

WIGMORE HALL

Wednesday 12 June 2024
7.30pm

Bach Keyboard Concertos

Mahan Esfahani harpsichord

Britten Sinfonia

Jacqueline Shave violin I
Marcus Barcham-Stevens violin II
Clare Finimore viola
William Clark-Maxwell cello
Stephen Williams double bass
Lynda Sayce theorbo

Anon

Overture in G minor BWV1070 (pub. 1897)
*I. Larghetto • II. Torneo • III. Aria. Adagio • IV. Menuetto -
Trio • V. Capriccio*

Johann Sebastian Bach (1685-1750)

Harpsichord Concerto No. 7 in G minor BWV1058 (c.1738-9)
I. • II. Andante • III. Allegro assai

Interval

Johann Rosenmüller (c.1619-1684)

Sonata seconda a2 in E minor (pub. 1682)

Johann Sebastian Bach

Harpsichord Concerto No. 1 in D minor BWV1052 (c.1738-9)
I. Allegro • II. Adagio • III. Allegro

The harpsichord being played tonight was made in 2018 by Jukka Ollikka in Prague. It is based on models by Michael Mietke (Berlin c.1660-1719) and has an extra set of strings at 16' pitch. There are some more modern features including the keyboard cheeks being inspired by instruments by Pleyel (Paris 1912).



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The anonymous G minor Overture-Suite survives in a set of parts prepared by the Bach pupil Christian Friedrich Penzel sometime in the early 1750s. Bearing the name 'Bach' (with no first name) on the first violin part, the work was assigned the catalogue number of BWV1070 in Wolfgang Schmieder's catalogue. There is fundamentally no basis for this attribution.

The general aesthetic of BWV1070 is what one might call 'Baroque adjacent', a style that derives its impact from rhetorical and harmonic tropes developed in the earlier part of the 18th Century but which later begin to ring somewhat hollow through over-repetition of figures that would have shocked the listeners of an earlier generation. Thus are the sighing figures of the opening of the first movement merely indicated in the score as echoes, as opposed to reiterations of an idea that in the hands of JS Bach would lead to motivic development or harmonic modulation of some kind. This motif appears throughout the various movements of the work to the point of exhaustion, and inevitably on unprepared dissonances of some kind or another, which in turn eventually lose their impact. The double fugue of the closing *Capriccio*, whilst thrilling, does not quite have thematic flavour of something from the pen of Bach Senior, and yet it has all the contrapuntal integrity from his school. This would indicate that the 'Bach' referred to in Penzel's manuscript parts would most likely be Wilhelm Friedemann (1710-84), the eldest of the Bach sons, whose style was relatively more archaic than that of his younger, more prolific brothers.

Various aspects of the score of **Bach's** Concerto in G minor BWV1058 suggest a composition date later than that of the D minor concerto BWV1052, or indeed the other five 'canonical' concertos BWV1053-1057. Overall, the style of keyboard writing in this re-arrangement of a known earlier work is much more integrated with the idiom of the harpsichord compared to, say, BWV1054 (whose material comes from the E major violin concerto BWV1042). Likewise, the relatively direct and unfussy style of the arrangement suggests hallmarks of late style, with the occasionally irrelevant details of earlier concertos being discarded for an approach favouring the singing style of the treble register. This is particularly apparent in the rather sparse writing of the middle movement, which may indicate that Bach had the early piano in mind; as it happens, at the harpsichord, I add a few countersubjects and accompaniments meant to call upon the harpsichord's ability to project a rich panoply of harmonies. After all, JS Bach's keyboard concertos give a double role to the harpsichord, which is not only a soloist but also a key component of the continuo group.

If BWV1070 represents the sort of music known by the generation after JS Bach, then the E minor trio sonata by **Johann Rosenmüller** is the music of Bach's youth and of his immediate forebears. Relatively little is known of Rosenmüller apart from the somewhat sordid details of his departure from the post of Thomaskantor in Leipzig in 1655 in the wake of allegations of impropriety with the older choristers. In order to avoid detention, the composer made his way to Venice, where he spent the rest of his career as a freelance musician in no doubt artistically more congenial and fruitful circumstances compared to the dour world of

church councils he'd left behind in Saxony. And it was from Venice that he dedicated the *Sonate à 2.3.4.e 5. Stromenti da Arco & Altri* in 1682, in which publication the current sonata is the second item.

The opening *grave* introduces the principal theme of the work, which throughout different tempo markings and metres is a veritable *idée fixe* that typifies the chamber music of the late 17th Century. This can be understood against the backdrop of Protestant German educational culture in particular, wherein the emphasis on literary exegesis had a profound impact on musicians exploring (and indeed exhausting, in Bach's case!) the possibilities and dimensions of a given melodic idea, which is exactly what Rosenmüller does in the E minor sonata. Seen in this light, this kind of music is part of a continuum that includes the witty *galant* repartee of the later music of CPE Bach and the obsessive motivic repetition found in the symphonies of Beethoven.

The concerto BWV1052 is surely the magnum opus of any of Bach's concertos for solo instrument, which is likely why Bach had it as the opening item in an autograph manuscript of six concertos prepared in 1738 – the general cleanliness of the MS may indicate Bach's desire to publish them at some point. By far the longest of the solo concertos, it's also the one with the most extended virtuosity for the keyboard and copious written-out cadenza material that normally would have been part of what scholars have come to call the 'unwritten tradition' (not entirely the same as 'improvisation'). Paradoxically, this all-but-the-kitchen-sink approach to the soloist and the style of scoring, wherein each instrument is treated as an equal in the manner of a consort rather than an accompanying ensemble, might very well place BWV1052 as the earliest of the concertos – at least if one is to draw parallels between this style of writing and notions of youthful exuberance. Interestingly, BWV1052 is the only keyboard concerto that works perfectly well, save one bar in the second movement, in the quarter-comma meantone tuning more typical of the 17th Century and of Bach's youth. Furthermore, its origins are fairly clear, as the material mainly comes from instrumental *sinfonias* with organ obbligato from cantatas BWV146 (c.1726) and 188 (1728), which both contain extensive enough material for the soloist to suggest that the keyboard concerto as a genre was already stewing in Bach's mind during his early years in Leipzig.

As with Bach's entire corpus for solo keyboard and orchestra, BWV1052 was probably fashioned in its present form for the concerts led by Bach as director of the collegium musicum of the University of Leipzig, where he not only directed performances of his own works but also of frankly more fashionable composers such as Handel, Telemann, Locatelli and Albinoni. What Bach's audience would have made of concertos for a keyboardist as opposed to more common ones for violin is anyone's guess, but no doubt they would have enjoyed the music within the context not of reverent silence but of the cheeriness that typified the instrumental concerts held at the cafes and music halls of a socially active city such as Leipzig.

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