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LIVE

# Mahan Esfahani

BYRD  
BACH  
LIGETI

## BYRD, BACH & LIGETI: A FEW REMARKS ON THREE MASTERS

*A note by Mahan Esfahani*

I decided to open this programme with three pieces from the sonic world of Byrd's youth. These solemn plainsong settings of the antiphon 'Clarifica me, Pater' (used for Lauds on the Saturday before Palm Sunday) come from the Tudor traditions of improvised divisions and polyphonic interplay above bits of chant. As with the efforts of earlier musicians in this genre – based more on a transference of vocal textures to the keyboard rather than an exploration of specific keyboard idioms as such – Byrd's pieces were most likely intended for the organ. Since we lack the same culture of familiarity with the chant repertoire, I have decided to include the chant melody itself in between Byrd's settings (track 2). The chant text is as follows: 'Clarifica me, Pater, apud temet ipsum, claritate quam habui, priusquam mundis fieret' ('Glorify me, O Father, with thyself, with the glory which I had before the world began', John 17:5).

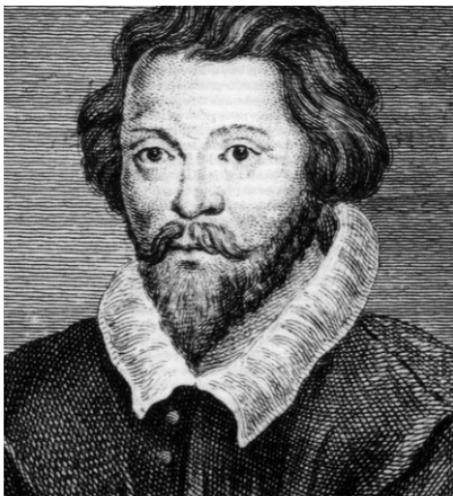
With the next couple of pieces, we go from the chapel to countryside and court. The song-variations on 'Jhon come kiss me now' exemplify Byrd's original handling of idiomatic keyboard style through the use of different patterns and the juxtaposition of varied textures. Byrd makes much of the emotional possibilities within variation form – as a result the piece has a large-scale narrative thread of extraordinary scope. The two sets of pavan and galliard pairs both come from

*My Ladye Nevells Booke* (Nevell MS) and attest to the strong tradition of dance which permeated English secular musical culture. Each dance is based on three strains, each of which in turn has a decorated reprise drawing upon the rich Renaissance tradition of rhythmically intricate decoration of the basic melody. The considered nobility of the pavan finds contrast in the athletic galliard which was defined by jumps, leaps, and other such vigorous steps. It is still a matter of debate as to how much keyboard pavan/galliard pairs were actually danced to (I am personally of the opinion that some were); it should be noted, at least, that if the galliards are played too slowly then they become rather unsuited to the steps prescribed for them. The galliard seems to have been a favourite at the Tudor court – indeed, one of Elizabeth I's advisors reported that even in her fifties 'the Queen is so well ... six or seven galliards in a morning, besides music and singing, is her ordinary exercise'.

The second set opens with one of Byrd's best-known keyboard pieces, which appears as 'The Marche Before the Battell' in the Nevell MS and as 'The Earle of Oxfords Marche' in the *Fitzwilliam Virginal Book*. Interestingly, in the Nevell MS as well as a couple of other period sources, the march appears as part of a 'battle sequence' of various programmatic movements fashioned in the most banal manner. Nothing of the banal,

however, is to be found in the ‘Fancie’ from the Nevell MS (No. 41). Here is an interesting example of a happy intersection of contrapuntal technique with allusions to rhythm and the art of divisions. Byrd spins a veritable world of fantasy as he seamlessly walks the boundary between polyphony and homophony – in other words, sometimes harmony occurs as a confluence of mutually independent lines, and sometimes harmony is ‘vertically’ planned in blocks of sonority. As the piece progresses, this ambiguity results in musical statements of great fervency and a spirited sense of rhythmic impulse. As the work ends in a flurry of semiquavers in both hands, one feels witness to a composer at the height of his powers.

