

SOUTHBANK CENTRE

James McVinnie: Fantasias

Wednesday 2 October 2024, 7pm
Royal Festival Hall

Classical music has always had reinvention at its core. Throughout our programme, we at the Southbank Centre – alongside our Resident Orchestras and Resident Artists – capture that trailblazing spirit with works that broke the mould across the ages and brand-new approaches to timeless classics.

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Toks Dada, Head of Classical Music, Southbank Centre

Repertoire

Stanford Fantasia and Toccata in D minor, Op.57	12'
Byrd Fantasia in G, MB Vol.28 No.62	7'
Giles Swayne Riff-raff, Op.34	19'
<i>Interval</i>	
Liszt Fantasia and Fugue on 'Ad nos, ad salutarem undam', S.259	28'

Performer

James McVinnie organ

This performance lasts approximately 1 hour and 40 minutes including an interval.

Charles Villiers Stanford (1852–1924)

Fantasia and Toccata in D minor, Op.57

Boundary-pushing, rule-bending freedom of expression is high on the agenda in tonight's concerts of fantasias across five centuries of music. The keyboard fantasia dates right back to the 16th century, when it might have been equally known as a 'fantasy' or even a 'fancy': the Fantasia by William Byrd we'll hear later this evening is one early example. Whatever the terminology, it became a catch-all name given to pieces in which a composer foregrounded intense emotional expression, while perhaps quietly disregarding some of the textbook rules of conventional musical forms. Fantasias grew more refined and cultured over time, of course, but they nonetheless maintained that original sense of improvisation, volatility, surprise.

Charles Villiers Stanford wrote tonight's opening Fantasia and Toccata in 1894. The Dublin-born composer, conductor and academic was a hugely influential figure as one of the founding professors at London's Royal College of Music, where his

students included Vaughan Williams, Holst, Bridge, Coleridge-Taylor and many others. He was notorious for his strict observance of tradition, however, and his mistrust of new-fangled musical innovations. His organ works provided not only an opportunity to articulate his love for the music of earlier times – in tonight's case, for JS Bach in particular – but also to explore his profound Anglican beliefs.

How did Stanford marry up a respect for tradition with the freedoms he was allowed in the fantasia form? In the case of tonight's piece, by following the model of Bach, in particular the earlier composer's Fantasia and Fugue in G minor, BWV.542, whose structure and ideas Stanford adheres to closely. The work's opening Fantasia kicks off with a bold, distinctly Bachian flourish right across the organ's range, before a quieter, more lilting section focuses more on moving melody and expressive colour. The later Toccata – a form intended to provide a showcase for a performer's dexterity – sounds equally spontaneous, but is in fact intricately constructed, building through challenging figurations for the performer's fingers and feet to a majestic, sonorous conclusion.

William Byrd (c.1540–1623)

Fantasia in G (Musica Britannica Vol.28 No.62)

We leap back in time three centuries for the Fantasia in G by William Byrd, one of the greatest and most respected English musicians of the Renaissance. He was a controversial figure, daring to shift in his beliefs away from accepted Anglicanism and towards the far more feared and mistrusted Roman Catholicism, right at a time when admitting your Catholic faith was tantamount to treason. It is miraculous, in fact, and testament to the respect he had earned (not least from Queen Elizabeth I), that Byrd managed to remain faithful to his Catholic beliefs – and even publish music expressing them – during a period of overt persecution.

Keyboard music formed a crucial part of his output, and Byrd was instrumental in establishing a distinctively English style that drew on the complex, interweaving lines of counterpoint,

while also offsetting them with dance-like music, even popular tunes. There are elements of that transition from the cerebral to the crowd-pleasing in tonight's Fantasia, thought to be an early work. It begins with a slow-moving theme – easily identified since it begins with a note repeated three times – that piles up against different versions of itself, in increasingly inventive counterpoint. After a while, the theme's appearances stop as Byrd shifts to more freely intertwining lines – including one or two crunchy note-clashes as different lines employ pitches not always entirely in line with each other. The piece seems to start again about halfway through with a faster-moving theme, but it's not long before it takes on a more dance-like aspect. A change of gear to three-time enhances the dancing mood further, though the Fantasia returns to its earlier seriousness just before its thoughtful close.

