Programme Notes by Cathal Twomey

February 2019

Claire Duff, baroque violin

Benjamin Alard, harpsichord

Programme:

Archangelo Corelli (1653-1713)

Sonata No. 5 in G Minor

(Sonate a violino e cembalo)

I. Adagio
II. Vivace
III. Adagio
IV. Vivace
V. Giga: Allegro

J. S. Bach (1685-1750)

Adagio in G Major, BWV 968

Fugue in B Minor, BWV 579 on a theme by Corelli

Sonata for violin and basso continuo in G Major, BWV 1021

I. Adagio
II. Vivace
III. Largo
IV. Presto

Sonata No. 4 in C Minor for violin and harpsichord, BWV 1017

I. Siciliano (Largo)
II. Allegro
III. Adagio
IV. Allegro

INTERVAL

J.S. Bach (1685-1750)

"Italian concerto", BWV 971

I. Tempo giusto
II. Andante
III. Presto

Jane O'Leary (b. 1946)

Fantasia (homage to J.S. Bach) for Baroque violin and harpsichord

J.S. Bach (1685-1750)

Sonata No. 6 in G Major for violin and harpsichord, BWV 1019

I. Allegro
II. Largo
III. (Alternate movement) Cantabile, ma un poco Adagio, BWV 1019(a)
IV. Adagio
V. Allegro

Archangelo Corelli (1653-1713)

Sonata No. 5 in G Minor

(Sonate a violino e cembalo)

I. Adagio
II. Vivace
III. Adagio
IV. Vivace
V. Giga: Allegro

The Italian composer and violinist Arcangelo Corelli was among the most influential musicians of the late Baroque. His music is the first in which we truly hear the goal-oriented harmonic motion we now call 'chord progression', and his sonatas played a key role in establishing the violin as a virtuoso solo instrument.

The G minor sonata (from the composer's fifth collection of sonatas) begins, as many of Corelli's chamber works do, with a slow movement. Here, the dramatic leaps and soaring melody of the solo violin combine with the *adagio* tempo to provide a gripping entrance of melancholy grandeur, before the second movement blows away the cobwebs. The energetic *vivace* also shifts the focus to a different aspect of the violin's musical potential: the athletic virtuosity for which the instrument was already becoming famous. One can only imagine how the performer-composer must have dazzled his audiences with such numbers.

Another *adagio* forms the third movement, more lyrical and wistful than the opening, but still tinged with anguish now and then. Its open-ended cadence excitingly ushers in the fourth movement, another *vivace* far more stately and more punchily simple in expression than the last. The movement increases in complexity as it goes on, however, and its energetic running notes bring the excitement close to agitation.

Corelli concludes, as Baroque composers loved to do, with a lively *gigue*. Here the lilting, dance-derived rhythms create an infectiously jaunty mood, but the relentless motion of the melody nevertheless keeps the violinist skittering across the strings until the very last note.

J. S. Bach (1685-1750)

Johann Sebastian Bach was another leading luminary of the Baroque era. However, while Corelli's music was among the most popular and influential of its time, Bach's vast compositional output only received widespread acclaim in the nineteenth century. During his career, he was far better known as a virtuoso organist than as a composer. In another way, too, he is a curious anti-Corelli. Whereas the Italian ushered in, or at least consolidated, a new way of composing, Bach's music represents the last great flowering of the contrapuntal style, a high-Baroque colossus made of the debris of the seventeenth-century.

Adagio in G Major, BWV 968

Bach's Adagio in G Major is a keyboard arrangement of a sonata movement, originally scored for solo violin. The keyboard version retains the original's incessant dotted rhythm, and that rhythm's attendant tension. It deepens and intensifies that tension, however, with similar rhythms in the left hand, and a rich, often shocking realisation of the harmony that could only be hinted at with the solo violin.