The miniature gems that is the brief set of variations on ‘Callino casturame’ captures the charming side of what has been stereotyped in the Industrial Age as ‘Merry England’. Of course it is a silly nostalgic conception, but it can be a useful starting-point to understand some of this music. The English fascination with folk-song (in this case, an Irish one – ‘Cailin O Chois tSuire Me’, also cited in Shakespeare’s *Henry V*) is not to be dismissed as a mere example of period ‘cuteness’. Rather, I find that the confluence of music (which is above all a form of mathematics ‘in sound’) with folk-song represents a sort of artistic manifestation of humanism whereby God-given scientific phenomena are married to the utterances of mankind. The grand ‘Fantasia’ from the *Fitzwilliam Virginal Book* (No. 52) walks with an inimitable swagger, as Byrd explores several



WILLIAM BYRD

melodic motifs in quick succession. As with the ‘Fancie’ from the Nevell MS, reference to dance occurs with the introduction of a jig in the last section of the piece. Closing this celebration of Byrd is the composer’s celebrated song-variations on ‘Walsingham’, the great Catholic protest tune of the Elizabethan period. This tune seems to have originated with the many ‘laments’ for the shrine at Walsingham at Norfolk following the Reformation-led destruction of the shrine in 1538. One of its many varying texts, in this guise by Sir Walter Raleigh, is as follows:

As you came from the holy land  
Of Walsingham,  
Met you not with my true love  
By the way as you came?

How shall I know your true love,  
That have met many one  
As I went to the holy land,  
That have come, that have gone?

In the later verses of the poem references to love are clearly coded allusions to the Virgin Mary. It is no coincidence that the two great Roman Catholic composers of the age (the other being John Bull) should have composed variations on this tune. And it is obvious that Byrd wishes us to hear the tune quite clearly, as he begins the piece with a single line of melody. Through varied harmonisations of the tune (which itself is harmonically unstable) and the use of polyrhythms, Byrd imbues the variations with a great sense of drama that culminates in the shattering final variation. Here, a countermelody in the soprano and numerous stretto entrances of various subsidiary motifs contribute to a sense of great climax and tragic heroism. How can we call Byrd's variations anything but grand, dramatic fantasies?

I chose to devote a whole half of a recital to William Byrd partly in reaction to the fact that so few people realise the centrality of Byrd to the development of keyboard composition and playing. To me at least, Byrd is the great liberator of the harpsichord, the father of Bach and Beethoven and Chopin and Liszt. True, he derived much from Cabezón and Tallis, but nothing in history prepares us for the amazing breadth of

spirit found in Byrd's extensive keyboard output. And yet the books written about him devote little space to Byrd as keyboard master. Englishmen, here is your musician to place on a par with Shakespeare – be proud of him!

J.S. Bach's *Musical Offering* (BWV1079) was conceived as a tribute to Frederick the Great following the composer's brief visit to the court of the Prussian monarch in May 1747. During Bach's visit, Frederick challenged the great master to improvise fugues in three and six voices at the King's new pianoforte – on a theme provided by the King himself. Bach is said to have improvised the three-part fugue with great aplomb but demurred at improvising one in six voices, providing instead a fugal improvisation in the same number of voices on a theme of his own. Some weeks following his visit to Potsdam, Bach produced a set of pieces – two fugues, several canons, and a trio sonata – on the 'Royal theme'. Apart from the fact that Bach derived so many ideas from this single theme, the truly remarkable characteristic of this work is that the poor composer could find any value in such a long, unwieldy, and just plain bad subject. The three-part fugue (called 'ricercar' in the collection, which comes from the Latin verb for 'to seek') is written in a manner rather different from that of most of Bach's fugues. There is something rhapsodic and unsettled about it, and its musical language is more of the modern *galant* style. In fact, the 'sighing' motifs of the fugue's episodes suggest a light-hearted mockery of the *galant* – in other words, a mockery of the aesthetic favoured at



