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# Mahan Esfahani

## Selected Reviews

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### JS Bach Das Wohltemperirte Clavier, Book 1 (Hyperion, September 2025)

"Mahan Esfahani's reading is lucid and illuminating" \*\*\*\*\*

– Andrew Clements, *The Guardian*

"he plants the music's power firmly in the realm of performance, and backs himself up with an interpretation that emphasises its flexible, human features" ... "the music never sounds as if it is playing itself, but it is always alive, always has personality"

– Lindsay Kemp, *Gramophone*

"The character of the instrument plays only one (considerable) part in influencing the overall character of the performances. The other, of course, is in the delivery. There is no better example of these two forces at work than the C major Prelude and Fugue that open the set. The harpsichord's sound is friendly on the ears, amplified with Esfahani's rich legato...thoughtful tone and smooth monophony in the opening subject. The theme speaks to solitude, and as other voices join in later, he creates a dialogue that centers around solemnity...Esfahani writes that Bach 'spoke' counterpoint so fluently that it became a vehicle for the expression of his innermost philosophical thoughts. Indeed, the harpsichordist's attention to detail, the movement of each line of counterpoint, speaks to an intelligent realization. There is hardly a single moment when a voice carelessly trails off into oblivion. All this takes place while many of his fugues reveal harmonic pairings, colorful dissonances, and textural facets that we may not always catch in piano performances."

– Azusa Ueno, *The Classic Review*

"Mahan Esfahani is unquestionably a latter-day philosopher of the harpsichord... he is always interesting, never boring. So, he proves again here, with his epic new recording of a cornerstone of the keyboard repertoire, Book I of JS Bach's *The Well-Tempered Clavier*. It's quite the ride. Esfahani combines philosophy with theatre while insisting on the integrity of the 24 preludes and fugues as a whole... the playing? Fabulous, of course – effortlessly virtuosic yet outstandingly musical – and definitely compelling enough for the recording to be devoured at one sitting, as Esfahani intends. There's the expressive flexibility in tempo towards both extremes – for example in the E-flat minor and F minor preludes, or the G major prelude and B-flat major fugue. The dramatic and narrative shaping via tension, momentum and contrast, as in the C minor and D minor preludes and the D minor and B minor fugues.

There's spaciousness and clarity, with plenty of room around voices – listen to the C-sharp minor prelude or the F-sharp minor fugue. There's rhetorically alert rubato, a deliciously lyrical use of the instrument's sonority and colours and, perhaps best of all, a real improvisatory character to much of the playing.

... Esfahani's take on *WTC Book I* embraces diverse performing traditions, historicism, modernism and the capacity for Bach's music to be different things to different people – and thus for all people, for all time."

– Will Yeoman, *Limelight*

### Recital at Edinburgh International Festival, Queen's Hall (Edinburgh, August 2024)

"Iranian-American soloist Mahan Esfahani is among the foremost harpsichordists of his generation, committed to keeping the instrument alive today. Here he explored varied dimensions of middle and late Baroque repertoire with deep sensitivity, musicality and considerable technical mastery.

Esfahani opened with Wilhelm Friedemann Bach's Fantasia in E minor BWV 21. Negotiating a flurry of notes with smoothness and aplomb, he moved straight on to Handel's contrasting Chaconne in G HWV 435, full of ornamentation and swagger in its 21 variations on a sarabande. The main feast was Bach senior's definitive, seven-movement Partita No 4 BWV 828. This was a masterclass. Esfahani's main focus is contemporary harpsichord music, but he is a fine exponent of high Baroque chromaticism too.

After the break attention turned to companion influences on Bach and Handel. Pachelbel's Chaconne in F minor is slow and tender. C P E Bach's Fantasia II in C lives up to its name, exuding elements of carnivalesque lightness and mischief. Perhaps the highlight of a compelling recital was Buxtehude's La Capricciosa, 32 demanding variations on a Bergamasca melody and chord progression. These include hints of Bach's Goldbergs and huge stylistic shifts, ending with a gothic stomp. Esfahani excelled in it all."

– Simon Barrow, *The Scotsman*

### **Preludes, Inventions & Sinfonias, Hyperion (CDA68448) (released August 2024)**

"With five predecessors in the bag, you might think that Mahan Esfahani's latest survey of Bach's keyboard music only contains odds and ends. True, the items, variously played on a harpsichord and clavichord, are brief: the album contains 55 tracks, the shortest, capturing a surviving fragment, lasting 32 seconds. But Bach's genius is so pervasive in these preludes, inventions and sinfonias, and Esfahani's playing so lively and subtle, that no one should bemoan the absence of grand musical architecture. Hyperion's recording and engineering spread their own delight by treasuring the dying reverberation of a piece's last note and taking a helpful breath before plunging us into the next jewel. This is the kind of album you wish would never end."

– Geoff Brown, *The Times*

### **Brandenburg Concertos with the Milwaukee Symphony Orchestra (Milwaukee, March 2024)**

"Most of the focus was on Mahan Esfahani, an elite harpsichordist, who dazzled in the first movement's kaleidoscopic cadenza. The Affettuoso second movement, pared down to a violin/flute/keyboard trio, allowed all the lines to be heard. Wong and Slocum played wonderfully together, their movements and emotions in sync. The finale once again belonged to Esfahani, his harpsichord burbling and trilling as an assertive member of the ensemble...

Between the two concerts, a panel discussion took place in the upper atrium with Wong, Esfahani, Masur, and MSO choir director Cheryl Frazes Hill. The talk covered topics from the communal nature of performing Bach to the composer's legacy and long history of neglect. Mahan Esfahani's input was the most provocative, challenging the very concept of festivals that put composers on a "pedestal" or trying to assign universal claims to their music, but then he reiterated his appreciation for Bach in the most poetic terms. Based on his probing thoughts, I would be interested to hear him speak at length on any musical topic... As soloist in Bach's Harpsichord Concerto No. 4, Mahan Esfahani was authoritative and engaging. I enjoyed hearing how he unfurled the solo lines in the slow movement against the ensemble's stark accompaniment."

–Brendan Fox, *Shepherd Express*

### **Recital at Stanford (Stanford, March 2024)**

"Esfahani opened with Tomkins's "Pavana FvB CXXIII," playing with remarkable control, beautifully highlighting its melancholy nature...Following the lighthearted "Courante," the "Sarabande" provided an incredible contrast. Esfahani presented the movement's heavy anguish and penetrative longing with remarkable authenticity and touch. His range in musical expression truly shone through in this movement, with an air of dark solemnity providing for an incredible listening experience...The second half of the concert revealed some of the most exciting and unique renditions of the music of Domenico Scarlatti I have ever heard. The explosiveness and energy that Esfahani brings to his music were truly at their best here. For instance, in "Sonata K. 28," Esfahani created incredible vigor through the imitations of Spanish guitar technique Scarlatti embedded in the piece, offering a thrilling adventure through the lively work. I've never heard a more convincing and exciting rendition of the piece, and I absolutely loved it. In the final "Sonata K. 436," Esfahani coupled his playfulness with virtuosity. He showcased his astounding ability to play with audience expectations by withholding cadential resolutions or playing moderately-paced scales that quickly snowballed into surprising eruptions."

