

WIGMORE HALL

Wednesday 27 March 2024
7.30pm

Bach Keyboard Concertos

Mahan Esfahani director, harpsichord
Jacqueline Shave director, violin I
Peter Facer oboe

Britten Sinfonia

Marcus Barcham Stevens violin I
Miranda Dale violin II
Clare Finnimore viola

Caroline Dearnley cello
Stephen Williams double bass
Lynda Sayce theorbo

Johann Gottlieb Janitsch (1708-1763)

Quadro in G minor 'O Haupt voll Blut und Wunden'
I. Largo e mesto • II. Allegretto • III. Adagio ma non troppo • IV. Vivace non troppo

Johann Sebastian Bach (1685-1750)

Harpsichord Concerto No. 2 in E BWV1053 (1738)
I. • II. Siciliano • III. Allegro

Johann Sebastian Bach

Harpsichord Concerto No. 8 in D minor BWV1059R
reconstructed by Mahan Esfahani
I. [Tempo giusto] • II. Cembalo ad libitum, e segue • III. Presto

Interval

Georg Philipp Telemann (1681-1767)

Violin Concerto TWV51:g1
I. Allegro • II. Adagio • III. Allegro

Alessandro Marcello (1673-1747)

Oboe Concerto in D minor S D935 (by 1715)
I. Andante spiccato • II. Adagio • III. Presto

Johann Sebastian Bach

Harpsichord Concerto in A BWV1055 (1738)
I. Allegro • II. Larghetto • III. Allegro ma non tanto



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This evening's programme features three harpsichord concertos by Johann Sebastian Bach (1685-1750) as well as instrumental works by three composers associated with or known by Bach: Johann Gottlieb Janitsch (1708-63), Georg Philipp Telemann (1681-1767) and Alessandro Marcello (1673-1747). Spanning the early to the mid-18th Century, these works illustrate both the stylistic interconnections among composers in this period as well as the stylistic development from the High Baroque to the *galant*, prefiguring the changes that brought about the Classical period later in the century.

Having impressed the Prussian king Frederick the Great, **Janitsch** spent much of his career at the Prussian court in Berlin, where he was a colleague of Carl Philipp Emanuel Bach (1714-88), second son of JS Bach. Along with CPE Bach, Janitsch composed mostly in the *galant*, a transitional mid-century style that favoured balanced melodies with light accompaniment. His *Quadro in G minor* features the popular Lutheran Lenten chorale 'O Haupt voll Blut und Wunden', known in English as 'O Sacred Head Now Wounded'. The melody, on which the third movement is based, was composed by Hans Leo Hassler around 1600 as a secular love song. It was later adapted for use as a hymn and JS Bach harmonised it for use in his *St Matthew Passion*.

Telemann and JS Bach were contemporaries, friends and at times competitors in the German musical job market. Telemann spent most of his career in Frankfurt and then Hamburg as music director of one of the largest churches in the city. He applied for and was granted the same post in Leipzig which JS Bach would eventually hold; however, he declined after receiving a raise from his employers in Hamburg. Telemann also served as godfather to Bach's son, Emanuel. He was one of the most prolific composers, with over 3000 compositions including many different genres both sacred and secular, vocal and instrumental. His work on tonight's programme, the Violin Concerto in G minor, is exemplary of his instrumental works and was also arranged by Bach for solo keyboard (BWV985).

Marcello was an Italian nobleman who composed as a hobby rather than a profession. Spending most of his life in his hometown of Venice, he wrote a number of concertos which represent the Venetian style. Marcello's Oboe Concerto in D minor is primarily known because of Bach's 1715 arrangement for solo keyboard (BWV974), one of a set of arrangements Bach made of concertos by Venetian composers, mostly Antonio Vivaldi. Bach's arrangement is the earliest extant manuscript, but the concerto was printed as originally composed in Amsterdam in 1717.

