

SOUTHBANK CENTRE

Iveta Apkalna: Organ at 70 with Bach

Sunday 24 March 2024, 7.30pm

Royal Festival Hall

Classical music is an incredible, centuries-long story. As we at the Southbank Centre – alongside our Resident Orchestras and Resident Artists – share that story with the world today, we're creating as many ways for as many different people as possible to experience this wonderful art form.

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Toks Dada, Head of Classical Music, Southbank Centre

Repertoire

Bach Toccata and Fugue in D minor, BWV.565 10'

Pierné Trois Pièces, Op.29 12'

I. Prélude

II. Cantilène

III. Scherzando de concert

Thalben-Ball Variations on a theme of Paganini for organ pedals 8'

Liszt Prelude and Fugue on the name BACH, S.260 13'

Interval

Boëllmann Suite Gothique, Op.25 15'

I. Introduction-Choral

II. Menuet gothique

III. Prière à Notre-Dame

IV. Toccata

Bach Passacaglia and Fugue in C minor, BWV.582 13'

Performer

Iveta Apkalna organ

Bach himself no doubt gave recitals. The records are sparse, but we know that at the age of 18 he was invited to give the inaugural performance on the new organ at what is now called the Bach Church in Arnstadt, a small town about 30 miles southwest of Weimar. An invitation to return as organist soon followed, and it was probably while he was there that he composed one of the most popular items in the organ repertory: his Toccata and Fugue in D minor. Quite short, the Toccata ranges around the instrument's possibilities of texture and register. The Fugue subject starts on the same mordent figure (A-G-A) that initiated the whole thing.

Gabriel Pierné introduces us to the French tradition of organist-composers, for he was César Franck's successor in the 1890s at Ste Clotilde, in the region of Les Invalides, one of the great Paris churches boasting an organ built by Aristide Cavaillé-Coll. The first of his *Trois Pièces* of 1893 is a Prelude that, like the Bach, shows off how well arpeggios and full chords sound on the organ. Next, the instrument is set singing to an accompaniment of arpeggios, and the set ends with a scherzo and trio, partly fugal in style.

At this point the programme comes home. George Thalben-Ball was the most prominent organist in Britain for more than half a century, from the 1920s to the 1970s, and took part in the first recital on the organ here at the Royal Festival Hall. His *Variations on a Theme of Paganini* (the much used theme of Paganini's Caprice No.24 for solo violin) for the pedals, which he composed in 1962, displays his showmanship. Transposing the theme to A minor, as Rachmaninov did, he treats it to ten variations, the first slow and quiet, many of the others swirling with organ noise that he brings forward by means of the registrations he specifies. Variation 6 features glissandos; Variation 8 is slow and in the major, like the accompaniment to a hymn. The ninth variation is in a creeping, chromatic F major, a preface to the big finale back in A minor.

Liszt is known to have turned his fingers and feet to the organ in 1836, but it was a good deal later that he composed his two big works for the instrument: the Fantasia and Fugue on the Chorale 'Ad nos, ad salutarem undam' (a theme from Meyerbeer's opera *Le Prophète*) in 1850, and the Prelude and

This performance lasts approximately 1 hour and 50 minutes with a 20-minute interval.

Fugue on the name BACH in 1855–56. He intended the latter for his pupil Alexander Winterberger to present at the dedication in September 1855 of the organ in the cathedral of Merseburg, east of Leipzig. The builder was the much admired Friedrich Ladegast, who had studied with Cavaillé-Coll. As the piece was not ready in time, Winterberger substituted the Meyerbeer fantasy and returned to Merseburg to give the BACH work its first performance on 13 May the following year.

Bach's musical monogram depends on how his surname can be encoded in German note names, as B–A–C–H (in English, B flat–A–C–B-natural): four chromatic neighbours giving two falls of a semitone. Liszt uses these features to create high drama in the Prelude: pairs of semitone-related chords crashing while the motif spins like a Catherine wheel. About a third of the way through the work's duration of 12 minutes or so, the Fugue takes over: soft and slow, *misterioso*. From this point it can build back to the original dynamism.

Iveta Apkalna now returns symmetrically to Bach by way of another French organist-composer, a close contemporary of Pierné, Léon Boëllmann. He similarly had charge of a Cavaillé-Coll organ, that of the church of St Vincent de Paul, near the Gare du Nord. His *Suite Gothique*, published in 1895, is one of several works in which he aimed for a medieval flavour, the term 'Gothic', for musicians of the time, implying strong block structure, simple rhythm and a melodic-harmonic language touched by the old church modes. All these characteristics are present here.

The opening movement is an echo piece in C minor that leads directly into the C major, modally coloured, of the 'Menuet gothique'. A strange notion, this 'Gothic minuet', but justified in how the light dancing metre picks up on one of the rhythmic formulae of the 12th and 13th centuries. Again, contrasting dynamics add drama. The slow movement is a quiet meditation before the imposing and darkly triumphant Toccata, often played as a recital piece or recessional. A melody mostly on the pedals stalks the crypt. Arpeggios go on rotating, seeming not to realise that they belong to the same structure, until a crisis comes when the melody gets stuck in the upper vaulting.

Bach's Passacaglia and Fugue in C minor probably dates from soon after his arrival as organist in Weimar, in 1708, and therefore from a few years after the Toccata and Fugue in D minor. Like his contemporaries generally, Bach seems to have used the terms *passacaglia* and *chaconne* interchangeably, for movements in triple time based on a recurring bass melody over which variations unfold. In this magnificent example the fundamental melody is heard alone to begin with, then in support of 20 variations. Because the first half of the melody forms the subject of the attached Fugue, it is not obvious where this begins: it does so accompanied by a figure that gives a bounce to its final note.

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