–Eric Wang, *Stanford Daily*

### **Recital at Bath Bachfest (Bath Guildhall, Feb 2024)**

"The next day, harpsichord superstar Mahan Esfahani played a programme of Handel (Suite No 2 in F major), Buxtehude (La Capricciosa) and JS Bach (English Suite No 6 in D minor). The expressivity of the Handel and the sheer virtuosity of the Buxtehude – a set of variations in which Esfahani seemingly turned a million black dots into a murmur – led, with well-judged logic, to the Bach: palindromes, enigmas and a "mirror" fugue to make your head hurt (despite Esfahani's lucid advance explanation), but finally, and unquestionably, best heard as music."

– Fiona Maddocks, *The Guardian* \*\*\*\*\*

## **The French Suites, Hyperion (CDA68401) (released October 2023)**

"Mahan Esfahani's extensive, often entertaining notes explain the decisions behind this new recording including variants and additions alongside all the familiar movements. A main beneficiary is the fourth suite in E flat that gains an improvisatory prelude, a second gavotte and a minuet. Esfahani also includes what he describes as three 'Orphan Suites', comprising works connected to Bach either by a single ascription, as in the G minor Suite, or via the copies of pupils, presumably based on their teacher's work. Whatever their provenance, the music rarely disappoints.

All credit to Esfahani for this carefully prepared recording...there is much to enjoy in playing that displays poise and expressive nuance as well as virtuosity...enjoyable performances of the first three French Suites and two of the 'Orphan Suites' on a clavichord with a modest, but expressive dynamic range that admirably suits the delightful intimacy of these works."

**– Jan Smaczny, *BBC Music Magazine***

"The sound [of the clavichord] is so seductive; the delicacy, the gentle chirpiness, the almost reedy timbre at times, and the way the notes sometimes bend under the finger pressure. And then there's Esfahani's fragrant ornamentation and embellishment, so beautifully integrated with Bach's lines, the feeling that the music is coming fresh from his and Bach's imagination—so intimate—before what Mahan calls the 'rich snarl' of his modern hybrid harpsichord in some of the suites. The whole album seems as though it's been designed to question our assumptions and prejudices in the most enlightening way."

**– *BBC Record Review***

"If the clavichord added a sense of intimacy to the earlier recording [of the Notebook for Anna Magdalena], here its more quicksilver touch has had a profound impact on the interpretation, including those works played on the harpsichord."

**– *Gramophone Magazine***

"The best years of the harpsichord are still ahead of it—even though too many people mistakenly consider it to be a relic of the Baroque. This appears to be Mahan Esfahani's working assumption, since, alongside commissioning and recording new music for his instrument, he's also actively engaged in recording the complete keyboard works of JS Bach—with all the freshness he brings to modern composition. Here, you feel as though Esfahani has ingested the French Suites whole, and that his performances, split between harpsichord and clavichord, are a real-time working-out of how to mould Bach contrapuntal nests so as to reveal their inner lyricism. This is playing of daredevil spontaneity, backed up by intense scholarly discipline."

**– *Prospect***

"Everything sings, everything dances, I breathe and I savour the art of this genius of the harpsichord."

**– *Artamag, France***

## **Corellimania, OUR Recordings (6220682) with Hille Perl and Michala Petri (released October 2023)**

"Few [discs focussing on Arcangelo Corelli] make for such a consistently gripping and gorgeous listen as this one does. This is a delectable combination of instruments: the slightly rugged tonal richness and depth of Hille Perle's 1686 Matthias Alban viola da gamba, meeting the sparkling whoomp of Esfahani's double-manual Kramer-built Italian harpsichord, and Michala Petri's assortment of Baroque recorders (A=415) by Swiss maker Heinz Ammann...For an entirely different-coloured example of how brilliantly the three instruments and musical personalities blend and bounce off each other, I also can't get enough of Telemann's Sonata Corellisante No 2 in A, where Petri is on a sweet-toned soprano, against the glow of Perl in her own soprano registers and Esfahani's luminous harpsichord. This is a radiant reading, full of tight, sprightly dialogue, its Allemande and closing Corrente the scenes of some of the entire programme's most ravishing displays of silkily perfect recorder virtuosity and suavely sparky gamba shaping and ornamentation – driven, as across the album, by the sense of energy and intellectual spring radiating out from the direction of the harpsichord.

Three cheers, then, for Esfahani's solo turn, Handel's Harpsichord Suite in B flat, HWV434, voiced with such buoyant, rhetorically freewheeling ease that it sounds almost as if the harpsichord is playing itself, and with the Aria variations sitting as its crowning glory – a gradually accelerating crescendo of merrily magnificent excitement that feels on the one hand like a finger in the direction of period-appropriate sophistication (for reference, perhaps give Schiff's elegant version a spin), and on the other hand, even more sophisticated."

**– *Charlotte Gardner, Gramophone***

"In interpretations of great virtuosity, the ensemble provides beautiful phrasing and ornamentation in this spontaneous performance. In addition to much lively vivacity, the music also contains sunshine, grace and, at times, a very southern melancholy...The result is atmospheric and lively music-making that captivates with its atmospheric density. Mahan Esfahani

shines with an expressive interpretation in Handel's solo suite HWV 434."

– **Pizzicato.Lu**

### **Recital with the Escher Quartet, Rockport Chamber Music Festival (June 2023)**

"Mahan Esfahani, an approachable wizard of the harpsichord, conveyed with immediacy why he had become spellbound by the instrument. His playing and communication—alone and with the Escher (String) Quartet—for the Rockport Chamber Music on Sunday were nothing short of stunning...The unusual choices of repertoire, particularly the world premiere of Composer-in-Residence Mark Applebaum's October 1582, for solo harpsichord, and a few other surprises, made for a remarkable concert..."

The final concert segment hailed from the Art of Fugue (BWV 1080) written in Eisenach, Germany, at the very end of Bach's life. Here the arrangement for string quartet and harpsichord ended with a fade out, as Bach left it uncompleted...

Mahan Esfahani and the Escher String Quartet, together with innovators such as Mark Applebaum, are ensuring the harpsichord's continuing relevance."

– **Julie Ingelfinger, Boston Musical Intelligencer**

### **Notebooks for Anna Magdalena, Hyperion (CDA68387) with Carolyn Sampson (released May 2023)**

"This partnership works well, doesn't it—Esfahani's delicate fingerwork and expressive ingenuity on harpsichord and clavichord, and his spontaneous flourishes and attractive ornamentation, combined with the simplicity and accuracy of Sampson's soprano. Intimate entertainment of the highest quality."