JOHANN SEBASTIAN BACH

Frederick's court. In contrast to the granite columns of the fugues from *The Well-tempered Clavier*, then, this is music of pink marble and pastel-coloured stucco. These qualities have caused some scholars to consider it as the pianoforte improvisation from that fateful day in Potsdam. The six-part *ricercar* is anything but a mockery (though it too has some faint *galant* features); rather, it offers a vision of eternity that is inexplicable in its scope and overwhelming tension between consonance and dissonance. It

should come as no surprise that this larger fugue has inspired many an orchestrator – Webern and Munchinger the most distinguished amongst them – since its textures are so beyond anything that was done in harpsichord music before.

Is it not strange, however, that Bach would have created a work that seems to challenge the King himself? The combative quality of the *Musical Offering* is further emphasised by the interspersing of somewhat stern injunctions throughout the collection, e.g., the inscription above canon No. 9, 'Quarendo invenietis' (Seek and ye shall find), which comes from Christ's Sermon on the Mount. The corresponding text from Matthew Chapter 7 reads:

- 7:7 Ask, and it shall be given you; seek, and ye shall find; knock, and it shall be opened unto you.
- 7:8 For every one that asketh receiveth: and he that seeketh findeth; and to him that knocketh it shall be opened.
- 7:12 Therefore all things whatsoever ye would that men should do to you, do ye even so to them: for this is the law of the prophets.

So, is Bach telling the King that he too must face a challenge? To a culture so steeped in the Bible, this was a very bold allusion indeed and not one that would have gone unnoticed. As if to deepen the sense of ambiguity as to whether he was flattering or provoking the King, Bach provided an inscription above the *Canon a 2 per tonos*: 'Ascendenteque Modulatione ascendat Gloria Regis' ('As the Modulations rise so may the Glory of the King'). The canon itself appears as a puzzle in which the King's theme is combined with a two-part canon at the fifth and the whole structure

goes through constant modulations of a whole tone in several cycles. Perhaps all this irony is intentional – after all, Bach would not have forgotten the hardships of the recent Prussian occupation of Leipzig. Sometimes only an artist may say what an ordinary citizen wouldn't dare.

With the three harpsichord pieces of György Ligeti we can say that one has come full circle from the works of Byrd which open this recital programme. The most obvious reference to the earlier master's work is to be found in Ligeti's use of repetitive patterns and forms, though it must be said that his use of such techniques owes as much to the composer's study of folk music. *Passacaglia ungherese* (1978) is the most conservative of the three pieces. Based on a two-bar cycle of eight minims in falling fourths, the *Passacaglia* has the distinct quality of a lament. The use of invertible counterpoint and the composer's specific indication of his preference for mean tone temperament hint at his interest in early and non-traditional models; the increasingly intricate and virtuosic melody spun throughout an otherwise static work has something of the exotic about it. Perhaps it is no coincidence that Ligeti turned to passacaglia form in his anguish-stricken Horn Trio (1982) and the final scene of his opera *Le grand macabre* (1977), in which the following text appears in conjunction with this compositional form: 'Fear not to die, good people all! / No one knows when his hour will fall.'

The next piece, *Continuum* (1968), explores the use of rapid movement (which the composer likened to 'innumerable thin slices of salami') to



GYÖRGY LIGETI

create not only the impression of continuous sound but also the effect of stasis or slow motion as small grains blur into larger sonic events which gradually broaden or contract as the piece progresses. Toward the end of the work, the various colours explored throughout the piece conclude in a constant repetition on one note in the higher register of the keyboard. Whether I have been able

to achieve a performance in which 'the individual tones can hardly be perceived, but rather merge into a continuum' (the composer's words) is yielded to the judgment of the listener.

