

WIGMORE HALL 125

Saturday 15 November 2025
7.30pm

Pavel Kolesnikov piano
Samson Tsoy piano

Johann Sebastian Bach (1685-1750)
arranged by György Kurtág

György Kurtág (b.1926)

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Olivier Messiaen (1908-1992)

Sonatina from *Gottes Zeit ist die allerbeste Zeit* BWV106

Aus tiefer Not schrei ich zu dir BWV687

Allein Gott in der Höh sei Ehr BWV711

Hommage à J. S. B. from *Signs, Games and Messages*
(*Játékok Book III*) (1989-97)

Ach wie nichtig, ach wie flüchtig BWV644

O Lamm Gottes unschuldig

Gott, durch deine Güte BWV600

Play with Infinity from *Játékok Book IV* (1979)

Christum wir sollen loben schon BWV611

Liebster Jesu, wir sind hier BWV633

Nun komm' der Heiden Heiland BWV599

Responsorium from *Játékok Book VIII* (2010)

Furious Chorale from *Játékok Book IV* (1979)

Herr Christ, der ein'ge Gottes-Sohn BWV601

Christe, du Lamm Gottes BWV619

Dies sind die heil'gen zehn Gebot' BWV635

One more voice from far away from *Játékok Book VIII* (2010)

Das alte Jahr vergangen ist BWV614

Alle Menschen müssen sterben BWV643

Sonatina from *Gottes Zeit ist die allerbeste Zeit* BWV106

Interval

Visions de l'Amen (1943)

*I. Amen de la Création • II. Amen des étoiles, de la planète à
l'anneau • III. Amen de l'agonie de Jésus • IV. Amen du désir •
V. Amen des anges, des saints, du chant des oiseaux •
VI. Amen du jugement • VII. Amen de la consommation*

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The first half of this programme is something of an homage. It recalls the practice initiated by **György Kurtág** (who will be celebrating his centenary next year) and his wife Márta of performing his arrangements of **Bach's** chorales alongside selections from *Játékok* as part of their four-hands concerts. Composed especially by György for him and Márta to play together, these arrangements are mostly of chorale preludes (the *Sonatina* from Bach's cantata *Gottes Zeit ist die allerbeste Zeit*, BWV106, being one exception) and are taken from the collections *Transcriptions from Machaut to J.S. Bach* (published in Budapest in 1991) and *Seven Bach Chorales* (published 2010). They are beautifully and sensitively conceived, calling for occasional hand-crossing (when played at the same piano) that suggests an intimate kind of entwinement between the players.

The chorales' formal integrity is balanced by the alternately humorous and dreamy interspersions from Kurtág's pedagogical series *Játékok* ('Games' in Hungarian). Comprised of ten volumes of (often very) short piano works (books IV and VIII contain the majority of the four-hand pieces), the collection was begun in the 1970s and is still ongoing. Its focus is more on childlike experimentation than formal instruction. Kurtág conceived of it as a celebration of the spirit of music making, writing in the preface to the 1979 score edition that 'pleasure in playing, the joy of movement' are more important than the 'clumsy groping for keys and the counting of rhythms'. There are more 'serious' pieces among these imaginary flights, and a great many homages, too: to Bach, but also to Tchaikovsky, Musorgsky, Schubert, Scarlatti and Varèse; to Kurtág's composition teacher, his publisher, to Márta; and numerous dedications to friends. There is a shrouded hymnal quality to pieces like 'Responsorium'; an eery vocalising is called for in 'One More Voice from Far Away'; while 'Playing With Infinity' features a slow-motion cascade across the length of the keyboard.

If Kurtág's chorale arrangements can be regarded as an intimate partnering against a backdrop of religiosity (the Lutheran context of Bach's originals), then **Messiaen's** *Visions de l'Amen* takes this notion to another level of intensity. The piece was composed in just a matter of months, at the start of 1943. It was Messiaen's first attempt at a major work since his *Quatuor pour la fin du Temps*, written two years earlier (and performed, famously) while he was interned in a prisoner-of-war camp in Görlitz.

By the time he was commissioned to write *Visions* at the end of 1942, Messiaen's circumstances had rather improved. Following his release in May 1941, he returned to Nazi-occupied Paris and accepted a role as professor of harmony at the Conservatoire. Among his earliest students were Pierre Boulez and the brilliantly talented pianist Yvonne Loriod, who would become Messiaen's second wife and lifetime collaborator (in later years Kurtág was also a student). The Piano I part

in *Visions de l'Amen* was written for Loriod, who was just 19 at the time, and the piece was dedicated to her. Messiaen himself played the Piano II part, anticipating Kurtág's own practice of writing arrangements for himself and his wife, but also recalling other husband-and-wife piano duos such as the Bartóks and the Schumanns.

The piece was premièred at the Concerts de la Pléiade (a series of private concerts of new music) on 10 May 1943, and was attended by such musical luminaries as Francis Poulenc and Arthur Honegger, as well as the highly influential Jean Cocteau, and the poet Paul Valéry.

Comprised of seven movements, the work requires formidable stamina and virtuosity, and ultimately a steadfast adherence to Messiaen's exalted vision of the eternal; the music seems to ask of nothing less. It is thickly textured, with an air of ritual as well as dramatic spectacle, and admits to numerous influences which were more or less a constant in Messiaen's creative life: Indian rhythmic patterns (*tālas*) sit alongside ancient Greek syllabic rhythms; birdsong (most prevalent in the fifth movement *Amen des Anges, des Saints, du chant des oiseaux*) is intertwined with cosmic dances; and the whole work is couched in Messiaen's spiritual aesthetics and eschatological theology. In the preface to the musical score, Messiaen stated that in these seven movements he wished to include 'the life of creatures who by their very existence say "Amen"', and in so doing express 'the greatly varied riches of the word, Amen'.

The piece begins (*Amen de la Création*) with a chorale-like 'creation' theme in the Piano II part alongside high-register, bell-like chords in Piano I. This music is reprised in the last movement (*Amen de la Consommation*) with Piano I this time free to indulge in dazzling rhythmic flashes and a rapturous pealing of bells. The second movement (*Amen des étoiles, de la planète à l'anneau*) and the fifth are linked thematically through the adoration of God by celestial bodies and beings; the mode of adoration depicted here is both turbulent and exuberant. Movements three and six (*Amen de l'agonie de Jésus* and *Amen du Jugement*) are linked by the idea of pain, with the slow, concluding part of the third movement described by Messiaen as a representation of Christ's 'unutterable suffering'. The sixth contains a recurring chordal idea – three icy stabs – which is presented simultaneously in both piano parts: a rare moment of coincidence. At the heart of *Visions de l'Amen* lies the *Amen du Désir* (movement four) which alternates between two contrasting 'desire' themes (the second introduced by an extended solo for Piano II), culminating in a sensual melding of voices. It is hard not to interpret the movement (or the work as a whole, for that matter) as somehow symbolic of Messiaen's and Loriod's fledgling relationship.

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