

# WIGMORE HALL

Wednesday 25 May 2022 1.00pm

**Marc-André Hamelin** piano

**Carl Philipp Emanuel Bach** (1714-1788) Württemberg Sonata No. 2 in A flat Wq. 49/2 (1742-3)  
*I. Un poco allegro • II. Adagio • III. Allegro*

**Ludwig van Beethoven** (1770-1827) Piano Sonata No. 29 in B flat Op. 106 'Hammerklavier' (1817-8)  
*I. Allegro • II. Scherzo. Assai vivace •  
III. Adagio sostenuto • IV. Largo - Allegro risoluto*

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There is a frequently reproduced painting of King Frederick the Great at Sanssouci Palace in Potsdam (by Adolph Menzel, 1852) playing the flute, with **Carl Philipp Emanuel Bach** leading a small group of musicians from an instrument variously referred to in captions as a harpsichord, a piano and, hedging bets, as a harpsichord-shaped piano. In this opulent, 19th-century appraisal of Rococo courtly entertainment, the monarch is surrounded by Enlightenment bigwigs, and it is perhaps worth noting that CPE Bach, second son of Johann Sebastian, referred to his father as 'the old wig', alluding to the grand old Kapellmeister's mastery of the old-fashioned, high-baroque art of counterpoint.

It is a neat snapshot of CPE Bach's place in the rapid evolution of music in the first half of the 18th Century. He had been employed by Frederick as keyboard accompanist for nearly a decade when the old Bach's visit to Potsdam in 1747 brought about his *Musical Offering*, the elaborate compendium of contrapuntalist genius based on a theme composed by the King himself. The other point of the father's visit was to inspect and play Frederick's new Silbermann fortepianos. His son, meanwhile, was well into his stride with a burgeoning list of works composed in the new *empfindsamer Stil* ('sensitive style'), in which he strained musical sinews to maximum emotional effect.

The son's only teacher had been his father, so he was well versed in the old contrapuntal style, but CPE Bach has taken his place in European music history as a highly influential and transitional figure of the generation before Haydn, Mozart and Beethoven, largely down to his extending the expressive reach and dramatic possibilities of sonata form, simultaneously a move away from the Baroque period's multi-movement dance suite (anticipated by the single-movement sonatas by Domenico Scarlatti, JS Bach's exact contemporary) and a growing focus on melody and harmony that reached well into the 19th Century.

One thing the son did share with his father was an astonishing output of work – symphonies, concertos, trios, and some 50 solo keyboard sonatas, mostly in three movements. The Sonata in A flat was the second of the set of six Württemberg Sonatas published in 1744, by which time the 30-year-old CPE Bach had definitely found his voice. Music lovers and performers heard, and still hear, this voice as mercurial, idiosyncratic, maverick, self-indulgent, even incoherent, but no one can deny CPE's extravagant powers of drama and invention. Moreover, his style was part of the long process of putting performer and their close identification with the

music centre-stage. Violent surges of mood, sudden silences, unexpected changes of key, equally surprising tempo variations – for many this was seize-the-moment improvisation committed to paper. Haydn was very excited, and influenced, by it all. This Württemberg Sonata's first movement depends on abrupt pauses, little cadential ruminations and wide-ranging harmonies for effects, but honours the new sonata-form layout; the rhapsodic slow movement takes harmonic adventurousness to extremes; and the finale is full of march-like vitality.

CPE Bach was also a renowned teacher, publishing the pedagogic *Versuch über die wahre Art das Clavier zu spielen* ('Essay on the true art of keyboard playing') between 1753 and 1762, a work hugely influential on the next generation of musicians. **Beethoven** gave it to his pupils for their improvement, but perhaps his 'Grosse Sonate für das Hammerklavier' Op. 106 was beyond its scope. Some 75 years separate this mighty work from CPE Bach, during which the range and technology of the piano had made significant progress. Yet both works share elements of shock, originality, passion and personality, and although the 'Hammerklavier' has a triumphantly symphonic integrity, there is a sense that one begat the other.

Written in 1817-8, it was Beethoven's first four-movement sonata since Op. 31 No. 3 some 16 years earlier, and its highly-charged music dwarfs even the 'Eroica' Symphony of 1804. From the 'Hammerklavier's' opening fanfares, the demands on the performer are stupendous, although after he had completed his last five piano sonatas (Opp. 101, 106, 109, 110 and 111) Beethoven denounced the piano as an unsatisfactory instrument – an opinion he later retreated from in the *Diabelli Variations* of 1823. The 'Hammerklavier's' first movement surges through key progressions that expand musical space, and that feeling persists in the taut *Scherzo's* brief fantasy-like presto middle section. The *Adagio sostenuto* is one of the most intimate and intense movements in all of Beethoven's music, stretching the instrument's powers of expression to the limit, such that the finale needs a strange illusionary blend of retuning and cadenza to redress the balance. Then one of music's most volcanic and colossal fugues takes over, an epic doffing of the cap to 'the old wig'.

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