The last piece on this recital disc came at an interesting time in Ligeti's artistic development, following a guest position at Stanford University which sparked an interest in computer-generated music, and an acquaintance with the composer Harry Partch who introduced Ligeti to the search for alternatives to the tempered system. The genesis for *Hungarian Rock* came out of the debates Ligeti had with his students at the Musikhochschule in Hamburg; the composer himself referred to the creation of this work and *Passacaglia ungherese* as 'musical arguments in a discussion I was having with my students ... [who were] deeply influenced by British and American pop music'. As with the *Passacaglia*, this piece is based on a repeating rhythmic pattern (2+2+3+2 in quavers) in four-bar cycles, above which the composer placed a melody using completely modern pitch content and technical acrobatics of an almost Scarlattian flavour. The rhythmic intri-

cacies of the melody have, I am convinced, some relation to Ligeti's interest in the *ars subtilior* repertoire of the fourteenth century and in American jazz. In fact, the last thirty-five or so bars exhibit the sounds of American big bands and their particularly mellifluous saxophone sections. Or at least this is how it sounds to me. What a tour de force this work is! And only five minutes' worth, at that, is enough to exhaust the performer's physical abilities.

N.B. The pieces by William Byrd which form the entire first half of this recital almost all come from two major sources: *My Ladye Nevells Booke* (British Library MS Mus. 1591), a presentation manuscript whose preparation was most likely corrected by Byrd himself, and the *Fitzwilliam Virginal Book* (Cambridge Music MS 168), an enormous compilation of keyboard music of the Tudor and Jacobean periods. I have decided to leave the spellings of titles as they are found in the sources.

*Notes by Mahan Esfahani © 2014*

### *A note on the instruments used in this recital*

The harpsichord used for the works by Byrd and Bach is a copy of an instrument built in 1711 by Pierre Donzelague of Lyon and now in private hands in London. For the works by Ligeti a very special kind of authenticity is represented in the 1972 concert grand double-manual instrument by the now-legendary English firm of Robert Goble & Son. This remarkable instrument epitomises the tradition of the modern or 'revival' harpsichords typified by a variety of registers (in this case, 16-foot, two 8-foot, a 4-foot, and a nazard) and the provision of pedals in order to quickly and conveniently add and subtract registers for certain effects and changes in colour. These instruments inspired a whole new period of modern composition and, in their own way, truly are period pieces. The Mackinnon & Waitzmann copy of the

1711 Donzelague has been provided by Simon Neal, and Andrea Goble kindly lent the modern harpsichord from his own collection.

With respect to the matter of harpsichord registration in the works of Byrd, I reserve the artistic right to make use of a multi-registered double manual in the Franco-Flemish tradition such as Byrd himself may not have known. At some point I may publish my arguments for doing so, but this is not the place for it. Suffice it to say that I am not indifferent to period instruments, nor have I done such things out of carelessness. There will always be those to whom a specific instrument from a specific year with a specific kind of hand-stop is a matter of existential propriety whose exigencies outweigh the immanent qualities of a musical text. They have my sympathy.

### *Acknowledgments*

The efforts of quite a few people went into the conception of this recital and its ultimate realisation. Simon Neal's excellent work with the period harpsichord copy and Andrea Goble's generous loan of his wonderful revival instrument allowed me to explore both early and modern music in the same recital. John McKean in Cambridge and Peter McMullin in Oxford provided indispensable information and advice on the works by Ligeti – I am particularly indebted to

Peter McMullin for his help in unlocking Ligeti's musical language. Joshua Copeland provided great help in understanding Byrd's handling of plainchant. Zuzana Růžicková in Prague unflatteringly went over every last bar of music with me in lessons. As with everything I endeavour to do, Betty Thayer has been there to guide me along the way. It is to her that I respectfully dedicate this disc.

