



Piotr Anderszewski

Wednesday 11 April 2018 7.30pm, Hall

JS Bach The Well-Tempered Clavier, Book 2:
Prelude and Fugue in C major, BWV870
Prelude and Fugue in A flat major, BWV886
Prelude and Fugue in D sharp minor, BWV877

JS Bach English Suite No 3 in G minor, BWV808

interval 20 minutes

Beethoven Diabelli Variations

Piotr Anderszewski piano

Part of Barbican Presents 2017–18

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Welcome

We're delighted to welcome to the Barbican the inimitable Polish pianist Piotr Anderszewski.

The two composers whose music Piotr performs this evening are both very close to his heart. His Bach interpretations create a balance between the sheer physical thrill of the keyboard writing and the profundity of the slow movements. Add to that an ability to elucidate even the most complex fugal textures and you have something very special indeed.

Piotr's relationship with Beethoven's *Diabelli Variations* is certainly longstanding – his 2001 recording of the piece won many prestigious prizes and it is a work to which he has returned time and again. Its appeal is not hard to understand, for it's a work that is endlessly fascinating, not least for Beethoven's genius in taking Diabelli's banal theme and not only sending it up but also ultimately transforming it into something transcendental.

I hope you enjoy the concert.

Huw Humphreys, Head of Music, Barbican

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Johann Sebastian Bach (1685–1750)

The Well-Tempered Clavier, Book 2

(compiled c1742) —

Prelude and Fugue in C major, BWV870

Prelude and Fugue in A flat major, BWV886

Prelude and Fugue in D sharp minor, BWV877

English Suite No 3 in G minor, BWV808

1 Prelude

2 Allemande

3 Courante

4 Sarabande

5 Gavottes I & II

6 Gigue

For some, the two books of Bach's *Well-Tempered Clavier* (or 48) represent a kind of Old Testament of keyboard music (with Beethoven's piano sonatas as the New Testament). But that is to solemnify music that doesn't need to be put on a pedestal. Bach's own aims were typically understated, recommending the collection be used 'for the profit and use of musical youth desirous of learning and especially for the pastime of those already skilled in this study'. That doesn't begin to hint at the riches and sheer variety within, as these three preludes and fugues show. And that wealth perhaps helps to explain the enduring appeal of Bach for performers and listeners alike – his music can be personalised in such a wide variety of manners and styles that anyone can put their own gloss on it and feel personally engaged by it.

Unlike the understated simplicity of the C major Prelude of the First Book, the one that launches the Second (BWV870) struts its stuff with immense confidence, contrasting with a bustling three-part Fugue that makes a virtue of its busyness. Piotr Anderszewski follows this with the A flat major

Prelude and Fugue, BWV886. The Prelude sets syncopation in the midst of the right-hand texture against a sturdy dotted rhythm in the left hand. The opening phrases are answered by eloquent semiquavers which lead to rich patterning featuring demisemiquavers and Bach proceeds to develop these ideas, with some very effective harmonic sleights of hand, not least at the Prelude's close. The Fugue sounds like an entirely natural pairing but was in fact written some two decades earlier. For whereas the Prelude was written specifically for the Second Book of the 48, the four-part Fugue is based on a work from around 1720 which Bach extends and develops, even adding a fifth voice near its close.

For the Prelude in D sharp minor – with its six sharps, not the easiest of key signatures to play – Bach retreats into murmuring mode, the sense of movement increased in the second half with the introduction of smaller note values, as well as plangent harmonic twists. The grand four-part Fugue is based on a sighing motif that gives it a mournful solemnity; this is combined with a countersubject that plays a prominent role. Bach

builds the piece up to a powerfully rhetorical climax which culminates in a radiant final major chord.

The first thing to be said about Bach's *English Suites* is that there's nothing intrinsically English about them. The title seems to have first cropped up in Bach's earliest biography, written in 1802 by Johann Nikolaus Forkel, who explained that the suites were composed 'for an English nobleman'. In fact, in terms of the actual dances featured, the *English Suites* are arguably more French than the *French Suites*, which is more than a little confusing.

They are essentially players' music, rather than being composed with an audience in mind. It used to be thought that the six dated from the time when Bach was Kapellmeister to Prince Leopold of Anhalt-Cöthen (1717–23) but now it seems more likely that they were written during the composer's Weimar period (1708–17), at the end of which he was jailed by his employer Duke Wilhelm in a misguided attempt to prevent his defection to Cöthen.

