WIGMORE HALL

Monday 25 July 2022 7.30pm

Mario Brunello violoncello piccolo

CLASSIC fM Wigmore Hall £5 tickets for Under 35s supported by Media Partner Classic FM

Johann Sebastian Bach (1685-1750)

Sonata No. 2 in A minor for solo violin BWV1003 (1720)
I. Grave • II. Fuga • III. Andante • IV. Allegro

Partita No. 3 in E for solo violin BWV1006 (1720)
I. Preludio • II. Loure • III. Gavotte en Rondeau • IV. Menuett I • V. Menuett II • VI. Bourrée • VII. Gigue

Interval

Sonata No. 3 in C for solo violin BWV1005 (1720)
I. Adagio • II. Fuga • III. Largo • IV. Allegro assai

Pictures from around 1600 show us a number of small, bass, bowed string instruments, many with five strings. Like the piano or the motor-car, such instruments have settled down into a comparatively dull uniformity from an initial riotous florescence of wildly contrasting designs; but that process was still in full swing in **JS Bach**'s day, so much so that he has sometimes been credited with the actual invention of the violoncello piccolo, an instrument especially apt to the Sixth Cello Suite. Today, with a fine Baroque adaptability, we shall hear the violoncello piccolo in works usually performed on the violin.

The techniques of playing polyphony on stringed instruments had been fully worked out by the end of the 17th Century, in Germany by composers like Biber and Walther, in England by gamba players like Christopher Simpson. The world awaited Bach to show exactly how far this genre could be taken. Bach's unaccompanied string works were composed round about 1720 in Cöthen, where he was enjoying an unaccustomed artistic freedom. As Court Kapellmeister to the Duke of Saxe-Weimar, Bach had been rather stuck in the organ-loft, but when in 1717 he stepped up from his Duke (who briefly imprisoned him, and never uttered his name again) to a Prince, he had an orchestra, and his violin-playing came into its own.

Bach may have written his Sonatas and Partitas for the famous violinist Johann Georg Pisendel, whom he knew. Telemann, Albinoni and Vivaldi, with whom Pisendel studied in Venice in 1717, also composed for him. Pisendel himself was one of many virtuosos who composed unaccompanied pieces: Locatelli, Stamitz, Ferdinand David, Vieuxtemps, and of course Paganini among them. Most of these unaccompanied pieces were called Caprices. Bach's pupil, Agricola, provides a scornful definition of the pedagogical purpose of a mere Caprice: pieces designed for learning to master the full resources of an instrument, presenting all possible difficulties, to enable the student to acquire a firm control of them. He goes on to compare Caprices to their disadvantage with Bach's Sonatas and Partitas, which combine technical usefulness with something much more musical. Bach very frequently managed this handy trick, often further blending in an idea of completeness, or at least order: complete liturgies of cantatas, all the possible intervals for a canon, preludes and fugues in every key. The manuscript of his solo violin pieces neatly presents Sonatas and Partitas in alternation, all in different keys, minor keys first and then the major ones. Performance opportunities for six long, difficult works did not exist, of course – the order of the manuscript was purely a matter for Bach's mind. The Sonatas were perhaps intended for performance in church, while the Partitas must have appeared in private salons.

A comparison with the 12 unaccompanied Fantasies by Telemann, the godfather of Bach's son Carl Philipp Emanuel, provides an interesting comparison with Bach's obsessions with order. Telemann was a fine and famous composer, even more highly regarded than Bach by many at the time. His Fantasies, as their name implies, are extremely varied, some with three movements, some with more, some beginning with a fast movement, some with a slow. The one hint of order is that every third fantasy is in a minor key, but to set against that, Bach might have tutted that there are two fantasies in D major.

Bach arranged the whole of the second Sonata for the harpsichord. The subject of its fugue was singled out by the scholar Johann Mattheson in 1737: 'One often finds the most excellent workings-out upon the fewest notes, or shortest fugue subjects; almost as the best sermons can be made on three or four words of text. Who would have believed that these eight short notes would be so fruitful as to bring forth a Counterpoint of more than a whole sheet of music, without unusual extension, and quite naturally? And yet the skilled Bach who is particularly gifted in this form, has set just this before the world; indeed he has also introduced the subject here and there in inversion.'

Bach arranged the first movement of his third Sonata for harpsichord. The fugue, 354 bars long, takes as its subject one of Bach's favourite tunes, the Whitsun antiphon *Veni Sancte Spiritus*, which also appears in two organ chorale preludes, two cantatas, and one of the motets, but never worked out at such length as here, for a solo violin. The subject is presented at length – seven entries – with a regular countersubject of steady, solemn, descending semitones. A long, sprightly passage takes us to a new key (A minor, the relative minor), and now the fugue subject appears in two-part *stretto*, that's to say in close canon, one voice after the other. Another 'episode', this time starting in E minor, leads to a new vigorous three-part version of the subject, all based on the open D string, leading to a great cadence in G ('the dominant'). Now Bach archly writes *al riverso* in his score, to show us that he's about to turn his subject (and its countersubject) upside-down. This version shows a curious affinity for minor keys, but eventually works its way back to the home key to recapitulate the first 60-odd bars, throwing in a few extra counterpoints here and there. A *tour de force*.

The third violin Partita follows its *Prelude* with a fine selection of dances, of which only the *Gigue* is a regular member of a suite. Bach arranged the whole partita for harp or lute, and arranged the *Prelude* for organ and orchestra so he could use it as an introduction to two of his cantatas. The *Gavotte en Rondeau*, which presents its catchy tune, with its bold consecutive sevenths, no fewer than five times, is one of Bach's most desirable numbers, stolen away for the piano by Rachmaninov, amongst many others.