

Mahan Esfahani harpsichord
Sunday 24 March 2019 2.30pm
St George's Hall Concert Room
sponsored by Investec

JOHANN SEBASTIAN BACH (1685-1750)

Born into a family of musicians in north Germany, J.S. Bach was orphaned at the age of ten and went to live in Ohrdruf with his brother, Christoph. At 15, Bach joined the choir of St Michael's in Lüneberg as a boy soprano, becoming their accompanist when his voice broke. He began composing, and became a violinist in Weimar's court orchestra.

In 1708, after spells at Arnstadt, Lübeck and Mühlhausen, Bach returned to Weimar, working there as court organist and chamber musician for nine years. In 1717, Prince Leopold of Cöthen invited Bach to become his kapellmeister; it was at Cöthen that Bach became proficient as a harpsichordist. In 1720, Bach's first wife Maria Barbara died, and nearly two years later he married a talented soprano, 20-year-old Anna Magdalena Wilcken, who helped raise the four of Bach's children who had survived infancy, as well as assisting him in copying scores.

In 1722 the cantor at St Thomas's School in Leipzig died and, after conducting his St John Passion there, Bach was appointed to the position. As part of his Leipzig duties Bach would frequently direct his music from the harpsichord, and it was during these years that he wrote his seven harpsichord concertos, BWV 1052-58. He remained in Leipzig for the rest of his life, and when he died his estate included eight harpsichords

and two lute-harpsichords – keyboard instruments which use gut rather than metal strings to sound rather like the lute.

Bach's obituary suggests that few could match his facility for inventing musical ideas at the keyboard, both spontaneously, and as part of the compositional process:

[inset] "How strange, how new, how beautiful were his ideas in improvising. How perfectly he realised them! All his fingers were equally skilful; all were capable of the most perfect accuracy in performance."

Bach wrote music in every known keyboard form, extending the parameters of each as he did so. He would have played on the spectrum of keyboard instruments available in his day, including the clavichord, with its gentle sonority created as each string is struck, as well as the harpsichord, its stronger sound made by plucked strings. Bach carried out repairs on all the court harpsichords at Cöthen, and was also known as a designer of organs.

As a teacher, Bach not only demonstrated to his students the art of great keyboard playing, but also wrote for them compositions specifically designed to enhance their technique. Bach had little time for theory separate from practice; rather than writing in words how a student might excel, he chose instead to provide practical solutions. The results are as far removed from dry student exercises as one could imagine. Musical profundity is never sacrificed to technical ingenuity, but nor is rigour of technique inhibited for the sake of expressive effect. As Bach said of his Inventions and Sinfonias, he aimed to offer:

[inset] "Honest guidance, by which the amateurs of the keyboard – especially, however, those desirous of learning – are shown a clear way not only (1) to learn to play cleanly in two parts, but also, after further progress, (2) to handle three [obligato?] parts correctly and well; and along with this not only to obtain good

inventions (ideas) but to develop the same well; above all, however, to achieve a cantabile style in playing and at the same time acquire a strong foretaste of composition.”

In 1790, Ernst Ludwig Gerber recorded a retrospective account of his father, Heinrich Nicolaus Gerber, as a 22-year-old student of Bach:

[inset] “[Bach] promised to give him the instruction he desired and asked at once whether he had industriously played fugues. At the first lesson he set his Inventions before him. When he had studied these through to Bach’s satisfaction, there followed a series of suites, then The Well-Tempered Clavier.”

Dance suites represented a popular instrumental genre during Bach’s lifetime, and both French and English Suites for the keyboard were included in his four Clavier-Übung (Keyboard Exercise) volumes. Bach’s first biographer, Johann Nikolaus Forkel, wrote in 1802:

[inset] “Keyboard compositions of such excellence had never been seen or heard before. Anyone who had learned to perform some of their movements well could make his fortune in the world, and even today a young artist might gain recognition in this way, so brilliant, well-sounding, expressive, and ever-new are these pieces.”

Four Duettos, BWV 802-805
from Clavier-Übung III (1739)

No.1 in E minor, BWV 802

No.2 in F major, BWV 803

No.3 in G major, BWV 804

No.4 in A minor, BWV 805

Published in 1739, the Clavier-Übung III is a substantial and hugely significant collection of organ works “prepared for the

lovers and particularly connoisseurs”, and includes the Four Duettos, BWV 802-805. These duets represent an encyclopaedic approach to French style, including variations of tempo, time signature, key, form, counterpoint and harmony.

The first, BWV 802, is an ingenious double fugue in which the material is swapped between the two parts. It has been suggested that BWV 803 was composed as a response to a heated debate on style. The fugue is a quintessential example of the so-called “natural” style; Birnbaum and Scheibe had criticised Bach for supposedly deviating from this ideal, the latter arguing that in Bach’s compositions he had “by his bombastic and intricate procedures deprived them of naturalness and obscured their beauty by an excess of art”. Bach seems to react to this attack with a deliberately angular, irregular, chromatic central section. BWV 804 is in G major, a key which frequently drew from Bach some of his most light-hearted music. True enough, this work exudes a dance-like quality and is relatively straightforward in terms of tonality and harmony. In BWV 805 Bach reaches new heights of originality with daring chromatic shifts. In common with the first duet, the two parts are interchangeable.

Partita No.4 in D, BWV 828
from Clavier-Übung I (1725-28)

Ouverture
Allemande
Courante
Aria
Sarabande
Menuet
Gigue

The Clavier-Übung I consists of the six Partitas, BWV 825-830. The Partita No.4 in D, BWV 828, begins with a French Overture (slow-fast), its quick section characterised by animated scales. The Allemande is celebrated for its shapely melody, spontaneous

rhythms, and two-part left-hand accompaniment. A remarkably lively Aria is sandwiched between a vigorous Courante and hypnotic Sarabande, and the Menuet borrows the same lilting Sarabande rhythm. The Gigue uses elements from both preceding movements to conclude the Partita with coherence and brilliance.

Fantasia in G, BWV 917 (1704-07)

The origins of the Fantasia in G minor, BWV 917, are obscure, and the work's authenticity has been questioned by a number of scholars. The piece was found in a Bach family manuscript, attributed to J.S. Bach, and was probably written before 1710. It was eventually published in 1890. The full title of the piece is 'Fantasie duobus subiectis', specifying that the work has two subjects, although there are three, not including the brief single-voice toccata with which the work begins. The Fantasia is not a full-blown fugue, but is a finely-wrought work mostly in three-part counterpoint; an instance of the older style of Fantasia, rather than the later, more improvisatory type.

Partita No.5 in G, BWV 829 from Clavier-Übung I (1725-30)

Praeambulum

Allemande

Corrente

Sarabande

Tempo di Minuetto

Passepied

Gigue

Again, G major draws from Bach a lightness of touch for the Partita No.5, BWV 829; it is, in many respects, his most genial partita. After the ebb and flow of the Praeambulum – long scales punctuated by pithy cadences – comes an Allemande of

apparently effortless grace. The bubbling Italian Corrente ripples with rapid passagework passed from right hand to left, contrasted with a bittersweet Sarabande. What follows is not strictly a minuet, but is given the indication Tempo di Minuetto, preceding a hearty Passepied. The Partita concludes with a Gigue of great skill and wit, in which Bach presents us with an upside-down version of his theme.

Programme notes by Joanna Wyld © 2019