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**MAHAN  
ESFAHANI**

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**Friday, April 30, 2021 ~ 8:00 pm  
The Library of Congress  
Virtual Event**

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HARPSICHORD



# PROGRAM

## **JOHANN SEBASTIAN BACH (1685-1750)**

*Six Little Preludes, BWV 933-938*

Prelude in C major, BWV 933

Prelude in C minor, BWV 934

Prelude in D minor, BWV 935

Prelude in D major, BWV 936

Prelude in E major, BWV 937

Prelude in E minor, BWV 938

## **JOHANN SEBASTIAN BACH**

*Ouverture nach französischer Art (by 1733, rev. 1735)*

Ouverture

Courante

Gavotte I

Gavotte II

(Gavotte I *da capo*)

Passepied I

Passepied II

(Passepied I *da capo*)

Sarabande

Bourrée I

Bourrée II

(Bourrée I *da capo*)

Gigue

Echo

## **BOHUSLAV MARTINŮ (1890-1959)**

*Deux Pièces pour Clavecin, H. 244 (1935)*

1. *Lento*

2. *Allegro con brio*

## **LOUIS ANDRIESEN (b. 1939)**

*Overture to Orpheus (1982)*

## **JOHANN CASPAR FERDINAND FISCHER (1656-1746)**

Passacaglia in D minor

from *Musikalischer Parnassus, Uranie Suite (by 1736)*



## ABOUT THE PROGRAM

### J.S. BACH, *Six Little Preludes & French Overture*

#### Six Little Preludes

Our concert begins with a grouping of six preludes by Johann Sebastian Bach, BWV 933-938. Bach wrote some 18 of these “little preludes,” presumably as didactic works for his students. As Angela Hewitt puts it, they “are among the most valuable pieces ever written for beginners. They form a bridge between the easiest pieces of the *Anna Magdalena Notebook* (1725) and the Two-part Inventions, giving the player a wonderful introduction to voice imitation, pedal points, cadenza-like passages, and basic ornamentation.”<sup>1</sup> Despite their brevity, these little binary nuggets are satisfyingly rich in content. And while they may be “gateway pieces” to Bach’s larger and more complicated oeuvre, they are refreshing to hear in performance as pieces in their own right.

#### *French Overture*

In the liner notes for Mahan Esfahani’s upcoming recording of the partitas that make up the first volume of J.S. Bach’s *Clavier-Übung*, he describes how the six partitas offer a “comprehensive overview of every style available to Bach,” and points to the influence of suite collections that preceded Bach’s work, such as those of Johann Kuhnau and most importantly, Handel.<sup>2</sup> The *Ouverture nach französischer Art* that is paired with the *Italian Concerto* in the second volume of the *Clavier-Übung* is also referenced as a partita, both in its constitution as a suite and given that an earlier version of the piece bore that title. In Esfahani’s discussion of a florid manuscript version of the C-minor sinfonia from Bach’s second partita (BWV 826) written out by one of Bach’s students, Johann Gottfried Müthel, he suggests that the “manuscript may very well testify to the notion that J S Bach purposefully engineered the possibility of a variety of personal interpretations by leaving a relatively undecorated and somehow ‘open’ text.”<sup>3</sup> Indeed, most performance-practice traditions require the interpretive intervention of the performer beyond simply “playing the notes.” Esfahani outlines one of the potentially divisive choices one could make, however: “Incidentally,

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1       Hewitt, Angela in liner notes to *Bach: French Suites* (Hyperion CDA67121/2, 1995),  
6.  
2       Esfahani, Mahan, in liner notes to *The Six Partitas* (Hyperion CDA68311/2, 2021).  
3       Ibid.

the notion of this opening sinfonia as an overture subject to questionable performance-practice dogmas is a red herring—does the presence of dotted rhythms necessarily a French overture make?”<sup>4</sup>

Non-experts such as myself weigh in on these issues at their peril, and so often appear only to be Bach-seat drivers, so I will not do so here. In the case of the French Overture, BWV 831, there are two versions that can be compared: the first is in C minor and exists in a copy by Anna Magdalena Bach (there entitled “Partita”), and the second is the final version published as part of the *Clavier-Übung*. Interestingly but perhaps not unexpectedly, the second version (now in B minor) is more explicit in its dotting and ornamentation. But even something like this is not without controversy, as Matthew Dirst pointed out in his article “Bach’s French overtures and the Politics of Overdotting,” in which he notes Frederick Neumann’s preference for the earlier, less angular (and ostensibly less “French”) C-minor version of the *French Overture*, despite Bach’s revisions.<sup>5</sup> Dirst’s essay, in his words, “[points out] a more general problem with research into historical performance: such work is often just as messy and just as contingent as the puzzles it tries to solve.”<sup>6</sup>

