

**Thursday 18th August**

Sonata V in C major BWV 529

*Allegro*

*Largo*

*Allegro*

Sonata IV in E minor BWV 528

*Adagio : Vivace*

*Andante*

*un poco allegro*

Sonata VI in G major BWV 530

*Vivace*

*Lente*

*Allegro*

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**Sonata in C major, BWV 529**

The longest sonata in the set opens with a bright, sunny theme in radiant C major, complete with confident octave leaps in the bass, which seems to evoke pomp and ceremony. The second-movement Largo in A minor is characterised by intertwining melodies in the two upper parts that grow ever more complex in their decoration. The fugal third movement in C major is full of humorous touches, including several moments where the pedals unexpectedly launch into flurries of semiquavers.

**Sonata in E minor, BWV 528**

Two short movements frame a meditative central Andante in this serious yet luminous sonata. The first movement's brief but majestic Adagio introduction leads into a Vivace with an off-kilter theme starting on an off-beat. The Andante in B minor is built upon a cantus firmus-like bassline with glorious filigree decoration in its two melodic lines. The sonata is rounded off by a stately dance in E minor, whose frequent triplets lend it a lilting character.

**Sonata in G major, BWV 530**

Unusually, the first movement opens with the two upper voices in unison, creating a simple two-part texture of melody with bassline. The main theme's characteristic repeated notes make it clearly recognisable even when it reoccurs embedded within the movement's rich textures. The second movement, a noble, plaintive Lento in E minor, is followed by a volatile Allegro, whose perky theme is characterised by quick rushes of notes.

*David Kettle*

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**Friday 19th August**

Sonata II in C minor BWV 526

*Vivace*

*Largo*

*Allegro*

Sonata III in D minor BWV 527

*Andante*

*Adagio e dolce*

*Vivace*

Sonata I in E flat major BWV 525

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*Adagio*

*Allegro*

**Sonata in C minor, BWV 526**

A straightforward C minor chord with an octave leap in the bass sets the tone for the forthright first movement – there's no room for pathos here, despite the minor key – and swirling textures create a sense of excitement and urgency. The lyrical second movement, a Largo in E flat major, pits a slowly moving melody against a constant semiquaver accompaniment, with a pulsing bassline below. The fugal third movement throws notes back and forth between the voices, before winding down to a final unison C.

**Sonata in D minor, BWV 527**

The first movement's plaintive, somewhat hesitant opening theme gives the music a delicate, even fragile feeling, full of poise and grace. The three voices in the second movement are set very widely apart, creating a remarkably transparent texture, and the third movement is a Vivace in three time, propelled along by repeated notes in the bass.

**Sonata in E flat major, BWV 525**

The fanfare-like opening theme creates a jolly, contended-sounding feeling in the first movement, and it's thrown back and forth between the three voices from the beginning onward. The second movement is a chromatic, aria-like invention in C minor that goes through a sequence of unpredictable harmonic twists. The distinctive rocking theme of the third movement has repeated tonic notes embedded within it, and returns upside down later in the movement.

## Note

The first question is simply what to call these pieces. In Britain they are usually referred to as trio sonatas, and in Germany they often take the name *Orgel-Trios* (organ trios). Bach called them neither of these things. To him they were simply individual organ sonatas, each in a different key, that he happened to collect together in a set.

So where does the trio sonata name come from? It was probably added to the composer's manuscript at a later date, but it's an understandable choice of title. In these six pieces, Bach seems to have been consciously trying to emulate the Italian trio sonata, a usually light, tuneful chamber music form, suitable for entertainment in the home. The original trio sonatas involved two melody instruments (perhaps violin and flute or oboe) along with bass continuo – a bass instrument, plus a harpsichord to fill out the harmonies.

Here, Bach retains the same format of two melodies plus bass, but what would have required four musicians is now the responsibility of a single person. In quite a feat of manual and pedalian dexterity, the organist takes a melody in each hand (using two of the organ's separate keyboards) and uses his feet for the bassline on the instrument's pedals. The three parts are treated entirely equally, with a single melodic line in each. Despite the rich textures, there are actually never more than three notes being played at once.

All this requires a high level of skill from the performer. Whereas in other, more straightforward organ pieces, the right hand might play the melody, with the left hand accompanying and the pedals supplying a slowly moving bassline, here all three parts are equally important, and they often intertwine in complex counterpoint. Ironically, the level of skill required

from the performer, and the wide range of moods to be conveyed in the music, are completely at odds with the duration of the pieces themselves – the longest movement lasts only a little more than five minutes. And frustratingly, such is the elegance and concision of the writing that the better the music is played, the easier it sounds to the listener.

Confusion over what to call these pieces is mirrored in the music found within them, which is a mixture of newly composed material, music that goes right back to Bach's earliest years as an organist, and even transcriptions from other works by the composer. The connection between the pieces and Bach's eldest son, Wilhelm Friedemann, is clear, however. It's been argued that the sonatas were either put together as study material while he was learning the organ, or that they were collected as a set that Wilhelm Friedemann could use to show off his skills when he embarked on a career as a organist. The dates suggest the latter: the set was put together around 1730, and Wilhelm Friedemann gained the prestigious post of organist at the Sophienkirche in Dresden in 1733.

Johann Nikolaus Forkel, Bach's earliest biographer, claimed that the pieces were conceived specifically to perfect Wilhelm Friedemann's pedal technique, and indeed some of the tricky feet figurations, especially in the sonatas' third movements, seem to support this theory. It's also possible that they were intended as teaching aids not just for performance by also for composition, such is the thoroughness and complexity of the counterpoint within them.

Bach never fixed the order that the sonatas should be played in, allowing performers today a certain flexibility in the sequence they choose for the works. The order of sonatas in these two concerts contrasts major and minor modes, and uses the set's brightest two pieces as bookends.

David Kettle