WIGMORE HALL

Sunday 4 June 2023
7.30pm

Louis Creac'h violin
Robin Pharo viola da gamba
Jean Rondeau harpsichord

Georg Böhm (1661-1733)	Prelude, Fugue and Postlude in G minor *I. Präludium • II. Fuge • III. Postludium*
Johann Sebastian Bach (1685-1750)	Violin Sonata in G BWV1021 (?1732-5) *I. Adagio • II. Vivace • III. Largo • IV. Presto*
	Viola da Gamba Sonata No. 2 in D BWV1028 (before 1741) *I. Adagio • II. Allegro • III. Andante • IV. Allegro*
Philipp Heinrich Erlebach (1657-1714)	Trio Sonata No. 2 in E minor (pub. 1694) *I. Adagio - Allegro - Adagio • II. Allemande • III. Courante • IV. Sarabande • V. Gigue*
Johann Sebastian Bach	Violin Sonata in E minor BWV1023 (after 1723) *I. [Preludium] • II. Adagio ma non tanto • III. Allemande • IV. Gigue*

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> The most renowned clavier masters of that day were Froberger, Pachelbel, Buxtehude, Bruhns and Böhm. Johann Christoph [Bach] possessed a book containing pieces by these masters and [Johann Sebastian] Bach begged earnestly for it, but without effect. Refusal increasing his determination, he laid plans to get the book without his brother's knowledge. It was kept on a bookcase which had a latticed front, but Bach's hands were small and inserting them, he got hold of the book, rolled it up and - over six months – copied it by hand. He worked by moonlight, since he was not allowed a candle…

Bach will have been around ten years old when this incident (recounted by his son Carl Philipp Emanuel) took place, but he already appreciated the music of Georg Böhm. Born in Thuringia, Böhm studied the organ in Ohrdruf with Bach's great-uncle Heinrich; there's a tenuous possibility that he may have tutored the young Johann Sebastian at Lüneburg, where he served as organist from 1698 until his death.

In any case, it's certain that Böhm was a widely-admired keyboard composer and contrapuntalist. This arresting *Prelude, Fugue and Postlude* survives only as a manuscript in the so called *Andreas-Bach-Buch* – a collection of keyboard works made by Johann Christoph Bach, and possibly the very one that the boy Johann Sebastian slipped out of the bookcase on that moonlit night, which would date it somewhere before the mid-1690s.

Johann Sebastian Bach was a skilled violinist: according to Carl Philipp Emanuel, he 'played the violin from youth to old age with a pure and searching tone'. Bach's biographer Forkel maintains that Bach wrote his sonatas for violin and keyboard or continuo while serving at the court of Cöthen (1717-23). 'There I had a gracious Prince as master, who knew music as well as he loved it, and I hoped to remain in his service until the end of my life' commented Bach years later, and with the Prince's support he focused on instrumental music in Cöthen to an extent unmatched in his later career.

While the exact date and provenance of this Sonata in G major (which survives only in a copy made after 1721 by Anna Magdalena Bach) remains uncertain (with some authorities placing it in Weimar or Cöthen, others maintaining that it dates from the 1730s, and still others questioning Bach's authorship outright) its spirit of instrumental invention is certainly reminiscent of Bach's Cöthen period. The sense of a musical partnership – a true dialogue – is unmistakable in the opening *Adagio* (the work falls into the four standard movements, alternately slow and fast, of the *sonata da chiesa*) – as the violin spins its *arioso* around a calmly responsive bass. The dance-like ebullience of the two faster movements, meanwhile is a friendly invitation, to both players, to let their imaginations run free.

Every authority agreed that Carl Friedrich Abel was the finest viola da gamba player of his age. 'Justly admired as he was at his publick Performances' recorded his obituary in the *St James's Chronicle* after his death in 1787, 'it was a few only of his intimate Friends in private who were Witnesses of his most wonderful musical Powers, to come at which …[Abel] would catch up his Viol di Gambo…till he brought tears into the eyes of his Hearers'. Abel came from a dynasty of virtuosos on this (by then) all-but-extinct instrument; his father Christian Ferdinand had played in Bach's Cöthen orchestra and Carl had studied under Bach himself at the *Thomasschule* in Leipzig.

Bach may have written his three sonatas for viola da gamba and harpsichord for either father or son – with no original manuscript in existence, it's frustratingly unclear. Scholars have suggested dates from around 1725 to the early 1740s. In any case, though, this was late in musical history to be writing for the gamba, and there's an air of melancholy about this D major Sonata with its *sonata da chiesa* form. The stately tread of the opening *Adagio* and the bittersweet, slowly-intensifying B minor *siciliano* third movement sink deep into the memory, evoking the 'pleasing, yet learned modulation; the richest harmony; and the most elegant and polished melody' which, according to Charles Burney, the younger Abel could draw like no other player from his soon-to-be-forgotten instrument.

Erlebach was a Saxon, and spent much of his career working in Thuringia at the court of the princes of Schwarzburg-Rudolstadt. They esteemed him so highly that after his death they purchased most of his unpublished manuscripts from his widow, only to lose them (and with them, some 90% of Erlebach's extant compositions) in a library fire in 1735. Erlebach is known to have written some 24 masses, 400 cantatas and around 120 instrumental works, of which his six trio sonatas published in 1694 are among the handful that survive.

The combination of violin and viola da gamba was popular in amateur music making of the period (the cello took hold relatively late in the German states), and Erlebach's sonatas demonstrate that he was abreast of contemporary taste – incorporating movements in fashionable dance styles from across Europe. This second sonata of the set allows both string instruments to sing and participate in the dialogue – the gamba is certainly not confined to a continuo role – and Erlebach maintains the same attention to all three of his players right through to the sonata's vigorous (and surprisingly intricate) closing gigue.

When, or indeed if, Bach actually wrote his Sonata in E minor BWV1023 is still uncertain: the earliest manuscript (which is not in Bach's hand, but that of a Dresden-based copyist) dates from 1730. But its brilliant, improvisatory introductory prelude, the searching *Adagio* that follows, and the two sophisticated but spirited dance movements that conclude the work are so characterful and arresting that even if they aren't unadulterated Bach, they're surely the work of a composer in the same class. Praise does not come higher than that.