What is common to most of the suites (apart from a lack of Englishness!), No 3 providing an exhilarating example, is a grandiose prelude combining fugal elements with textures that alternate between 'solo' and 'tutti' passages characteristic of the concertos of Corelli, Vivaldi and Bach himself. Bach achieves this effect on the keyboard by the lightening or intensifying of textures.

The Allemande, its theme unconventionally first appearing in the bass, is followed by a glorious Courante which delights in its rhythmic dexterity. The gravity of G minor is fully exploited in the dark-hued Sarabande, with its daringly twisting harmonies.

Relief comes in the form of the pair of Gavottes, the second of which has a distinctly Rameau-ish flavour, and a thrillingly virtuosic fugal Gigue, which again seems to take its inspiration from the concerto genre in its texture and brilliance of coloration.

interval 20 minutes

Ludwig van Beethoven (1770–1827)

33 Variations on a waltz by Anton Diabelli, Op 120 (1819–23)

Had Bavaria not closed all its monasteries in 1803 during a wave of secularisation, we might not have had the *Diabelli Variations* at all. For Anton Diabelli originally trained for the priesthood and it was only after being ejected from his cloistered life that he sought an occupation in the wider world. He was already something of a composer by this time so a move into publishing was a natural step. And, being something of a marketing whizz, he hit upon the idea of writing a waltz and inviting 50 composers each to contribute a variation, publishing the resulting musical patchwork and getting priceless publicity into the bargain. So it was that everyone from Schubert, Hummel and Czerny to the 8-year-old Liszt duly contributed. So did Beethoven – but not quite in the manner Diabelli anticipated.

Beethoven was no stranger to variation form – indeed his 20 sets for piano span a longer period than the sonatas – but there was nothing to suggest what he was about to do to Diabelli’s somewhat crass theme, which he described dismissively as ‘a cobbler’s patch’. It clearly got under his skin, for he produced not one but 33 variations, most of which were composed in 1819, with another 10 being added in 1823; these last 10 (Vars 1, 2, 15, 23–26, 28, 29 and 31) dramatically altered the shape of the work itself.

Diabelli’s theme is not promising in the conventional sense: its two halves are too similar, it’s singularly lacking in melodic memorability and, as Alfred Brendel has pointed out, if you take away the dynamics and the *Vivace* marking then what you have is closer to an old-fangled minuet than a waltz. What Beethoven does with this is put it in its place: this is more a satire on a theme than a homage to it. Moreover, this satire lasts around an hour, a time-scale in which you might expect the joke to wear a little thin.

Nowhere does Beethoven fling away the rulebook with quite such force as in this piece.

Conventional wisdom states that variations are supposed to develop a theme gradually, becoming more intricate, more fanciful as they progress. The classic ‘what not to do’ is to lose sight of the essential character of the theme in Var 1. But that’s exactly what happens here (a masterstroke of second thoughts, this being one of the later additions to the work), Beethoven turning Diabelli’s waltz into a march with what sounds dangerously close to contempt. Var 2 adds insult to injury, retaining only Diabelli’s bass-line, and when the theme does become more apparent, in Var 3, it seems to have lost its sense of direction. Which brings another problem, for, as quickly becomes apparent, these variations don’t exalt and caress the theme in the way that Bach’s *Goldbergs* do; rather, we have something of a character assassination.

Beethoven picks the theme apart, into its constituent motifs, and it is these that fuel the variations. Diabelli’s initial ‘turn’ idea, for example, comes to the fore in Vars 2, 6, 9, 11, 12 and 25, while the predictable sequential phrases (in bars 9–12) fuel Vars 27 and 28. And such a banal feature as Diabelli’s C major chord, repeated 10 times, is lampooned in Var 21 and greeted with silence in Var 13. Var 22, meanwhile, ushers in another comic master with its quotation from Mozart’s *Don Giovanni*, and specifically Leporello’s aria ‘Notte e giorno faticar’, in which the servant complains about working for such a meagre salary – surely a not exactly subtle reference to Beethoven’s own experiences of turning such poor material into musical gold.

