



# SOUTHBANK CENTRE

## MULTITUDES THE ART OF FUGUE

Friday 24 April 2026, 7.45pm & Saturday 25 April 2026, 3pm & 7.45pm  
Queen Elizabeth Hall

Welcome to *Multitudes*, our multi-arts festival powered by orchestral music. We're bringing together some of the world's finest classical music ensembles – including our six Resident Orchestras – for collaborations with an incredible range of artists from different art forms. Together, we're creating a new way for you to encounter the enduring power of classical music, with unique, adventurous, boundary-breaking concerts. It's a musical experience like no other!

Mark Ball, Artistic Director, Southbank Centre

The Australian Brandenburg Orchestra is known for its warm, spirited interpretations of Baroque music, as well as its ambitious and innovative approach – strengths that come to the fore in this collaboration with renowned contemporary circus arts company Circa. Together, they interpret Bach's *The Art of Fugue*, playing off one another to explore the boundless possibilities of artistic creation through exhilarating music and movement.

Following a critically acclaimed appearance at last year's *Multitudes* festival, Circa makes its return to our stage. The ensemble responds to the challenges and complexities of Bach's mysterious, unfinished masterpiece with daring artistry, embodying this monumental work through gravity-defying acrobatics that play on the always-evolving repetitions and variations of the music.

These two powerhouse Australian companies and longstanding collaborators make a rare UK appearance in this show. *The Art of Fugue* is their fifth project together – the result of an ongoing artistic dialogue between Circa and the Australian Brandenburg Orchestra, and their respective Artistic Directors, Yaron Lifschitz and Paul Dyer, where musical and physical prowess combine to create something extraordinary.

Produced by the Australian Brandenburg Orchestra. Co-commissioned with the Moss Arts Center, Virginia Tech, and the University of Georgia Performing Arts Center.

### MUSIC

Bach *The Art of Fugue*, BWV.1080

75 mins

### CREATIVE TEAM

Australian Brandenburg Orchestra  
Circa

*Run time (approx.): 1 hour and 25 minutes, with no interval*

## JOHANN SEBASTIAN BACH (1685–1750)

### The Art of Fugue

When you think of Johann Sebastian Bach, it's fair to say that 'dance' is not likely to be the first artform to spring to mind. Perhaps more than any other composer, Bach is revered almost to the point of worship. This lofty composer of profoundly intellectual and deeply spiritual works can seem just a little intimidating. In the famous portrait of Bach painted by Elias Hausmann in 1748, a grave countenance gazes out at us, exuding an air of wisdom and solid self-confidence. He looks as though dance might be alien to him, or something of which he disapproves.



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'Bach's *The Art of Fugue* creates an encounter with limits of what can be comprehended and expressed. This demands our performance be pervaded by those most essential of theatrical siblings, terror and wonder.'

Yaron Lifschitz  
Director, *The Art of Fugue*

Yet Bach was flesh and blood. He enjoyed beer and loved coffee, so much so that he wrote a piece about it. He had two wives and fathered 20 children. He was eminently practical, usually working pragmatically with the forces at his disposal – which is why he never wrote an opera, like his contemporary Handel, even though it seems he rather yearned to expand his range into big stage works. And Bach wrote lots of dances. There are suites full of them: jovial Gavottes, lively Bourées, rollicking Gigues... This was music for pleasure.

Bach was also, as a young man especially, full of energy. In 1706, he strode 280 miles across Germany to the city of Lübeck, to meet his hero, the great organist and composer, Dietrich Buxtehude. Not only that: he vastly outstayed his allotted time, annoying his employers. This early defiance would recur in later clashes with his bosses, revealing a character unfazed by authority.

The author Horatio Clare recreated Bach's epic journey to Lübeck, resulting in the book *Something of His Art*, in which he wrote about some of Bach's keyboard music: 'The lilting, dancing statements seem all questions, reminiscent of children twirling: can you do this? And this? Watch this! The answers are full of flight and caprice, as though a second dancer has heard the questions but asks them again... Again and again he resolves propositions by expanding upon them, the way beauty expands beyond its beginnings, nature beyond her seeds.' This is a wonderful way of hearing Bach's music: swirling, intertwining lines, full of balletic grace.

