

WIGMORE HALL

Thursday 27 February 2025
7.30pm

Mahan Esfahani harpsichord

George Frideric Handel (1685-1759)

Suite No. 2 in F HWV427

*I. Adagio • II. Allegro • III. Adagio •
IV. Allegro. Fugue*

Georg Böhm (1661-1733)

Prelude, Fugue and Postlude in G minor
Capriccio in D major

George Frideric Handel

Suite No. 3 in D minor HWV428

*I. Prelude • II. Allegro. Fugue •
III. Allemande • IV. Courante •
V. Air and variations • VI. Presto*

Interval

George Frideric Handel

Suite No.7 in G minor HWV432

*I. Overture • II. Andante • III. Allegro •
IV. Sarabande • V. Gigue • VI. Passacaille.*

Suite in B flat HWV434 (1733)

IV. Minuet



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Watching **Handel** playing the harpsichord 'with marvellous neatness' one evening were his friends the singer Susanna Cibber and the Irish actor James Quin. The latter, 'being asked by Mrs Cibber whether he did not think Mr Handel had a charming hand, replied - " 'A hand, madam? You mistake, it's a foot.' 'Poh poh!' says she, 'has he not a fine finger?' 'Toes, by G-, madam!' Charles Burney, who tells this story, goes on to note that Handel's knuckles 'were like those of a child, dimpled in so as to be rendered concave; however, his touch was so smooth, and the tone of the instrument so much cherished, that his fingers seemed to grow to the keys.'

The composer's virtuosity at the keyboard had always been a thing of wonder. Even Sir Isaac Newton, not exactly mad for music, had been impressed by the 'remarkable elasticity' of his fingers. Another listener marvelled at 'that amazing fulness, force and energy' in Handel's performing style, while his friend Mary Pendarves, watching him at a rehearsal of the opera *Alcina*, wrote 'Whilst Mr Handel was playing his part, I could not help thinking him a necromancer in the midst of his own enchantments.'

By 1720, when his chief focus was on the newly-launched opera season at the King's Theatre, Handel had assembled a whole range of keyboard pieces, some of them from his early years as an organist in Halle, others from his spell as a theatre musician in Hamburg and few dating from his crucial 1706-10 visit to Italy. Only when a pirated collection of these was issued by publishers in London and Amsterdam did Handel feel driven to secure a royal privilege to protect his copyright, under which the London firm of John Cluer in Cheapside could go on to print an authorized edition.

The 'Eight Great Suites', as they are known, mixed revisions of earlier pieces with a number of new items 'to make the work more useful', as the composer's preface states. The whole ensemble mirrors Handel's unique cosmopolitanism, reflecting his response to the very different musical worlds of Germany, Italy and England, but also the ways in which French styles and forms pervaded all of these. In this connection it is noteworthy that the Cluer publication appeared as *Suites de Pieces pour le Clavecin Composees par G.F. Handel, Premier Volume*. The market envisaged here by composer and printer was not just generically international but more specifically French, appealing to the world of the great clavecinistes, Francois Couperin, Elisabeth Jacquet de La Guerre and others, which had set a benchmark for keyboard music in recent decades.

Yet, are these works suites in the sense traditionally understood, as used, for instance, in J. S. Bach's French and English collections? Not necessarily, we might object, since Handel's approach to issues of form was notably cavalier, reminiscent of Lewis Carroll's *Humpty Dumpty*, for whom 'words mean what I choose them to mean'. Thus, all sorts of movement find their way into this

Premier Volume, including overtures, stray concerto episodes, operatic airs and extended fugal exercises, alongside the customary dances such as the *allemande*, *courante* and *gigue*, so that none of the eight suites exactly replicates the layout of its fellows.

From this formal aspect the Suite no. 2 in F major is the least orthodox, presenting us with what is essentially an Italian *sonata da chiesa*, its four alternating movements each highly distinctive in profile. The questing uncertainty of the opening Adagio, touched with a certain sombreness, is set off almost violently by the jubilant Italianate Allegro that follows it. Contrast this with the contrapuntal sobriety of a second Adagio, looking back to Handel's student days in Halle, or the dedicated expansiveness of the culminating fugue.

Wholly different in outline is the Suite no. 3 in D minor, whose omnium-gatherum variety among its seven movements reflects that calculated waywardness in Handel's approach to his art which both enchanted and exasperated his admirers. While an opening Prelude and fugue exhibit his prodigious technique, he then tips a nod to convention by including an Allemande and Courante before lurching into an Air with Variations, of a kind he scattered throughout the collection. A Gigue that might normally tie a neat bow around the suite turns out to be not quite the end, reserved as this is for the nervy Presto later orchestrated for his *Concerti Grossi* Opus 3.

Throughout his career Handel remained firmly rooted in his inheritance from the rich musical culture of Baroque Germany. Among its leading organists and keyboard masters was **Georg Böhm**, whose G minor Prelude, Fugue & Postlude, with its brilliantly inexorable opening iterations and graceful concluding paragraph, is one of the most striking works of its period. That the young J. S. Bach took stock of Böhm's achievement is clear from the Capriccio in D, a perfect blend of musical learning with a readiness to take the listener by surprise.

In writing an overture Handel would always remain loyal to the French style standardised by King Louis XIV's court composers, in which a fugal allegro is heralded by an opening adagio's gestural grandeur. For Suite no. 7 in G minor he adapted such a piece from an early cantata. Gallic elegance equally colours the succeeding Andante, followed by a restless Allegro, a pensive Sarabande and a Gigue whose character takes a hint from the popular harpsichord suites of Charles Dieupart, who played in Handel's opera orchestra. The work ends as loftily as it began, with a Passacaille whose *ostinato* formula uses a Venetian folk tune *La Pedrina*, perhaps picked up one of the composer's trips to Venice. Passacaille itself derives from Spanish words meaning 'a walk through the streets'. Who better than Handel for our companion?

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