

WIGMORE HALL

Tuesday 3 October 2023
7.30pm

Bach Sonatas for violin and harpsichord

Antje Weithaas violin
Mahan Esfahani harpsichord

Carl Philipp Emanuel Bach
(1714-1788)

Violin Sonata in B minor H513 (1763)
*I. Allegro moderato • II. Poco andante •
III. Allegretto siciliano*

Georg Benda (1722-1795)

Harpsichord Sonata No. 3 in D minor (pub. 1757)
I. Allegro ma non tanto • II. Andantino • III. Allegro

Johann Sebastian Bach (1685-1750)

Violin Sonata No. 4 in C minor BWV1017 (c.1717-23)
I. Siciliano. Largo • II. Allegro • III. Adagio • IV. Allegro

Interval

Johann Sebastian Bach

Fugue in G minor BWV1026 (before 1712)
Violin Sonata No. 3 in E BWV1016 (c.1717-23)
*I. Adagio • II. Allegro •
III. Adagio ma non tanto • IV. Allegro*

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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 one more concert of Bach Sonatas for violin and harpsichord, on Saturday 7 October, 7.30pm.



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In 1747, the 62-year-old JS Bach arrived in Potsdam after a long and uncomfortable journey from Leipzig, looking forward to a meal and a rest before meeting his son Carl Philipp Emanuel and his employer Frederick the Great. Instead, though, he was summoned straight to court to be met by the King who, with 'a kind of agitation in his voice' that might have had more to do with his coffee addiction than any sort of musical reverence, had professed himself too impatient to wait any longer. He had come up with what he believed to be a melody immune to fugal treatment and wanted to defeat the 'old' Bach with it.

Despite the frosty reception - and the fact that far from being by Frederick, the melody was so sophisticated that it could only reasonably have been written by CPE Bach - this infamous meeting yielded one of Bach's greatest masterworks, *The Musical Offering*. Yet neither Bach nor Frederick would concede that this meeting was anything special: the King had his biographer relegate it to a footnote, and Bach referred to it subsequently as no more than 'that small incident'. Nevertheless, this crossing of paths absolutely embodied the critical musical crossroads that was happening across Europe at the time.

During his tenure as concertmaster at the court of Prince Leopold of Anhalt-Köthen, which lasted from 1717 to 1723, JS Bach had written a set of six sonatas for violin and harpsichord. Although not as obviously virtuosic or radical as the six solo sonatas and partitas that came out of the same period, they represented a reimagining of the Italian trio sonata as duo sonata and had, consequently, revolutionised both forms. This is borne out in **CPE Bach's** Violin Sonata in B minor, written 46 years later in 1763 when he was still in the employment of Frederick the Great. Like his father's version, also the first of the set, it uses the opening movement to showcase the contrast and relationship between the violin and keyboard. Although it opens with a very different mood to his father's model, the procedure is strikingly similar: he introduces the keyboard first, asserting its equal footing with the violin and introducing the threads of all possible permutations and combinations between the two before gradually pulling them together for the end of the movement, where the listener realises that he has established an entirely reciprocal and equal relationship. In the other movements, phrases are relayed between the two with perfect ease and parity.

JS Bach had secured his first proper job when he was 18, as court violinist in the private orchestra of the Duke of Weimar's brother. During his time there, Bach had become thoroughly familiar with the solo violin sonata as it had existed at the time: a solo line with a figured accompaniment in the old Italian style. He was never hugely attached to it as a form - the instruments operated too much as individuals and

there was little space for sophisticated interaction - but he was, however, interested in the musical personality of the sonata that was grounded in the works of Vivaldi and Corelli. When Bach arrived at Köthen and was given a vast array of top-quality instruments to use, he was able to experiment with the relationship between instruments, but he never lost sight of the Italian heritage of many of the forms with which he was also experimenting. This was still true by the time his own son was extending these ideas for Frederick, most of whose court musicians had also had some form of early experience either of Italian church music, or the violin works of Vivaldi.

For **Georg Benda**, both of these were the case: his first violin influence had been from the works of Vivaldi, and he had been trained as a chorister in Dresden before working for Frederick. His keyboard sonatas in particular show these influences and although they are often idiosyncratic and slightly eccentric, they are nevertheless also the product of the deep study of his predecessors. He and CPE Bach are known to have held each other in high mutual esteem, and his set of six sonatas in which his Harpsichord Sonata No. 3 in D minor appears is structured in the same way as CPE's, which had been published some years before. However, Benda's musical sensibilities are not on display in the same abundance as they are in his colleague's, and he finds his own way to the Italianate lyrical melodies that were at the root of the whole progression of this form. In that way, he also creates a closer link to the opening *Siciliano* of **JS Bach's** Violin Sonata No. 4 in C minor than were found in many of CPE's calling-cards.

The Fugue in G minor is the earliest surviving of a group of four violin sonatas with continuo accompaniment that provided Bach with a touchstone for his violin works at Köthen. But while the toccata-like opening of the E minor sonata that began last night's concert emphasises the Italian influences with which Bach subsequently experimented for the accompanied violin sonatas, the G minor Fugue reminds the listener of the more technical elements, such as the double and triple counterpoint, that evolved into the solo sonatas and partitas.

The opening of the Violin Sonata No. 3 in E could not be more of a contrast to the G minor Fugue, beginning with a song-like *Adagio* that could almost be a concerto movement. But the third movement has an almost limitless number of parts that nearly negates the similarities - or not - between the trio sonatas from which they came, and the masterful artform they turned into in Bach's hands.

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