



ORGAN GIANTS

J.S. BACH • MENDELSSOHN • SCHUMANN • BRAHMS • B-A-C-H

Simon Johnson

Sunday 7th March 2021, 4.30 pm

 ST PAUL'S
CATHEDRAL

B-A-C-H: The Influence of J. S. Bach

Recital II – Late Bach Contrapuntal Symphonies

Ricercar a 6 & Ricercar a 3

from *The Musical Offering* (BWV 1079) J. S. Bach (1685 – 1750)

Towards the end of his life, in 1747, Bach visited the court of Frederick the Great of Prussia, where his son Carl Philipp Emanuel was working as an accompanist. While this visit was initially intended for the composer to see the King's collection of fortepianos, it also acted as an opportunity for Bach to flaunt his improvisatory prowess. The King presented him with a deliberately challenging theme on which to play a fugue in three voices; so demanding that Arnold Schoenberg suggested that it was really the work of Carl Philipp Emanuel, calculated to be a stern test for his father. Bach reportedly responded so well to this challenge that the King subsequently asked for another on the same theme, this time in six voices. While Bach declined to create one spontaneously, upon his return to Leipzig he composed a masterful, imposing contrapuntal edifice based on this theme. He inscribed the work *Regis Iussu Cantio et Reliqua Canonica Arte Resoluto* ("the theme given by the King, with additions, resolved in the canonic style"), the initials of which spell 'Ricercar'. Perhaps Bach's investment in this work is displayed by the subtle inclusion of the B-A-C-H motif, his musical signature, at the fugue's conclusion. Transcribing the original three-voice improvisation as well, this pair of ricercars was subsequently incorporated into a larger scale collection of music for unspecified instrumentation, based on the *Thema Regium* (theme of the King).

Contrapunctus I & Contrapunctus XIV

from *The Art of Fugue* (BWV 1080)

J. S. Bach

The Art of Fugue represents the culmination of Bach's lifetime dedication to mastering contrapuntal writing. On display in this musical compendium is an expansive series of fugues and canons

based on a single theme, all of which are strikingly different in character and utilise a vast array of Bach's radical compositional techniques. It is plausible that the composer, his health rapidly deteriorating, wished to offer a final statement in the discipline which he had so obsessively refined and perfected. *Contrapunctus XIV*, which incorporates the B-A-C-H motif as its third subject, was left incomplete; it is likely that Bach had died at this point. The piece has since been finished by the Swiss organist and composer Lionel Rogg, recalling the musical material established in *Contrapunctus I*.

Notes by Samuel Bristow

Simon Johnson

“A brilliant and sensitive musician achieving greatness” (Gramophone), Simon Johnson has been the Organist of St Paul's Cathedral for 12 years. During this time he has played for Her Majesty the Queen, the Dalai Lama, numerous Prime Ministers, Archbishops and international dignitaries, and at all the state occasions that have taken place at St Paul's during his tenure.

Recitals have taken him all over the USA and Europe, including a Royal Festival Hall debut in 2017. Various collaborations have seen him work with NASA, the International Space Station, Wes Anderson, Jo Brand, Alastair McGowan, LSO, RPO, City of London Sinfonia, the Vatican, The Sixteen. Simon serves on the Academic Board of The Royal College of Organists, for whom he is also an examiner.

Prior to his move into the organ loft, he was a successful choral director, most notably with the St Albans Abbey Girls' Choir (5* “Stunning” Choir and Organ).

Simon has recorded for Decca and Hyperion, been published by OUP and Peters, and worked on the Oscar-winning soundtrack for *The Grand Budapest Hotel*.

Next recital

Sunday 14th March at 4.30 pm

Samuel Bristow | Complete Organ Works of Mendelssohn Recital III

Sunday Organ Recitals rely on the generous support of our audiences. The musical heritage of St Paul's has come under severe pressure as a result of COVID-19. We recommend a donation of £5, and thank you in advance for your contribution. Please include ‘Sunday Organ Recitals’ in the comment box in the link below:

<https://www.stpauls.co.uk/support/st-pauls/donate-to-us>