WIGMORE HALL 125

Friday 23 January 2026
7.30pm

This concert is supported by Serena Simmons and Michael Thomas

Angela Hewitt piano

Johann Sebastian Bach (1685-1750)	Toccata in D BWV912 (c.1707, rev. c.1710)
Jean-Philippe Rameau (1683-1764)	Suite No. 2 in A minor (1726-7) *I. Allemande • II. Courante • III. Sarabande •* *IV. Les trois mains • V. Fanfarinette •* *VI. La triomphante • VII. Gavotte et six doubles*
	Interval
Domenico Scarlatti (1685-1757)	Sonata in A K322 Sonata in D K145 Sonata in D minor K417 Sonata in C K460 Sonata in F K518 Sonata in F minor K519 Sonata in F minor K466
Johann Sebastian Bach	Prelude and Fugue in A minor BWV894 (c.1717)

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As a young church organist working in the small German town of Arnstadt, Johann Sebastian Bach was something of a rebel. During his tenure at the Neuekirche (1703-7), he was criticised by the town authorities for his flamboyant style of playing, which apparently 'confused' the congregation, and for taking four months of leave (quadruple the approved time) in 1705 to hear the famous Danish organist Dietrich Buxtehude (c.1637-1707) in Lübeck. Buxtehude was a master of the *stylus phantasticus*, which combined dramatic, improvisatory passages in a free manner with stricter, more polyphonic music. The influence of this style is clearly evident in Bach's seven keyboard toccatas, which date from around 1705-14 and therefore represent some of his earliest works.

The word 'toccata' comes from the Italian *toccare* (to touch), and such pieces were designed to showcase the player's brilliance and virtuosity. The Toccata in D BWV912 is a bright and brilliant work, with an introduction (incorporating a distinctive tremolo figure) that segues into a delightful *Allegro*, in which motifs are exchanged between the two hands. The tremolo from the opening reappears in the recitative-like *Adagio* that follows, leading into a fugue in F sharp minor. Suddenly, however, expressive improvisatory material appears, first transforming into a radiant D major *Presto* before breaking free into a dancing fugal gigue. Bach then crowns the fugue – and the whole toccata – with an exuberant virtuoso passage, and a final improvisatory flourish.

Although his fame arrived relatively late in life, Bach's French contemporary Jean-Philippe Rameau was not only a superb organist and composer but also a noted music theorist. His *Pièces de clavecin*, published over a period of around 20 years, contain a dazzling array of dance movements and character pieces that, as he himself said, speak to 'the true music…the language of the heart'. The Suite in A minor comes from the third and last volume, the *Nouvelles suites de pièces de clavecin* (dating from no later than c.1729-30). Full of rich counterpoint, it opens with a lyrical *Allemande* that only fleetingly breaks its dignified air at the end of each section with toccata-like figuration. This is followed by a *Courante*, rhythmically and polyphonically complex, that the Rameau biographer Cuthbert Girdlestone called 'one of the summits of Rameau's art'. In the noble *Sarabande*, we enter the sunnier world of A major, but one tinged with courtly tragedy (indeed, Rameau later used this movement in his tragic opera *Zoroastre*). *Les trois mains*, as its title implies, creates the impression of the harpsichordist having three hands rather than two, due to the left hand constantly crossing over the right; this is followed by two character pieces, *Fanfarinette* (depicting a 'fanfaron', someone who brags and boasts) and *La triomphante*. The final *Gavotte et 6 doubles*, however, is even more spectacular: what begins as a tender theme builds into a magnificent set of variations. Running scalic figuration in both hands and brilliant repeated notes lead to a thrilling climax, in which left hand virtuoso leaps accompany the right hand as it triumphantly sings out the theme.

Most of Domenico Scarlatti's 555 keyboard sonatas were written for his patron and pupil, Princess Maria Barbara of Portugal (later Queen of Spain). Typically, they are in a simple binary form, consisting of two distinct sections that are both repeated, but the sheer variety of musical invention they contain is astounding. The Sonata in A K322, for example, is a spirited work that calls us to attention from the outset with three repeated notes. It evokes the fashionable *galant* style, which emphasised naturalness and simplicity: here, the melody is accompanied only by minims, and has a song-like quality. Another 'popular' device appears in the Sonata in F minor, K519, an Andalusian dance in which whole phrases are transposed up, increasing the tension and excitement. Sharp contrasts are found in the Sonata in D K145, from its bright opening to a more contrapuntal section featuring syncopated part-playing between the hands, and a final section filled with brilliant passagework.

Contrasts of a different sort appear in the Sonata in F, K518. For such a compact work, the range of keys and moods that Scarlatti effortlessly leads us through is remarkable: along the way, we encounter the dark hues of A minor and B minor, and even touch on such remote keys as C sharp minor and G sharp minor, before returning to cheerful F major right at the end. With the Sonata in D minor K417, one of the few not in binary form, Scarlatti also reveals himself as a master polyphonist, constructing a fugue that begins in three voices but then transforms into a thrilling *moto perpetuo* in the left hand. The Sonata in C K460, meanwhile, contains several passages distinctly reminiscent of early Spanish guitar technique, including arpeggio chords and phrases in the *punteado* (plucked) style. Arpeggio figures also form a key element of the ethereal Sonata in F minor, K466, above which a touchingly ornamented right hand sings out in lament.

Tonight's recital concludes with JS Bach's virtuosic Prelude and Fugue in A minor, BWV894. Likely composed around 1717, towards the end of Bach's employment as Kapellmeister at the court of the Duke of Weimar, it later served as the model for the two outer movements of the Triple Concerto for flute, violin and harpsichord, BWV1044. This is hardly surprising, for concerto textures are already present in the *Prelude*, which alternates between orchestral-like tutti and solo passages. Both it and the following *Fugue* are propelled forward by long passages of triplets, which in the latter serve to cast it, like the end of BWV912, as a gigue. Although Bach had now moved away from the *stylus phantasticus* that had influenced many of his early compositions, he had clearly not lost his sense of showmanship.

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