– **BBC Record Review**

"Mahan Esfahani and Carolyn Sampson open the household doors with a generous selection of pieces from the 1725 notebook...What an unfailingly delightful compilation it is, featuring keyboard galanteries, chorale melodies with or without voice and a wide variety of arias...Esfahani's choice of instrument for each piece, whether clavichord or harpsichord, is well judged...an enchanting programme, affectionately and intimately performed."

– **Nicholas Anderson, BBC Music Magazine**

### **Martinů, Krása & Kalabis: Harpsichord Concertos, Hyperion (CDA68397) (released February 2023)**

"I may be genetically conditioned to adore this repertoire, but this new album from Mahan Esfahani is an unalloyed joy from first chord to last. Martinů, Krása and Kalabis all on one programme: what's not to like? Of course, sometimes expectations run wild ahead of actuality, but not here. If I encounter an album as good as this one this year I will be overjoyed!"

...Martinů's music almost always smiles good-naturedly, but in this beautifully nimble account it positively beams. The accompanying ensemble is relatively modest – eight strings, flute, bassoon and piano (played by Ivo Kahánek, no less) – but what other composer would create a chamber concerto for harpsichord with an orchestral piano nestling in the accompaniment? Esfahani and conductor Alexander Liebreich achieve a remarkably balanced, warm sound, each line and texture precise and needle-sharp...

Hindemith did not, so far as I am aware, write for the harpsichord, but had he penned a chamber concerto for it in the 1920s or '30s it would surely have sounded much like Hans Krása's delightful diptych for harpsichord and seven instruments (1936). Bearing the Hindemithian title of Kammermusik, it was partly based on a song Krása had composed a few years before. On first hearing, there is a feeling of incompleteness, as if a robust finale somehow failed to materialise, but familiarity shows that Krása got it spot on.

Spot on well describes the final and largest item here, Viktor Kalabis's 1975 Concerto for his wife (and Esfahani's teacher and mentor), the late, great Zuzana Růžicková. Esfahani writes so movingly in the booklet of the composer and this most personal of his works, and it is magnificently played, every bit as splendid as Růžicková's and Kalabis's own account (Supraphon, 7/13) – but with finer sound – and more than a match for Jory Vinikour's fine if occasionally more cautious rival (Cedille, 10/19). Here, as throughout, the Prague Radio Symphony Orchestra's accompaniment is sensitive and ideal, and Esfahani plays like an angel..."

– **Guy Rickards, Gramophone**

"Esfahani makes sparks fly as ancient meets modern...Three 20th century Czech pieces for the harpsichord are full of lively interest in this new recording with Alexander Liebreich and the Prague Radio Symphony Orchestra."



You would hear some robust words from Mahan Esfahani if you dared suggest the harpsichord wasn't an attractive solo instrument for a concerto – but even he will admit that in the 20th century it took a special kind of composer to write one for it. The latest addition to Esfahani's eclectic discography highlights three of them, all Czech, all grappling in their time with how to make something modern using an instrument so strongly associated with the past. It's an ear-opening recording...

There's a sense that Martinů and Krása both had fun writing their pieces, whereas the concerto Viktor Kalabis composed in 1975 for his wife, Zuzana Růžicková – Esfahani's teacher – was something he had to write. This has the scope of a grand piano concerto, and between two expansively driven movements there's a bleak, wide-open slow one in which time stops. In all three works, Esfahani's unfussy yet attention-grabbing playing strikes sparks off the musicians of the Prague Radio Symphony Orchestra and their conductor, Alexander Liebreich.”

– Erica Jeal, *The Guardian* \*\*\*\*

“Nor is there anything stale about Mahan Esfahani. His crusades for his instrument, the harpsichord, know no bounds, and this album of 20th-century Czech repertoire, vividly recorded in Prague with top Czech musicians, keeps springing surprises. From the 1930s, Martinů's concerto starts with neoclassical clatter, then widens its attractions, while pungent delights never end in the stylistic pot-pourri of Hans Krasa's Kammermusik. Balancing things out, Viktor Kalabis's 1975 concerto offers muscular strength and painful feelings. Throughout Esfahani's fingers never stop sparkling; he should commission an opera, “The Magic Harpsichord.”

– Geoff Brown, *The Times*

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### **Scarlatti solo recital, Queen Elizabeth Hall, Southbank Centre (October 2022)**

“Scarlatti's sonatas surprise us anew – the Iranian harpsichordist found the humanity and links between works in an immaculate recital. Domenico Scarlatti's keyboard sonatas crop up regularly enough in recitals, most often in a group of four or five beginning a programme, or acting as a palate-cleanser between more substantial works. Concerts devoted exclusively to them are rare, but in doing precisely that harpsichordist Mahan Esfahani was on a mission to encourage his audience to see Scarlatti and his music on their own terms...

Of the more than 550 sonatas Scarlatti wrote, Esfahani says, more than 90% are still largely unknown, and only 30 were published in the composer's lifetime (as “Exercises”, in 1739). Esfahani included six of those in the 19 (with two more added as an encore) that he selected for his recital, presenting them all in a single span without an interval. He played sonatas that Scarlatti clearly intended as linked pairs with scarcely any break between them, like the two in F major, Kk296 and Kk297, with which he opened, the first almost Romantically effusive, the second extrovert and unpredictable, and together making the maximum contrast with the profoundly introspective F minor Kk466 sonata that followed them, whose expression “straddles the wide expanse of life between lullaby and funeral dirge”, according to Esfahani...

The unidentified harpsichord that he was playing seemed to have been chosen for its intimately expressive qualities, allowing him to trace melodic lines in silvery filigree, and to ensure that the denser harmonies also remained lucid. But it was clear, too, that he had planned his programme so that it built steadily, with the grandest, flashiest pieces reserved for the final quarter of his 80-minute sequence, whether that was the exuberance of the C minor sonata Kk116, the brilliance of the A major Kk24, or the quasi-operatic ornamentation and key shifts of the E minor Kk263. But the published programme ended on a quieter note, with the simple aria of Kk32 in D minor, which Esfahani played with just as much care and attention to detail as he had the most imposing and demanding pieces before it – a fascinatingly conceived recital, immaculately presented.”

– Andrew Clements, *The Guardian* \*\*\*\*

### **Poul Ruders: Harpsichord concerto with the RSNO, UK premiere (October 2022)**

“A sharp crisp performance [of] Poul Ruders' Concerto for Harpsichord, a work written in 2020 for the fearless Iranian harpsichordist Mahan Esfahani. The joy of Ruders' writing is that it seeks to release the instrument from its Baroque straitjacket, give it a contemporary voice, and overcome its volume limitations through subtle amplification... Esfahani's performance captured the infectious volatility of the music, from its pulverising wildness to chiming sensitivity, its pervading obsession with repeated notes to copious liberating flights of free-flowing virtuosity. Rich and sensitive colourings from the RSNO enhanced its charming freshness.”

