

SOUTHBANK CENTRE

Iveta Apkalna: Glass, Bach, Widor

Friday 23 September 2022, 7.30pm
Royal Festival 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

Philip Glass (b. 1937)

arr. Michael Riesman (b. 1943)

Conclusion from Act 3 from *Satyagraha* for organ 9'

Johann Sebastian Bach (1685–1750)

Ricercar a 6 from *Musical Offering* 7'

Charles-Marie Widor (1844–1937)

Organ Symphony No.5 in F minor, Op.42 No.1 35'

I. Allegro vivace

II. Allegro cantabile

III. Andantino quasi allegretto

IV. Adagio

V. Toccata

Performers

Iveta Apkalna organ

Philip Glass' opera *Satyagraha* (1979) takes its title from the practice of peaceful resistance that Mahatma Gandhi developed in India in the early years of the 20th century. A Sanskrit term, it could be translated as 'insistence on truth', or perhaps better, 'insistence through truth'. A great push, rooted in truth, would have to succeed against falsehood and wrong, with no need for violence. A protest march could be the physical embodiment of such a push, and a protest march is the opera's pretext. At the end comes an 'Evening Song' for Gandhi, and this is the number that Michael Riesman, who has been working with Glass since 1974, transcribed for keyboard. Glass' music fits well with Gandhi's philosophy and its application, for through repetition this music conveys steady insistence, and it has its roots in basic harmonies.

Small cycles, repeating and repeating, generate massive force through the nine-minute piece. The goal is always clearly in sight, and it is reached.

One thing Glass' music has in common with that of JS Bach is how well it survives a change of instrumentation, in this case from orchestra with solo tenor voice to organ. Exactly what instrument or instruments Bach imagined for his six-part ricercar (another term for a fugue, from the Italian for 'search out') we do not know. Since he wrote it at the request of Frederick the Great of Prussia, he could have intended it for one of that monarch's newfangled pianos. But the organ will do nicely.

Bach visited Frederick's court at Potsdam, outside Berlin, in May 1747. He went principally to see his son, Carl Philipp Emanuel, who was employed there, but the young king took the opportunity to present the aging master with a musical challenge: to improvise a fugue on a subject that begins sturdily in C minor but then goes in for a long descent down the chromatic scale. Bach not only answered the challenge on the spot but also, back home in Leipzig, produced a whole hour of music on Frederick's theme: fugues, canons and a four-movement sonata, which altogether he called *Musical Offering*.

The six-part ricercar, almost as long as the Glass piece, begins with the theme entering successively in six different registers. It is accompanied by ornamental figures that then become the main thread in the continuing counterpoint. At times the harmony clears, as if in a brief pause for breath, until eventually the theme begins to appear again, on the approach to the end.

As organist of Saint Sulpice in Paris for over 60 years, Charles-Marie Widor must have played a lot of Bach. He also made a suite of arrangements for organ, which he called

Bach's Memento. His major works for the instrument, though, are his ten symphonies, written for the kind of grand organ that organ builder Aristide Cavaillé-Coll – a family friend, who had overseen Widor's education and early career – had installed in Saint-Sulpice and other Parisian churches. There was also a Cavaillé-Coll organ in the concert hall of the Trocadéro, a large building in an exhibition park across the Seine from the Eiffel Tower. The hall was new when Widor gave the first performance of his Fifth Symphony there in 1879.

The first, and longest, of the symphony's five movements is based on a creeping march in F minor that plays for 32 bars in dotted rhythm. This is followed by three regular variations, of which the last features offbeat accents against a watery background of running semiquavers. There is then a turn to the major for the beginning of a section in which the theme is developed, on the way to a big restatement.

Contrastingly songful, the second movement also presents a theme that is loosely varied before it comes back as before. There is then a middle section in D flat, where melodic strains of vocal character play over static harmonies. A beautiful transition goes from here to a reprise of the opening.

The third movement turns to the relative major, A flat, for an introduction that leads into a hymn-like melody. There is again

a middle section, where a repeating pattern in the pedals contributes to oscillating cross-accents. The pattern then rises, on the way to a return of the hymn.

A short slow movement follows, in a chromatic C major, a meditation on a theme identified most clearly by mirroring three-note figures, the first going two steps down, the second starting on the middle step and going two steps up.

Then comes what most listeners to this symphony will have been waiting for: the concluding toccata in F major. By far Widor's biggest hit, this movement has never looked back in the UK since it was played by Francis Jackson (who died earlier this year at the age of 104) as recessional at the wedding of the Duke and Duchess of Kent in York Minster in 1961. Swirling semiquavers, bouncing triads and sonorous pedal interventions make it irresistibly thrilling on any occasion.

Programme note © Paul Griffiths

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