

WIGMORE HALL

Monday 2 October 2023
7.30pm

Bach Sonatas for violin and harpsichord

Antje Weithaas violin
Mahan Esfahani harpsichord

Johann Sebastian Bach (1685-1750) Violin Sonata in E minor BWV1023 (c.1717)
I. [Preludium] • II. Adagio ma non tanto • III. Allemande • IV. Gigue

Partita No. 2 in D minor for solo violin BWV1004 (1720)
I. Allemande • II. Courante • III. Sarabande • IV. Gigue • V. Chaconne

Violin Sonata No. 1 in B minor BWV1014 (c.1717-23)
I. Adagio • II. Allegro • III. Andante • IV. Allegro

Interval

Violin Sonata No. 2 in A BWV1015 (c.1717-23)
I. Andante • II. Allegro • III. Andante un poco • IV. Presto

Georg Benda (1722-1795) Harpsichord Sonata No. 6 in D (pub. 1757)
I. Allegro • II. Un poco lento • III. Allegro assai

Carl Philipp Emanuel Bach (1714-1788) Sonata in C minor for violin and harpsichord H514 (1763)
I. Allegro moderato • II. Adagio ma non troppo • III. Presto



This concert is part of the CAVATINA Chamber Music Trust ticket scheme, offering free tickets to those aged 8-25

Antje Weithaas and Mahan Esfahani return later in the week with two more concerts of Bach Sonatas for violin and harpsichord:

Tuesday 3 October, 7.30pm

Saturday 7 October, 7.30pm



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JS Bach's six sonatas for violin and harpsichord, written between 1720 and 1723 for Leopold, Prince of Anhalt-Köthen, are typical of his insatiable desire to learn, change and perfect. It is a wildly varied set of pieces that heralded the dawn of the Classical period years before it began. Long after Bach's death his son, Carl Philipp Emanuel, said of them: 'they still sound excellent and give me much joy, although they date back more than fifty years.' The truth was, though, that even dating back half a century by then, the influence of this extraordinary collection was only just beginning to show itself.

When Bach first arrived in Köthen he was given access to the best musicians available and a treasure-trove of high-quality instruments. It was the perfect opportunity for a musical change, and a happy period in his life working for 'a generous Prince who not only loved music, [but] understood it.' A further addition of a sophisticated new harpsichord to the Prince's collection meant Bach was also able to investigate the potential for chamber music, and the Violin Sonata in E minor BWV1023 is representative of the small set of violin sonatas with figured bass accompaniment which he wrote in his early years at Köthen. The opening toccata is as much of a direct statement of the Italian heritage of the *sonata da camera* as it could possibly be, using the violin alone to drive the music forward until it naturally opens out into equally lyrical Italianate elegance. Of the small number of solo violin sonatas in this style that Bach composed, this one makes the clearest case for his intent to understand, change and even subvert recognised forms into something new.

To that end, the *Chaconne*, the final movement of the second partita for unaccompanied violin in D minor, is on the surface simply one dance movement of the many that make up the collection of six sonatas and partitas for solo violin. Despite the individual marvels in every movement, the *Chaconne* more than any other is a free-standing work of profound genius and the one most frequently performed as a single piece. On the page it is largely laid out as melodic lines underpinned by vertical chords: to maintain the melody it is necessary to use the chords, but to illuminate the beauty of those chords it is also necessary to sew them into the melody. It could almost be mistaken for a solo sonata with figured bass presented on a single line, with the melody, accompaniment and continuo all present to be picked out of the texture by the listener at their pleasure.

If the E minor sonata is a solo sonata for two instruments, and the *Chaconne* is a duo sonata for one instrument, then the sonatas for violin and harpsichord go further: they present the trio sonata according to JS Bach. In them, he imagines two melody lines – the violin and the upper voice of the harpsichord – of equal importance, supported by a bassline that moved constantly between supporting

voice and actor in the conversation (and back again), reinventing the trio sonata in the shape of the duo sonata, and revolutionising both in the process.

The Violin Sonata No. 1 in B minor is in many ways the technical masterpiece of the set, beginning with an *Adagio* that integrates all the parts into a perfectly coherent texture. The harpsichord opens the sonata, but when the violin enters four bars later its swell covers the decay of the harpsichord, and it is immediately clear that one instrument will not survive without the other. The Violin Sonata No. 2 in A is entirely different in character, showcasing how the three parts work together and passing melodic and harmonic ideas around in a playful way to draw clear lines between the parts, rather than the instruments. In doing this, Bach completely emancipates the harpsichord from its previous role of servant to the violin, and makes sure that no true soloist is ever established.

By the middle of the 18th Century, though, fashions were changing, and the 'old' Bach was being left behind in the traditions of the past. Music at the flamboyant court of Frederick the Great in Potsdam in particular was surging ahead with the new *empfindsamer stil* ('highly sensitive style'), and its composers, which included members of the extensive Benda family and even Bach's own son Carl Philipp Emanuel (known then as the 'great' Bach) were, on the surface, making his painstaking processes appear dusty and staid.

Like JS Bach, **Georg Benda** was equally renowned as a violinist and harpsichordist. He also had one eye on the future, writing for the first practitioners of the clavichord in the same spirit of experimentation. His Harpsichord Sonata No. 6 in D combines the unexpected with meticulously wrought counterpoint. But although parallels have long been drawn between the music of Benda and his colleague CPE Bach, it was Johann Sebastian's son who was the true musical presence in Frederick's court, even though the diarist Charles Burney noted 'the prince had certainly great professors in his service, though he was never partial to Emanuel Bach, the greatest of them all.'

CPE Bach's Sonata in C minor for violin and harpsichord is one of two such sonatas he composed in 1763 and comes closer than anything Benda wrote to fully integrated pieces of chamber music in the mould of his father's accompanied violin sonatas. In a reversal of the first of that set, it opens with just two voices, neither fully engaged in conversation until the central slow movement. But also, in reversing that reveal, it presages the most quintessential string quartet movements of the subsequent Classical period. In that, if the solo sonatas and partitas made history, the accompanied sonatas of JS Bach made the future.

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