Fugue in B Minor, BWV 579 on a theme by Corelli

The B minor fugue offers an interesting link back to Corelli, and another taste of Bach the arranger (or perhaps the re-composer). The piece's musical material derives from the fourth sonata of Corelli's third sonata collection; specifically, from that piece's vivace second movement. Bach's treatment of the material is highly expansive, adding a fourth voice to the original three, and almost tripling the length of the piece. He also disrupts the regularity of the original, creating a less integrated but ultimately more dramatic musical experience.

Sonata for violin and basso continuo in G Major, BWV 1021

I. Adagio
II. Vivace
III. Largo
IV. Presto

Bach's G major sonata for violin and continuo is preserved in a manuscript copied by the composer's second wife, Anna Magdalena Bach (née Wilcke, or Wilken). The detailed figuring of its bass line encourages complex harmony of a kind rarely seen in the continuo parts of other late-Baroque composers. The sonata has a slow opening, as Corelli's often do; here, a sweetly tender adagio, whose florid violin part is underpinned by a steadier tread in the continuo.

Next, a vibrant vivace in triple time sees the two instruments on equal rhythmic terms, racing up and down the scale in rapid flurries of notes, while the multiple stops in the solo part should again be familiar from the second movement of the Corelli. This is followed by another slow movement, which is very different from the first. In this minor-key largo, steadiness of bass still contrasts with violin ornamentation, but the mood is one of yearning lament, sometimes crossing into anguish. Like Corelli, Bach ends the movement on an open-ended harmony, and we eagerly await the finale. The sparkling presto does not disappoint, as rapid chord changes and even more rapidly flying melodies seem to race each other to the finish, which comes in the form of a sweeping four-note chord from the violin, a true flourish to close out the fun.

Sonata No. 4 in C Minor for violin and harpsichord, BWV 1017

I. Siciliano (Largo)
II. Allegro
III. Adagio
IV. Allegro

The sonata in C minor is quite a different beast. Whereas instrumental sonatas in the Baroque era were generally accompanied in basso continuo style (only the bass was written, and the player improvised appropriate chords), this sonata has a fully written-out harpsichord part. Its first movement, marked largo, is a siciliano, a dance thought to originate in Sicily, and characterised by a songful mood and lilting dotted rhythms. The violin obliges with a lyrical tune, but the right hand of the harpsichord glitters up and down the scale, almost suggesting a melancholy love song sung under the stars. The slightly sentimental tone is shattered by the stern contrapuntal grandeur of the second movement. Opening with the harpsichord alone, the music races through a driving, rhythmic melody whose angular leaps only intensify the excitement. At least one part seems always to be moving in giddy quavers.

The adagio that follows returns us to the song-like style of the opening, but here the expression is simpler, more direct. The right hand of the harpsichord moves in triplets against the duplets of the violin, creating a subtle but rich rhythmic tension throughout most of the movement, before a more animated, descending scale motif leads to yet another conclusion on an inconclusive cadence. The final movement, like the second, is a marvel of contrapuntal austerity, beginning with the harpsichord alone. The rhythm is once again relentless, whirling through chords and keys toward an inexorable finish with bare, open-octave Cs in all parts.

INTERVAL

J.S. Bach (1685-1750)

“Italian concerto”, BWV 971

I. Tempo giusto
II. Andante
III. Presto

Bach’s ‘Concerto after the Italian Taste’ (known more generally as the ‘Italian concerto’), is an unusual piece in several respects. First, it features the harpsichord as a solo instrument at a time when this was still uncommon in concerti. Yet even more oddly, it is scored for solo harpsichord throughout. This seems to be a contradiction in terms, for a concerto is typically a virtuoso display

piece for a solo instrument or group of instruments, accompanied by an orchestra. The work is certainly a showpiece, and its three movements are in the fast-slow-fast order by then standard for concerti, yet how can a concerto be a concerto if there is no orchestra to accompany the soloist?

