

SOUTHBANK CENTRE

Daniel Pioro & James McVinnie: Rosary Sonatas

Sunday 22 January 2023, 8am – 5pm

Queen Elizabeth Hall Foyer & Purcell Room at Queen Elizabeth Hall

Welcome to Classical Music: Autumn/Winter 2022/23. This new edition, the first under my curatorship since arriving as Head of Classical Music, celebrates classical music in all its forms with artists and ensembles from the UK and around the world.

Having spent the majority of my life immersed in classical music, it is a tremendous honour to be leading the programme at the Southbank Centre, and flying the flag for this incredible art form. We look forward to welcoming you to our spaces.

Toks Dada, Head of Classical Music, Southbank Centre

Repertoire

Heinrich Biber (c. 1644–1704) Rosary (Mystery) Sonatas

Set 1 – Queen Elizabeth Hall Foyer, 8am

No.1	The Annunciation	6'
No.2	The Visitation	6'
No.3	The Nativity	7'30
No.4	The Presentation in the Temple	8'20
No.5	The Finding in the Temple	7'20

9.45am: Deep Dive Session 1 – The Music (Dr Elisabeth Giselbrecht)

10.45am: Deep Dive Session 2 – The History (Dr William O'Reilly)

Set 2 – Purcell Room at Queen Elizabeth Hall, 12 noon

No.6	The Agony in the Garden	9'15
No.7	The Scourging at the Pillar	9'
No.8	The Crowning with Thorns	7'15
No.9	The Carrying of the Cross	8'
No.10	The Crucifixion	9'15

2pm: Deep Dive Session 3 – In Conversation: James McVinnie with Toks Dada

2.45pm: Deep Dive Session 4 – The Rosary (Revd Sarah Lenton)

Set 3 – Queen Elizabeth Hall Foyer, 4pm

No.11	The Resurrection	8'
No.12	The Ascension	7'30
No.13	The Descent of the Holy Spirit	8'15
No.14	The Assumption of the Blessed Virgin	10'30
No.15	The Coronation of the Blessed Virgin	12'30

Performers

Daniel Pioro *violin*

James McVinnie *organ, harpsichord*

Hans Christian Andersen wrote: 'when words fail, music speaks'. Given this, it's no surprise that music has played such a pivotal role in church worship throughout history. Music can fulfil so many different functions in the church, but perhaps above all, it provides a bridge between the rational world and the inexpressible elements and inexplicable mysteries of religious belief. While a hymn might describe the story of Jesus' birth or crucifixion, a piece of vocal or instrumental music might be designed to offer the listener something much more abstract, as an aid to mediation and contemplation. Nowhere is this latter element more palpable than in Heinrich Ignaz Franz Biber's *Rosary Sonatas*, which Daniel and I are performing today.

The Rosary is a set of prayers used in the Catholic church. A Rosary is also a physical object: a set of beads or knots – a tactile aide-memoire, with each bead representing a prayer. Amongst these prayers are the *Mysteries of the Rosary*, each relating to an episode in the life and death of Jesus and his mother Mary. Prior to Pope John Paul II's addition of the five *Luminous Mysteries* in 2002, there were 15 *Mysteries* in total, divided into three groups of five: the *Joyful Mysteries*, which centre around the early life of Jesus; the *Sorrowful Mysteries*, which depict the events leading to the Crucifixion; and finally the *Glorious Mysteries*, which centre around the Resurrection, Ascension and beyond. Biber wrote 15 musical meditations, one for each of the *Mysteries of the Rosary*, for violin and continuo accompaniment in around 1674. Amazingly, they remained unpublished during the composer's life, but were rediscovered in the early 20th century and finally published in 1905.

Biber was a famous composer and virtuoso violinist who lived and worked for most of his life in the royal court at Salzburg. His *Rosary Sonatas* contain technically advanced and strikingly individual writing for the instrument. Following the 15th Sonata, the manuscript contains a final Passacaglia for solo violin, an extraordinary work based on a descending bassline.

One of the most striking elements of Biber's *Rosary Sonatas* is that he calls for the violin to be tuned in scordatura (literally, Italian for 'discord' or mistuning'), whereby one or more of the violin's strings are raised or lowered to a new pitch, producing unusual and unique sonorities, colours and harmonies from the instrument. Each Sonata calls for a different tuning and in the case of the most extreme retunings, the violin is put under extreme physical tension which is perceptible to the ear. Andrew Manze has noted in the liner notes of his own recording of the work that 'through the progression of the sonatas, the difficulty of the scordatura tuning rises and falls, with the peak of difficulty located in the *Sorrowful Mysteries*.' The same rise and fall can be said of the emotional intensity of the collection as a whole, peaking with the dramatic events of Jesus' death on the cross in the Tenth Sonata.

Canon James Mustard writes: 'the Cross is perhaps the most powerful symbol of the Church, of Christ's victory over death, turning an instrument of torture into a sign of rebirth and hope. Wooden Cross becomes the Tree of Life, the ensign of Resurrection [...] the English poet and priest George Herbert, in his poem "Easter", described all wood resonating with the Cross, never more so when fashioned into a musical instrument, the stretched, gut strings as the outstretched arms of Christ on the Cross.' Who knows if Biber knew Herbert's poetry, but his *Rosary Sonatas* and use of the violin show that he must have shared Herbert's beliefs.