Bach wrote *The Art of Fugue* in the last decade of his life, and it remains shrouded in mystery. It's usually assumed to have been written for the keyboard, but Bach didn't specify this, so different arrangements, such as the orchestral one heard in this performance, may be just as illuminating in terms of how we enjoy this music. Some experts think Bach may even have been writing the work more as an intellectual exercise than with the intention of it being performed. This is quite possible: alongside his practical nature, he was aware of his legacy and may partly have written pieces like his *Mass in B minor* as a sort of compendium of his best ideas. Countless interpretations have been applied to Bach's *The Art of Fugue*, from religious symbolism to mathematical prowess to a final statement before God and humanity.

Alongside these fascinating ways of trying to understand *The Art of Fugue*, dance has been rather neglected – yet the gravity-defying movements of Circa emphasise Bach's extraordinary flights of imagination. After all, the music is full of dancing rhythms; Bach even specifies 'in the French style' as a reference to plentiful 'dotted rhythms' – skipping motifs then associated with French music. From skipping to dancing is but a dance step, and in this performance dance brings the music to life, drawing out its capacity for fluidity and animation.

The whole work is based on one main theme. Bach was a master of the fugue: an intricately layered form of strict rules and rich textures, which in his hands sounds effortless, even airy. As you'd expect from the title, *The Art of Fugue* boasts pretty much every fugue technique

under the sun. The theme is stretched and shrunk (with note lengths doubled or halved). It's even treated in 'inversion', when its shape is flipped to create a kind of mirror image. What's wonderful, as we watch this music embodied by the dancers of Circa, is that while our minds may, even subconsciously, appreciate these complexities, our senses can enjoy the sheer beauty and elegance of this creation as it makes our spirits soar.

There is a further mystery associated with *The Art of Fugue*: its ending. It just... stops. This was unusual for Bach, who liked to do the job properly, either for the musicians performing his music or with one eye on posterity. Yet the final fugue is incomplete. Even more dramatically, it includes Bach's musical 'signature', as though he really was signing off. This notation would often be written B flat–A–C–B–natural; but in Germany this can be written as, you guessed it, B–A–C–H. One of Bach's sons, CPE Bach, wrote on the manuscript: 'While working on this fugue, which introduces the name BACH in the countersubject, the composer died.'

It seems likely that CPE Bach was overstating things: his father had been well enough to write this incomplete piece, so it probably predates his deteriorating health. We shall probably never know exactly what happened, but numerous musicians have offered completions of the work. And as Horatio Clare implied, Bach's music has a timelessness to it that defies real finality, as though these fugal patterns continue to proliferate like fractals, out into the ether: 'beauty expands beyond its beginnings...'

Programme notes © Joanna Wyld, 2026



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THE EVENTS IN MULTITUDES

# AUSTRALIAN BRANDENBURG ORCHESTRA

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## ARTISTIC DIRECTOR / HARPSICHORD

Paul Dyer AO

## CONCERTMASTER, BAROQUE VIOLIN

Shaun Lee-Chen

## PRINCIPAL BAROQUE SECOND VIOLIN

Ben Dollman

## PRINCIPAL BAROQUE VIOLA

Monique O'Dea

## PRINCIPAL BAROQUE CELLO

Jamie Hey

Australian Brandenburg Orchestra acknowledges the assistance of the Australian Government through Creative Australia, its principal arts investment and advisory body, and the NSW Government through Create NSW.

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# CIRCA

## DIRECTOR, THE ART OF FUGUE

Yaron Lifschitz

## COSTUME DESIGNER

Libby McDonnell

## PERFORMERS

Jon Bonaventura

Holly-Rose Boyer

Helga Ehrenbusch

Scott Grove

Chelsea Hall

Sam Letch

Daniel O'Brien

Darby Sullivan

Christina Zauner

Circa acknowledges the assistance of the Australian Government through Creative Australia, its principal arts investment and advisory body and the Queensland Government through Arts Queensland.

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▶ Australian Brandenburg Orchestra

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▶ [southbankcentre.co.uk](https://southbankcentre.co.uk)