Like the celebrated *Italian Concerto* (BWV 971) that accompanies the piece in the second volume of the *Clavier-Übung*, the *French Overture* displays Bach’s ability to assimilate the styles of his day while simultaneously transcending them with his own artistic stamp. The *French Overture* is the largest of these kinds of suites in Bach’s output, containing 11 movements (plus the *da capo* return of the first Gavotte, Passepied and Bourrée). The majestic Overture that opens the suite occupies pride of place and stature; the sharpness of the ornamentation gives the sensation that one is witnessing a live etching into the granite edifice of the material. The contrasting secondary material in 6/8 draws its breath from a new world, and the music of this exciting section is full of passages that take advantage of the two-manual harpsichord setup, offering dynamic contrast in registration and voicing. The Allemande that one might expect to find is missing, but the absence is compensated for in the variety of the remaining dances.

For those who know the *French Overture* well, be on the lookout for a hidden tribute to Wanda Landowska in the first Bourrée, where in the repeats Esfahani adds an extra voice that Landowska had written into her copy of the score—he suspects she meant to include this in her planned

4        *Ibid.*

5        Dirst, Matthew, “Bach’s French Overtures and the Politics of Overdotting,” in *Early Music*, vol. 25, no. 1 (1997), 35.

6        *Ibid.*, 43.

but never-completed recording of the work. There is also the special concerto-like treat of the final *Echo* movement, which prominently features alternations of piano and forte passages as Bach, in Esfahani's words from the recording, "really puts the harpsichord through its paces."



## **BOHUSLAV MARTINŮ, Deux Pièces pour Clavecin**

Composed for the French harpsichordist and student of Landowska Marcelle de Lacour<sup>7</sup> in 1935, Bohuslav Martinů's Two Pieces for Harpsichord were only published posthumously. Martinů was no stranger to the harpsichord, as late in life he composed a harpsichord sonata and two impromptus; his harpsichord concerto dates from the same year as the pieces recorded in Esfahani's performance. The first piece is a neo-Baroque *Lento* that plays with ornamentation and harmonic expectation to encircle the poles of B-flat and F major. As with much of the Czech composer's music, the nods to tradition are so pleasantly integrated with Martinů's characteristic style that the effect is natural and convincing; the harpsichord is allowed to revel in itself. The second piece is a joyful exercise in effective up-tempo harpsichord techniques. From minimalist repetitions to unison writing and sequential passages, Martinů offers in this piece a tongue-in-cheek love note to the harpsichord, ending with the signature unadorned F-major sonority of the set.

*David Plylar*  
*Senior Music Specialist*  
*Library of Congress, Music Division*



## **LOUIS ANDRIESEN, Overture to Orpheus**

Louis Andriessen was born in 1939 into a family not just of musicians, like many composers, but of composers. His father Hendrik Andriessen (1892-1981) and brother Jurrian Andriessen (1925-1996) were noted Dutch composers, while his uncle Willem Andriessen (1887-1964) was a pianist

<sup>7</sup> Wade, Graham in liner notes to Christopher D. Lewis' *20th Century Harpsichord Music* (Naxos 8.573364, 2015), 4.

and composer. Initially, Andriessen studied music with his parents; his studies in composition at the Royal Conservatory in The Hague were followed by work with Luciano Berio in Berlin and Milan. His father and older brother introduced him to current music and their particular interests, which encompassed a wide range of music, including Stravinsky and jazz. These early listening experiences have endured; Andriessen has said, "I cannot remember a time when I did not love the music of Stravinsky."<sup>8</sup> Other influences can be detected in Andriessen's output: the instrumentation and sound of big band music, with its emphasis on brass; the minimalism of Steve Reich and Philip Glass, and certain elements of popular and folk music.

Many of Andriessen's major works reveal his interest in the political and social ramifications of art in general, music in particular. From early in his career, Andriessen was involved in the politicized arts community in Europe, whose proponents rejected post-World War II complacency and bourgeois conservatism. Andriessen's refusal to write music for symphony orchestra stems from his frustration, along with other composers, at the lack of state funding devoted to contemporary music. Composers during the 60s and 70s planned and carried out disruptive activities, such as interrupting concerts, to protest the state support of establishment symphony orchestras whose management they found undemocratic and opaque. Gradually, state support shifted to smaller, leaner, more progressive arts organizations and ensembles, and contemporary composers were able to create their own performance opportunities. Andriessen founded two such ensembles, De Volharding (1972) and Hoketus (1977), both devoted to the music of contemporary composers. Andriessen's political concerns seem naturally to be trained more on actual music rather than society as a whole. Throughout his career Andriessen's focus and concerns have been "what sort of music you make, who plays it, and for whom."<sup>9</sup> Andriessen is easily considered the most influential Dutch composer working today.