Another striking feature of Biber's manuscript is the way that the music looks on the page. To help the player, Biber notates the music in scordatura as if the violin is tuned normally – the player then just has to put their fingers down in the conventional way for the notes to sound correctly from the retuned strings. The problem is that music looks like gibberish, unnerving for the player and accompanist alike during both rehearsal and performance! Also, instead of written titles at the start of each Sonata, the music is preceded by a charming copper-engraved vignette depicting the particular event which inspired each piece.

Biber's settings of each of these *Mysteries* are of course more than just a reminder of how the story goes – they offer an abstract aid to meditation, prayer and profound contemplation for the listener. Interestingly, though, the connection between the story of each Sonata and the character of Biber's music is often elusive. Roseen Giles writes: 'Biber's sonatas are intentionally enigmatic, revealing underlying connections to the sensual yet deliberately mysterious nature of Catholic art and culture of his day.' For instance, the Seventh Sonata describes Jesus being whipped at the pillar; on first hearing you might assume the music, set in the gentle key of F major, is depicting a pastoral idyll. Delve a little deeper and you realise the violence of the scene is portrayed by the immense tension the violin is being put under from the extreme retuning of its strings: here the lower string is raised by a fourth, the second string is lowered by a tone, and the top string is lowered by a third. It's as if the instrument itself is screaming under its new-found weight and precariousness.

Just as the Rosary prayers are designed to be used in a ritualistic way, Daniel and I wanted to present these three groups of five sonatas in the early morning, noon and late afternoon, just as the faithful might offer structured prayer throughout the course of a day.

Wherever we might lie on the spectrum of faith, it's hard not to be moved by hearing these pieces. Taken as a whole, they offer a unique portrayal of joy, sorrow, death, resurrection, faith, hope and love.

Many of the Sonatas contain dance movements: allemandes, courantes, sarabands and so on. Rather than list each in turn for each Sonata, I have chosen instead to just list points of interest.

The Joyful Mysteries

Sonata No.1 *The Annunciation*. The archangel Gabriel announces to Mary she will bear a son. Rapid violin figuration opens the Sonata before a central dance movement written over a repeated bassline.

Sonata No.2 *The Visitation* of Mary, who was pregnant with Jesus, to Elizabeth, who was pregnant with John the Baptist.

Sonata No.3 *The Nativity*. This is set in the doleful key of B minor, which some have suggested might represent Mary and Joseph's difficult journey to the stable.

Sonata No.4 *The Presentation (of Jesus) in the Temple*, or Candlemas. This ritual combines the purification rite with the Jewish ceremony of the redemption of the firstborn.

Sonata No.5 *The Finding (of Jesus) in the Temple*, was an episode in the early life of Jesus where Mary and Joseph find

him conversing with the elders in the Temple. The music is playful and upbeat.

The Sorrowful Mysteries

Sonata No.6 *The Agony in the Garden*. After the Last Supper, Jesus goes into a garden and experiences great anguish and prays to be delivered from his impending death on the cross. This is a continuous movement in the dark key of C minor.

Sonata No.7 *The Scourging at the Pillar*. A scene from the Passion of Christ in which Jesus is flagellated against a pillar. The tuning for this Sonata enables the player to play the same note simultaneously from two adjacent strings.

Sonata No.8 *The Crowning with Thorns*. In an act of pain and mockery, Jesus' captors crown him with thorns as King of the Jews.

Sonata No.9 *The Carrying of the Cross*, after Jesus has been condemned to death.

Sonata No.10 *The Crucifixion* depicts Christ's struggle to Calvary through increasingly difficult figuration, and the thoughtful opening and closing movements allow reflection on Mary's grief.

The Glorious Mysteries

Sonata No.11 *The Resurrection*, when God raised Jesus from the dead on the third day after he was crucified. As well as the scordatura, Biber calls for the middle two strings to be crossed over, which enables a breathtaking melody in parallel octaves in the violin part in the final movement.

Sonata No.12 *The Ascension*, where Christ ascends to Heaven. Here Biber's music is declamatory and triumphant and reminiscent of his other sacred music, especially the *Missa Salisburgensis*.

Sonata No.13 *The Descent of the Holy Spirit*, or Pentecost. The Holy Spirit descends on the 12 disciples.

Sonata No.14 *The Assumption of the Blessed Virgin*. The body and soul of Mary were taken up into the glory of heaven. The Sonata starts with a florid free section and is followed by a charming extended set of variations over a simple folk-like bassline.

Sonata No.15 *The Coronation of the Blessed Virgin*, where Mary is crowned Queen of Heaven. The final Sonata is set in the open key of C major. Its final movement seems to trail off as if on the crest of a wave, pointing to Heaven.

James McVinnie plays the harpsichord (Double manual French after Taskin by Michael Johnson, 1979) and the organ (Goetze & Gwynn after 17th-century English chamber organs, 1982).

Programme note © James McVinnie, 2023

Find out more

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