Programme notes for Coffee Concert 18.4.21

J.S. Bach (1685-1750) Harpsichord Concerto No 5 in F minor BWV 1056 (1738)
No tempo marking
Largo
Presto

This concerto is one of a set of six for single harpsichord and strings that Bach assembled in Leipzig around 1738-9. Little is known of their provenance or purpose, but some are clearly identical to earlier surviving concertos written for a different solo instrument such as violin or oboe. For example, No 3 in D is a transposition of the violin concerto in E - the shift down a tone allowing its top note to remain within the compass of contemporary harpsichords.

Unfortunately, no precursor of the F minor concerto still exists, but it is thought that the outer movements may also have come from a now lost violin concerto (in G minor), and the *Largo* from an oboe concerto in F major which in turn may have been inspired by a Telemann flute concerto in G !

W.A. Mozart (1756-1791) Three Fugues after Bach K.405 (1782)
I Fugue in C minor: Well-Tempered Clavier Book II, BWV 871
II Fugue in E flat major Well-Tempered Clavier Book II, BWV 876
III Fugue in E major Well-Tempered Clavier Book II, BWV 878

We have the diplomat Baron Gottfried van Swieten and Mozart's soon-to-be wife Constanze to thank for the various fugues that Mozart arranged and composed in 1782. Van Swieten had returned to Vienna from the Austrian embassy in Berlin where he had accumulated a large collection of the works of Bach and Handel. He invited Mozart round on Sundays to play them to him.

On April 20, 1782 (239 years ago on Tuesday) Mozart wrote to his sister Nannerl about a prelude and fugue (K.394) that he had just written:

“My dear Constanze is really the cause of this fugue’s coming into the world. The Baron van Swieten, to whom I go every Sunday, gave me all the works of Handel and Sebastian Bach to take home with me (after I had played them to him). When Constanze heard the fugues, she absolutely fell in love with them. Now she will listen to nothing but fugues, and particularly (in this kind of composition) the works of Handel and Bach. Well, as she had often heard me play fugues out of my head, she asked if I had ever written any down, and when I said I had not she scolded me roundly for not recording some of my compositions in this most artistic and beautiful of all musical forms and never ceased to entreat me until I wrote down a fugue for her. So that is its origin".

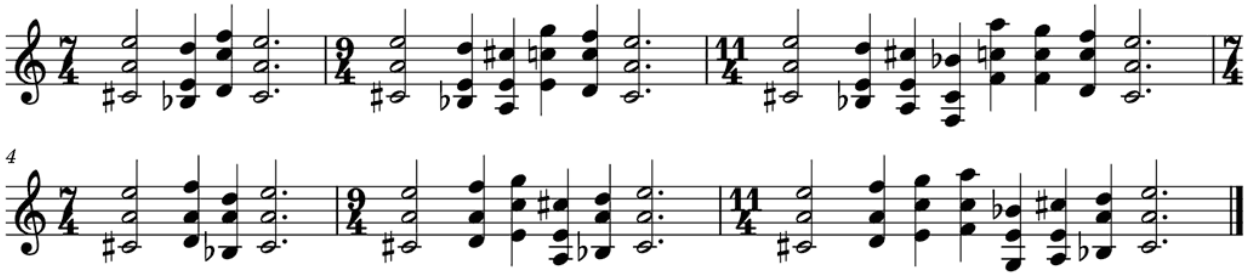
Today's five 4-part fugues from the Well-Tempered Clavier were arranged (along with some 3-parters) to be played with other Sunday guests at the Baron's. Mozart's own fugues from this period are rather un-Mozartianly dry, but this grounding in baroque technique served his music and his marriage well.