The three harpsichord concertos by **JS Bach** on this evening's programme reveal Bach's penchant for reusing earlier compositions. Many of his seven concertos for solo harpsichord, intended as a set and found in a single autograph manuscript from 1738, include instrumental arrangements of cantata movements, demonstrating the frequent overlap of sacred and secular genres in the Baroque. Bach's many arrangements of concertos by other composers such as those by Telemann and Marcello on this programme show how his wide-ranging familiarity with the work of other composers of various national styles influenced his own instrumental style.

The Harpsichord Concerto No. 2 in E BWV1053 is based on two of Bach's own church cantatas from 1726. The first two movements are derived from *Gott soll allein mein Herze haben* BWV169; the first movement is based on the opening sinfonia while the second is based on the alto aria 'Stirb in mir, Welt'. The final fast movement is based on the sinfonia which begins the cantata *Ich geh und suche mit Verlangen* BWV49. Bach's choice of these cantatas likely stems from the fact that they included obbligato parts for organ - that is, written out parts rather than the conventional improvised basso continuo part. The inclusion in those cantatas of an existing keyboard part would make its adaptation to a keyboard concerto much easier.

The Harpsichord Concerto No. 8 in D minor BWV1059 is particularly difficult to trace as its extant sources are only fragmentary. As scored for harpsichord, oboe and strings, only nine bars exist in manuscript, apparently abandoned by Bach shortly after he began it. Like BWV1053, Bach reused the opening sinfonia of a church cantata, *Geist und Seele wird verwirret* BWV35, in writing this fragment. Tonight, Mahan Esfahani plays the work in a reconstruction of his own devising.

Finally, the Harpsichord Concerto No. 4 in A BWV1055 remains a mystery in terms of its origins. Since it has sometimes been suggested that the other concertos in the same manuscript have their roots in earlier concertos, musicologists have proposed different instruments for a hypothetical original concerto of which this work is an arrangement, including the oboe d'amore, a relative of the oboe which is slightly lower in pitch and has a less piercing timbre, and the viola d'amore.

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Nothing counters the notion of Bach being somehow indifferent to the instrumentation or forces for his works more obviously than the composer's keyboard concertos for which the same ideas were expressed in other forms, e.g., BWV1054 (which uses material from the violin concerto in E major BWV1042) and BWV1057 (which has a similar relationship with the fourth 'Brandenburg' Concerto in G, BWV1049). Let us be very clear: the keyboard concertos in these instances are *not* transcriptions of earlier concertos, but rather instances of Bach amplifying material in other ways with other instruments whilst sensitively re-fashioning that material to fit the idiom at hand. Philipp Spitta, the first modern musicologist to seriously examine Bach's output, subtly dissects the complex relationship between these works:

For that Bach undertook their re-arrangement merely because he did not care to write new clavier concertos is an assumption utterly contrary to his character, and is disproved even by the large number of these re-arrangements. No doubt he felt that the style of his violin concertos was so much moulded by his clavier style that their true nature could only be fully brought out in the shape of clavier

concertos. It cannot be denied that in many details, and notably *cantabile* passages, lose in effect in the clavier arrangement, but as a whole we must regard them as new and higher developments, rather than arrangements.

Likewise, the argument that there must have been 'lost' originals for concertos existing only in keyboard form - namely, BWV1052, 1053, 1055 - is based on the shaky logic that since the keyboard-writing in these concertos has violinistic figuration they clearly must have been originally for violin. Seeing as most concertos in the era were written for violin, it only seems natural that in inventing a new type of concerto Bach would be imitating the violin in some way. Are we to assume then that the preludes of the English Suites, solo keyboard pieces designed according to concerto form, thus also have lost originals simply by virtue of having violinistic figuration? Of course not. Let me repeat: there is no documentary evidence for BWV1052, BWV1053 or BWV1055 having been transcribed from lost works. Anything to the contrary is the result of relentless repetition of faulty notions.

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