The *Overture to Orpheus*, for harpsichord, was composed in 1982 for Dutch harpsichordist Annelie de Man (1943-2010) and was commissioned by the Johan Wagenaarstichting. Andriessen offered some explanatory text in the Donemus publication of this work: "A harpsichord has little to do with a piano, but rather with plucked instruments such as harp, guitar, lute. Orpheus' prelude-playing came to my mind when writing the composition. A reference to dramatic development in this piece makes it an overture for an imaginary opera in which Orpheus plays the leading part. The fringe between canon and unisono techniques - just as in my other works

8 Robert Adlington, "Louis Andriessen, Hanns Eisler, and the Lehrstück," *The Journal of Musicology* 21, no. 3 (Summer 2004), 414.

9 *Ibid.*, 416.



from recent years - is the musical subject of the composition."<sup>10</sup>

To enlarge on Andriessen's remarks, the canon at the unison is offset by an 8th note, making it essentially a single-voice work with an echo, since the canon follows the first voice so closely, although the imitation is not constant, and there are brief moments of independence in each line. It is idiomatic for the historical 2-manual harpsichord in several aspects. The slight difference in tone quality between the manuals combined with the 8th-note delay creates a richly resonant sound. The opening measures of the piece resemble an Arabic *taqsim*, with a gradual introduction of the *makam* (mode) a few notes at a time. In a reference to both lute and harpsichord music of the 17th century, Andriessen uses *style brisé*, or broken, arpeggiated chords that slowly expand and modulate in an irregular, extemporaneous fashion. This *style brisé* was part of standard lute preluding practices of the mid-17th century, which composers such as J.H. D'Anglebert and Louis Couperin introduced into their harpsichord music to increase its expressive possibilities, as it does here. Other harpsichord practices Andriessen employs to expressive purposes are written-in rubato to shape phrases and create tension in rising lines, and overholding (as in François Couperin's *Barricades mystérieuses*) to create a legato effect and increase resonance. With this close canon, Andriessen has written a 20th-century *pièce croisée*, a harpsichord piece in which two parts, one for each hand, cross and re-cross one another in the same range, often sounding the same note simultaneously, as in lute preludes.<sup>11</sup> Andriessen not only evokes the lute, but also cleverly references the psalterium, or harp, of ancient Greece, so appropriate to the Orpheus of Greek mythology. In keeping with Andriessen's interest in elements of popular music, one section migrates to a syncopated and pulsing rock bass guitar line. A following section, through the use of ornamentation and the pentatonic scale, evokes Japanese koto music. The succession of lute, harp, and guitar references takes on an improvisatory, stream-of-consciousness quality, but also suggests an introduction to a dramatic work containing a variety of music.

Laura Yust  
Senior Cataloguing Specialist  
Library of Congress, Music Division



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10 Louis Andriessen, *Overture to Orpheus*, "Description," Donemus webshop, accessed April 23, 2021, <https://webshop.donemus.com/action/front/sheetmusic/2459/Overture+to+Orpheus>.

11 Pamela Nash, "A discussion of Overture to Orpheus with Louis Andriessen," *Contemporary Music Review* 20, no. 1 (2001), 107.

## JOHANN CASPAR FERDINAND FISCHER, *Passacaglia in D minor*

Johann Caspar Ferdinand Fischer was a respected composer from the generation preceding J.S. Bach, mentioned by numerous contemporaneous encyclopedias and musical “who’s who” listings. Influenced by Lully,<sup>12</sup> Fischer composed a great deal of sacred music and keyboard works, as well as numerous dramatic works that have unfortunately been lost. Fischer wrote two large collections of organ works, the *Praeludia et Fugae per 8 tonos ecclesiasticos* and the *Ariadne musica*. This latter collection was known to Bach, who “adopted some of the themes in *Das wohltemperierte Clavier*.”<sup>13</sup> Fischer composed two major sets of keyboard works: the *Musicalisches Blumen-Büschlein* and the *Musikalischer Parnassus*. This latter work is a collection of nine suites: Clio, Calliope, Melpomene, Thalia, Erato, Euterpe, Terpsichore, Polymnia and Uranie. It is this last suite that is the source of the passacaglia that closes the program, and indeed it is the last work in the impressive collection. In Fischer’s ode to the nine muses of Greek mythology, he was inspired to use dance suites as a means of exploring the versatility of the keyboard.

