

THE UNIVERSITY OF EDINBURGH CONCERT SERIES    SPRING · SUMMER 2011

# Concerts at The University

Friday 21 January 2011

1.10pm

Reid Concert Hall

**John Kitchen** · organ

*CHACONNES AND PASSACAGLIAS*

Programme of works by BUXTEHUDE, COUPERIN,  
PURCELL, LULLY, RAISON, and J.S. BACH.



## CHACONNES AND PASSACAGLIAS

### **Ciacona in C minor BuxWV 159**

Dieterich Buxtehude (1637–1707)

### **Passacaille in G minor**

#### **Chaconne in G minor**

Louis Couperin (1626–1661)

### **A New Ground (Musick's Handmaid, part 2, 1689)**

Henry Purcell (1659–1695)

### **Chaconne de Phaeton**

Jean-Baptiste Lully (1632–1687)

arr. Jean-Henri d'Anglebert (1635–1691)

### **Trio en passacaille (Messe du deuziesme ton, 1688)**

André Raison (c.1640–1719)

### **Passacaglia and Fugue in C minor BWV 582**

J.S. Bach (1685–1750)

The idea of basing a piece of music on a repeated melody in the bass — a 'ground bass' — over which variations occur, dates from about the late 15th century and has been used in many musical contexts throughout the centuries: from Monteverdi through Purcell, Bach, Beethoven and Brahms to twelve-bar blues. Any melodic idea in the bass will imply harmonies, and ingenious composers have delighted in writing ground-bass pieces where varied harmonic progressions and endlessly imaginative textures are devised to maintain interest and variety. The two Baroque dance forms, the chaconne and the passacaglia, are almost always written over ground basses, and are generally in slowish triple time. Although many attempts have been made to distinguish them, the terms are often used interchangeably. With one exception, all the pieces in today's programme are written over repeated grounds.

Surprisingly, perhaps, there are very few chaconnes or passacaglias for the organ by the great German Baroque composers. Buxtehude left two chaconnes and one passacaglia; the *Ciacona in C minor* is constructed over a four-bar ground which is generally heard in the pedals, although it occasionally migrates up to the manuals. Bach may have known this piece.

Louis Couperin's two chaconnes are really harpsichord music, but they work quite well on the organ. Chaconnes were rather a speciality of his, and nearly all reflect the typically French *rondeau* structure, where a repeated refrain alternates with contrasting *couplets*. Such pieces share the same slow triple-time rhythm but are not written over a ground bass. (The ground had Italian and Spanish origins, and the French in the 17th century made a point of being different from the Italians.) The second of the two pieces by Couperin, the *Chaconne in G minor*, falls into the *rondeau/couplets* category, but the *Passacaille in G minor* is written over a classic falling Italianate ground.

*A New Ground* appears in the 1689 publication *Musick's Handmaid*, which consists largely of songs and theatre dances by Purcell (and others), arranged for keyboard. This piece is his own keyboard version of the celebrated song 'Here the deities approve' from the 1683 Ode for St Cecilia's Day *Welcome to all the pleasures*; the movement is constructed over a three-bar ground. Purcell declared that "composing upon a Ground [is] a very easie thing to do, and requires but little Judgment" — a masterly understatement.

Lully's music was so much admired in its day that when d'Angelbert published his *Pièces de Clavecin* in 1689 he included 15 transcriptions for keyboard of works by Lully. He no doubt hoped that this would add to the attractiveness of his publication and boost sales, but he would also have had great admiration for the pieces. The *Chaconne de Phaeton* comes from the second act of Lully's opera *Phaeton*, and is a substantial movement which would have accompanied dance on the stage.

The 'Trio en passacaille' from Raison's *Messe du deuziesme ton* is the 'Christe' verset from that mass, and is a modest little movement. Unusually for French organ repertoire, however, it is written on a ground bass — and, fascinatingly, that four-bar phrase is identical to the first half of the ground on which J.S. Bach's monumental *Passacaglia* is based. It seems likely that Bach knew Raison's piece, and that it was a starting-point for his masterpiece — but we cannot be sure.

Bach used ground bass technique in various works, including cantata movements, and most memorably, in the *Goldberg Variations* for harpsichord where he outdoes all his predecessors (and successors?) in scale and sheer inventiveness. But the *Goldbergs* are a relatively late work, published in 1741.

We do not know exactly when Bach wrote his *Passacaglia*, but it is now thought to date from his early 20s. As such, it is a staggering achievement; to describe it as '20 variations on the ground bass first heard in the pedals, followed by a double fugue' is accurate, but conveys nothing of the consummate control of every aspect: formal, harmonic, contrapuntal, figurative. Peter Williams asks: "Did even Mozart produce a work of such power and cohesion by the age of 22 or 23?"

JK

**John Kitchen** is a Senior Lecturer in Music and University Organist in the University of Edinburgh. He also directs the Edinburgh University Singers, is Director of Music of Old Saint Paul's Episcopal Church and Edinburgh City Organist with duties at the Usher Hall. He gives many solo recitals both in the UK and further afield, and also plays regularly with several ensembles, covering a wide range of musical styles. In addition, he is much in demand as a continuo player, accompanist, lecturer, writer and reviewer. John has recorded extensively for both Priory and for the Edinburgh-based label, Delphian Records. Recent Delphian publications include a highly-acclaimed recording of the complete organ music of William Russell, played on the 1829 Bishop organ in St James's, Bermondsey in London, and a CD of Handel overtures and suites played on two of the harpsichords from the Raymond Russell Collection of Early Keyboard Instruments, housed at St Cecilia's Hall. A Delphian recording of nine instruments from the recently-bequeathed Mirrey Collection at St Cecilia's was released in August 2010, and has already featured several times on BBC Radio 3. John was also heavily involved in the recently-released *Organs of Edinburgh* publication which comprises recordings of 22 Edinburgh organs.

#### FORTHCOMING CONCERT:

Tuesday 25 January

1.10pm

Reid Concert Hall

Laura Smith · mezzo-soprano

Colin Kingsley · piano

PURCELL arr. BRITTEN *Sweeter than Roses*

*Mad Bess*

RAVEL *Cinq Melodies Populaires Grecques*

BRITTEN *Charm of Lullabies*

MAHLER Selection of songs from *Des Knaben Wunderhorn* including  
'Rheinlegendchen'

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