– Ken Walton, *The Scotsman* \*\*\*\*

“Music meets machine...we were treated to one of the most original and mesmerising concertos I have ever heard on this stage. This was the UK premiere of Poul Ruders' Concerto for Harpsichord, co-commissioned by the RSNO and the Aarhus Symphony

Orchestra, a piece that cheerfully upends everything we thought we knew about an instrument firmly anchored in the 18th century. We are accustomed to hearing the harpsichord against a small baroque orchestra, but not against a large symphony orchestra with a lush score, and not making any particular effort to be quiet either. For this reason, Ruders specifies amplification of his solo instrument, acknowledging in his programme note that "period-instrument fundamentalists will be horrified – the mere thought is abominable". In the event, the amplification was unobtrusive, and it certainly did not detract from the extraordinary performance by harpsichord superstar Mahan Esfahani, for whom this concerto was written. The solo part is driven forward by an almost brutal rhythmic momentum, dense chord clusters merging into an almost unearthly sound in which the musical notes are subsumed into an expression of pure percussive energy. The vision that came to mind was that of a machine grinding music much like stones being crushed in a gravel quarry. If that sounds like an unflattering comparison, it does not take into account the compelling presence of Esfahani at the keyboard, often rising from his seat in sheer exuberance, hands chasing each other up and down the keyboard. For the most part, the orchestra inhabits a different universe, providing a calm, near-romantic backdrop to Esfahani's manic energy, though the slower central movement allowed soloist and orchestra to find common ground in a cinematic interlude...It's difficult to do justice to a concerto that defies convention as thoroughly as this one, but suffice to say that it was met with a roar of approval at the end...Esfahani treated us to an encore, an exquisitely poised Gavotte and Variations by Rameau, which reminded us of the harpsichord's principal musical constituency. That these two contrasting visions could co-exist so easily in one concert shows that adventurous programming can work when the commitment is as evident as it was on Friday night.."

**-Christopher Lambton, Arts Desk \*\*\*\*\***

### **Miroslav Srnka: Harpsichord concerto world premiere with the Gürzenich Orchester Köln, Kölner Philharmonie (September 2022)**

"For years, soloist Mahan Esfahani has paved the way to bring the harpsichord into the modern age, sometimes against heavy resistance... Srnka's work displays all the joy of experimentation and virtuosity."

**– Johannes Zink, Kölnischer Rundschau**

"Esfahani played the new harpsichord concerto by Czech composer Miroslav Srnka with great virtuosity...The orchestra and harpsichord are on the best of terms as partners. The harpsichord manages the gurgling and bubbling noises of the ensemble, evoking associations of an overflowing water tank... after enthusiastic applause, for which Esfahani thanked the audience with an improvised passacaglia over a Purcell bass to honour the recently deceased Queen."

**– Markus Schwering, Kölner Stadtanzeiger**

### **Clavier-Übung II, Hyperion (CDA68336) (released September 2022)**

"JS Bach may be the great fons et origo of Western art music, but quite a few people are simply allergic to his music. If the sufferer also has an allergy to the sound of the harpsichord – again, not uncommon – then this new album of two hefty masterworks, the Italian Concerto and the French Overture, plus the four rarely heard Duets and two very early pieces might seem the most exquisite torture.

But if they try it, I'd be willing to bet it would bring them joy, as the performer is Mahan Esfahani, the Iranian-born, American-raised and now Czech-domiciled harpsichordist. Esfahani won a string of awards in his youth, including a BBC New Generation artist and Borletti-Buitoni Award. He is as passionate about contemporary harpsichord music as he is about the great pre-classical composers from Frescobaldi to CPE Bach, the familiar territory for harpsichordists from which only a few adventurous players stray.

Esfahani's performances of Bach are dramatic and highly coloured in a way which often subverts the ideology of "period performance", which in recent decades has been the guiding light of most harpsichordists. That ideology says: study the sources, play on exact replicas of old instruments, and above all strive to catch older styles of playing, in an effort to give listeners "what the composer wanted". Esfahani is far too smart to be taken in by this idea, which is impossible in practice as well as being dubious in principle. He never forgets he is playing for 21st-century audiences, not a bunch of 18th-century aristocrats in an ancien régime palace. At the same time he is fascinated by old styles and old sources, and really wants to be true to the composer – in his own way.

The result is something poised tantalisingly between "then" and "now". Many of the pieces are in dance form, but Esfahani doesn't piously recreate the rhythm of the dance; instead he pulls the rhythms around in a way that reminds you of a great pianist moulding a Chopin waltz. Those knitting-machine fast movements are intelligently marked out by pauses, so you become aware of the grand harmonic changes beneath the incessant patter of notes. The music jumps into vivid relief, an effect

magnified hugely by the prismatic variety of rich, jangling colours Esfahani conjures from his custom-made harpsichord. In the performance of Bach's very early "Capriccio on the Departure of a Beloved Brother" Esfahani adds laugh-out-loud wit and imaginative recreation to the mix. In all these performances are a marvel. Never has Bach seemed less dry and more full of fantasy."

– Ivan Hewett, *The Telegraph* \*\*\*\*\* ( *The best classical CDs of August and September 2022*)

"Esfahani takes wing at top speed with glittering virtuosity. The colours he brings to all the works here make us revel anew in the sonic capabilities of the harpsichord."

– Fiona Maddocks, *The Guardian*

"Mahan Esfahani couldn't make a routine recital of Bach's keyboard music if you paid him to ... what a great way to end a Bach harpsichord recital ... I love that final 'ping' as he lifts his hands from the keys. Bach's Italian Concerto begins the album, leaping into life with irresistible immediacy, bristling with trills and decorations like little fireworks bursting over the left hand's propulsive leaps, and it's easy to share the sense of satisfaction at the range of sounds Esfahani's harpsichord produces under his fingers, recorded in a well-handled church acoustic: there's a lovely halo around everything with no loss of detail, and the bass of the instrument fully captured. Mahan's notes are as engaging and communicative as his playing."

– BBC Record Review

"Since for Esfahani any performance starts from a position where everything is freshly, indeed forensically reconsidered, Clavier-Übung II offers particularly rich pickings. Bach sets out not only to demonstrate how thoroughly he understands the flagship styles of Italy and France, but also how he can bend them to his own purposes. The interpretive possibilities are catnip to the harpsichordist who proves himself stylishly bilingual ... the concluding Presto [of the Italian Concerto] goes off like a rocket trailing scarcely-containable energy—the end thundering like Wanda Landowska on steroids ... altogether, a challenge to complacency that can't be ignored."

– Paul Riley, *BBC Music Magazine*

### Leipzig Bachfest solo recital (June 2022)

"Mahan Esfahani performs a sparkling evening concert at the Bachfest Leipzig...an inspiring concert experience and probably a highlight of this year's Bach Festival...Mahan Esfahani's lets virtuosic runs sparkle, and he understands how to shape phrases like a relaxing walk in the gardens of Versailles (Sarabande), phrased in disciplined structured sentences...Mahan Esfahani has an electrifying touch, knows how to place accents, and yet, he keeps the singing character of the harpsichord."