As Esfahani remarks in the video, this passacaglia was made famous through Wanda Landowska’s performances and recording of the work, and he views it as a “party piece” given the innate fun to be had in the music. While the passacaglia’s theme itself is compelling, it is Fischer’s inventive series of variations that make the piece shine. His use of register and figuration to maximally differentiate each variant is extremely effective. Of particular note are the variations such as the *trillo sostenuto*, wherein the middle voice maintains a trill throughout the variation, and the subsequent *tremolando* variation where the preceding trill morphs into a *tremolando* between thirds. A full chordal variation follows, and then a scalar variant, and so forth. The variational progressions are sometimes expected, and sometimes not, offering a rich scenario for discovery by the audience. Urania was the muse of astronomy; while Fischer’s feet were firmly planted on the ground (bass) in the passacaglia, his musical inspiration had a celestial trajectory.

~ David Plylar



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12 Walter, R., “Fischer, Johann Caspar Ferdinand” (*Grove Music Online*, April 2021).

13 *Ibid.*

## About the Artist

Since making his London debut in 2009, **Mahan Esfahani** has established himself as the first harpsichordist in a generation whose work spans virtually all the areas of classical music-making, from critically-acclaimed performances and recordings of the standard repertoire to working with the leading composers of the day to pioneering concerto appearances with major symphony orchestras on four continents. He was the first and only harpsichordist to be a BBC New Generation Artist (2008-2010), a Borletti-Buitoni prize winner (2009), a nominee for Gramophone's Artist of the Year (2014, 2015, 2017), and on the shortlist as Instrumentalist of the Year for the Royal Philharmonic Society Awards (2013, 2019).

As a concerto soloist, Esfahani has worked with leading conductors such as Leif Segerstam, François Xavier-Roth, Ilan Volkov, Riccardo Minasi, Ludovic Morlot, Alexander Liebreich, Martyn Brabbins, Thomas Dausgaard, Antoni Wit, Thierry Fischer, Jiří Bělohlávek, and Ed Gardner with major symphony and chamber orchestras and contemporary music ensembles. He also varies his solo engagements with meaningful chamber music partnerships alongside artists such as Antje Weithaas (violin), Maximilian Hornung (cello), Stefan Jackiw (violin), Nicholas Daniel (oboe), Michala Petri (recorder), Adam Walker (flute), Hille Perl (viola da gamba), and Florence Malgoire (baroque violin).

Esfahani's work with new and modern music is particularly acclaimed, with high-profile solo and concertante commissions from George Lewis, Bent Sørensen, Poul Ruders, Anahita Abbasi, Laurence Osborne, Gary Carpenter, Miroslav Srnka, Elena Kats-Chernin, Daniel Kidane, Michael Berkeley, and other contemporary voices in forming the backbone of his repertoire. His commitment to exploring the contemporary voice for the harpsichord is reflected in his 2020 Hyperion release *Musique?* – a compilation of electronic and acoustic works including the modern revival of Luc Ferrari's 1974 *Programme commun* for harpsichord and tape.

His richly-varied discography for Hyperion and Deutsche Grammophon – including an ongoing series of the complete works of Bach for the former – has been acclaimed in the English- and foreign-language press and has garnered one Gramophone award, two BBC Music Magazine Awards, a Diapason d'Or and 'Choc de Classica' in France, and an ICMA as well as numerous Editor's Choices in a variety of publications including a spot in the *Telegraph's* compilation of essential classical music and *The New York Times* list of top recordings.

He can be frequently heard as a commentator on BBC Radio 3 and Radio 4 and as a host for such programs as Record Review, Building a Library, and Sunday Feature, as well as in live programs with the poplar

mathematician and presenter Marcus du Sautoy. For the BBC's Sunday Feature he is currently at work on his fourth radio documentary following popular programs on such subjects as the early history of African-American composers in the classical sphere and the development of orchestral music in Azerbaijan.

Born in Tehran in 1984, Esfahani grew up in the United States and studied musicology and history at Stanford University and worked as a répétiteur and studied in Boston with Peter Watchorn before completing his studies in Prague with the celebrated Czech harpsichordist Zuzana Růžičková. Following several years spent in Milan, Oxford, and London, he now makes his home in Prague.



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Ensemble Correspondances  
"Les Plaisirs du Louvre"

Virtual Event (<https://loc.gov/concerts/ensemble-correspondances.html>)  
Additional video content available starting at 10am on 5/7/21

**Saturday, May 22, 2021 at 8:00 pm [Concert]**

Kandace Springs  
Tribute to legendary female singers

Virtual Event (<https://loc.gov/concerts/kandace-springs.html>)  
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**Thursday, May 27, 2021 at 8:00 pm [Concert]**

Marouan Benabdallah, piano

Music by Succari, Dada, Moultaqa, Fairouz, Benabdeljalil & Saint-Saëns

Virtual Event (<https://loc.gov/concerts/marouan-benabdallah.html>)  
Additional video content available starting at 10am on 5/27/21

**May 13, 19 & 26, 2021 at 10:00 am [Lectures]**

American Musicological Society Lectures  
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