Giles Swayne (b.1946)

Riff-raff, Op.34

Giles Swayne is one of Britain's senior musical voices, and has produced a rich catalogue of choral music – it was his pioneering 1980 *CRY*, for 28 solo voices and electronics, that really put him on the musical map. After studies with Messiaen and Birtwistle, among others, Swayne immersed himself in African music, first in The Gambia and southern Senegal in 1981–82, and later in Ghana, where he lived from 1990 to 1996. Swayne's music abruptly moved towards far greater simplicity from the early 1980s, partly as a result of working with children and amateurs. Tonight's *Riff-raff* – commissioned by the 1983 St Albans Festival, and premiered in St Albans Cathedral in July that year – comes from exactly that time. Even its title, Swayne has explained, is a humorous dig at snobbish attitudes towards the musically uninitiated – to whom the piece is specifically intended to be accessible. It's also inspired by the music Swayne encountered in Africa, specifically that of the Jola community in Casamance, southern Senegal.

Riff-raff's title is also something of a play on words, though. A riff is something we might more readily associate with rock or pop music, but Swayne's organ work is full of them. The first is a three-chord idea that launches the piece, and which comes back again and again in different forms. Another is a heavy bassline on the organ pedals, which arrives shortly after. As *Riff-raff* develops – seemingly spontaneously, and in very much a fantasia-like fashion – Swayne embraces Glass-like minimalism, boogie-woogie, fanfares, Rossini-style build-ups and plenty more. Holding everything together is an intense focus on catchy rhythm and propulsive energy. After what Swayne describes as a 'wild

solo on the pedals', *Riff-raff* ends where it began, with a repeat of its three-chord-based opening – but now played backwards.

Franz Liszt (1811–86)

Fantasia and Fugue on 'Ad nos, ad salutarem undam', S.259

Franz Liszt as an astonishing keyboard virtuoso, snapper of piano strings, and creator of hair-raisingly, finger-twistingly difficult music for that instrument, we may feel we know; Liszt as an organ composer, perhaps less so. Nonetheless, organ music formed a significant if smaller part of Liszt's musical output: he used the instrument not only to explore his Catholic faith (certainly towards the end of his life), but also perhaps to conjure sounds that were louder, grander and more colourful even than those that his beloved piano could conjure.

He wrote the Fantasia and Fugue on 'Ad nos, ad salutarem undam' in the winter of 1850, during the height of his power and influence as director of music extraordinary at the Weimar court, where he had found a kindred spirit in the form of local ruler Grand Duke Carl Alexander. The piece's inspiration, however, came not from his religious beliefs, but from a deeply radical opera. With its themes of revolution and social justice – not to mention its violence, mob rule and conspiracies – Giacomo Meyerbeer's *Le prophète* was a raging success at its Paris premiere in 1849. Liszt was there, and was deeply moved by the work, writing no fewer than four keyboard pieces inspired by it. The last of them, the monumental Fantasia and Fugue we'll hear this evening, takes as its theme a rabble-rousing hymn sung by three heretic priests, encouraging villagers to embrace re-baptism as an entry ticket into heaven.

You could convincingly argue that the first and second of the piece's three large sections form its grand Fantasia. Liszt opens the first of them with the somewhat sinister hymn tune itself, which is quickly developed beyond recognition and builds to two sonorous climaxes. The mood calms for the piece's slower central section, a devout, sometimes sparse meditation on the hymn melody, before a furious cadenza erupts right across the organ's range (including a particularly challenging pedal part). The concluding Fugue launches with a spiky version of the hymn melody, quickly intermingled with altered versions of itself, and ultimately leading to a majestic climax that exploits the organ's sonic grandeur to the fullest, and bathes the original hymn tune in brilliant light.

Programme notes © David Kettle, 2024

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