Arvo Pärt (b.1935) Fratres (1977) for violin & piano

Fratres was one of the first pieces that Estonian Arvo Pärt wrote in a radically new style 'tintinnabuli'. His early compositions, following Shostakovich and Prokofiev, had been neo-classical. They included film and theatre music, and found favour with the Soviet authorities. He subsequently studied the few serialist scores that leaked into the USSR, leading to the composition of *Credo* in 1968 in which the famous Bach C major prelude is gradually distorted by 12-note row techniques before returning to tonality. It was condemned by the Soviet authorities, more for its avowal of Christianity than for its invocation of Schoenberg.

There followed seven creatively very lean years when Pärt explored monody and simple two-part counterpoint inspired by his studies of medieval and renaissance music and Gregorian chant. He also changed his religious allegiance from Lutheranism to Orthodox Christianity. Eventually, in 1976, he started fluently composing again in the new tintinnabuli style, named after the bell-like sound of the notes of a triad. The technique involves two voices: a melodic voice moving stepwise around a central pitch, and a tintinnabuli voice sounding the notes of the tonic triad. The relationship between the two voices follows a predetermined numeric or prosodic scheme and is certainly not, as one would indeed expect from a student of the works of Schoenberg, haphazard. Pärt's subsequent work has broadly continued in this style; dubbed 'holy minimalism' along with the related work of Górecki and Tavener, it has proved immensely popular.

Fratres (Brethren) consists of a theme and eight variations. The theme is a very constrained six-bar phrase (*illustrated*); its first three bars have 7, 9 & 11 beats respectively, with two extra notes being added to the middle of the previous bar. The



simple, chant-like melody is played in parallel tenths by the upper and lower notes of each chord, while the middle (tintinnabuli) note comes from an A-minor chord (A,C,E). In the second three bars, the melody in the upper and lower notes is inverted and a different A-minor note is chosen for the middle. In subsequent variations, the central pitch of the theme (initially C#) descends.

The original 1977 composition left the instrumentation open, but Pärt produced a version specifically for violin and piano in 1980 which he dedicated to Latvian violinist Gidon Kremer and his wife. The variations explore in turn different technical possibilities of the violin.

Edgar Alan Poe perhaps anticipated Pärt's style in his well-known 1831 poem *The Bells*.

Keeping time, time, time,
In a sort of Runic rhyme,
*To the *tintinnabulation that so musically wells*
From the bells, bells, bells, bells,
Bells, bells, bells—
From the jingling and the tinkling of the bells.

*Poe's use of the word popularised it so that by 1880 The Daily Telegraph's legal section reported "a clause authorising the tintinnabulatory 'promulgation' of muffins".

Astor Piazzolla (1921-1992) Three Tangos arr. MacGregor
Michaelangelo 70
Milonga del Ángel
Libertango

Piazzolla's father did his son two particularly good turns: first, in 1929 he bought him a second-hand bandoneon (a sort of concertina) from a pawn shop in Greenwich Village. Astor took to the instrument, playing not only the bandoneon's specialty - the tango music of their native Argentina and his father's record collection - but also jazz and classical music. His music teacher, a pupil of Rachmaninoff, taught him to play Bach on the bandoneon. Second, when he was 13, his father prohibited him on the grounds of his age from going on tour as a bandoneon player with Carlos Gardel, the doyen of tango singers. The tour plane fatally crashed in Medellin, Colombia.

Piazzolla returned to Argentina in 1936 and played bandoneon in tango clubs in the band of Aníbal Troilo. Arthur Rubinstein recommended that he study orchestration with the distinguished classical composer Alberto Ginastera. 1943 saw his first classical composition – a Prelude for violin and piano – and increasing dissatisfaction with the mismatch between the style of Troilo's band and his own more advanced composition ideas. He formed his own orchestra, gave up playing the bandoneon in order to compose, and produced his first tango in a nascent new style.

In 1953 his *Buenos Aires Symphony in Three Movements* won a competition and a grant from the French government to study with Nadia Boulanger at Fontainebleau. She was not so impressed by his classical compositions, but astutely pricked up her ears when he played her his tango *Triunfal*. Back in Argentina, he formed a string orchestra (2 bandoneons, 2 violins, cello, double bass, electric guitar, piano) that broke the mould of the typical tango band and produced the unique sound of the *tango nuevo* – a tango blend with jazz improvisation, incorporating baroque techniques such as passacaglia and counterpoint.