In JS Bach's Toccata in D minor (BWV 913) and in D major (BWV 912) as well as the Fantasy and Fugue in A minor (BWV 904), the Iranian-American-Czech harpsichordist reveals the complex multi-faceted structures, and he makes it come across just as manifold as it does on an Organ. The organ friends must be excited to experience this!

Any more discoveries? Girolamo Frescobaldi is a legendary composer, however his works are rarely heard! The Capriccio sopra la Bassa Fiammenga (F 4.05) leaves one amazed and makes one ask, why is it so? Are Frescobaldi's works too difficult, or is there a lack of curiosity to explore his music? This playful and lively piece leaves nothing to the imagination in terms of strings of sparkling notes."

– Wolfram Quellmalz, *Neue Musikalische Blätter*

### Poul Ruders: Harpsichord concerto (OUR Recordings, May 2022)

"A century ago, harpsichords were generally regarded as interesting silvery creatures pushed out of history by the rise of the piano. That's scarcely true today, not with the growth of the period instrument movement, nor with the rise of Mahan Esfahani, the dynamic Iranian-American who believes the harpsichord should stop at nothing, not even a minimalist milestone such as Steve Reich's Piano Phase."

Esfahani particularly welcomes new concertos for his instrument...[Ruders'] new work [is] a modern twist on the baroque concerto model... the harpsichord delights in suave melodies; decorative flourishes, too. Matters calm down in the worried beauties of the magical slow movement, where Ruders' ear for colour and texture is particularly acute. Elsewhere in this live recording of the work's 2020 premiere, Esfahani's sparkle and energy meet their match in the spry sounds of the Aarhus Symphony Orchestra, conducted by the Finnish maverick Leif Segerstam. All in all, I emerged from listening feeling refreshed and very clean, as if I'd just stepped out of a hot shower."

– Geoff Brown, *The Times* \*\*\*\*\* (Classical Album of the Week)

"There's almost a 'fairy-tale' story to the Harpsichord Concerto itself. One day in 2019, as Ruders switched on his computer, up popped a commission from the Aarhus Symphony Orchestra, for a new piece for harpsichord and orchestra – which would feature leading international virtuoso, Mahan Esfahani. The rest, they say, is history."

Mahan Esfahani's playing is simply breath-taking throughout. Ruders impressively-idiomatic writing for the harpsichord is centred on Esfahani's prodigious skill and virtuosity, as well as his all-embracing sense of musical architecture, expressive niceties, and incredible feel for detail. It might, therefore, be felt that a bespoke concerto like this would fit the player like a well-tailored suit, but if you listen to Esfahani's video, he confirms just how very difficult the work is, in every respect. His prodigious talents, however, are such that he is able to surmount every technical challenge, effectively belying its obvious difficulty."

– Philip R Buttall, *MusicWeb International*

"Mahan Esfahani is one of the most sought-after harpsichordists of our time, who, in addition to the technical requirements, has the necessary curiosity and musical intuition to perform such a composition. Therefore he succeeds in an exciting and intensive interpretation."

– Pizzicato \*\*\*\*\*

### **Bent Sørensen harpsichord concerto UK premiere with the City of Birmingham Symphony Orchestra (April 2022)**

"An exquisite, often hauntingly sad work...the concerto itself seems to hide a free-floating melancholy beneath an exterior of refined and sometimes brilliant colour... the harpsichord writing had its share of virtuoso flourishes (Esfahani reached inside his instrument to draw sweeping glissandi across its strings), but overall, seemed focused more on its performer's questioning intelligence than on anything as predictable as mere display. Esfahani worried away at fragments of bristling mock-baroque passagework, set in opposition to the orchestra's kaleidoscopic shifts. Or he suddenly locked onto a trumpet or woodwind phrase, giving a weird, brittle phosphorescence to the overall sonority. A scherzo and a fughetta glittered and bustled: in the finale, squealing trumpets, like predatory seabirds, seemed briefly to have the upper hand, leaving Esfahani's last word – a descent onto an unaccompanied final note – to feel all the more conclusive.

Esfahani returned after the interval with CPE Bach's D major keyboard concerto Wq18, and the audience's response suddenly lifted from polite bewilderment to the kind of unabashed enthusiasm – complete with whoops and cheers – that dear old Emmanuel probably last encountered back in Potsdam round about the time Frederick the Great annexed Silesia. Esfahani gilded Bach's writing in sumptuous colours, with sweet-toned melodies unfurling over angular, black-and-bronze left-hand figuration, plus occasional, teasing little tugs at the tempo to assert (as appropriate) a phrase's subversive potential or aristocratic swagger."

– Richard Bratby, *The Arts Desk* \*\*\*\*

### **Los Angeles Philharmonic solo recital, Walt Disney Concert Hall (December 2021)**

"Exquisite beyond measure...much about the harpsichord — as Mahan Esfahani, today's best known harpsichordist, marvelously demonstrated in his Disney recital — is curiously liberating. The lightness of touch stimulates flights of fancy. In his program note, Esfahani likens the effect of the harpsichord to that of sketches and etchings by great painters.

...Esfahani ended his recital with a lacy Purcell encore, "Ground in C Minor." But he ended his program note with the promise that next time he comes back to L.A., it will be for an evening of new and modern music. It may not be all that different. Old or new, Esfahani can make one thankful to abide a thankless instrument. There might even be a life lesson in that act."

– Mark Swed, *LA Times*

### **Cambridge Music Festival solo recital, Downing College (October 2021)**

"Anyone who was present is unlikely to forget Mahan Esfahani's performance of Bach's Goldberg Variations at the Cambridge Summer Music Festival two years ago. Iranian-born Esfahani, who has set out to promote the harpsichord to what he believes is its rightful place among concert instruments, is a prodigy of the keyboard whose astonishing abilities, demonstrated on that occasion, were once again on display at the current Cambridge Music Festival. Of worldwide renown he is one of the greatest performers on the harpsichord, and indeed one of the outstanding living instrumentalists.

The whole, and to a layman well-nigh impossibly demanding repertoire, presented Esfahani with not the slightest of difficulties. The audience was simply left agog at this genius of the instrument.

From the delicacy of touch he achieved in the C. P. E. Bach Sonata in G minor, and the exquisite Kuhnau sonata (No.6 in B flat major), to the power which made the modest-looking harpsichord sound sometimes like an organ, sometimes even an entire

orchestra, Esfahani gave the lie to the received opinion that the piano makes possible tones and colours forever denied to a harpsichord whose strings, being plucked, allow no room for subtlety of interpretation.

