

WIGMORE HALL

Thursday 23 January 2025
7.30pm

Angela Hewitt piano

George Frideric Handel (1685-1759)

Suite No. 2 in F HWV427
I. Adagio • II. Allegro • III. Adagio • IV. Allegro

Johann Sebastian Bach (1685-1750)

French Suite No. 6 in E BWV817
*I. Allemande • II. Courante • III. Sarabande •
IV. Gavotte • V. Polonaise • VI. Bourrée •
VII. Menuet • VIII. Gigue*

Joseph Haydn (1732-1809)

Piano Sonata in E flat HXVI/52 (1794)
I. Allegro moderato • II. Adagio • III. Finale. Presto

Interval

George Frideric Handel

Chaconne in G HWV435 (1733)

Johannes Brahms (1833-1897)

Variations and Fugue on a Theme of Handel Op. 24
(1861)



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In June 1720, **George Frideric Handel** was granted Royal Privilege from King George I, giving him a monopoly on the publication of his own work. It is no coincidence that his first collection of suites for harpsichord, the Eight 'Great' Suites (HWV426–433), appeared in print within a few months. They had largely been written several years earlier, but, as Handel noted in the preface, he had been 'obliged to publish [the suites]...because Surreptitious and incorrect Copies of them had got Abroad'. Handel's keyboard suites exhibit a more varied profile than those of J.S. Bach, with no two alike in their design; the Suite No. 2 in F major (HWV427), for instance, resembles a classic four-movement Italian sonata. It opens with a highly ornamented, aria-like Adagio that ends unexpectedly in A minor, leading straight into an Italianate Allegro. The third movement, in D minor, again evokes the world of opera (complete with a written-out cadenza), before launching into the finale, an assertive four-voice fugue.

The dance suite was the most important genre of keyboard music in the early 18th Century. Among the most well-known of those written by **Johann Sebastian Bach** are his six French Suites (BWV812–817), composed between 1722 and 1725, possibly for his second wife Anna Magdalena. Like the so-called 'English Suites', their collective title dates from after Bach's death, and is a misnomer: there is little that is particularly French about them, and indeed many of the movements - including the Courante from the sixth suite in E major (BWV817) - are thoroughly Italianate in style. Filled with characteristic running passages, the Courante is preceded by a joyful Allemande, and followed by a dignified Sarabande. After the Sarabande come four 'galanteries', various extra movements based on fashionable dances. In BWV817, Bach chooses to present a Gavotte and a Bourrée, both duple-time dances with rustic origins, which contrast with the more elegant triple-time Polonaise and Minuet. The spirited concluding Gigue is reminiscent of the Two-Part Inventions, composed around the same time.

Joseph Haydn's Sonata in E flat HXVI/52 is one of his last, and greatest, works for the piano. It was written in 1794 for the London virtuoso Therese Jansen (whose wedding Haydn also witnessed the following year), and is a highly demanding piece, both technically and conceptually. It is nonetheless full of Haydn's customary wit and charm, often communicated through rhetorical pauses and sudden contrasts. The opening movement begins with a commanding motif in thick chords, which is later contrasted with a secondary theme, skittish and playful. Despite the latter being presented in E major at one point, Haydn's use of this remote key for the following Adagio still comes as an aural shock. Daniel Heartz characterises its beautiful theme as 'placid yet fervent striving upward, tinged by deep longing'. It is subject to intensification and decoration throughout, including an anguished contrasting section in the parallel minor. Haydn closes the work with a perpetuum mobile Presto finale that again plays with tonal expectations. First published as Suite No. 2 in his second collection of suites (1733), Handel's Chaconne in G major HWV435 bears a

distinctive French influence. A chaconne is a piece in triple time featuring a repeated (usually descending) bass line and harmonic progression that is used as the basis for increasingly elaborate variations. Handel presents 21 variations in all; from Variations 9 to 16, he switches to the minor mode, giving the music a special expressivity. The complex source situation for this piece, however, has resulted in multiple textual differences between published editions—not least the ending!

Over a century later, an aria from the third movement of Handel's Suite in B-flat major (HWV434) served as the basis for another set of variations. Johannes Brahms, who was deeply influenced by the music of both Bach and Handel, wrote his Variations and Fugue on a Theme of Handel (Op. 24) in September 1861, dedicating them to 'eine liebe Freundin' ('a dear friend'). This was Clara Schumann, to whom Brahms presented the work on 13 September, her 42nd birthday, and it was she who premièred it in Hamburg in December that year. The formal elegance and simplicity of the theme made it ideal for variation; indeed, it was originally published with five variations by Handel himself. It is divided into two four-bar sections, each repeated, and Brahms mostly preserves this structure throughout, ensuring that the 25 variations are of equal length.

As with J.S. Bach's *Goldberg Variations* and Beethoven's *Diabelli Variations*, there are multiple ways to understand the organisation of this work. Brahms generally emphasises musical contrasts between individual or pairs of variations, alternating between B flat major and B flat minor (except for Variation 21, which is in G minor), *legato* and *staccato* variations, and homophonic and polyphonic textures. Some scholars divide the variations into 'strict' and 'free' style groupings, or see patterns in how Brahms utilises dynamic control and momentum across the set. However one perceives them, the variations unfold with an astonishing range of musical and technical diversity, from polyrhythms (Variations 2 and 21), bravura showpieces (4, 14 and 15), and canons (6 and 16), to a funeral march (13), a Baroque *siciliana* and *musette* (19 and 22), and even paired 'variations of variations' (e.g. 23 and 24).

The Variations climax with an enormous fugue, the subject of which is derived from the beginning of the theme. It is then treated in a variety of contrapuntal transformations, including augmentation, diminution, inversion, double counterpoint and stretto, leading to a final peroration over a dominant pedal point and a thrilling conclusion. No less triumphant was the work's reception, becoming an important milestone in Brahms's career. Even Wagner, who was not known for his compliments towards Brahms, admitted, 'One sees what may still be done in the old forms when someone comes along who knows how to use them'.

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