Bach ingeniously answers that question by using contrasts of volume to imitate contrasts of instrumentation. The loud manual of the harpsichord is used for the 'orchestral' ritornelli, and the soft manual for the 'solo' sections. The F major allegro opening movement is a firework display of ornaments and speed, but with playfully arresting moments of seemingly self-contained digression. The move to adagio and to D minor in the second movement signals a radical change, as the steady, almost funereal trudge of the left hand underpins a highly ornamented melody reminiscent of an opera aria. Intensely expressive yet subdued, the movement refutes any suspicion that floridity and pathos are mutually exclusive. Gloom is dispelled with a return to F major in the finale, a spirited presto of irrepressible energy and good cheer. Now, the softer moments seem like giggling whispers among a group of friends before the joke is shared with the whole room.

Jane O'Leary (b. 1946)

Fantasia (homage to J.S. Bach) for Baroque violin and harpsichord

Born in Hartford, Connecticut, Jane O'Leary became resident in Ireland in 1972, making her home in Galway. A founding member of Aosdána, she is a graduate of Vassar College and holds a PhD in composition from Princeton University. She was awarded an Honorary Doctor of Music Degree by the National University of Ireland in 2007.

As artistic director and pianist of Concorde ensemble, Jane has been nurturing the development of new music in Ireland and promoting its performance worldwide since 1976.

Jane's music has been represented on numerous occasions at the ISCM World New Music Days and performed at prestigious international venues, including the Kennedy Center, Washington DC; Lincoln Center and Carnegie Hall, NY; Chicago Cultural Center; Centre Culturel Irlandais, Paris. The RTÉ National Symphony Orchestra featured her music on their debut tour of the USA in 2003. In March a portrait concert of her music for clarinet and piano will be presented in New York City. She is the featured composer in Hard Rain Soloist Ensemble's 2018-19 season in Belfast.

The Passing Sound of Forever, a CD of Jane's chamber music, was released in January 2017 with Navona Records.

Jane has kindly supplied the following programme note for her piece, Fantasia:

> *This piece was commissioned by Music Network for Baroque instruments, surrounded by Bach's music in performance. I drew on some general impressions of Bach's music, the style of the period, and also the particular qualities of sound inherent in these two contrasting instruments from another era. Open strings, harmonics and arpeggiations create stretches of rich sonority from the violin, while the harpsichord's plucked strings make sharp incisions into*

these lines. Alongside rhythmic passages there are free sections where the music escapes into a timeless space.

'Fantasia' was a form often used by Bach, described as 'the play of imaginative invention'; the term implies freedom, unpredictability, an element of surprise. As the music flows, moving forward and reaching upward, it takes some twists and turns, and a resonance from the past filters through.

J.S. Bach (1685-1750)

Sonata No. 6 in G Major for violin and harpsichord, BWV 1019

I. Allegro
II. Largo
III. (Alternate movement) Cantabile, ma un poco Adagio, BWV 1019(a)
IV. Adagio
V. Allegro

We return to the violin-harpsichord combination with Bach's G major sonata. Here again the harpsichord plays not from figured bass but from a fully written part, and this time we jump into things with a fast opening. Allegro may mean 'fast' in a musical context, but its original meaning of 'cheerful' is entirely appropriate for this jaunty movement, which feels almost more like four minutes of laughter than music. Nevertheless, the technical demands on both players are considerable; once again, scarcely a beat goes by that is not filled with rapid quavers in at least one part. Desolate loneliness and a powerful yet gentle minor mode overtake the sonata in the second movement, marked largo, as the violin and the right hand of the harpsichord trade the strains of a plangent melody.

The favourite device of ending on an unfinished cadence this time leads to a solo movement for the harpsichord, again in minor mode but this time with thrilling counterpoint that we might suspect escaped from the Two Part Inventions. An even more remote minor key pervades the fourth movement, an adagio of simpler and more serene contemplation than the previous one. But again the Baroque master never stays sentimental for long, and with bouncing triple time and resounding G major the last movement is once again allegro in both senses of the word. The laughter is more serious this time, however. Just as the second slow movement seemed more stoic in lamentation than did its predecessor, the finale shows the slightest frown of concentration as it dances to the finish.