

barbican



Classical Music

Concert programme

Mahan Esfahani
Harpsichord Recital

Sat 3 May 7.30pm

Milton Court Concert Hall

Important information



When does the concert start and finish?

The concert begins at 7.30pm and finishes at about 9.30pm, with a 20-minute interval.



I'm running late!

Latecomers will be admitted if there is a suitable break in the performance.



Please ...

Switch any watch alarms and mobile phones to silent during the performance.



Please don't ...

Take photos or recordings during the performance – save it for the curtain call.



Use a hearing aid?

Please use our induction loop – just switch your hearing aid to T setting on entering the hall.



Need a break?

You can leave at any time and be readmitted if there is a suitable break in the performance.



Looking for refreshments?

Bars are located on Levels -1, G and 1.



Looking for the toilets?

The nearest toilets, including accessible toilets, are located on Levels -1, G and 2.



Carrying bags and coats?

Drop them off at our free cloak room on Level -1.

Mahan Esfahani

Harpsichord Recital

Sat 3 May 7.30pm, Milton Court Concert Hall

Mahan Esfahani harpsichord

I

Hans Werner Henze *Six Absences*

- 1 Molto mesto e lento
- 2 Andante cantabile
- 3 Pesante, molto mosso
- 4 Andantino
- 5 Lento
- 6 Allegramente
- 7 Agrément de la sixième Absence

II

Jean-Philippe Rameau *Suite in E minor*

- 1 Allemande
- 2 Courante
- 3 Gigue en rondeau I and II
- 4 Le rappel des oiseaux
- 5 Rigaudons I, II and double
- 6 Musette en rondeau
- 7 Tambourin
- 8 La villageoise

III

Luciano Berio *Rounds*

Johann Pachelbel *Chaconne in F minor*

Haïm Alexander *Improvisation on a Persian
Folksong*

Interval 20 minutes

Produced by the Barbican

Programme produced by Harriet Smith
All information correct at time of printing
Printed by APS Group on Edixion Offset
FSC Mix Credit

IV

Elisabeth Jacquet de la Guerre *Pièces de
Clavecin:*

- Prélude
- Allemande
- Courante I – Courante II
- Sarabande
- Gigue
- Canaries
- Chaconne

V

Mark Applebaum *October 1582 for
harpsichord and live electronics*
European premiere



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Mahan Esfahani brings his characteristic combination of musicality and probing intellect to a programme that demonstrates the remarkable versatility of the harpsichord, with music that takes us from the late 17th century right up to the present day.

There is something idiomatic about the harpsichord that sets it apart from other instruments. It is, perhaps, that unique pluck that conjures worlds in a movement – that speaks of timelessness and futurism, suspending its listener for a moment. I remember the first time I heard the harpsichord live, and feeling as if something were being woven from the inside of the instrument out into my impressionable ears. I also recall playing scales in the ‘harpsichord’ sound on my Yamaha keyboard as a child, the *sostenuto* pedal rendered useless and all my mistakes suddenly 10 times more noticeable. The harpsichord takes no prisoners, I learned. Later, I became intrigued by how the instrument might stretch to find new musical resonances in a world of lush soundscapes and inflections from electronics. This programme, which lifts the harpsichord out of its gilded early-music cage, allows Mahan Esfahani to show where it has been, and where it might be going. The Baroque has not been written out of the story – we are still treated to Jacquet de la Guerre and Rameau – but here they rub shoulders provocatively with Berio, Henze and Applebaum, making (and perhaps proving) the case that this instrument belongs on all stages, in all contexts.

To begin, an absence: Hans Werner Henze wrote his six short pieces for



harpsichord in 1961 in dedication to the great instrumentalist Antoinette Vischer, who in her lifetime commissioned many composers, including Luciano Berio and John Cage (who famously did not like the sound of the instrument when originally approached). Henze, on the other hand, was an omnivore, taking inspiration from everywhere across his lifetime. By the time he wrote his *Six Absences*, he had left Germany, his country of birth, and moved to Italy.

This relocation was not unfamiliar to Jean-Philippe Rameau, who, early in his career, was sent to Italy from France to study. His work began with the harpsichord: in 1706, when he would have been in his early twenties, he published his first set of pieces for the instrument. Twenty or so years later – having in the meantime been interested in the writing (and performing) of church music – he returned to the instrument, producing two more suites of harpsichord music, including the *Technicolor Suite* in E minor.