The Chromatic Fantasia and Fugue (BWV 903), one of J.S.Bach's most famous works, may have been played equally as well, but is unlikely ever to have been played better than in Esfahani's performance, where his diamond precision and his amazing technique seemed to find new meanings and dimensions in the approach that he took to this imaginative toccata and its well-balanced fugue.

Esfahani's sense of timing here, and elsewhere, was perhaps no more obviously a prominent gift of his playing than that displayed in the concluding French Overture (BWV 831) with its array of dance measures derived from the elegant style of French masters such as Lully and Couperin, great influences on the German tradition. Esfahani's rhythmic vitality, his precision and confidence all coalesced to deliver an almost perfect rendition of this most challenging of Bach's keyboard compositions.

A 'speechless' audience, though loudly vocal in its calls for more and more, brought Esfahani back to encore with, as he said, 'a work by Henry Purcell'. This was no towering virtuosic reprise, simply an undemonstrative, brief but exquisitely executed, lyrical piece from an extraordinarily accomplished musician. An occasion where there is nothing to fault can only be enjoyed. And this was one of those occasions."

**– John Gilroy, Cambridge Independent**

### **BBC Prom with the Manchester Collective, Royal Albert Hall (August 2021)**

"A high energy Proms debut [for the Manchester Collective]...Mahan Esfahani's playing was punchy and brilliant."

**– Andrew Clements, The Guardian**

"The playing was incisive and lively all evening and, as Szabo put it, it's great to have music at the Proms by female and non-dead people. More like this one, please, BBC."

**– David Karlin, Bachtrack \*\*\*\***

"Music for harpsichord and strings ranges from the fierce to the festive...The programme was bookended by harpsichord concertos, played by the charismatic Mahan Esfahani. Henryk Górecki's, from 1980, is uncompromising and unrelenting, playing with ideas of baroque music in a minimalist manner. There is none of the interplay of orchestra and soloist familiar from the classical concerto: here they plough their own furrow, harpsichordist doing frantic finger-exercises and the strings in an inscrutable unison. Esfahani handled the endless repeated chords (a terrifying technical challenge) with energy and enthusiasm."

**– Bernard Hughes, The Arts Desk**

"An epic night. Wild rhythms and visceral textures from the Manchester Collective – their debut at the BBC Proms – and Mahan Esfahani...There was a rock-gig feel to Mahan Esfahani's keyboard work in Gorecki's Harpsichord Concerto, the music of which holds absolutely no prisoners with a driving incessant rhythm. The rust-like feel in the combined textures of harpsichord and strings gave proceedings a creepy edge. The frenzied cacophony had a tinge of madness about it that was magnetic and repellant. Music that brings about strong contradictory emotions. Efficient writing. Electrifying playing."

**– Thoroughly Good**

"Henryk Górecki is best known for his contemplative works, but his 1980 Harpsichord Concerto is anything but. Two relentlessly busy movements of breathtakingly sustained Minimalist rhythm (think the love child of Nyman and Reich) had the audience drilled to their seats, and the soloist, the peerless Mahan Esfahani, jumping up and down on his stool to deliver a barrage of schrecklicher chromatic chords...Joseph Horowitz' Jazz Harpsichord Concerto is a work that needs a lot more exposure. A concerto grosso for harpsichord, drums and string bass masquerading as a tour de force of hot 60s jazz riffs, it herds Swingles, Jacques Loussier and Brubeck into an entire cattery of cool rhythmic contrasts."

**– Barry Creasy, MusicOMH, 4.5\***

"Esfahani and the Manchester Collective brought real excitement to [Gorecki's Harpsichord Concerto] with a sound which filled the Royal Albert Hall."

**– Planet Hugill, \*\*\*\*\***

"One of the most thrilling Proms I've ever attended... Esfahani is sometimes described as genre-busting in his campaign to keep the harpsichord and its repertoire current. But maybe the other way round works just as well. Hearing tonight how vibrant and natural the harpsichord sounds in so many different contexts suggests to me that barriers between styles, eras and genres are simply those we erect ourselves for no reason – resulting in the joy and surprise we felt as the Manchester Collective kicked them down."

**– Artmuse London**

"Esfahani's playing in both pieces was magisterial...Every work on the concert was given a performance whose obvious understanding of and enthusiasm for the music and generosity of music making was matched by the meticulous preparation and flawless performance. The whole concert was enjoyable and memorable."

– **Rodney Lister, *Sequenza21***

### **Recital with Dame Sarah Connolly, Wigmore Hall (June 2021)**

"In Connolly and Esfahani's concert, the brow was always high. It ventured into emotional areas that were sometimes darkly ambiguous, sometimes melancholic, sometimes nervily changeable. We heard an extraordinary contemporary arrangement of John Dowland's song 'Come, Heavy Sleep', in which Connolly's rich voice traced Dowland's original melody in serene defiance of Esfahani's atonal thickets of sound. Here and in the group of four Purcell songs, Esfahani forsook his harpsichord to accompany Connolly on the piano, which he did with subtle touch and pedalling. They seemed as if they'd been performing together for years. In contrast to these songs were Esfahani's harpsichord pieces, which teased us by being enigmatic: the strangely involuted Overture to Orpheus by Dutch composer Louis Andriessen, the spiky wit of the Two Pieces by Czech composer Bohuslav Martinů. Oddest of all was a sonata by WF Bach, the oldest and most wayward of the more famous Bach's sons. It seemed to change mood and direction in mid-phrase, an effect Esfahani captured as eloquently with his body language as his fingers. Finally, singer and harpsichordist came together for the delicate wit of Michael Tippett's Songs for Ariel...engrossing and performed with consummate artistry."

– **Ivan Hewett, *The Telegraph* \*\*\*\***

### **The Six Partitas, Hyperion (CDA68311/2) released May 2021**

"Bach's six keyboard partitas are essentially suites of 18th-century dance forms with distinctive rhythms, each preceded by an introduction. Mr. Esfahani renders them with super-charged technical flair and a point of view. In the opening Toccata of the sixth partita, his tempo is slower than most, but the momentum never sags, and his playing is expressive. His jubilant take on the Capriccio of the second partita captures the maniacal quality in much of Bach's most virtuosic writing. The harpsichordist's performance of the third partita goes from strength to strength: touchingly wistful in the Allemande, stately in the Sarabande and vibrant in the Burlesca, where imaginative registration choices for some chords accent the section's jaunty, humorous character."

– **Sarah Jepson, *Wall Street Journal***

"Part of the startling immediacy and modernity of Mahan Esfahani's performances comes from the range of sounds his modern harpsichord can produce, with its rich bass register ... but also the breadth of Esfahani's imagination, his sense of theatre, his willingness to explore and experiment. It might be too much for some, but it'll be a revelation to others."

