

WIGMORE HALL

Friday 1 March 2024
7.30pm

Six Concerts à plusieurs instruments

London Handel Players

Adrian Butterfield solo violin,
viola, viola d'amore, director
Andreas Helm solo oboe
Rachel Brown solo flute,
recorder
Oliver Webber violin
Maxim Del Mar violin
Nicola Cleary violin

Rachel Byrt solo viola
Gavin Kibble solo viola da
gamba, cello
Sarah McMahon solo cello
Jonathan Rees viola da
gamba, cello
Cecelia Bruggemeyer double
bass

Silas Wollston harpsichord
Katy Bircher flute, recorder II
Joel Raymond oboe II
Nathaniel Harrison bassoon
Paula Chateaufneuf lute,
theorbo

- Georg Philipp Telemann (1681-1767) Concerto in E for flute, oboe d'amore, viola d'amore and strings
TWV53:E1 (c.1730-40)
I. Andante • II. Allegro • III. Siciliano • IV. Vivace
- Antonio Vivaldi (1678-1741) Concerto in F RV572 'Il Proteo, ò Il mondo al roverscio'
I. Allegro • II. Largo • III. [Allegro]
- Johann Sebastian Bach (1685-1750) Double Concerto for oboe, violin and strings in C minor
BWV1060R (c.1736)
I. Allegro • II. Adagio • III. Allegro
- Interval*
- Johann Sebastian Bach Brandenburg Concerto No. 6 in B flat BWV1051 (1721)
I. • II. Adagio ma non tanto • III. Allegro
- Georg Philipp Telemann Concerto in A minor for recorder, viola da gamba and strings
TWV52:a1 (c.1725-35)
I. Grave • II. Allegro • III. Dolce • IV. Allegro
- Antonio Vivaldi Concerto in G minor RV577 (c.1720-4)
I. Allegro • II. Largo non molto • III. Allegro



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Multi-instrument concertos by JS Bach, Telemann and Vivaldi

The solo concerto form was born in northern Italy in the latter years of the 17th Century, and the printing of Vivaldi's set of 12 concertos Op. 3, *L'Estro Armonico*, in Amsterdam early in the 18th Century (1711) attracted enormous attention to this musical genre across Europe. Johann Sebastian Bach, for example, acquired a copy, studied all 12 works in depth and arranged them for solo keyboard.

The three composers featured in this programme not only made highly important contributions to the concerto genre in general but they also had a large part to play specifically in the development of the multi-instrument type which became especially popular in the 1720s and 30s. The dating of many of these works is somewhat unclear, which makes the survival of Bach's autograph manuscript of his six 'Brandenburg' Concertos, a precious document which was nearly lost during the Second World War, highly important. Bach marked his dedication 'Coethen, 1721' and described this set in French: *Six Concerts avec plusieurs instruments*.

It seems extraordinary that **Telemann** should have written over 100 concertos and yet claim in 1718: 'Because it was a pleasant diversion I also began to write concertos and yet in my heart of hearts I never got on with them even though I wrote a fair number...' His greater affinity with the more gentle and subtle French style than with the bolder, more extrovert Italian ensured that his concerto writing would be a synthesis of the two styles.

Leopold Mozart, in his violin treatise of 1756, describes the viola d'amore as 'a distinctive kind of fiddle which sounds especially charming in the stillness of the evening', a description that fits rather aptly with the beautiful opening of Telemann's E major concerto for flute, oboe d'amore and viola d'amore - and the composer has chosen solo partners for the d'amore that reflect the gentle voice of that instrument. The viola d'amore, which is an instrument of the gamba family, though without frets, usually has six or seven playing strings and this often encouraged composers to write chordal music for it. But in this four-movement work Telemann employs it as a lyrical voice in the slow movements, as well as a virtuoso one in the fast ones.

His concerto for treble recorder and viola da gamba is also in his preferred four-movement slow-fast-slow-fast pattern, and he slims down the *tutti* forces to just one violin, one viola and continuo to ensure the soloists are easily heard. The opening *Grave* has a grand, processional character whilst the three movements that follow all incorporate the folk elements that Telemann had grown to love during his three years working in Sorau (Żary) in Poland. There's a particularly beautiful intimacy to the *Dolce* third movement which has a simple trio sonata texture without the *tutti* players, whilst the rondo-style finale brings the work to a joyful conclusion.

In his Brandenburg Concertos **Bach** employed six unique combinations of instruments, none of them more unusual and imaginative than in No. 6 which features just two solo violas with two gambas and continuo. He usually opted for the Italianate three-movement fast-slow-fast pattern in his concertos, and in this instance he gives the gamba players a rest in the *Adagio* leaving us with a beautiful trio sonata slow movement.

The 1764 Breitkopf catalogue lists a concerto by Bach for 'Oboe Concert. Violino Conc. 2 Violini, Viola, Basso', a rare clue pointing to the existence of a concerto by Bach that has been lost. Already in 1886 scholars surmised that the Concerto in C minor for two harpsichords could be a surviving transcription of the lost concerto for oboe and violin. This hypothesis is based on several striking features of the work for two keyboards. Unlike the Concerto in D minor for two violins, the two solo parts are very different in character. The first solo part fits the compass of the oboe of Bach's time perfectly in the key of C minor, and contains none of the violin figuration found in the second solo part. The second solo part seems to have been written for the violin in the key of C minor. In one instance the writing specifically avoids descending below the note G, the lowest string of the violin, and in other places this open string is exploited in the virtuoso writing of this solo part.

Vivaldi wrote a number of multi-instrument concertos and for a wide variety of combinations of instruments. The concerto called *Il Proteo, ò il mondo al roverscio* ('Proteus, or the world turned upside-down') comes down to us in two distinct versions; the first, RV544, is for violin, cello and strings and the second, RV572, is an arrangement made for two flutes, two oboes, violin, cello, harpsichord (right hand only) and strings. Initially, the idea of an upside-down world seems to have been merely an in-joke for the players, since the violin solo in RV544 was written in the tenor clef and the cello solo in the treble clef. But in the RV572 arrangement Vivaldi seems to have taken more seriously the idea of connecting the work with Proteus, the sea god who could transform his shape at will, remodelling the work so that there were two solo groups, one of flute, oboe and violin and the other of flute, oboe, cello and harpsichord.

Vivaldi's G minor concerto RV577 was written for the virtuoso instrumentalists of the Dresden orchestra of the 1720s and is scored for solo violin, two recorders, two oboes, bassoon and strings. There is a wonderful, raw energy to the *Allegro* outer movements which includes lively interplay between the wind instruments and the drive of the bass line in the finale. The slow movement in the middle is the eye of the storm, a beautiful and gentle dialogue between oboe and bassoon that could hardly be more contrasted from the turbulence surrounding it.

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