

WIGMORE HALL

Saturday 20 April 2024
7.30pm

Brett Dean viola

Lawrence Power viola

Nash Ensemble

Adrian Brendel cello

John Myerscough cello

Gemma Rosefield cello

Graham Mitchell double bass

Xiaowen Shang harpsichord

Sergio Bucheli theorbo

Heinrich Biber (1644-1704)

Partia VII in C minor from *Harmonia artificioso-ariosa* (pub. 1696)
*I. Praeludium (Grave – Presto) • II. Allamande • III. Sarabande •
IV. Gigue • V. Aria • VI. Trezza • VII. Arietta variata*

George Benjamin (b.1960)

Viola, Viola (1997)

William Byrd (c.1540-1623)

Fantasia a3 No. 1 in C (c.1603)

Fantasia a3 No. 2 in F (c.1603)

Fantasia a3 No. 3 in C (c.1595)

Brett Dean (b.1961)

some birthday... (1992)

I. Introduction • II. Chorale • III. Very fast

Interval

William Byrd

Pavan and Galliard in A minor 'The Earl of Salisbury' (late 16th century)

The Bells (late 16th century)

Brett Dean

Byrdsong Studies (2021)

I. Allegro. 'How daintily this BYRD his notes doth vary, As if he were the Nightingalls owne brother!' Mr Hugh Holland, from Parthenia, 1613 • II. Broad and still '...naturally disposed to gravity and piety...' Henry Peacham, writing about William Byrd, 1622 • III. Allegro assai. Dances and fancies • IV. Unhurried. Secret Songs

Approach (Prelude to a Canon) (2017)

Allegro impetuoso, volatile - Calm, serene - Slightly agitated though unhurried - attacca -

Johann Sebastian Bach

Brandenburg Concerto No. 6 in B flat BWV1051 (1721)

(1685-1750)

I. • II. Adagio ma non tanto • III. Allegro

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This evening's programme honours the viola; so much so in fact that there are always two of them! Together with my dear friend and esteemed viola-playing colleague Lawrence Power, we explore repertoire from across the ages that shines the light on two violas, culminating in Bach's magnificent Sixth Brandenburg Concerto from 1721. In the process we cover over 400 years of music history, from William Byrd's 3-part *Fantasias* from the end of the 16th Century through to my *Approach* from 2017.

We begin with *Partia VII*, the final section of **Heinrich Biber's** *Harmonia artificiosa-ariosa*, his last collection of instrumental music published in Salzburg in 1696. While best known nowadays for his *Rosary Sonatas* and the sonatas for solo violin, these trio sonatas with 'artificial harmonies' (or different tunings) present us with colourful multi-movement suites of contrasting dance forms. Biber employs rapid changes of tempo, dynamics and textures to create music of virtuosity, varied sonorities and a Baroque-operatic sense of 'affect' or sonic story-telling.

Of his *Viola, Viola* for two violas from 1997, composer **George Benjamin** wrote 'My desire...was to conjure an almost orchestral depth and variety of sound. I didn't want it to be a duet of simple, transparent chamber music. I wanted it to be a huge, multiple-magic viola'. What has made *Viola, Viola* such a favourite among viola players is the way in which it transforms the accustomed role of viola 'as a melancholy voice hidden in the shadows' into a 'fiery and energetic character', again quoting from the composer. Its 10 minutes make for a truly wild and ecstatic ride!

In many ways, **William Byrd** was the founding father of the viol consort genre. His music for instrumental consort was written primarily at a time when such activity was a rare thing indeed, the pursuit of courtiers and gentlemen, well before it became a domestic pastime in well-to-do houses in the 1600s. His three *Fantasias* a3 most probably date from 1595-1603 and, played this evening by two violas and cello, are miniature gems, music of the purest and most refined kind, faithful to the polyphonic principles of his mentor Thomas Tallis.

Closing the first half is one of my earliest works, *some birthday...* also scored for two violas and cello. It was the first work of mine ever performed at a public concert, in Berlin in 1992. The piece contains an introduction, theme and variations and is an attempt to transport the good old 'Happy birthday to you' tune into new and unexpected realms of expression.

Like his consort music, Byrd's music for keyboard also had a visionary aspect. Alongside his contemporary John Bull and other contributors to the *Parthenia* and other printed collections for virginal from the early 17th Century, Byrd brought to keyboard composition a startling virtuosity and telling depth, pushing the boundaries of what one mind and one pair of hands were capable of. The technical demands required to play these works expanded hand-in-hand with the widening of their emotional scope. The core of his keyboard output were grounds, variations and dances, as found in The Earl of Salisbury's *Pavan* and

Galliard which open the second half. This brief pair of dances is followed by *The Bells*, a pictorial set of variations on a two-note ground.

Set in between ghostly, distant-sounding fragments of the Earl of Salisbury *Pavane* that we have just heard, the impulsive birdsong-like motives of my *Byrdsong Studies* for solo harpsichord pay tribute to the energy and invention that, even during his lifetime, earned William Byrd ironic comparisons to his feathered namesakes. Further contrasting music of both repose and vigour throughout the first three movements explores the sonic possibilities of the instrument whilst also leading ultimately to an unexpected confrontation with Byrd's 'secret' music: a recording of the opening *Kyrie* from one of his clandestine Latin Mass settings bursts in unexpectedly, drawing varied responses from the soloist. My thanks to singers Lotte Betts-Dean (mezzo-soprano), James Robinson (tenor) and Augustus Perkins-Ray (baritone) for their recorded performance from Byrd's *Mass for 3 voices* (c.1593).

JS Bach's works with two concertante soloists have a special place in the genre as being genuine 'double' concertos. Many other later double concertos in the repertoire such as Mozart's *Sinfonia Concertante* or Brahms's Double Concerto establish a more operatic, statement-and-response type dialogue between the two soloists. But for a few passages in running thirds or sixths, the soloists of these works rarely play simultaneously. In contrast, Bach's works for two soloists - through their highly contrapuntal nature - provide the soloists with individual parts that only reveal their completeness when played alongside their duo counterpart. Nowhere is this more apparent than in the tight canonic writing found in the first movement of Bach's extraordinary Brandenburg Concerto No. 6 where the two soloists hocket along, imitating or mirroring each other often at only a quaver's distance in music of great rhythmic tension. And here, with not a single violin or flute in sight, the traditional 'underdogs' of the orchestra, the mid-voiced violas, are allowed to shine as soloists in this score of sombre, archaic magic.

As part of the Swedish Chamber Orchestra's 2015-17 initiative to commission works that reflect on the six Brandenburg Concertos, I felt compelled to address this concept of counterpoint, an aspect of composition that nowadays plays only a minor role in contemporary practice, at least in Bachian terms. My *Approach (Prelude to a Canon)* is an introductory work in three connected sections that eventually segues directly into Brandenburg 6. In establishing at the outset vividly contrasting temperaments between the two soloists (one busily cantankerous and argumentative, the other more sanguine, even ethereal) I sought to uncover points of reconciliation and agreement between them that can lead us, seamlessly, into the particular type of close, contrapuntal companionship of voices inherent in Bach's original.

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