Joanna MacGregor writes:

> "Astor Piazzolla was a master of the bandoneon - the Argentine accordion - and single-handedly re-invented Argentina’s greatest musical form, the tango, with a great deal of controversy. Spending his childhood in a poor part of New York - where his parents worked for the Mafia - as a teenager he headed back to his birthplace Buenos Aires, and formed his own orchestra. It took him twenty years to conquer the aficionados. His melting pot of modern jazz, classical and folkloric Latin music incensed tango purists, and he regularly received death threats. His music reflects struggle and anguish, even anger - alongside a thrilling gift for melody and driving rhythm. Despite fierce criticism, financial failures and a turbulent private life, Piazzolla was eventually recognized as genius, whose dark music is steeped in Hispanic, Italian and Jewish ideas.
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> "My piano and string quintet arrangements were inspired by the late, unpublished scores for Piazzolla’s preferred line-up of bandoneon, violin, piano, electric guitar and acoustic bass. Soon after Piazzolla died, I was asked to tour with Quinteto Piazzolla, Piazzolla’s original musicians from Buenos Aries (including the great guitarist Horacio Malvicino and bassist Hector Console). I learnt a great deal about the Piazzolla style: especially how certain little licks have to sound *mugre*, loosely

translated as dirty, streetwise. I also admire the vibrant energy that explodes from these pieces!

Michelangelo 70
Written for the opening of Teatro Michelangelo in Modena, Italy - an exciting, jazzy bolero.
Milonga del Angel
One of his heart stopping, yearning melodies, from his Angel trilogy written in 1965. The tango is traditionally the dance of parting lovers.
Libertango
Piazzolla's most famous composition, from 1974; the title merges the Spanish word for liberty – 'libertad' – with 'tango', symbolising Piazzolla's often painful and contentious break from classical tango to his *tango nuevo*. The marvellous ground bass in A minor comes directly from Bach, his musical hero."
Notes by Joanna MacGregor ©

Henry Purcell (1659-1695) Chacony in G minor (c. 1678) arr. Benjamin Britten (1947-8 rev 1963) for String Quartet

Purcell, whose father and uncle were both court musicians, probably wrote this piece in the post that he had obtained in 1677 as composer for the court violin band (the Twenty Four violins), succeeding Matthew Locke. Its title is an idiosyncratic version of Chaconne, a set of variations on an 8- bar figure with a repeating bass line. Britten particularly admired the clarity of Purcell's music, and made arrangements and realisations of many Purcell works: he created and performed a realisation of *Dido and Aeneas* and in 1945, to commemorate the 250th anniversary of Purcell's death, used the Rondeau from his *Abdelazer* as the theme of a set of variations for an instructional film *The Instruments of the Orchestra*. Britten's contribution to this version of the Chacony for string quartet involved primarily adding dynamic markings.

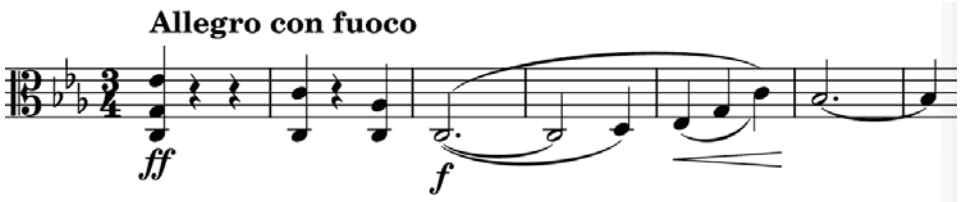
Ralph Vaughan Williams (1872-1958) Piano Quintet in C minor (1903; rev 1904-5)
Allegro con fuoco
Andante; Lento
Fantasia (quasi variazioni): Moderato