– **BBC Record Review**

"For an example of a mindful variety of mechanical, listen to his rapid-fire take on the first partita's Gigue—a good reference point for the swifter, toccata-like Allemande earlier in the suite. The opening Sinfonia of the Partita No 2 in C Minor is glorious, the spacious, spread chord of the first bar establishing a dramatic tension which underpins the subsequent faster sections of the movement. Well-dramatised, too, are relationships among movements, such as those among the flowing Fantasia, the busy Corrente, the transparent Sarabande, the bustling Burlesca and the exciting Gigue in the Partita No 3 in E Minor. Which sets up the sunny, tirade-streaked Overture in the following Partita No 4 in D just nicely. And its bittersweet cousin, the Sarabande in the same suite. Some of the best playing here can be found in Esfahani's improvisatory and beautifully characterised account of the fifth Partita's Praeambulum—which again points ahead to the sixth Partita's opening Toccata, as thrilling an account as you're likely to hear anywhere."

– **Will Yeoman, *Limelight Magazine* 4.5\***

"For his recording of Bach's Partitas, Mahan Esfahani uses a harpsichord built by the workshop of Jukka Ollikka in Prague, which conveys a brightness and definition that mirrors the performer's absorbing and occasionally unconventional interpretations."

...Esfahani's imagination particularly flourishes in the Sarabande, where the harpsichordist's elasticity of phrase and ear-catching embellishments up the music's expressive ante while illuminating its dance origins... [He] sets an intimate, conversational tone in the Third Partita's Allemande, where his sophisticated legato finger technique generates uncommon harmonic tension...Esfahani's decisions regarding tempos and articulation throughout each of the Fourth Partita's movements add up to one of this big work's most satisfying recorded interpretations, highlighted by a hypnotic, deliberately unfolding Allemande. The Fifth Partita's striking features include unusual yet convincing fermatas over the rests in the Praeambulum's opening bars and the Tempo di minuetta's alluringly blended registration.

It's refreshing to hear the fugue of the Sixth Partita's Toccata so beautifully rounded and embellished, as well as how Esfahani relishes the Sarabande's dissonances. As for the question of playing the Gigue's main theme in duple or triple metre, Esfahani serves it up both ways. Clearly his pursuit of scholarship never lapses into pedantry either as performer or annotator...There's no questioning Esfahani's inquiring musical mind and absolute mastery of his instrument."

**– Jed Distler, Gramophone Magazine**

"If the first volume of Mahan Esfahani's foray into Bach's keyboard music showcased the youthful flamboyance of the Toccatas, the sequel embraces a composer pushing at the boundaries of the suite, upscaling its possibilities through an encyclopaedic assault buttressed by assorted national styles, compositional techniques old and new and an array of 'Galantieren' ranging from Rondeau and Capriccio to Burlesca and Scherzo. All keyboard life is there, and they raise plenty of issues for a performer. Esfahani is keen to tackle them head on, and his liner notes make for required reading ... Trevor Pinnock (on Hänssler) or Richard Egarr (Harmonia Mundi) offer less idiosyncratic readings, but then Esfahani has never been one to play it safe. BWV 825's 'Menuet 1' has the solidity of a bürgermeister mindful of his respectability, but its da capo positively boogies, darting embellishments doing the not-so-heavy lifting... At its pungent best, Esfahani's joie de vivre can be uniquely captivating."

**– Paul Riley, BBC Music Magazine**

"I've always admired Mahan Esfahani as one of the finest keyboard players of his generation. This latest recording in his Bach solo keyboard cycle, the Six Partitas published as Clavier-Übung I, once again reasserts 'his interpretive flair, expressive freedom and meticulous scholarship'...The opening Grave adagio of the Sinfonia of the Partita No 2 in C minor, played slower than most, but sounding wonderfully improvised and free. He then goes on to inject energy and sparkle into the two-part fugue which ends the movement, delivering it with such clarity and precision.

The Praeludium in the Partita No 1 in B flat is nicely paced, refined and elegant, with the Corrente airborne and buoyant. The Sarabande proceeds with great nobility of gesture, with the florid melody expressive and the trills beautifully contoured. He plays the Giga briskly without sacrificing precision and clarity in the hand-crossing. The Partita No 4 is both noble and intimate. The French Overture is a majestic curtain raiser on proceedings with its double-dotting, trills and flourishes. The long lines of the Allemande which follow are expressive and intimate, contrasting startlingly with the brusque articulation of the Courante. Esfahani makes some potent colour registration variants in the repeats. These are compelling and imaginative readings, both bold and convincing, captured in superb sound."

**– Stephen Greenbank, MusicWeb International**

"Esfahani is a passionate performer rather than a scholarly purist and chooses the readings, like his choice of instrument, that make most musical sense to him—the sources he has consulted are all listed ... the instrument delivers a smooth and homogenous performance under Esfahani's nimble fingers, and—as always—his readings, as well as his playing, challenges many of the more conventional 'period instrument' assumptions ... I recommend this recording not just for its well-argued and committed performances but for Esfahani's challenging approach. He is on the way to recording all Bach's keyboard for Hyperion, and if you like his style they will be well worth watching out for."

**– David Stancliffe, Early Music Review**

## **Manchester Collective project, UK tour (May 2021)**

"A bold, perception-challenging programme of rich textural contrasts, every note illuminated by these incomparable musicians...Esfahani brings his unique musicianship to a far broader repertoire than one might usually associate with his period instrument...[Horowitz's Jazz Concerto] was the scintillating climax to a memorable evening."

**– Geoffrey Mogridge, Ilkley Gazette**

## **JS Bach – Well-Tempered Clavier Book 1, Wigmore Hall stream (April 2021)**

"This was a mighty achievement... The complete Book 1 of JS Bach's The Well-Tempered Clavier — all two hours, all 24 preludes and fugues of it. Who knows whether the baroque master intended it to be performed in one sitting, but Mahan Esfahani made it a gripping experience...As we cycled through all 12 major and minor keys, the sense of journeying gathered pace, the wondrous interplay of notes became more and more enthralling.

...In tempo, articulation and colouring each piece had real character, be it joyful, reverential, playful, scholarly, lamenting or light-hearted. Esfahani both revelled in improvisatory freedom and intelligently led us through thickets of fugal writing.



Plentiful rubato highlighted expressive points. And then there was his bespoke harpsichord, whose range of colour he deftly exploited, evoking sounds from lute to organ...

At the end, a surprise. The B minor fugue uses an ingenious subject featuring all 12 chromatic notes, evolving into the longest fugue in the set. After the last note, Bach wrote "Fine" and "S.D.G." — Soli Deo Gloria, the motto with which he customarily signed all his works. This is very clearly the finish. Not here. Just as Bach brought back the opening Aria at the end of his Goldberg Variations, Esfahani returned to the very first prelude. Its key of C major felt brighter than ever, its freshness like a new dawn. It wasn't what Bach wrote, but it made the evening complete."

