

SOUTHBANK CENTRE

Mahan Esfahani: Harpsichord & Electronics

Wednesday 5 April 2023, 9.15pm
Purcell Room at Queen Elizabeth 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

Tal Concerto for harpsichord & electronic tape	13'
Merula Toccata secondo tono	5'
Merula Capriccio cromatico	4'
Oscar Jockel honig.meer.licht (honey.sea.light) for harpsichord & electronics	15'
Frescobaldi Capriccio sopra la bassa fiamenga, F.4.05	6'
Ferrari Programme commun	17'

Performer

Mahan Esfahani *harpsichord*

There is no interval in this performance, which ends at approximately 10.20pm

Josef Tal (1910-2008)

Concerto for harpsichord and electronic tape

Four centuries of time and technological developments separate the two strands of pieces in tonight's concert. That said, you may well be able to discern certain musical parallels and resonances between the works, however contrasting their musical styles.

In Josef Tal's 1964 Concerto for harpsichord and electronic tape, we're plunged headlong into the excitement and enthusiasm for new sounds and uncompromising musical techniques in the decades after the Second World War. Tal had been born (as Josef Grünthal) in 1910, in Pinne in the German Empire (now Pniewy in Poland), but emigrated in 1934 to what was then Mandatory Palestine, having been prevented from working in Germany by Nazi anti-Jewish labour laws. He went on to teach at the Jerusalem Academy of Music and Dance and Hebrew University of Jerusalem, and in 1961 – just three years before he wrote tonight's Concerto – Tal established Israel's Centre for Electronic Music.

Electronics played a crucial role across Tal's wide-ranging output: he wrote several concertos for harp, piano and harpsichord with electronics, as well as incorporating electronics into many of his eight operas. And though he created a number of pieces for tape alone, he admitted feeling slightly uncomfortable about delivering them in a concert setting, with an audience facing a set of speakers rather than human performers. Nonetheless, against a backdrop of the soft-focus, Middle Eastern folk-inspired music in vogue in Israel at the time, he produced instead harder-edged, unashamedly challenging works that looked back to his European modernist roots.

Despite its uncompromising dissonances and rhythmic complexities, however, his 1964 Concerto takes the form of a relatively straightforward conversation between its human performer and its taped electronics. Both contribute separate arguments to the ongoing discussion, only to come together after an insistent percussive rhythm kicks off, propelling the piece to its dance-like conclusion.

Tarquinio Merula (1595-1665)

Toccata del secondo tono

Capriccio cromatico

We leap back in time four centuries for tonight's next two pieces. Tarquinio Merula was a Renaissance musical pioneer, born in 1595 near Cremona. He would later hold several music roles there and in Bergamo, and he played a crucial role in developing musical forms such as the cantata, sonata and sinfonia that would occupy composers in the decades after his death in 1665. His keyboard music was a particularly fruitful area for experimentation: Merula emphasised direct expression and dramatic effects, with the aim of captivating the listener through profound emotion and quicksilver mood changes.

With its showy introduction and the far more sober contrapuntal section that follows it, the *Toccata del secondo tono* seems to prefigure the Baroque prelude and fugue that JS Bach would tackle so thoroughly about six decades later. Its majestic, slow-

moving opening soon gives way to virtuosic filigree lines for both hands, before its slower concluding section weaves together four lines of counterpoint.

More overtly experimental is Merula's *Capriccio cromatico*, whose main melody (if you can call it that) is simply a rising chromatic scale, almost as if the harpsichordist is simply trying out their instrument by playing all its white and black keys one after another. From these unpromising beginnings, however, Merula conjures a richly imagined web of interconnected ideas, all linking back to his all-pervasive opening scale, with a slightly seasick sense of ever-shifting harmonies that keeps you guessing as to where the music might be heading next.

Oscar Jockel (b.1995)

honig.meer.licht

Born exactly four centuries after Merula, Oscar Jockel – tonight's youngest composer – is currently Assistant Conductor at both the Berlin Philharmonic and the Parisian new music group Ensemble Intercontemporain. Increasingly prominent as a composer, he has commissions for the Diotima Quartet, Camerata Salzburg and the Bruckner Orchestra Linz. If Merula was out to display his ability to tame the dissonances of the chromatic scale, in his *honig.meer.licht* (which Mahan Esfahani premiered in June 2021 at the Brucknerhaus, Linz), Jockel shows what can be done with just the more consonant 'white' notes of the harpsichord keyboard.

His aim, Jockel says, is simplicity: 'It is not difficult to create complex pieces with complex material. I find it much more exciting to discover something new, inexplicable, interesting and complex in simple things. The composition consists of the simple material of the diatonic scale (white keys). The complexity arises in the infinite combination of diatonic sounds, clusters and in the depth of time perception.' Jockel articulates his sonic exploration of time through slowly shifting clouds of tremolos, though a later section in *honig.meer.licht* looks back more directly to the counterpoint heard in tonight's earlier pieces.

Girolamo Frescobaldi (1583-1643)

Capriccio sopra la bassa fiamenga

Girolamo Frescobaldi was born 12 years before Merula, in Ferrara, and is generally considered one of the most prominent and influential keyboard composers of his time. He held positions in his birth city, as well as at Rome's Accademia di Santa Cecilia and St Peter's Basilica, where his fame reached its zenith.

It was in 1624, while he was organist at St Peter's, that Frescobaldi published his *First Book of Capriccios*, of which tonight's 'Capriccio sopra la bassa fiamenga' is the fifth piece.

He used the collection almost as a demonstration of his compositional prowess, sticking strictly to the arcane rules of counterpoint while also taking audacious freedoms in the moods and emotions that his pieces set out to convey. He also showed what compositional heights could be reached from rather modest musical beginnings: the *bassa fiamenga* in this case is a Flemish popular tune, a love song about a beautiful brown-haired maiden that had been around in various forms for about a century before Frescobaldi got his hands on it. When he did, he conjured a miraculously inventive miniature that seems to observe the tune from many contrasting angles, with ever more daring rhythmic subtleties – sometimes it's dance-like, but elsewhere it's far more contemplative. However intricate Frescobaldi's invention becomes, though, the distinctive repeated notes of the theme's opening are never far from the surface.

Luc Ferrari (1929-2005)

Programme commun

The concert ends with tonight's most substantial piece, a work that looks beyond pure music to issues of society, politics and progress. Like Josef Tal, French composer Luc Ferrari was a pioneer in electronic music, working alongside musique concrète innovators Pierre Schaeffer and Pierre Henry, and co-founding the Groupe de Recherches Musicales electro-acoustic research institute in 1958. Even in his earliest electronic works, however, Ferrari made a particular feature of environmental or ambient sounds, perhaps in a nod to Cage's idea that music is happening constantly, all around us, or perhaps to situate his works in a particular time and place.

Environmental sounds don't play a huge role in Ferrari's *Programme commun*, though the time and place of its composition do. In June 1972, the French socialist and communist parties agreed a joint set of progressive policy proposals – a 'programme commun' – covering all aspects of contemporary life. Ferrari wondered: what would the programme's implications be for music? His *Programme commun* – slyly subtitled *Musique socialiste?* – is Ferrari's witty yet profound response. Is its human performer trying desperately to escape from the incessant, rigid repetitions of the electronic backdrop? Or are both moving together in solidarity, showing abundant creativity and freedom, even joy, in the process? There's plenty of wry musical symbolism in Ferrari's monumental work, though it defies easy interpretation – which is surely the point.

Programme note by David Kettle, 2023

Find out more

- ▶ Mahan Esfahani
- ▶ southbankcentre.co.uk

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