

SOUTHBANK CENTRE

Robert Quinney Plays JS Bach

Friday 3 March 2023, 7.30pm
Royal Festival Hall

Welcome to Classical Music: Spring/Summer 2023. With this programme, we continue to celebrate classical music in all its forms with leading artists and ensembles from the UK and around the world.

In close collaboration with our dynamic family of Resident Orchestras and Resident Artists, we are presenting the full spectrum of classical music, as well as embracing new approaches to how we do so. We are thrilled to welcome such an incredible range of global artists to our spaces – and beyond – to perform, and you to see them.

Toks Dada, Head of Classical Music, Southbank Centre

Repertoire

Johann Sebastian Bach (1685–1750)

Toccatina and Fugue in F, BWV.540 14'
Sonata No.1 in E flat, BWV.525 10'
Toccatina and Fugue in D minor (Dorian), BWV.538 13'

Interval

Sonata No.5 in C, BWV.529 15'
Passacaglia and Fugue in C minor, BWV.582 13'

Performer

Robert Quinney *organ*

The organ played a vital role in every stage of JS Bach's life. As a young man in 1706, Bach famously walked 280 miles to Lübeck to see organist and composer Dieterich Buxtehude playing the organ. He also regularly tested organs. One of his sons, CPE Bach, recorded that this involved assessing the instrument's 'lungs': 'To find out, he would draw out every speaking stop, and play in the richest possible texture. At this the organ builders would often grow quite pale with fright.'

Whereas much of Bach's output was written with a specific purpose or occasion in mind, the organ sonatas and the toccatas and fugues are less easily categorised. Almost all of the toccatas and fugues date from Bach's Weimar years (1708–17), when he had the most opportunities to play the organ, although he may have revised them in Leipzig (after 1723). Their elaborate nature belies the fact that Bach had to be careful about showing off: in 1705, while temporarily in

Leipzig, he was censured for an over-long organ prelude before Communion, and in 1706 he attracted the ire of the Arnstadt authorities by confusing the congregation with complicated chorale accompaniments.

In the prestigious role of cantor at the Thomasschule in Leipzig, a position he took up in 1723, Bach's duties were wide-ranging. When it came to services at the Thomaskirche and Nikolaikirche, he would have been directing the choir and orchestra, sometimes from the harpsichord, but he was not principally an organist. Each church had its own designated organist: Christian Heinrich Gräbner at the Thomaskirche until 1729; JG Görner at the Nikolaikirche until 1729, then at the Thomaskirche; and Johann Schneider at the Nikolaikirche from 1729. The list of duties given to Bach in 1723, however, mentions playing organ preludes at regular intervals throughout the four-hour-long Lutheran services, preceding chorales and larger choral works; the music that he might play before and after the services was less formally outlined.

It was while he was in Leipzig, during the late 1720s, that Bach compiled most of his Six Trio Sonatas, BWV.525–530, many of which include recycled earlier music. Bach's first biographer, Johann Nikolaus Forkel, suggested that these magnificent works were composed for the advancement of the organist's technique – specifically that of another of Bach's sons, WF Bach: 'Bach composed them for his eldest son, Willhelm Friedemann, who, by practising them, prepared himself to be the great organist he later became. It is impossible to say enough about their beauty. They were written when the composer was in his full maturity and can be considered his principal work of this kind.'

Our programme opens with the Toccata and Fugue in F, BWV.540, in which the Toccata shows the recent impact on

Bach of Vivaldi's concertos, with their motivic unification, driving rhythms and strong, structural contrasts. There may have been a substantial gap in composition between the Toccata and the Fugue; the former is estimated to date from around 1712, but the Fugue is more vaguely dated as 'before 1731' (although it is possible that they were conceived together). Combined, the effect of both sections is powerfully architectural. The tussling ideas of the Toccata include canonic imitation and bold harmonic statements such as its powerful interrupted cadence. The chromatic Fugue that follows is particularly knotty: it is the only example in Bach's organ works of a double fugue in which both subjects are fully worked before being combined in the monumental final passages.

The Trio Sonatas are so called because of their three-part texture, which would be suitable for performance by two solo instruments and continuo; Bach adapted this form for the keyboard via his Three-Part Inventions of the early 1720s. In an Italianate three movements, the Sonata No.1 in E flat major, BWV.525, unfolds with the upper voices in imitation over a steady bass-line. There follows an Adagio in binary form (two related sections, with, in this case, some reprise of the opening material), and the triple-time final Allegro is also in two parts, the second of which features the thematic material played in inversion (upside down) – a technique also used in the first movement of the Sonata No.5, BWV.529.

Dating from his Weimar years, Bach's Toccata and Fugue in D minor, BWV.538, is known as the 'Dorian' partly to differentiate it from the more famous D minor work, BWV.565, and partly because it was written without a key signature, which gives it the appearance of being in the Dorian mode. The piece is based on an insistent, recurring motif and, unusually, includes notated manual changes. Both BWV.538 and BWV.540 show the influence of the *Italian Concerto*, and the Fugue of BWV.538 resembles that of BWV.540 in that both are particularly structurally imposing, using quavers rather than semiquavers and including syncopation, suspensions and chromaticism. The works differ, however, in that the

contrapuntal and harmonic devices used in BWV.540 contrast with the concerto-like manual exchanges in BWV.538. When in 1732 Bach visited Kassel for the examination and inauguration of the organ at the Martinskirche, he may well have played BWV.538.

The Sonata No.5 in C, BWV.529, opens with a gloriously intricate, bubbling Allegro, after which comes a solemn, chromatically rich Largo that probably dates from Bach's Weimar period. The engaging main theme of the final movement may suggest the influence of Corelli, and the movement is characterised by its contrapuntal finesse.

The stunning Passacaglia and Fugue, BWV.582, dates from between 1706 and 1713, possibly when Bach was at Arnstadt after returning from Lübeck. A passacaglia, like a chaconne, is structured around a recurring line: in a chaconne this is restricted to the bass, but in a passacaglia the recurring theme may be used in the upper voices. This particular Passacaglia opens with the solemn theme played on the pedals before numerous variations unfold. A double Fugue follows: the first half of the Passacaglia theme is used as the basis of the first subject, and a transformed version of the theme's second half is used as the second subject; Bach deftly weaves a countersubject into the mix to create a precision-engineered texture.

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