

WELCOME BACH 3

Saturday 11th September 1pm,
at St Olave's Church, York

THE HERSCHEL PLAYERS

Graham O'Sullivan *flute*
Molly Marsh *oboe*
Huw Daniel *violin*
Susanna Pell *viola da gamba*
Tim Smedley *cello*
Mie Hayashi *harpichord*

CHAMBER MUSIC BY “THE ENGLISH BACH”

J.C.Bach (1735-1782) - Quintet in E flat major, op.11 no.4 (Wb73)

Andante – Minuetto - Allegro

C.F.Abel (1723-87) - Flute Sonata in E minor, op.6 no.3

Adagio – Allegro - Vivace

J.C. Bach - Quartet in E flat major, op.8 no.3 (Wb53)

Largo – Allegro con spirito

J.C. Bach - Quintet in D major, Op.22 no.2 (Wb76)

Allegro – Andantino – Allegro assai

“I expect that you know that the ‘English Bach’ is dead? What a loss to the musical world!” lamented Mozart in a letter to his father dated 10th April 1782. The Bach in question, Johann Christian Bach (1735-1782), the youngest son of Johann Sebastian Bach, had died at the very beginning of 1782, but not without leaving his mark on musical history, not least through his influence on the young Mozart, who had met and befriended him during his and his father’s stay there from April 1764 to July 1765.

Notwithstanding the fact they were born twenty-one years apart, the two composers clearly formed a warm and enduring personal relationship. Although no formal master-pupil relationship seems to have existed between the two, they are known to have improvised jointly at least once in London, and the influence of Bach’s music on that of Mozart was profound. As he often did with the music of those

composers he most admired, Mozart closely studied Bach's works, both at the time they met, and also later in life, demonstrated, for example in his later arrangement of three of Bach's opus 5 keyboard sonatas as concertos (K.107), probably in 1772. When the two composers met again briefly in 1778 in St Germain, Mozart's affection for the 'English Bach' is clear: he writes to his father "you can easily imagine his joy as well as my joy in seeing each other again... I love him, as you know, with all my heart, - I have the highest respect for him..."

Johann Christian began his own musical education, as one would expect, under his father, in Leipzig. Following his father's death in 1750 the fourteen-year-old Johann Christian went to live and study in Berlin with his older brother Carl Philipp (Johann Sebastian's second son) who was twenty-one years his senior. After this Johann Christian worked for a period in Italy before, in 1762, he travelled to London to première three of his operas in early 1763. These operas helped to establish his reputation in England, and he settled in the capital, becoming music master to the German-born Queen Charlotte, and later marrying the soprano Cecilia Grassi, as well as running the celebrated concert series with his friend, the composer and viol virtuoso Carl Friedrich Abel (1723-1787), from 1765 until his death.

Abel himself had spent a number of his formative years living with the Bach family in Leipzig. Abel's father, Christian Friedrich Abel, had been the chamber cello and viol-player in Cöthen when Johann Sebastian was appointed Kapellmeister there in 1717. It is likely, therefore, that Abel Senior would have been one of the gambists to first perform the sixth Brandenburg Concerto. Johann Sebastian appears to have formed a close professional and personal friendship with him, and was named godfather to Carl Friedrich's sister. When Abel Senior died in 1737, the thirteen-year-old Abel was sent to Leipzig to live with the Bach family, likely studying with Bach Senior whilst perfecting his skills on the instrument with which he was become synonymous. It is possible that the viola da gamba sonatas by Johann Sebastian were written for the young Abel, and that he may have played one of the gamba parts in the late version of the St Matthew Passion, probably performed in 1742. Although an accomplished keyboard player it was on the viola da gamba that Abel earned his reputation as a virtuoso, first in Dresden from 1743, and thereafter in London, from his arrival in 1759, some four years before Johann Christian's arrival.

Of particular interest to us in the preparation of today's programme was the music which Abel and Johann Christian performed together or may have performed together, both in the public concerts they promoted, in the performances they gave together twice a week with the other members of the *Queen's Chamber Band*, and also in private performances they gave at Bach's home. We know that Abel played viola gamba but also harpsichord in chamber ensembles and that when he played viola da gamba he would tend to play the alto/viola part. Elizabeth Harris wrote to her son James that the Bach-Abel concert on 6th March 1765 included "a most delightful quartetto between Abel, Bartolemon, Tacett & Ciri". François-Hippolyte Bartolemon was a violinist, Joseph Tacet a flautist and Battista Ciri a cellist. Abel himself is known to have written a number of works for this combination (flute,

violin, viola da gamba and cello), one of which survives. It also evident from a variety of sources that Johann Christian's own quartets (though invariably published for flute or oboe or violin, violin, *viola* and cello) were amongst the pieces originally composed by Bach intending the viola part to be performed by Abel on viola da gamba. In 2012, by way of example, a set of part-books of English provenance containing 5 of Bach's 6 published opus 8 quartets, came to light, in which viola da gamba (rather than viola) was stipulated for the alto line. One of the opus 8 quartets is included in today's programme.

