



Kaia Smith

HPSCHD: Music for Electronics and Harpsichord

Thursday 17 January 2019 7.30pm
Milton Court Concert Hall

Sunleif Rasmussen Quadroforone No 1
(world premiere: Barbican commission)

Berio Rounds

Miroslav Srnka Triggering

interval 20 minutes

Cage HPSCHD – Solo VII

Anahita Abbasi Intertwined Distances
(UK premiere: commissioned by Mahan Esfahani)

Mahan Esfahani harpsichord

Electronic Realisation by the Electronic Music
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Welcome

A warm welcome to this evening's Milton Court concert, presented by harpsichordist Mahan Esfahani. He's an artist who brings a unique vivacity and panache to every style of music that he plays.

He has a particular passion for contemporary music, however, and has already broadened the harpsichord's repertory with the commissioning of new music.

Two of tonight's works are premieres – we begin with the world premiere of

the Barbican commission *Quadroforone* No 1 by the Faroese composer Sunleif Rasmussen. Mahan also gives the UK premiere of *Intertwined Distances*, written for him by fellow Iranian Anahita Abbasi. Miroslav Srnka's *Triggering* is another piece written especially for tonight's soloist.

Interleaved with these recent pieces are classics by two of the 20th century's greatest iconoclasts: John Cage and Luciano Berio.

It promises to be a very memorable concert. I hope you enjoy it.

Huw Humphreys, Head of Music, Barbican

Sunleif Rasmussen (born 1961)

Quadroforone No 1 (2018)

world premiere: Barbican commission

Hailing from the Faroe Islands, Sunleif Rasmussen is the composer of a large, various and vigorous output, drawing on local folk music, jazz and spectral thinking. Among his credits is the first Faroese symphony, subtitled 'Oceanic Days' (1995–7).

This evening's piece is the first in a set of four that will each pitch a live instrument against recorded images of itself, these images changed in timbre and heard from loudspeakers around the hall. In this case the live harpsichord gets things rolling, with swirling modal rotations in both hands that are, for the moment, very slowly rising in pitch. The transformed harpsichords do the same thing as they enter progressively, each a fifth lower than the last, so that registral spread increases at the same time as do density and harmonic complexity. Changes from legato to staccato provide further variation, and may help in picking out one participant from the other

three. As the music spins and shifts, it is the live harpsichord that stands out more and more, and that ends the opening section once more alone.

The speed is effectively halved for a section headed 'Nocturne', featuring the live performer very much as soloist. One of the recorded harpsichords accompanies, mirroring; the others intervene more intermittently, until they, too, take up the strain. The live harpsichord moves on to arpeggiated-seventh chords and further elaborations of the Nocturne theme, the texture thinning at one point to leave it playing solo.

It is by itself again to introduce a new fast section, marked *leggero*, offset against recorded harpsichords maintaining the speed of the nocturne, more or less in canon. The finale is a 'Nocturne 2' that ends with the live musician almost alone once again, but not quite. Altogether the piece lasts for 20 minutes.

Luciano Berio (1925–2003)

Rounds (1965)

Berio wrote this piece for the Swiss harpsichordist Antoinette Vischer (1909–73), a specialist in new music for the instrument who three years later elicited *Continuum* from Ligeti. The Berio piece belongs to a period when he was focusing on freeing up notation, so that printed music

could be read in different ways. Several of his contemporaries were looking in the same direction; he also had the extra prompt of his friend Umberto Eco's book *Opera aperta* ('The Open Work'), which had been published in 1962.

Rounds, Berio's only harpsichord solo, is printed on a single page, with separate paired staves for the two manuals but no clefs. The performer plays through the piece imagining treble and bass clefs in the expected positions, then turns the page upside-down and plays it again, so that not only is everything reversed and inverted, but what was in the bass before is now in the treble, and vice versa. (Accidentals are replaced by a

new symbol that will work either way up.) Middle-register C and C sharp will be the same in either clef, and this C sharp, in particular, provides a guiding thread. Finally, the musician turns the page back again to play it through again, faster. Tempos otherwise are free, but the piece is likely to last only three minutes or so, to create, as the composer put it, 'a kind of firework of lines and timbres blended and ramified ad infinitum'.

Miroslav Srnka (born 1975)

Triggering (2018)

I Digital Wounds

II Major Rain

III The Last Tennis Match With My Grandfather

IV Yet Another High School Shooting

V My Mom Just Got the Only Sewing Machine Available Back Then and Learns

VI Analyzing the Fatal Shot

VII Hammers in the Forest Vault —

VIII Does God Shoot His Own Particles?

The composer writes:

In solo pieces, I try to (re)discover instruments, to find something in their substance with which my music could communicate.

The harpsichord is an especially challenging case, for its substance is very historical: tones without any possibility of modifying colour or loudness.

The harpsichord mechanism either plucks the strings or does not. 1 or 0. Very digital.

Suddenly very contemporary.

What is in between the ones and zeros?

There is this very special instant, between the moment when the finger starts pressing the key and the moment when the plectrum plucks the string.

An instant characterised by a mounting pressure.

A mechanism that literally triggers a tone.

Each tone becomes a shot.

Between shots another time.

This time may be political, social, private, metaphorical, sporting, humorous, existential, climatic.

In this piece I attempt to construct all these different times – the instants and the

betweentimes – until the mechanism of playing dissolves and the times change in nature.

