

Mahan Esfahani

Harpsichord Pioneer

The Iranian-born, US-raised and now Prague-based harpsichordist Mahan Esfahani is nothing less than evangelical about his instrument. That's despite being one of the world's most exciting and most innovative young musicians, with worldwide performances – including a three-concert residency with Royal Northern Sinfonia this season – and an ongoing project with eminent label Deutsche Grammophon to record all of Bach's harpsichord music, not to mention being a BBC New Generation Artist from 2008 to 2010.

He's evangelical, he says, because he needs to be. 'There are so many places – including some pretty major European cities – where I've played the very first solo harpsichord recital, or at least the first in living memory. From that perspective, this is pioneering work.'

His evangelising started, he says, when he was trying to establish his own career. Born in Tehran, Esfahani moved to the US with his family at the age of four, going on to study at Stanford and in Boston, and later in Prague. He first came across the harpsichord around the age of nine, he says. What attracted him? 'I think it was just the pure sound at that stage – a very visceral, very basic thing. You like what you hear, and you go for it.'

But he first ran into obstacles after finishing his extensive studies. 'I made a very late decision to be a harpsichordist, and I needed to get enough concerts to be able to live and make a musical career. But a lot of the response at the time was disbelief that a harpsichord recital was even a viable thing – or even that a harpsichord repertoire exists. So my first objective was to show it's a living instrument – to do away with all those unhelpful assumptions about the instrument.'

What were those 'unhelpful assumptions' he encountered? 'Oh, people sometimes think the harpsichord has no expression, or that it's not viable against an orchestra. Or they're so taken with it belonging to early music that they can't imagine it playing anything else.' Three assumptions, in fact, that you'll hear challenged and dismissed across his trio of centuries-spanning concerts in the RNS season: in his deeply expressive, highly distinctive playing; in the three contrasting concertos he performs with orchestra; and in the fact that two of those concertos come from less than a century ago.

But let's go back to the instrument's earlier repertoire (though it's far from the earliest). On 12 April, Esfahani performs the D minor Concerto by C P E Bach, J S's second (surviving) son. If the name 'Bach' makes you think of intricate counterpoint and blazing Baroque ornateness, think again. 'C P E Bach was a classic middle child – he rebelled hard against his father,' Esfahani explains. 'Unbelievably, he wrote this Concerto – it's probably his most admired and best loved – while his father was still alive. When you listen to it, and all the innovations he was making in it, you can't help thinking that J S must have been holding a handkerchief to his mouth in shock! C P E Bach has the benefit of having been trained by probably the greatest ever composer, but also finding entirely his own path. I'm playing it to show that music by a Bach doesn't always look to the past – this is a Bach who's looking very intrepidly towards the future.'

'I definitely have a missionary attitude. Every day I start a conversation with someone about the harpsichord – on a train, in a coffee shop, wherever. I keep photos of it on my phone. I give out little cards about it. If I spread the message to just one person a day, that soon adds up.'

Moving forward in time, Esfahani performs Poulenc's witty, sophisticated *Concert champêtre* at the season's opening weekend on 23 September – one of the pieces that launched the harpsichord's revival in the 1920s. 'It's such a nice way to mark the rebirth of the instrument,' says Esfahani. 'Poulenc makes a bit of a joke out of the harpsichord's history. In a very respectful way, of course – it's never contrived, never kitsch. He's so clever.'

And bringing the harpsichord almost up to our own times, on 11 October he plays the very different Harpsichord Concerto by British post-minimalist composer Michael Nyman, celebrated for his distinctive movie scores and his unmistakably propulsive, highly rhythmic music. 'It's such a cool piece,' Esfahani enthuses. 'And the really cool thing is that it's for amplified harpsichord and orchestra – Nyman's orchestration is pretty full-on, so it needs that. He's really exploring the limits of writing for the harpsichord, and he doesn't compromise.'

The result is almost certainly unlike anything for harpsichord you've ever heard before – relentlessly energetic, breathtaking in its demands on the player. As Esfahani himself acknowledges: 'It's a real physical work-out! The last time I played it, I had to go to the gym intensively beforehand. This time, I've already started practising, just to build up the stamina and strength. For the player, it's very unforgiving, but it's an amazing experience for the listener.' And it's just the match, too, for Esfahani's own big personality – evident in his exuberant playing, his perpetual enthusiasm and his pioneering spirit.

David Kettle