We then jump forwards from the early 18th century to the 1960s for Luciano Berio's *Rounds*: here both the programme and its plotting offering a lesson in travelling through time. Berio, born in Italy in 1925, was occupied for a great period of his career with the art of soloistic virtuosity, through his expansive series of *Sequenza*. This work, *Rounds*, composed for harpsichord, but perhaps better known in its piano adaptation, dates from 1964, and many of its ideas became jumping-off points for his *Sequenza IV* for piano, written the year after. In *Rounds*, Berio appears to be playing some kind of game, with flurries of activity giving way to silence, before beginning again. The game, we assume, is played in rounds. When the ultimate end pause occurs, we're floated back in time once more with Johann Pachelbel's sophisticated Chaconne in F minor. We're most familiar with the composer thanks to his Canon in D, a piece that's so famous it's known

simply as 'the' Pachelbel Canon, but of course the man himself boasts a much richer history. He was a close friend of the Bach family, hugely popular in his own lifetime and composed reams of music, both sacred and secular.

Flinging us forwards in time once more, we pass the 1960s to land in 1974, with Haim Alexander's *Improvisation on a Persian Folksong*. Alexander began his career as a café jazz pianist in Jerusalem, so it's hardly surprising that he excelled at improvisation, which fed his expansive compositional practice. Also in the mix was the Damstadt School, where he attended seminars on the avant-garde, which sat alongside his practice in the 1970s of transcribing traditional songs kept in the National Sound Archives. His *Improvisation* pulls on, and braids, each of these threads, into a compact but powerful work.

Of course, improvisation is also a staple technique of the Baroque, where music allowed space for artists' own ornamentations and inflections. In Elisabeth Jacquet de la Guerre's *Pièces de Clavecin*, there is that room. Across the sequence of pieces in tonight's programme (all but the final 1707 Chaconne dating from 1687), de la Guerre's understanding of and passion for the instrument shines through, showing off her own virtuosity at the instrument, but allowing room for the creativity of the performer.

You could perhaps assume that she would approve of Mark Applebaum's *October 1582* for harpsichord and live electronics, which, having been premiered by Mahan Esfahani in 2023, sweeps us very firmly into the present (with a nod, of course, to the 10 days cut from time when the world moved between the Julian and Gregorian calendars). It is, in the composer's own words, a piece about the 'speculative weird consequences that might have happened to [the harpsichord] had those days existed'. A fitting end, then, to our evening of time travel.

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Mahan Esfahani

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 around the world. He was the first and only harpsichordist to be a BBC Radio 3 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). In 2022 he became the youngest recipient of the Wigmore Medal, in recognition of his significant contribution and longstanding relationship with the Hall.

He has given recitals and performed concertos in most of the major series and leading concert halls, including here at the Barbican Centre, Oji Hall in Tokyo, the Forbidden City Concert Hall in Beijing, Shanghai Concert Hall, New York's Carnegie Hall and Lincoln Center, Sydney Opera House, Melbourne Recital Centre, Cologne Philharmonie, Berlin Konzerthaus, Zurich Tonhalle and Vienna Konzerthaus. He has also appeared at leading festivals, including Schleswig-Holstein, Edinburgh, Aspen, Aldeburgh, Bergen, Mecklenburg-Vorpommern, Al Bustan Festiva, Jerusalem and the Leipzig Bach Festival.

Recent highlights include his debut performance of Roberto Gerhard's Harpsichord Concerto with the Barcelona Symphony Orchestra and appearances with the Odense and Yomiuri Nippon Symphony orchestras, Orchestre National de Lyon and Aichi and Munich Chamber orchestras; he has also given recitals at Carnegie Hall, LSO St Luke's, Muziekgebouw Eindhoven, Darmstadt and Wigmore Hall.

He is particularly renowned for championing contemporary music, regularly partnering with conductors such as François-Xavier Roth, Ludovic Morlot, Thierry Fischer, Leif Segerstam, Thomas Dausgaard, Martyn Brabbins, Ilan Volkov, Andrew Manze, Antoni Wit, Joshua Weilerstein, Ken-David Masur and Michael Sanderling. He has been the dedicatee of some 20 new works both from established names – Bent Sørensen, Gavin Bryars, George Lewis, Poul Ruders, Brett Dean, Michael Berkeley and Miroslav Srnka – and a younger generation, including Anahita Abbasi, Laurence Osborn, Francisco Coll and Daniel Kidane.

His richly varied discography includes critically acclaimed recordings for Hyperion and DG – garnering one *Gramophone* award, two *BBC Music Magazine Awards*, a *Diapason d'Or* and a 'Choc de Classica' in France. The latest release in his solo Bach cycle for Hyperion was awarded an ICMA in the Baroque instrumental category, while his disc of Czech concertos (released in 2023) won an *Opus Klassik* award.

Mahan Esfahani studied musicology and history at Stanford University, where he first came into contact with the harpsichord in the class of Elaine Thornburgh. He then studied harpsichord privately in Boston with Peter Watchorn before furthering his studies with the celebrated Czech harpsichordist Zuzana Růžicková. 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; he is currently at work on his fourth radio documentary.

Born in Tehran in 1984 and raised in the United States, Mahan Esfahani lived in Milan and then London for several years before taking up residence in Prague.

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Thu 29 May, Milton Court



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