

WIGMORE HALL 125

Friday 22 May 2026
7.00pm

Salvation is Created

Daniel Pioro violin
David Gordon harpsichord, chamber organ
Jonas Nordberg lute

David Lang (b.1957)

From *mystery sonatas* (2014)
joy • after joy

Heinrich Biber (1644-1704)

Mystery Sonata VI in C minor 'The Agony in the Garden' (?1674)
I. Lamento • II. • III. Adagio

Mystery Sonata VII in F 'The Scourging at the Pillar' (?1674)
I. Allamanda, Variatio • II. Sarabanda, Variatio

Mystery Sonata VIII in B flat 'The Crowning with Thorns' (?1674)
I. Sonata • II. Guigue, Double 1, Double 2

Mystery Sonata IX in A minor 'The Carrying of the Cross' (?1674)
I. Sonata • II. Courante, double • III. Finale

Mystery Sonata X in G minor 'The Crucifixion' (?1674)
I. Praeludium • II. Aria • III. Variatio

David Lang

glory from *mystery sonatas*

Hildegard of Bingen (1098-1179)

O eterne Deus



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Daniel Piro returns to two of his obsessions, modern and ancient: the exuberant American minimalist David Lang and the composer and violinist Heinrich Ignaz Franz von Biber. Theirs is a meeting of mysteries. Biber's five 'Sorrowful' sonatas are framed by Lang's more personal, spiritually tinged responses.

Biber was born in Bohemia in 1644 and was one of the standout violinists of his time. From 1670 onwards, Biber was in the employ of the Archbishop of Salzburg Maximilian Gandolph von Kuenburg. He became Vice-Kapellmeister in 1679, Kapellmeister in 1684 and was ennobled by Emperor Leopold I in 1690 (hence the 'von'). Unlike his contemporaries, there's little evidence that Biber ever toured outside of Salzburg. From his Salzburg base, he wrote extraordinary, extremely complicated instrumental music and sacred music reflecting on his Jesuit upbringing, making the most of the city and the cathedral's vibrant, well-resourced musical life. Biber dedicated his *Mystery Sonatas* to the Archbishop. They were composed in the 1670s, probably as postludes for the rosary processions that would take place at Salzburg Cathedral in the autumn.

The music historian Charles Burney (1726-1814) wrote that Biber composed 'the most difficult and most fanciful of any music I have seen of the same period'. But Burney seemed to only know a handful of Biber's works: not the *Sonata Representativa*, with its sounds of frogs, hens, cats and musketeers; the *Battalia*, which imitates muskets, cannons and drunken soldiers; or any of his massive choral works, like the *Missa Salisburgensis*, for 53 voices, or the *Plaudite tympana*, for 54. And Burney definitely wouldn't have known of his remarkable *Mystery sonatas*, which were only published in 1905.

What's particularly notable about this collection is Biber's adventurous use of *scordatura*. From the Italian *scordare* (to be out of tune), 13 of the 15 sonatas require an alternative string tuning, allowing contrasting sonorities to illuminate the different atmospheres. One micro-narrative within this programme is a transition from dissonant tuning to consonant: the Sixth Sonata, illuminating Christ's betrayal in the garden of Gethsemane, opens with the unusual, closed-off tuning of Ab-Eb-G-D; by the crucifixion of the Tenth Sonata, the tuning has unfurled into the open, resonant G-D-A-D.

In an essay on Biber's sonatas for *VAN Magazine*, Benjamin Poore described his *scordatura* as 'the sound of a melting clock'. There is definitely something Dalí-like about the way Biber makes ordinary shapes droop and bend. But there's also a flavour of Dalí in the interesting new shapes that are created through this disfigurement. *Scordatura* makes chordal playing that much easier, and Biber opens up new polyphonic possibilities for an instrument that, as time progressed, seemed destined to play only monophonically. It's a tantalising thought to wonder how violin playing might have changed if these sonatas had found an audience even a hundred years previous. Imagine, for instance, if they'd been played by a *scordatura* adventurer like Nicolò Paganini...

In the manuscript (currently housed in Munich) each of Biber's *Mystery Sonatas* features a small engraving, depicting 15 important episodes from the life of Christ and the Virgin Mary. They're split into three groups of five: Joyful, Sorrowful and Glorious, according to the succession of episodes. This evening, Biber's expressive sorrow, compounded by his regular repeating or variation structures, is surrounded by Lang's inward joy and gossamer glory.

It's worth remembering just how dark and vivid the Bible passages are that Biber sought to illuminate. The sting of ritual humiliation rings around the verses of Luke 23 that inform the Ninth and Tenth Sonatas; after Jesus is mocked, jeered and paraded, he's led away to be crucified, but not before he is stripped of his robes and returned to his own clothes. Previously, in the scene on the Mount of Olives (that informs the Sixth), Matthew tells of Jesus beginning both to accept his fate and submit to God's will, sealed by the phrase 'Yet not as I will, but as you will'. Faced with verses of extraordinary pathos, it's no wonder that Biber's most anguished expressions followed.

These works are best understood as illuminators of an atmosphere, rather than programmatic responses to the various episodes. (For one, the Sonatas are littered with dance segments, which bring us back to earth.) But there are moments when a programme draws nearer. The striking dotted rhythms of the Praeludium in the Tenth suggest nails being hammered into a cross.

Rather than tuning or religious commentary, for Bang on a Can founder **David Lang**, the most interesting subject in Biber's Sonatas is 'the idea that one might want to express one's most personal, most intimate, most spiritual thoughts through wild displays of virtuosity'.

Lang's *mystery sonatas* were premièred by Augustin Hadelich in 2014. They begin with a joy that's inward rather than effusive, almost nervously so. The first movement uses glisteningly bright but essentially unstable violin harmonics, creating a feverish *nervoso* that continues in *after joy*, where stratified voices flirt with polyphony without ever quite meshing. Lang denies a theological scheme, but his narrative feels similar to Biber's, particularly in the set's strong, rising foreboding.

Where Biber's structures build on repetitions and reflections – tripartite structures, variation forms – Lang's overall scheme feels like one big return. Only one of Biber's movements, the final *Passacaglia* (not performed tonight), is unaccompanied. Its pair is Lang's concluding thought, *glory*, which consolidates and synthesizes the themes – stratified registers, chilly harmonics, meandering inwardness – into a whole that feels refreshed.

To close, **Hildegard of Bingen's** fervent collect *O eterne Deus*. 'May you be pleased to blaze once more in love', Hildegard pleads. 'Look upon this need that over us has fallen, draw it off from us according to your Son, and lead us back into salvation's wholesome happiness.'

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