

G E R A R D C O U S I N S

1685

Bach
Handel
Scarlatti

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1. Domenico Scarlatti.
Sonata in C Major, K.330
2. Johann Sebastian Bach.
Sonata No. 2, BWV 1003: III. Andante
3. George Frideric Handel.
Sarabande No. 1 from Suite, in D Minor HWV 448
4. George Frideric Handel.
Sarabande No. 2 from Suite, in D Minor HWV 448
5. Johann Sebastian Bach.
Sonata No. 2, BWV 1003: IV. Allegro
6. Domenico Scarlatti.
Sonata in B Minor, K.197



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1685 was a remarkable year, witnessing the birth of three extraordinary composers: Domenico Scarlatti, Johann Sebastian Bach, and George Frideric Handel - each possessing a unique musical imagination.

I have long been fascinated by the life and music of Scarlatti, a composer who devoted much of his creative energy to what might seem a modest form: short solo keyboard sonatas. Yet within these works - of which he wrote over 500 - he created entire worlds. The two contrasting sonatas featured here beautifully demonstrate his ability to evoke both joy and catharsis within such concise forms.

By contrast, Handel is best known for his large-scale works, yet he was also a virtuoso keyboardist who composed extensively for the harpsichord. The keyboard Suite in D Minor, HWV 448, from which the two Sarabandes are drawn, was written when he was around twenty years old.



Handel and Scarlatti were famously pitted against each other in a musical competition in 1708. "The two greatest virtuosos of the time performed prodigious improvisations on organ and harpsichord. Scarlatti had amazed everyone with his music and with his absolute mastery in playing the harpsichord. Handel for his part had left those present breathless, such was the prodigious skill on the organ." While Scarlatti was judged the finer harpsichordist, Handel was deemed to be the superior organist. Scarlatti later remarked that Handel was "the only man I have ever feared at the keyboard."

Again with Bach, we have a man who could write at any scale, but with his violin sonatas we clearly see how a composer can concentrate all his musical creativity into a limited model and still produce sounds that reach deep into your soul. The Allegro is music at its simplest - only a single line of melody, but from that, Bach manages to give us harmony and melody combined in a way that totally satisfies for there is never a feeling that anything is missing.

Bach twice attempted to meet Handel but never succeeded - but what a great meeting of minds it would have been if these three had ever met.



The Music

The album opens with Scarlatti's Sonata in C Major, K.330 - a work of brightness and movement, full of light. Its energy feels almost spontaneous and it translates beautifully to the guitar, its brilliance and vitality shining through despite its technical challenges.

From there, Bach's Andante unfolds like a quiet meditation. A most exquisite melody floats above a steady, gently pulsing bass line, calm and unwavering. In this transcription, I chose a higher key than is typical for guitarists, seeking to bring a sense of lightness and enhance the music's luminous, suspended quality.

Handel's keyboard music is seldom heard on the guitar, largely due to its technical demands. I selected two of the more intimate Sarabandes from HWV 448, allowing space for a direct and expressive approach. While these works are often richly ornamented, I chose instead a simplicity of interpretation, focusing on tone, colour, and the natural beauty of the melodic lines. Exploring different octaves helped reveal both the tenderness and the stark elegance of the music.



Handel's Sarabandes may seem simple on the surface, but within that simplicity lies a profound stillness. Rather than embellish, I felt compelled to strip things back, let the notes speak directly, and explore their colour, space and silence. Shifting between octaves became a way of revealing different shades of the same voice from stark elegance to tenderness.

Bach's Allegro is a work of extraordinary concentration, filled with intricate interweaving patterns that present the performer with countless interpretative possibilities. I approached it here as a standalone piece, separate from its place within the full sonata, and then shaped its flow to illuminate its architecture in a new way. I was particularly drawn to the way Bach juxtaposes moments of uncertainty with passages of inevitability. Despite its relentless motion, there are fragile phrases that seem to hesitate with vulnerability. I found myself drawn to these moments, wanting to give them space to breathe, to exist alongside the drive and stern clarity that so often define performances of this piece.

The final work, Scarlatti's Sonata in B Minor, K.197, feels like a closing reflection. I first encountered it through Vladimir Horowitz's recording, which left a lasting impression with its intensity. Translating it to the guitar required compromise, but also revealed something new. The instrument's intimacy brings the music closer, softly spoken rather than declared. What remains is something fragile, direct, and deeply personal with an added beauty which only the guitar can provide.



Gerard Cousins is a true innovator in the world of classical guitar, pushing the boundaries of his instrument to create mesmerising music that appeals to a wide audience. From his unique interpretations of Philip Glass's piano works to his transcriptions of choral composer Eric Whitacre, Gerard's recordings have garnered tens of millions of streams and earned him a front-page feature on Apple Music. But Gerard's music is far from confined to the studio. His live performances are immersive experiences, blending imaginative arrangements with original compositions. Known for his improvisational flair and connection with audiences, each concert becomes a unique and personal event. Gerard's passion for music began early, shaped by the recordings of guitar legends John Williams and Julian Bream, and fueled by explorations into jazz, rock, electronic, Indian classical, flamenco, and minimalist music. A pivotal moment came when he attended a concert by the great Joe Pass—an experience that convinced him of the power of a single guitar to captivate an audience.



His musical journey has been one of exploration and perseverance, evolving from traditional Spanish repertoire to a deeply personal voice that fuses diverse influences. With his 2014 album *The First Beat is the Last Sound*, Gerard firmly established his identity as a composer, blending his wide-ranging inspirations into a distinctive and original sound. In 2024, he achieved a significant milestone by writing and performing his first guitar concerto for full symphony orchestra— further demonstrating his creative ambition and versatility. Gerard's music is broadcast worldwide, with dedicated radio programmes on BBC Radio Wales and France Musique. In 2015, he appeared as a finalist on the UK television series *Guitar Star* on Sky Arts. A graduate of the University of Leeds and Enschede Conservatorium (Netherlands), he has performed in festivals and concert halls across Europe, South America, and the Middle East—including the Purcell Room on London's South Bank. He has released nine solo albums, each one exploring a different musical realm—from traditional Spanish works to original compositions and unique reimaginings of Welsh folk music. 1685 is Gerard's fifth release with Prima Classic, following *Simple Truths*, *Charme de la Nuit*, *The Poet Acts*, and *Stay by My Side*.



Credits

Executive producer: Edgardo Vertanessian

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Mixing and Mastering: Edgardo Vertanessian

Guitars: Paco Santiago Marin (2006) (Track 2); Antonio Marin

Montero (1992) with many thanks to Roger DeBree

Photographs by Paz Vaira

All Texts by Gerard Cousins

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