest son, Carl Philipp Emanuel, then in the monarch's employ. It is a simple if protracted fugue in the fashionable *galant* style, in which iterations of the *thema regium* are flavoured by attractive free episodes in the latest taste (boasting, for example, sentimental sigh motives) which obviously gave the composer time to think about the next occurrence of his fugal entries. Bach had been bidden to devise a six-voiced fugue on the given theme but refused the invitation, knowing he needed ruled paper and a lot of forethought to do justice to the long, chromatic subject. The result, after he returned home to Leipzig, was the six-voiced *Ricercar*, whose hybrid style, strikingly, is cast in the *stile antico* evoking the old 16th-century traditions in a fundamentally new way.

This hearkening to the past while remaining grounded in the present also marks the extraordinary pieces from the *Clavier-Übung III* which contains some of Bach's most adventurous harmonic explorations. When exposed to consort performance, the relentless wandering of these pieces comes as somewhat of a shock. For Bach often goes out of his way to shun conventional tonal expectations: there are few regular cadences or predictable progressions, and instead a great deal of surprise. This new synthetic approach is foreshadowed already in *sinfonias* from the *Inventions* and in fugues from the second book of the '48', where, in the D major *Fugue*, cornets and sackbuts from St Mark's in Venice are wittily evoked within a 'modern' fugal idiom.

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