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## MAHAN ESFAHANI



Acclaimed by *De Standaard* as ‘the harpsichord genius’ and by *Opera Today* as ‘the leading harpsichordist of his generation’, Mahan Esfahani was born in 1984 in Tehran. He first studied the piano with his father and as a teenager went on to explore an interest in the organ and harpsichord. He was the first harpsichordist to be named on BBC Radio 3’s *New Generation Artist* scheme and to be awarded a fellowship prize by the Borletti-

Buitoni Trust. He has made numerous concerto appearances, under the baton of such conductors as Martyn Brabbins, Thierry Fischer and Jiří Belohlávek, and with increasingly numerous modern orchestras in Britain and on the Continent. During his time as a BBC *New Generation Artist* he gave his solo debut at Wigmore Hall in London (broadcast on BBC Radio 3), about which *The Daily Telegraph* exclaimed, ‘the harpsichord

comes out of hiding ... magnificent'. In addition, his recording of Poulenc's Harpsichord Concerto was issued with the *BBC Music Magazine* in May 2010, and he has been featured as a 'Hot Property' by *Classic FM* magazine. Mahan Esfahani has recorded C. P. E. Bach's 'Württemberg' Sonatas for Hyperion.

With a repertoire that spans four centuries, Esfahani works to take the harpsichord beyond the realm of 'early music' and to major festivals and series in the mainstream of classical music across Europe, Canada and the United States. Concert highlights include solo recitals at halls in Tokyo, Nagoya, Cologne, Zurich, Bruges, Copenhagen, Nicosia, Vancouver, Bristol, Leeds, Istanbul, Prague, and New York, where his Frick Collection debut was met with critical acclaim. In 2011 he sold out London's Cadogan Hall with the first solo harpsichord recital in the 116-

year history of the BBC Proms, and 2012 saw a triumphant return to the Proms with his own arrangement of Bach's *Art of Fugue* for the Academy of Ancient Music.

Esfahani studied as a President's Scholar at Stanford University, where his principal mentor was the musicologist George Houle; he went on to pursue his performance studies under the supervision of the Australian harpsichordist Peter Watchorn (Boston) and the Italian organist Lorenzo Ghielmi (Milan), and currently benefits from the advice and guidance of the celebrated Czech harpsichordist Zuzana Růžičková.

Mahan Esfahani makes his home in the United Kingdom. In his free time he enjoys exploring Persian cuisine, the study of etymology, and a deep interest in Czech culture and history. For more information please see [www.mahanesfahani.com](http://www.mahanesfahani.com).

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# Mahan Esfahani *harpsichord*

Recorded live at Wigmore Hall, London, on 3 May 2013

## **WILLIAM BYRD** (c.1540/43–1623)

- |    |   |      |
|----|---|------|
| 01 | Clarifica me, Pater I                                 | 1.38 |
| 02 | PLAINCHANT Clarifica me, Pater                        | 0.41 |
| 03 | Clarifica me, Pater II                                | 1.15 |
| 04 | Clarifica me, Pater III                               | 1.55 |
| 05 | Jhon come kiss me now                                 | 4.55 |
| 06 | The Fifte Pavian                                      | 3.45 |
| 07 | The Galliard to the Fifte Pavian                      | 1.44 |
| 08 | The Marche Before the Battell                         | 3.03 |
| 09 | Fancie ( <i>My Ladye Nevells Booke</i> , No. 41)      | 4.11 |
| 10 | The Firste Pavian                                     | 3.40 |
| 11 | The Galliard to the Firste Pavian                     | 1.43 |
| 12 | Callino casturame                                     | 2.02 |
| 13 | Fantasia ( <i>Fitzwilliam Virginal Book</i> , No. 52) | 6.33 |
| 14 | Walsingham  | 7.33 |

## **JOHANN SEBASTIAN BACH** (1685–1750)

from *The Musical Offering*, BWV 1079 (1747)

- |    |   |      |
|----|---|------|
| 15 | Ricercar a 3  | 5.56 |
| 16 | Ricercar a 6  | 6.55 |
| 17 | Canon a 2 per tonos<br>( <i>Ascendenteque Modulatione ascendat Gloria Regis</i> ) | 2.56 |

## **GYÖRGY LIGETI** (1923–2006)

- |    |                              |      |
|----|------------------------------|------|
| 18 | Passacaglia ungherese (1978) | 4.21 |
| 19 | Continuum (1968)             | 3.59 |
| 20 | Hungarian Rock (1978)        | 5.40 |

Total time: 74.58