According to Charlotte Papendiek (sister-in-law to the flautist Charles Papendiek), in addition to their public performances for their concert series, and in addition to their bi-weekly performances as part of the Queen's Chamber Band, Bach would host private quartet parties at his house in Richmond twice a week, assisted by Abel, the violinist Wilhelm Cramer and oboist Fischer. She records that on these occasions Bach and Abel would take it in turns to provide new music to be played together. Of particular interest is an account she has left us of one occasion, apparently in 1776 when *"Bach had totally forgotten that it was his turn, so after dinner he sat down and wrote an enchanting first movement of a quintet in three flats. He sent off for two copyists, who wrote down the parts from score over his shoulders, while he wrote the harmony, after having composed the melody. The quintet is ranked among the best of his compositions, and the melody is sweetly soothing"*.

The **Quintet in E flat major (Op.11, no.4; Wb73)**, with which we open our programme, is the only surviving quintet by Johann Christian in three flats and so is an obvious candidate to be the quintet described by Papendiek's account. Certainly, along with the other five quintets in the opus 11 collection, it can be considered to be among his finest chamber works, and "sweetly soothing" is undoubtedly an apt description of the melody of the opening movement.

The **Quartet in E flat major (Op.8, no.3; Wb53)**, also performed in our programme, however, is another potential candidate, as what Papendiek could be describing was a quartet being performed by five musicians, with cello and harpsichord performing the bass together as would not have been unusual at the time (indeed the published editions of both quartets and quintets tended to include figures in the bass part to that end). If either of these works *is* the work in question, however, the 'quintet' movement referred to in Papendiek's account was not composed from scratch by Johann Christian, but rather was written down from memory, as both works had already been published by the time the events described took place.

Including Abel's **Sonata in E minor for flute and basso continuo (Op.6, no.3)** has allowed us to showcase both the quality and qualities which characterize his music. Although the majority of his works are for viola da gamba, he has left us a number of fine solo sonatas and concertos for the flute in addition to trios and quartets including flute or flutes. This sonata - something of a rare example in chamber works published around this time being composed in a minor key! - was published in London by Bremner in 1763, although it may well have been

composed at an earlier period of Abel's life. It provides us something of a bridge between the late baroque, *galant* style, and the later classical style, which it foreshadows with its well-ordered symmetrical phrasings. Abel was particularly known for his execution of *Adagio* movements. Thomas Gainsborough, who painted portraits of Abel (and Johann Christian Bach) wrote that he excelled at "feeling upon the instrument". He was regarded as a leading exponent in his field of music of 'sensibility' – the cult of sincere and direct emotion popular during this period – and he drew comparisons as such with the write Laurence Sterne. In his obituary, he was described as "the *Sterne of Music*. – The one *wrote*, and the other *composed* to the *soul*".

We conclude our programme with another fine example of Johann Christian's chamber music, his **Quintet in D major (op.22, no.2; Wb76)**. The quintets in Opus 22 (published posthumously in 1785) differ from the six in Johann Christian's earlier set in putting the keyboard centre-stage. Whereas the earlier set of quintets can be formed with or without a keyboard accompanying the bass line played by cello, these fine quintets reverse this. Indeed, the title page suggests that both quintets can be performed on harpsichord or piano without the additional *accompanying* instruments, and the melodies in the flute, oboe, violin and cello parts – alas no viola/viola da gamba part! - are incorporated into the keyboard part to allow for a solo performance by the keyboard player unable to call upon the services of these instruments. Undoubtedly, however, both quintets are heard to best advantage performed with *all* instruments, including the *obligato* cello here given equal prominence with flute, oboe and violin, unshackled from the bass line on occasion to great effect!

Graham O'Sullivan
York, September 2021

There is no admission charge for today's concert. There will be a retiring collection at the end of today's concert, and contributions towards the costs of the concert will be gratefully received. Alternative ways of making a contribution (e.g. bank transfer, Paypal or cheque) can be found on our website.

Thank you in advance for your support!

NEXT CONCERT: Sunday 12th December 2021
The Herschel Players perform J.S.Bach's "The Musical Offering"
St Olave's Church, York
Further details to follow on our website.

www.herschelplayers.com