

WIGMORE HALL

Tuesday 21 February 2023
7.30pm

The English Concert

Francesco Corti director, harpsichord
Nadja Zwiener violin, violino piccolo
Jacek Kurzdyko violin
Elizabeth MacCarthy violin
Manami Mizumoto violin, viola
Alfonso Leal del Ojo viola
Charlotte Fairbairn viola
Joseph Crouch cello
Jonathan Byers cello

Anna Reisener cello, viola da gamba
Emily Ashton cello
Alexander Jones double bass
Tatjana Zimre oboe
Katharina Verhaar oboe
Bethan White oboe
Katrin Lazar bassoon
Ursula Paludan Monberg horn
Martin Lawrence horn

- Johann Sebastian Bach** (1685-1750) Harpsichord Concerto in D minor BWV1052 (c.1738-9)
I. Allegro • II. Adagio • III. Allegro
- Brandenburg Concerto No. 3 in G BWV1048 (1721)
I. • II. Adagio • III. Allegro
- Concerto for 2 oboes and bassoon (after BWV42 and BWV249)
I. Sinfonia • II. Adagio • III. Sinfonia
- Interval*
- Brandenburg Concerto No. 6 in B flat BWV1051 (1721)
I. • II. Adagio ma non tanto • III. Allegro
- Brandenburg Concerto No. 1 in F BWV1046 (1721)
*I. • II. Adagio • III. Allegro •
IV. Menuet - Trio - Polacca - Trio II*

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From 1717 until 1723, **Johann Sebastian Bach** was employed by Prince Leopold of Cöthen. While some movements of the *Brandenburg Concertos* stretch back to Bach's earlier years in Weimar, their assembly as a collection can be dated to this period. The full presentation score bears the date 24 March 1721 in Bach's hand, as well as a typically sycophantic dedication to the Margrave of Brandenburg, Christian Ludwig: 'I have taken the liberty of rendering my most humble duty to Your Royal Highness with the present Concertos, which I have adapted to several instruments,' wrote Bach on the title page of his meticulously written-out score. Was this Bach sniffing out a new job?

It's possible that Bach met the Margrave in May 1718 in Karlsbad. This is where German royalty often gathered in the summer, accompanied, of course, by their court musicians. It's also possible that the pair met again, a chance encounter perhaps, during Bach's trip to Berlin in the Spring of 1719. Bach was on assignment to test out and collect a two-manual harpsichord on behalf of this Cöthen employer.

But 'chance' is perhaps not the best way to put it. Recent scholarship has uncovered just how important the Margrave was in Berlin society. He was the youngest son of the 'great Elector' Frederick William of Brandenburg, and though he himself had no sovereign rights, his own wing in the Berliner Stadtschloss (Berlin City Palace) – including a *Kapelle* occupied with fantastic musicians – created a kind of musical court itself. Indeed, once Frederick I died in 1713, and his heir Frederick William abolished the court ceremonial – apparently not a music lover – many of the musicians which found themselves unemployed ended up in the orchestra maintained by the Margrave. Bach scholar Peter Wollny even argues that it formed an 'unofficial *Hofkapelle* of the Prussian royal family'.

Bach's collection was certainly suitable for such royal environs. There is an undeniable lavishness to the musical writing. The Concerto No. 1 in F is elaborately and joyfully scored. As well as strings, basso continuo, three oboes, bassoon and two corni da caccia – which, in the words of Nicholas Kenyon, 'burble exuberantly' – Bach includes a solo part for violino piccolo. The exchanges between the different instrumental groups are characteristic of Bach's festive writing, and the rhythmic interplay and pulsating motives create the most glorious sense of dance.

The *Adagio* features haunting melodic writing for oboe and violino piccolo. The *tutti* strings become a groaning chorus over the bassline. Then the third movement banishes all melancholy, somehow outdoing the first movement in joyfulness. Bach closes the Concerto with an unusual 'appendage': a French-style *Menuet* with three trios. The second trio is a *Polacca* of swirling strings, while the third brings back the hunting calls of the horns and the oboes in quacks of arpeggios.

The Concerto No. 3 is scored for three 'choirs' of the violin family: three violins, three violas, and three cellos (plus the expected harpsichord as *basso continuo*). No hermeneutic exploration of the Holy Trinity is necessary

to sense that Bach was obsessively exploring just how far he could take it. A three-note anapaest figure – *duhduhdum* – dominates the motivic material. The movement kaleidoscopically spins through different combinations, and occasionally representatives of each group emerge from the bustling crowd as soloist.

The second movement consists of two chords. It is a Phrygian half cadence – and we can be certain that no sheets of music at some point went missing because the chords come at the middle of a page in the presentation autograph! A traditional interpretation is that the cadence signifies an improvisatory cadenza, and some performances choose to insert a movement from another of Bach's works here. I do, however, enjoy John Butt's speculation that perhaps 'given the complexity and intensity of the movements on either side, they [the two chords] should be played precisely as they stand, as if the slow movement has simply vaporised'. The third movement is immediately back to business with fleet-of-foot counterpoint.

Bach clearly relished in experimenting with different timbral combinations in the collection, and the Concerto No. 6 is no exception. The two violas da gamba evoke an archaic soundworld, while the two violas represent something more modern. But the scoring engages more than symbolism. Musicologist Michael Marissen tells us that the 18th-century orchestra functioned as a kind of social microcosm. We're reminded that violists were very different creatures to violinists. As Johann Joachim Quantz wrote in his *Versuch einer Anweisung die Flöte traversiere zu spielen* published in 1752:

...so few violists devote as much industry to their work as they should. Many believe that if they only know a little about metre and the division of notes, nothing more can be demanded of them. This prejudice, however, is more than a little detrimental to them. If they employed the necessary industry, they could easily improve their lot in a large establishment, and gradually advance their position, instead of remaining chained to the viola to the end of their lives, as is usually the case.

Is this an 18th-century version of the 'viola joke'? Well, Bach seems to be in on it as he subverts conventions. In the final movement, for example, the viola da gamba parts are simple – as opposed to their usual fiddly diminution work – and the virtuosic music goes to their supposedly 'lazy' colleagues!

Alongside this evening's Brandenburgs are Bach's Harpsichord Concerto in D minor BWV1052 and the Concerto for two oboes and bassoon (a reworking of movements from *Am Abend aber desselbigen Sabbats* BWV42 and the *Easter Oratorio* BWV249). The Harpsichord Concerto is likely to have been intended for performance by the Collegium Musicum at Zimmermann's coffee-house in Leipzig, and published a century later in 1837, it was championed by Mendelssohn and Schumann.

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