

A detail from a painting, likely by Johannes Vermeer, showing two young women. The woman on the left is seated at a keyboard instrument, her hands positioned over the keys. She wears a red dress with a greyish-brown shawl. The woman on the right stands beside her, holding a sheet of music. She wears a blue dress. The background is dark and indistinct.

# National Gallery of Art

81st Season of  
Concerts

March 31, 2024

# Bach Birthday Bash

What makes the music of Johann Sebastian Bach so enduring? Frequently described by musicians and scholars as the greatest composer who ever lived, J. S. Bach (1685 – 1750) spent his professional life in service to the church and to royalty. He composed an enormous amount of music largely due to the requirements of his positions as *Kapellmeister* (director of music) in royal courts and as organist and cantor (choir leader) at churches in Germany. He was best known as an organist during his lifetime.

A master of form and musical architecture, Bach was not an innovator. He knowingly composed “old-fashioned” music and made music as pedagogical material. In the last decade of his life, Bach focused on his musical legacy. The *Art of Fugue* and *Goldberg Variations* sum up his 40 years of developing a musical language. At the time of his death, his music was considered out of date, and Bach died in relatively poor financial circumstances. His meager estate was divided between his widow and nine surviving children. A revival of interest began in the 19th century when composer Felix Mendelssohn organized a performance of Bach’s *St. Matthew Passion*.

In his book *Counterpoint: A Memoir of Bach and Mourning* (2020), Philip Kennicott, a Pulitzer Prize-winning critic at the *Washington Post*, details his experience of listening to Bach as his mother was dying. In Bach’s music he felt joy, despair, life, and the end of life. French composer Claude Debussy referred to Bach as a “benevolent god,” and American singer-songwriter

Nina Simone claimed, “Bach made me dedicate my life to music.” The American composer Aaron Copland said, “If one were asked to name one musician who came closest to composing without human flaw, I suppose general consensus would choose Johann Sebastian Bach.”

You don’t need to be a critic or a musician or a composer to appreciate Bach’s music. Please enjoy our celebration of J. S. Bach’s 339th birthday. Fun fact: The actual date of Bach’s birth is often disputed. His birth was first recorded, using the Julian calendar, as March 21. By 1750, most of Europe had adopted the Gregorian calendar. Its difference of approximately 10 days moved Bach’s birthday to March 31 — today! – Danielle DeSwert Hahn  
Head of Music Programs

cover: Orazio Gentileschi and Giovanni Lanfranco, *Saint Cecilia and an Angel* (detail), c. 1617/1618 and c. 1621/1627, oil on canvas, National Gallery of Art, Samuel H. Kress Collection, 1961.9.73

# Program

**March 31, 1:00 p.m.**

**West Building, West Garden Court**

**Sophie Shao, cello**

Music of Johann Sebastian Bach

Cello Suite no. 2 in D Minor, BWV 1008

Cello Suite no. 6 in D Major, BWV 1012

# Musician

## **Sophie Shao**

A versatile cellist, Sophie Shao has won the prestigious Avery Fisher Career Grant as well as top prizes at the Rostropovich and Tchaikovsky competitions. Her solo appearances include performances with the Houston Symphony, the American Symphony Orchestra in New York, the National Symphony Orchestras of Taiwan and Ukraine, the Pacific Symphony in Orange County, California, and the BBC Concert Orchestra in London. A native of Houston, Texas, Shao began playing cello at age six. She holds a BA in religious studies and a master's of music degree from Yale University. Shao is on the faculty of the University of Connecticut.

# Program

**March 31, 3:00 p.m.**

**West Building, West Garden Court**

**Mak Grgić, guitar**

**Stephen Ackert, harpsichord**

Music of Johann Sebastian Bach

Prelude and Fugue in C Major  
from Book I of The Well-Tempered Clavier

Prelude and Fugue in F Minor  
from Book II of The Well-Tempered Clavier

Sonata no. 1 for Solo Violin, BWV 1001  
Arranged for solo guitar by Mak Grgić

Fugue in F Major  
from Book II of The Well-Tempered Clavier

Sheep May Safely Graze in Pasture

Air on the G String

Jesu, Joy of Man's Desiring

# Musicians

## Mak Grgić

The expansive and adventurous repertoire of two-time Grammy-nominated artist Mak Grgić attests to his versatility and wide-ranging interests. He has commissioned numerous compositions for solo guitar and guitar with ensemble, including works by Michael Gordon, Julia Adolphe, Nina Senk, Leon First, and Cengiz Eren. In 2018 Grgić was invited by singer-songwriter k. d. lang to perform as the opening act for the North American leg of her *Ingénue Redux* tour. A few years later, in 2022, he premiered and toured a commissioned guitar concerto by Michael Abels. His most recent recordings, *Balkanisms* (Naxos Music) plus *MAKrotonal* and Grammy-nominated *Mak/Bach* (MicroFest Records), span ethnic music, microtonal, new music, and early music on re-fretted instruments.

In addition to holding a full-time teaching position at the University of South Carolina, Grgić is a founder and CEO of Notey, a startup that is building a mobile music education game. He is proud to be involved with the Bosana Foundation, an organization that raises money for Bosnian youth. Grgić also regularly awards education-furthering scholarships to select students across South America.

## **Stephen Ackert**

Stephen Ackert studied the harpsichord under Maria Jäger-Jung at the Hochschule für Musik in Frankfurt am Main, Germany. A resident of the Washington, DC, area from 1979 to 2022, he served as organist and choir director at several area churches, where he presented a series of 40 Bach concerts. Outside the United States, he has played recital tours in historic concert halls and churches in Germany, including the Jakobskirche in Köthen, where Bach was a guest organist and conductor.

Ackert headed the music department at the National Gallery of Art from 2004 to 2014. The interrelationships between music and art were a regular feature of his lecture/recitals and preconcert talks.

# General Information

The use of cameras or recording equipment during the performance is not allowed. Please be sure that all portable electronic devices are turned off.

Concerts are made possible in part through the generosity of donors to the National Gallery of Art through the Circle. Reserved seating is available in recognition of their support. Please contact the development office at 202.842.6450 or [circle@nga.gov](mailto:circle@nga.gov) for more information.

## **National Gallery of Art Podcast: Sound Thoughts on Art**

*Sound Thoughts on Art*, a podcast from the National Gallery of Art, explores the intersection of sight and sound. Hosted by musician and journalist Celeste Headlee, each episode focuses on a work of art in the National Gallery's collection and now features performers Jenny Scheinman, Dom Flemons, Sa-Roc, Delfeayo Marsalis, Daniel Ho, Maria Schneider, Peter Sheppard Skaerved, and others. Listen and dig deeper at [nga.gov/music-programs/podcasts](http://nga.gov/music-programs/podcasts).

## **Upcoming Concerts**

Interested in future music performances at the National Gallery of Art? Visit our calendar page at [nga.gov](http://nga.gov) or scan the QR code below to learn more about future concerts, as well as our permanent collection, current exhibitions, and many public programs.