The piece was written for Mahan Esfahani. For his unique sense of time.

interval 20 minutes

John Cage (1912–92)

HPSCHD (1967–9) – Solo VII

Along with Berio and Ligeti, Cage was one of Antoinette Vischer's willing victims, though what he produced in response to her request for a solo was a massive mixed-media enterprise, *HPSCHD*, involving seven harpsichordists and numerous tapes together with projections, presented for the first time in May 1969 by the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign. That was the venue because Cage, wanting to use a computer in creating the music, had drawn on the assistance of Lejaren Hiller, a UI professor

and pioneer of digitally automated composition. The seven harpsichord solos, each 20 minutes long, may be performed independently, so that Vischer did indeed receive what she asked for, as well as far more. Solos I–VI are based on a musical dice-game ascribed to Mozart and are fully notated, covering many pages, but this note has already greatly exceeded in length the text Cage supplied as sole instruction for Solo VII: 'Practice and/or perform any composition(s) by Mozart. Amplitude and registration free.'

Anahita Abbasi (born 1985)

Intertwined Distances (2018)

UK premiere: commissioned by Mahan Esfahani

The composer writes:

Distance, Movement, Silence, Perception,
Paradox, Continuity.

According to Merriam-Webster, distance is a separation in time, an extent of advance from a beginning; and in mathematics it refers to the degree or amount of separation between two points, lines, surfaces, or objects.

In this piece I am exploring the qualities of various dimensions of 'distances'.

The piece opens perceptual spaces and plays with the listener's perceptions. It is an observation of how the sound moves and travels within the concert hall, of the distances between the performer on stage and the audience, and of the relationships of both with the quadrasonic speakers. On another level, it explores the

phenomena of distance in time (the centuries-old harpsichord being placed in a modern environment) and distance between people (geographically, emotionally, etc). Our daily life is made of these intertwined distances, which are constantly in movement and change.

On a personal level, the electronic component comes out of a close collaboration, between Mahan Esfahani and the composer. The sounds are solely harpsichord sounds, specially recorded for this piece. In association with various filters and processes, the material developed further and gained other colours and qualities.

The piece is an observation of these constant movements of sound and various perceptions of distances – and of ultimately how all these unite and convolute by twining with each other.

About the performer



Keira Smith

Mahan Esfahani

Mahan Esfahani harpsichord

Mahan Esfahani has made it his life's mission to rehabilitate the harpsichord in the mainstream of concert instruments, and to that end his creative programming and work in commissioning new works have drawn the attention of critics and audiences across Europe, Asia and North America. He was the first and only harpsichordist to be a BBC New Generation Artist (2008–10), a Borletti-Buitoni prize winner (2009) and a nominee for *Gramophone's* Artist of the Year (2014, 2015, and 2017).

He has given recitals in the world's leading concert halls, including the Wigmore Hall, Barbican Centre, Tokyo's Oji Hall, the Forbidden City Concert Hall in Beijing, Shanghai Concert Hall, Sydney Opera House, Melbourne Recital Centre, Berlin Konzerthaus, Cologne Philharmonie, Zurich Tonhalle, Wiener Konzerthaus and the 92nd St Y; he has also appeared in San Francisco Performances and at Lincoln Center's Mostly Mozart Festival, the Schleswig-Holstein Festival, Edinburgh Festival, Aspen Festival, Aldeburgh Festival, Madrid's Fundación Juan March, the Bergen Festival, Festival Mecklenburg-Vorpommern, Al Bustan Festival in Beirut, Jerusalem Arts Festival and Leipzig Bach Festival. He has performed concertos with the Aarhus, BBC, Chicago, Czech Radio, Hamburg and Melbourne Symphony orchestras, Malta and Royal

Liverpool Philharmonic orchestras, Auckland Philharmonia, Orquesta de Navarra, Munich Chamber Orchestra, Britten Sinfonia, Royal Northern Sinfonia, and Los Angeles Chamber Orchestra, with whom he is was an artistic partner (2016–18).

Recent highlights include his Carnegie Hall debut in 2018, recitals at the Amsterdam Concertgebouw and Thüringer Bachwoche with violinist Liza Ferschtman, concertos with the Kammerakademie Potsdam, residencies with both the RLPO and the Royal Northern Sinfonia, and the continuation of a multi-year project of the complete keyboard works of J S Bach for the Wigmore Hall.

His discography includes two critically acclaimed recordings for Hyperion – C P E Bach's *Württemberg Sonatas* (which won a *Gramophone Award* in 2014) and Rameau's complete *Pièces de Clavecin*, which was named in the *New York Times Critics' List of Top Recordings of 2014* – and two albums for DG. The first for DG, *Time Present and Time Past*, garnered a *Choc de Classica* in France, while the latest, of Bach's 'Goldberg' Variations, was released in 2016 to international critical praise, winning him a *BBC Music Magazine Award* in 2017. He also has recorded Dutilleux with the Seattle Symphony under Ludovic Morlot and an album for Wigmore Hall Live. A recording of Corelli with the recorder player Michala Petri was awarded an ICMA in 2016.

Mahan Esfahani was born in Tehran in 1984 and was raised in the USA. He studied musicology and history at Stanford University and studied harpsichord in Boston with Peter Watchorn before furthering his studies under the celebrated Czech harpsichordist Zuzana Růžičková. Following a three-year stint as Artist-in-Residence at New College, Oxford, he continues his academic associations as an honorary member at Keble College, Oxford, and as professor at the Guildhall School of Music & Drama. He can be frequently heard as a commentator on BBC Radio 3 and Radio 4.

