

WIGMORE HALL

Saturday 7 December 2024
1.00pm

Bach and Italy

Justin Taylor harpsichord

Alessandro Scarlatti (1660-1725)

Arpeggio from Toccata in D minor

Johann Sebastian Bach (1685-1750)

Chromatic Fantasia and Fugue in D minor BWV903
(before 1723)

Concerto No. 3 in D minor (after Marcello Oboe
Concerto in D minor) BWV974
I. Allegro • II. Adagio • III. Presto

Domenico Scarlatti (1685-1757)

Sonata in A Kk208

Sonata in B minor Kk27

Johann Sebastian Bach

Concerto for harpsichord, strings and continuo (after
Vivaldi RV230) BWV972
I. Allegro • II. Larghetto • III. Allegro

Benedetto Marcello (1686-1739)

Adagio from Harpsichord Sonata No. 7 in A minor

Johann Sebastian Bach

Andante from Concerto in C BWV Anh.151

Toccata in E minor BWV914

Antonio Valente (1565-1580)

Lo Ballo dell'Intorcia con sette mutanze

Gagliarda Napolitana con molte mutanze

Johann Sebastian Bach

Allegro from Concerto in C (after Vivaldi RV208)
BWV594

Italian Concerto in F BWV971 (pub. 1735)
I. [Allegro] • II. Andante • III. Presto

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Note: The programme of this concert has changed since these notes were written

In his pioneering biography of **Johann Sebastian Bach** (1802), Johann Nikolaus Forkel gives an informative (albeit biased) account of Bach's development as a composer. He writes: 'Bach's first attempts at composition were, like all first attempts, defective...[but] he soon began to feel...[that] some kind of guide was necessary. Vivaldi's Concertos for the violin, which were then just published, served him for such a guide. He so often heard them praised as admirable compositions that he conceived the happy idea of arranging them all for his clavier....The change necessary to be made in the ideas and passages composed for the violin, but not suitable to the clavier, taught him to think musically.'

Bach first encountered the modern Italian concerto style, as exemplified by the works of Antonio Vivaldi, the Marcello brothers, and others, around the years 1713–1714, when he was working at the ducal court in Weimar. These composers were by no means his only influences: as Forkel notes, Bach also carefully studied the music of figures such as Pachelbel, Buxtehude and Frescobaldi. Nonetheless, the impact of Italian music on the development of Bach's own style—and his compositional process of 'musical thinking'—was profound.

During his time in Weimar, Bach transcribed around 20 concertos by other composers for solo keyboard. Several of these are violin concertos from Vivaldi's *L'estro armonico*, Op. 3 (1711), including the Concerto in D major BWV972, based on Op. 3 No. 9 (RV230), and the Concerto in F major BWV978, based on Op. 3 No. 3 (RV310). However, Bach goes much further than simple arrangement: he frequently rewrites sections of the music, making them more idiomatic for keyboard and adding his own personal flourishes. In the sprightly last movement of the D major concerto, for instance, he changes Vivaldi's original semiquavers in the central section to demisemiquavers, increasing their virtuosity and brilliance. Similar refinements are found in the first movement of the F major concerto, where the opening descending figure is imitated in the bass, a feature missing in the original. The Concerto in C major BWV594, meanwhile, is actually a transcription for organ of a Vivaldi concerto in D major (RV208); however, its last movement concludes with a solo cadenza for manuals only that is equally impressive on the harpsichord.

Bach also transcribed concertos by the Marcello brothers, including Alessandro Marcello's Concerto for oboe and strings in D minor, which had been published

around 1716. The Adagio from Bach's solo keyboard arrangement (BWV974) features a steady heartbeat of repeated quavers in the bass, above which sits an exquisite, highly ornamented melody. In today's recital, we also hear excerpts from an original work by **Benedetto Marcello**, the Harpsichord Sonata No. 7 in A minor. The Andante from the Concerto in C BWV Anh.151 (BWV App C, S. 716) is likewise very much in the Italian melodic style; although it is ascribed to Bach in an 18th-century manuscript source, he is probably not the composer.

The celebrated Italian Concerto in F major BWV971 is an original composition that comes from the second part (1735) of Bach's landmark publication *Clavier-Übung* ('Keyboard Practice'), which also includes the French Overture in B minor BWV831. Here, Bach brilliantly juxtaposes the two great national styles of his day, represented by their principal orchestral genres, a contrast heightened by their extremely different keys. Both works are written for a two-manual harpsichord, allowing distinctions between 'tutti' and 'solo' textures through the use of forte and piano dynamics. The opening movement of BWV971 is a spirited Allegro, in which the right hand is generally the virtuosic soloist and the left the accompanist. In the following Andante, Bach draws closely on his Italian models, spinning out a beautiful *arioso* melody that soars over the bass accompaniment. The concerto concludes with a high-spirited Presto, in which melodic material jumps from hand to hand.

The Chromatic Fantasia and Fugue in D minor BWV903, which survives in three versions, was admired even during Bach's lifetime, and remained highly influential after his death. For Forkel, it was 'unique, and never had its like', and it was widely played during the 19th Century. Virtuoso and improvisational in style, the Fantasia opens with bravura flourishes that span almost the entire keyboard. The Fugue, which features an angular chromatic subject, is spread out over a magnificent canvas, gradually building in intensity and momentum towards a thrilling climax.

Bach's seven keyboard toccatas represent some of his earliest works. The word 'toccata' comes from the Italian *toccare* ('to touch'); these pieces were therefore designed to showcase the player's brilliance and virtuosity. The Toccata in E minor BWV914 opens with a brief declamatory introduction that leads into a double fugue marked *Un poco allegro*. A cadenza-like Adagio follows, before a second fugue—the subject of which evokes the Italian violin style—concludes the work.

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