

SOUTHBANK CENTRE

James McVinnie: Bach for Organ & Piano

Sunday 19 April 2026, 7pm | Queen Elizabeth Hall

We are proud to be a place where people come together to discover and connect with the wonder of classical music. Throughout the year, we provide unrivalled opportunities to encounter, live in person, the full range of music, and a variety of different ways for you to experience it.

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Toks Dada, Head of Classical Music, Southbank Centre

Repertoire

Bach French Suite No.4 in E flat, BWV.815

1. *Allemande*
2. *Courante*
3. *Sarabande*
4. *Gavotte*
5. *Air*
6. *Minuet*
7. *Gigue*

Bach Sonata No.4 in E minor, BWV.528*

1. *Adagio – Vivace*
2. *Andante*
3. *Un poco allegro*

Bach Concerto in the Italian Style, BWV.971

1. *(no tempo marking)*
2. *Andante*
3. *Presto*

Interval

Bach Chorale-prelude, Allein Gott in der Höh sei Ehr, BWV.662* 7'

Bach Trio, Allein Gott in der Höh sei Ehr, BWV.664* 4'

Bach Prelude and Fugue in B flat, BWV.890 7'

Bach Prelude and Fugue in B flat minor, BWV.867 5'

Bach Prelude and Fugue in E flat, BWV.552* 16'

Performer

James McVinnie *organ*, piano*

*This performance lasts approximately 1 hour and 50 minutes.
There is a 20-minute interval.*

Bach's music continues to make an indelible impression on the world and to play it is one of the greatest joys that any musician can experience. For me, it forms the backbone of my musical identity and offers a continuous sense of artistic engagement on three seemingly disparate but ultimately connected levels. First, there are significant technical demands in the score; to be able to play the notes on a purely physical sense in Bach is to be good at any repertoire, requiring strength, dexterity and independence of finger movement. Secondly, there is an intellectualism connected with the construction of the music, often hidden to the listener. Canons, inversions, augmentations, diminutions, strettos etc as well as elaborate mathematical elements and numerological symbolism, often relating to theology and Lutheran doctrine, all contribute to a dizzying, often intimidating picture on the page. For me what makes Bach's music so special is that he never allows the dryness of these academic details to overshadow the emotional core of the music, which for me is the most striking element in this trifecta. The emotional impact of Bach's music is surely what makes it speak to us so directly – each and every work seeming to encapsulate the entire gamut of human experience.

The *Six French Suites* were written between 1722 and 1725. Each follow the basic form of the Baroque dance suite, comprising *Allemande*, *Courante*, *Sarabande* and *Gigue*. Never one to doing anything by half, in each of the *French Suites*, Bach adds to this core four several other dance movements for variation and extension, with the *Sarabande* movement always feeling like the emotional core of the work. Compared to his other collections of keyboard dance suites (the *Six Partitas* and *English Suites*) the *French Suites* are perhaps the smallest in scale and simplest musically. Andras Schiff described the act of listening to the *French Suites* as being like looking at a beautiful and elaborate flower arrangement: roses, tulips, chrysanthemums, irises, carnations – but all of the same colour.

The trio sonata was perhaps the most common musical form in instrumental music of the Baroque period. It is surprising that Bach wrote comparatively few of them, and also that the six he did write were written for the organ rather than for the more standard chamber ensemble. With these works Bach created an

entirely new genre for the organ based on the three-movement Italian *concerto da camera* for two violins and continuo. All of the six sonatas have three movements following the usual Baroque fast – slow – fast pattern. The organist must supply the two solo melodic voices with each hand and the basso continuo part with the feet, securing a place for these works amongst the most technically challenging for the instrument.

The *Italian Concerto* forms one half of *Clavierübung II* (*Clavierübung* meaning literally 'keyboard practise') next to the French Overture. These two works date from 1735 were written by Bach as a pair, set in F major and B minor (the most distant keys to one another), and show his chameleon-like approach to the assimilation of different national styles of composition into his own inimitable writing. In the *Italian Concerto*, the keyboard is the whole orchestra. Intricate passages are passed between imagined soloists and tutti – a tour de force riot for the fingers. There are three movements in the standard Italianate *fast – slow – fast* format.