Another striking aspect of the work is how much of it is in C major, with the exception of the fugue (Var 32), which is in E flat major, and a clutch of variations in C minor. Yet within that rootedness is a sense of unending variety, contrast and unpredictability; humour may be uppermost much of the time (some of it verging on the angry) but then Beethoven throws into the mix the profoundly

serious Vars 14, 20 and 24. The drawn-out Var 14, with its use of the extremes of register that were such a feature of Beethoven's late piano style, stills the momentum to extraordinarily potent effect, satire turned to tragedy in an instant. But this is almost shockingly brushed aside with the chipper Var 15, and the defiant Var 16, with its bolshie striding bass. We stare into the abyss again in 20, in what Alfred Brendel has called the 'inner sanctum' of the work – a variation whose harmonies defy anything as banal as analysis but which seem to stare far, far into the future (not for nothing did Liszt call this variation 'Sphinx').

Beethoven constantly destabilises the listener in this piece, not least via sly alterations of phrase

lengths, cutting out bars here and there (in the first half of Var 4, for instance, or the second part of Var 11), while in Var 29 he adds bars into each half. This is the first of three expansive minor-key variations, creating some 10 minutes of utter pathos. After this what can come next? A fugue of course, exploiting the repeated-note banalities of Diabelli's theme in a proud E flat major. It ends indecisively, and for the final variation the waltz returns (now marked 'Tempo di menuetto moderato'); it's initially archaic in style, stripped of its original self-importance, but as the variation develops it gains a transcendental quality as luminous as that of the final Arietta of the Op 111 Sonata. The ridiculous has, finally, metamorphosed into the sublime.

Programme notes © Harriet Smith

About the performer

MG de Saint-Yvenant/Warner Classics



Piotr Anderszewski

Piotr Anderszewski piano

Piotr Anderszewski is regarded as one of the most outstanding musicians of his generation.

In recent seasons he has given recitals at the Royal Festival Hall, Vienna Konzerthaus, Carnegie Hall and the Mariinsky Concert Hall in St Petersburg. His collaborations with orchestra have included appearances with the Berlin Philharmonic and Berlin Staatskapelle orchestras, Chicago and London Symphony orchestras, Philadelphia Orchestra and Royal Concertgebouw Orchestra. He has also given many performances directing from the keyboard, with the Scottish Chamber Orchestra, Chamber Orchestra of Europe, Sinfonia Varsovia and Deutsche Kammerphilharmonie Bremen, among others.

This season he appears with the Philharmonia, Munich and Vienna Philharmonic orchestras, Deutsche Sinfonie-Orchester Berlin, Budapest Festival Orchestra, Orchestre de Paris and San Francisco Symphony Orchestra. In recital he can be heard at Chicago's Symphony Center, the Amsterdam Concertgebouw and here at the Barbican Centre. Next month he also resumes his play-direct collaboration with the

Scottish Chamber Orchestra for an extensive European tour.

He has been an exclusive artist with Warner Classics/Erato (previously Virgin Classics) since 2000. His first recording for the label was of Beethoven's *Diabelli Variations*, which went on to receive a number of prizes, including a Choc du Monde de la Musique and an ECHO Klassik award. He has also recorded a Grammy-nominated CD of Bach's Partitas Nos 1, 3 and 6 and a critically acclaimed disc of works by Chopin. His affinity with the music of his compatriot Szymanowski is captured in a highly praised recording of the composer's solo piano works, which won a *Gramophone Award* in 2006. His recording devoted to solo works by Schumann received an ECHO Klassik award in 2011 and two *BBC Music Magazine* awards in 2012, including Recording of the Year. His disc of Bach's *English Suites* Nos 1, 3 and 5 was released in November 2014, going on to win both a *Gramophone* award and an ECHO Klassik award in 2015. His most recent recording is of Mozart's Piano Concertos Nos 25 and 27, which was released in January this year.

Recognised for the intensity and originality of his interpretations, Piotr Anderszewski has been selected for several high-profile awards during his career, including the prestigious Gilmore Award, given every four years to a pianist of exceptional talent.

He has also been the subject of two award-winning documentaries by the film maker Bruno Monsiegeon for ARTE. The first of these, *Piotr Anderszewski plays the 'Diabelli Variations'* (2001), explores his close relationship with the piece, while the second, *Piotr Anderszewski, Unquiet Traveller* (2008), captures the pianist's reflections on music, performance and his Polish-Hungarian roots. A third film by Monsiegeon, *Anderszewski plays Schumann*, was made for Polish Television and first broadcast in 2010.

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Tue 5 Jun

Yuja Wang
in recital

Thu 21 Jun

Murray Perahia
in recital

Images:
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