Ralph Vaughan Williams was not a composing prodigy. After learning the violin and piano at prep school in Rottingdean and switching to the viola at Charterhouse, he studied composition for two years at the RCM under Stanford and then read History, and Music under Charles Wood, at Cambridge. Though drawn to composing, progress was slow. His cousin Gwen Raverat recalled 'overhearing scraps of conversation about "that foolish young man, Ralph Vaughan Williams", who *would* go on working at music when "he was so hopelessly bad at it"'. But he persevered and returned to the RCM as a student of Hubert Parry, forming lasting friendships with Leopold Stokowski and particularly with Gustav Holst with whom he enjoyed unusually frank and productive mutual musical criticism until Holst's death in 1934. Vaughan Williams later studied with Max Bruch in Berlin (1897) and Maurice Ravel in Paris (1908). His discovery of English folksong in 1904 led not only to his finding his own individual composing style but also, as with Bartók and Kodály in Hungary, to collecting the songs of an oral tradition threatened with extinction.

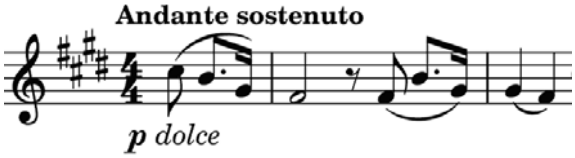
The C minor piano quintet, though first performed in 1905 in the Aeolian Hall, was only published in 2002. It had been withdrawn by the composer along with most of the music

he wrote at that time including an early string quartet, perhaps in consultation with Holst. It comes from a period where he had not yet found a personal voice. On Vaughan Williams' death his widow Ursula donated the unpublished manuscripts to the British Library but embargoed their performance, only relenting on the occasion of a celebratory conference on the composer in 1999 – its first documented performance since 1918.

The work has the same scoring as Schubert's Trout Quintet, shifting the tonal range down by removing the usual second violin from the conventional piano quartet and appending a double bass, a move which gives Vaughan Williams' own instrument, the viola, more prominence. The first movement is one of large Brahmsian or perhaps Bruchish gestures. Indeed when Bernard Benoliel was editing the manuscript for publication he realised that at some point Vaughan Williams must have performed it using a string band instead of single strings.

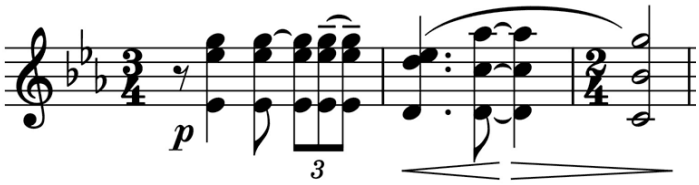


After the four descending chords of the opening, the viola, at the bottom of its range, sings the expansive arch-shaped theme (*illustrated*), joined a third higher by the cello, it is then repeated by the violin paired with the viola. The theme ends in a version of the opening four chords which also form the *Andante* second subject (*illustrated*).



An interesting feature of the work is the variety of different textures the composer conjures from the four wide-ranging strings. For instance, the *Andante* theme appears later played by viola, cello and double-bass creating a timbre that makes you think that the recording has suddenly halved its playback speed. The movement contrasts the different themes interestingly and intersperses solo piano with varied string textures – the viola and the double-bass get particularly gratifying parts.

Two bars of *Andante* from the piano echoed by the strings introduce the main *Lento* of the slow movement. Again the piano leads with the langourously expansive theme and the strings (*illustrated*) follow. The tempo picks up into a middle section that introduces more luscious string writing, builds to a climax and sinks back to the slower material of the opening.



The *Moderato* finale is a theme with five variations. Vaughan Williams reused the theme (*illustrated*) for the final variations movement of his 1954 violin sonata.

It has been a pleasure discovering this work, which has some glorious writing for a rare combination of instruments; it deserves more airings.

Programme notes by Chris Darwin