The second half of tonight's concert starts with two contrasting settings of the chorale *Allein Gott in der Höh sei Ehr* (Alone to God be Glory), taken from the *Leipzig Chorales*. Both settings are in the bright key of A major and the delicate first setting (BWV.662) opens with a sensuous accompaniment in two parts above a walking bass line. The musical material here is derived from the chorale melody itself, which finally enters in the top voice on a pungent stop combination. The fast and joyous second setting, BWV.664, is a bright trio – two melodic voices sit above a sprightly bass line for the pedals, all in active dialogue. Bach waits to the very final few bars to present the chorale theme in plain long notes in the pedals.

The second book of *The Well Tempered Clavier* appeared in 1742 at a time when the musical world was embracing the new 'gallant' style, aligned with the Enlightenment – a cultural and philosophical movement focused on individualism, reason, empirical experience and a rejection of the complexities of the Baroque. While it is true that Bach did not fully embrace this new aesthetic in music, some of his later work does in fact incorporate elements from this movement. Bach was a master of taking musical ingredients from other traditions and repackaging them to his own ends, and the Prelude and Fugue in B flat major from Book 2, BWV.890, is a prime example, incorporating a kind of ultra-efficient sonata form. The lilting extended Prelude moves with a slow harmonic movement, and is complimented by a brief Fugue. The Prelude and Fugue in B flat minor from Bach's earlier *Well Tempered Clavier I* could be lifted straight out of the *St Matthew Passion*. The quiet Prelude,

surely among Bach's most intensely mournful music, begins with gently repeated figurations, which gives way to its Fugue, comprising austere, bear counterpoint. There are two books which make up *The Well Tempered Clavier*, composed with a 20-year gap between them. Each book is made up of 24 Preludes and Fugues in ascending chromatic keys with one major and one minor pair for each key. Taken as a whole, *The Well Tempered Clavier* is one of the great monuments of Western culture.

The concert comes to a close with the Prelude and Fugue in E flat BWV.552 from Bach's *Clavierübung III* – a vast compendium of compositional techniques and an encyclopaedia of musical styles both ancient and modern. It is also an affirmation of Bach's own Christian faith and a musical summation of the doctrine of the Lutheran Church. The number three crops up in this collection again and again. Three settings of the Gloria in three different keys, three flats in the key signature of the Prelude and Fugue that bookend the collection, three distinct musical ingredients in the opening prelude, three themes in the final fugue, 27 pieces in total, which is 3 x 3 x 3. Many have supposed this is Bach's representation the doctrine of the Holy Trinity in musical terms – God the Father, God the Son, God the Holy Spirit – three in one and one in three.

The Prelude opens with regal, stately music in the French overture style (overtures to French operas signalling to the audience the entrance of the monarch – perhaps here an allusion to God), which gives way to playful second Italianate music, with increasingly dissonant harmonies (perhaps here an allusion to Christ's childhood and crucifixion). The final element follows with flowing rushing Germanic counterpoint (perhaps an allusion to the Holy Spirit). Structurally the Fugue is even more obviously a representation of the Trinity – three broad sections, each with its own thematic material, each increasing in activity and intensity. The final section – a lively dance of the Holy Spirit – contains some of Bach's most glorious writing in which all three themes of the Fugue are combined together. The work spirals to its close with a thunderous final entry before an elaborate final cadence.

Programme notes © James McVinnie, 2026

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Tamsin Waley-Cohen & Cordelia Williams: Lullabies

Saturday 6 June 2026, 3pm | Purcell Room at Queen Elizabeth Hall

Two British star musicians explore an enchanting selection of music about evening, lullabies and the mysteries of night, ranging from Schubert to Arvo Pärt.