

WIGMORE HALL

Monday 3 October 2022
1.00pm

Ewa Półożcka piano

Johann Sebastian Bach (1685-1750)

Ricercar a3 from *The Musical Offering* BWV1079 (1747)

15 Sinfonias BWV787-801 (c.1720 rev. 1723)

*No. 1 in C • No. 2 in C minor • No. 3 in D •
No. 4 in D minor • No. 5 in E flat • No. 6 in E •
No. 7 in E minor • No. 8 in F • No. 9 in F minor •
No. 10 in G • No. 11 in G minor • No. 12 in A •
No. 13 in A minor • No. 14 in B flat •
No. 15 in B minor*

Partita No. 5 in G BWV829 (pub. 1726-31)

*I. Præambulum • II. Allemande • III. Corrente •
IV. Sarabande • V. Tempo di Minuetto •
VI. Passepied • VII. Gigue*

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RADIO



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In May 1747, the Leipzig *Kapellmeister* **Johann Sebastian Bach** travelled to Potsdam, near Berlin, to visit his son Carl Philipp Emanuel, who was employed as a keyboard player at the court of King Frederick II ('the Great'). The King played a theme on his fortepiano and invited Bach to improvise, on the spot, a three-voice fugue based on it, which he did so skilfully that 'all those present were seized with astonishment'. On his return to Leipzig, Bach decided to expand this fugue into a much larger work, dedicated to the King: the *Musikalisches Opfer* ('Musical Offering'), BWV1079. Not only did Bach present a polished version of the improvised fugue, the *Ricercar a3*, but he also included a further *Ricercar* for six voices, a trio sonata for flute, violin and continuo, and five canons, all based entirely on the Royal Theme.

'Ricercar' is an archaic Italian term, meaning 'to search and research'. For Bach, it perfectly encapsulated the character of fugal art, but he also used it in the published score to form an ingenious acrostic that summarises the genesis of the entire work: *Regis Iussu Cantio Et Reliqua Canonica Arte Resoluta* ('The theme given at the King's command and the remainder resolved according to canonic art'). The special origins of the Royal Theme are still evident in the *Ricercar a3*, with interludes between the fugal expositions – unlike any others found in Bach's keyboard music – that hint at its improvisatory roots and conception for the fortepiano, a new instrument that, unlike the harpsichord, could play both loudly and softly.

The 15 Sinfonias BWV787–801 form the second half of a much earlier collection of keyboard works entitled *Aufrichtige Anleitung* ('Honest Guidance'). On the title page of the autograph manuscript Bach explains that it has a didactic purpose, designed to help 'lovers of the keyboard, and especially those eager to learn' to play pieces written in two-voice counterpoint (the 15 Inventions, BWV772–786), and then more difficult works in three voices (the Sinfonias). The term 'invention' directly relates to the theory of classical rhetoric, in which a central idea for an oration was 'invented' and expanded upon. Similarly, as Bach states on the title page, his collection shows its users how to develop good musical ideas: in each piece, all the musical material is derived in some way from the themes heard in the first few bars. Bach was likewise deliberate in his use of the term 'Sinfonia', which comes from the Greek *symphonia* (meaning 'sounding of voices'), thus highlighting the more complex nature of these pieces, with three independent parts sounding together. They demonstrate an extraordinary variety of contrapuntal techniques: for example, in the bleak No. 9 in F minor, where three distinct motifs are introduced in the opening four bars and then combined and transformed in different ways using invertible counterpoint, moving through a range of keys.

The *Aufrichtige Anleitung* has its origins in the *Clavier-Büchlein* ('Little Keyboard Book') that Bach

began writing in 1720 for his nine-year-old son, Wilhelm Friedemann, whilst in Köthen. Among many other pieces, this manuscript contains earlier versions of both the Inventions and Sinfonias, where they are each titled 'Preambulum' and 'Fantasia', respectively. When Bach then decided to copy these pieces out again in 1723, he made only minor alterations to their musical text, but completely changed their ordering. Unlike *The Well-tempered Clavier* (1722), which features all 24 keys, the Inventions and Sinfonias utilise only eight major and seven minor keys, none of which exceed four sharps or flats. These were the keys most favoured by an older system of tuning, in which each key had its own special character. In the *Clavier-Büchlein*, Bach emphasised this fact by organising each set of 15 pieces in a circular fashion, according to the ascending and descending diatonic scale (C major, D minor, E minor, F major, etc.). In the *Aufrichtige Anleitung*, however, he reordered them to alternate between major and minor, thus creating a single ascending scale pattern (C major, C minor, D major, D minor, etc.) that resembles the more modern chromatic scheme of *The Well-tempered Clavier*.

By 1723, when this final copy was made, Bach had become musical director of the St Thomas School in Leipzig, where his initial focus was on writing church music. However, he returned to keyboard composition with his *Clavier-Übung* ('Keyboard Practice'), the first part of which comprises the Six Partitas (BWV825–830). Originally published separately, they were issued in 1731 as a set. Like the so-called English and French Suites, each Partita consists of an ordered series of dance movements.

The fifth Partita in G major, BWV829, is a joyous work that is reminiscent of other pieces by Bach in this key (including the fifth French Suite and the *Goldberg Variations*). It opens with a spirited *Praeambulum* featuring running passages and exciting displays of hand-crossing. A graceful *Allemande* follows, based on a short motif in triplets that is developed in two-part counterpoint, before being inverted in the second section. The *Corrente*, an agile Italian dance in 3/8, precedes an elegant three-voice *Sarabande* filled with ornamentation (here, dotted rhythms and appoggiaturas) that requires careful expressive interpretation from the performer. The cheeky hemiola rhythms in the following minuet, pitting two beats against three, are atypical of this dance; by contrast, the rustic, swinging character of the *Passepied* is more conventional. Bach doesn't hold back in the final *Gigue*, however, crowning this Partita with an exuberant (and very difficult!) double fugue featuring two themes that are at first heard separately, and then combined in dialogue. With the *Clavier-Übung*, Bach sought not only to 'refresh the spirits', but once again push the boundaries of musical composition and performance in unprecedented ways.

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