

WIGMORE HALL

Saturday 25 November 2023
7.30pm

This concert is supported by Cockayne Grants for the Arts, a donor advised fund at the London Community Foundation

COCKAYNE

Laurence Osborn Day

Mahan Esfahani harpsichord

Fenella Humphreys violin

Britten Sinfonia

William Cole conductor

Hannah Perowne violin I

Miranda Dale violin II

Clare Finnimore viola

Caroline Dearnley cello

Ben Russell double bass

Thomas Hancox flute, piccolo

Nicholas Daniel oboe

Joy Farrall clarinet, bass clarinet

Carl Philipp Emanuel Bach (1714-1788)

Württemberg Sonata No. 6 in B minor H36 (1742-3)

I. Moderato • II. Adagio non molto • II. Allegro

Laurence Osborn (b.1989)

Coin Op Automata (2021) *London première*

I. • II.

Carl Philipp Emanuel Bach

Sinfonia in A H660 (1773)

I. Allegro ma non troppo

II. Largo ed innocentemente

III. Allegro assai

Interval

Laurence Osborn

Rendering Error* (2019)

Carl Philipp Emanuel Bach

Sinfonia in B flat H658 (1773)

I. Allegro di molto • II. Poco adagio • III. Presto

Laurence Osborn

Automaton (2019)

Performing parts based on the critical edition Carl Philipp Emanuel Bach: The Complete Works (www.cpebach.org) were made available by the publisher, the Packard Humanities Institute of Los Altos, California.

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In the introduction to the first part of his *Essay on the True Art of Playing Keyboard Instruments*, Carl Philipp Emanuel Bach immediately critiques contemporary keyboard practice:

'All other instruments have learned how to sing. The keyboard alone has been left behind, its sustained style obliged to make way for countless elaborate figures. The truth of this is attested by growing beliefs that to play slowly or legato is wearisome, that tones can neither be slurred nor detached, that our instrument should only be tolerated as a necessary evil in accompaniment.'

I find the critique interesting because it so nakedly communicates the composer's anxieties about the 18th-century keyboard, its inhumanity ('all other instruments have learned how to *sing*'), its mechanical and sonic limitations, and its utility as a supporting player in the ensemble. We might expand on these ideas further to consider the keyboard as the site for many Enlightenment-era anxieties relating to de-humanising processes of automation and industrialisation. After all, the harpsichord is remarkable in that its sound is impossible to detach from the mechanical means of its production. It paints particularly vividly the cyborg aspect of music practice, the bizarre fusion of human and machine required in performance.

These ideas combine especially powerfully with the music of CPE Bach because it exhibits such a profound overflow of living, of hot blood. Put simply, you can hear the humanity of CPE Bach's music pushing against the boundaries of its medium. The first movement of his Württemberg Sonata No. 6 H36, for example, is operatic. Here, the harpsichord truly does learn how to sing, its wire vocal chords intoning a recitative-like melody punctuated with orchestral stabs in the accompaniment. The slow movement combines two irreconcilable ideas: a sweet, falling *cantabile* line, and a snapping, dance-like secondary-theme. The result is a beautiful, vulnerable music that doesn't seem to know what it is. The final movement succeeds these vocal and psychological analogs with something more elemental: a two-part invention of sheer High-Baroque bravura.

In providing a mechanical foil to the human aspects of music making, the keyboard also captures something of music's *un*-deadness: performance's irrevocable act of necromancy; the act of breathing life into the cold, wire innards of a machine. *Coin Op Automata* (2021) begins as an expansion of the harpsichord's inner mechanism, wires crawling out of the belly of the instrument to lasso the string players, leading them in a clockwork dance. The second movement opens with a clanking aria heard in low harpsichord and high violin, complete with arabesques borrowed from both Baroque and auto-tuned RnB singing. This chimerical voice - part human, part machine, part bird - is just one of many mechanical vignettes that the piece is built from. *Coin Op Automata*

is inspired by a museum my wife used to visit as a child, filled with coin-operated machines. The structure of the piece is itself an arcade: a series of little musical automata that share space and parts with one another.

The string sinfonias of CPE Bach are some of my favourite music ever written, partly because it is literally impossible to guess the direction that it will take at any given point: antecedent and consequent are always at least a knight's-move away from one another. Ideas in the first movement of the Sinfonia in A H660 tumble out in technicolour, like a parade of characters in a *Looney Tunes* cartoon. Dainty arpeggios, like mechanical laughter, shared between the strings suddenly transform into a brash cadential figure, which then slides flatwards into a quiet, austere melody, itself interrupted halfway through by pounding semiquavers. All three movements are performed without a break, and this truly extraordinary level of inventiveness continues throughout. Hear it as the slow movement holds its breath for a crawling ascent in octaves, or as the first stanza of the final movement is struck over the head with tolling bell sounds from the violins.

My *Rendering Error* (2019) started with the idea of a pixellated rendering of an 18th-century room being printed by a faulty printer. The music is an invention that begins to glitch; these glitches then *become* the music of the next section. The material, corrupted from the outset, begins to play the violinist, rather than the other way around.

The opening movement of CPE Bach's String Sinfonia in B flat H658 tears along, with heart-stopping intensity and impulsivity. The sheer dynamic range of this movement is remarkable: hear the biting *fp* ascent in the low strings and harpsichord, which gives way to an introverted, sighing figure led by the first violin. The slow movement implies a human voice: there is an almost improvisatory quality to the wayward motions of its broad, song-like lines, accompanied by *pizzicato* cello. This movement literally collides with the locomotive opening to the final movement, its protagonist sucked into the hum of the collective, like a bird into a jet engine.

Automaton (2019) returns to the idea of the harpsichord, and the elision of organicism and mechanism that its sound implies. As a set of mechanical noises in thrall to the sensitivity and humanity of the performer, the harpsichord is a human voice cloaked in the veneer of a machine. *Automaton* plays with this duality. Musical clockworks are constructed in time before coming to life and bursting from their frames. The mechanised unspooling of the harpsichord solo transforms into the expressive outpouring of a cadenza. The music is sometimes mechanical, sometimes human, and often both.

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