– Rebecca Franks, *The Times* \*\*\*\*

## **JS Bach – Goldberg Variations, Leipzig Bach Archive (January 2021)**

"Accustomed as most of us are to hearing the Goldberg Variations played on modern pianos, it is good to be reminded why Johann Sebastian Bach's full title for the work, published in 1741, was Aria with 30 Variations for Double-Manual Harpsichord, Goldberg Variations. It was Part IV of a collection called simply Clavier Übung (keyboard exercises). When the person reminding us is the phenomenal harpsichordist Mahan Esfahani, the results can be transcendent.

...Esfahani has wiped the slate clean of interpretations by harpsichordists and pianists of the current era, burrowing deeply into the essence of Bach's music and articulating it breathtakingly while offering a fresh approach to the details...Technically, it is hard to believe a plucked instrument like a harpsichord can sing, but Esfahani creates the illusion, much as a guitarist does.

...Esfahani's approach to the nine canons is especially delicious. They punctuate the proceedings every third variation, almost like a suite scattered throughout the piece; some dance, others sing, but each one feels like a continuation of the last one heard, building in complexity even as tempos vary. Variation 15 turns contemplative before the exuberance of No.16 launches the second half. Scampering merrily through the final canon (No.27) fits itself neatly into the way Bach ratchets up the gathering storm in the final five variations.

...Esfahani coaxes a range of textures from this instrument, drawing delicacy in the Andante and Adagio and springiness in the rapid tempos for others.

In all this brilliance, several variations stand out: No.5 for the way the lead hand shifts from left to right without losing a thread from the texture; the Fughetta of No.10 for its impeccable clarity as the lines intertwine; No.13 for its evocation of a guitar's sonorities. No.23, a variation that often sounds clumsy on the modern piano, feels like rain falling delicately, lifted occasionally by the wind. The fluttering right hand of No.26 is a tour de force of dexterity and deft musicality, and the constant trilling of No.28 brings thrills.

After the burst of energy in No.29, instead of making the final Quodlibet of No.30 feel majestic, Esfahani surprises us with a halting rhythm that calls to mind an improvisation, with exaggerated rubato. This leads seamlessly into the restatement of the aria, here played with more embellishment and confidence than the opening. He is unafraid to let a phrase die away or let the music take a long breath before moving on. The final phrase finishes with a sort of droop of shoulders. After the beauty of the aria, that can break a heart."

– Harvey Steinman, *Seen and Heard International*

## **Musique? Hyperion (CDA68287) released July 2020**

"Doth Mahan Esfahani protest too much? Here we have a cohesive, effective, taut programme of 20th-century harpsichord works that builds surely in density, complexity and philosophical provocation as it proceeds. In terms of programming, it's a winner. Yet Esfahani writes not one but two barbed introductions in the booklet, one of which insists, on a noticeably staccato tone, that he must be allowed to simply play the music he wants to play at a given time. Well yes. The album's title also wants to provoke an argument that isn't really called for, thanks to Esfahani's musicianship.

The album could just as easily have been titled after Anahita Abbasi's Intertwined Distances, as John Fallas's booklet note illustrates with rigour. It starts out with the clear shapes, mirror games and spacious probing of acoustic resonance in Takemitsu's Rain Dreaming, in which Esfahani plays the echoes as musically as he does the keys. Cowell's Set of Four is framed by a series of pained neo-Baroque flourishes, Louis XIV-style opulence refracted through the mind of a man who had spent four years of the 1930s in San Quentin prison. It's like a nightmarish Gloriana and Esfahani mines thrilling darkness in his Jukka Ollikka harpsichord.

Kaija Saariaho's *Jardin secret II* is witty and intelligent, and presents an expression of 'intertwined distances' far more eloquent than Abbasi's – a teasing, meticulous game between amplified harpsichord and electronics that avoids the rhetorical or the gestural and forms a good prelude to Gavin Bryars's theatrical *After Handel's 'Vesper'*. The piece, by its fantastical, narrative nature, is less focused than its counterparts but at least exposes the many registrations on Esfahani's instrument and his ability to tinker with it like a loving mechanic. Voicing counts for little in Abbasi's work, which uses electronics to throw everything but the kitchen sink into a dense, dark sound picture and seems less an evocation of intertwined distance after what we've already heard. Luc Ferrari's *Musique socialiste?* gives its own question-concept space to breathe, pitting the steady electronic throbbing of the state against the paranoia of the individual harpsichordist – soothing or suffocating, depending on your politics. There's a lot here to get your teeth into but, in truth, not much to be afraid of."

**– Andrew Mellor, *Gramophone***

"That question mark in the title certainly implies a lot. On the one level, it's referring to a piece on the disc, but on another, it's Esfahani the pugilist, fighting for the harpsichord's place in contemporary music-making; he says in the notes that one inspiration for making this recording was the audience members who "over the years, booed, cat-called, and/or walked out of halls worldwide in anger and confusion (in other words, fear)" during performances of these works. He concludes, "be assured, my friends, that much more of this is on its way". That question mark, then, is Esfahani sending a message to the members of his audience who don't want to engage with "difficult" music, and daring them to ask – is this music? Well, the answer is pretty easy. This is a brilliant, refreshing, and powerful disc that re-positions the harpsichord as a vital part of modern music-making.

The disc opens with Toru Takemitsu's *Rain Dreaming*, part of both Takemitsu's "Waterscape" series and "dream and number" works. Beginning with consonant single notes, they're soon contrasted by the sprinkling of dissonant raindrops before being overtaken by chordal material. Henry Cowell's music deserves to be performed more often, though a "morals" charge and prison stay in the 1930s probably didn't help the conservative public of the time accept his music. His *Set of four* refracts ancient forms through his own sensibilities – it's not often you hear tone clusters on harpsichords. Esfahani's performance here is a striking one, highlighting and reinforcing the form of this unusual collection.

Later works on the disc pit Esfahani against pre-recorded electro-acoustic layers. Anahita Abbasi's *Intertwined distances*, written for Esfahani, uses harpsichord sounds alone, while Luc Ferrari's *Programme commun* expands to pulses and drones. Saariaho's *Jardin secret II* is an especial highlight. Esfahani's exploration of these works is a must-buy for those interested in contemporary music. Bold and thrilling."

**– Paul Ballam-Cross, *Limelight Magazine***

"Harpsichord soloist Mahan Esfahani has made something of a name for himself as an *enfant terrible* of early music. His dazzling performances and imaginative recital programmes have forged his reputation as an artist to be reckoned with, as this compelling new disc of contemporary music – described by Esfahani as 'the culmination of years of thinking about underserved areas of harpsichord repertoire' – finds himself on suitably fiery form.

Spanning nearly 60 years of composition, the repertoire selected still feels refreshingly new. Henry Cowell's *Set of Four*, composed in 1960, draws nominally on Baroque and Classical forms but adventures across the keyboard with fabulous invention and is performed with poise and vitality by Esfahani. The most recent composed work to be included, *Intertwined distances* (2018) by Iranian-born Anahita Abbasi, explores ideas of space, expanding the soundworld of the harpsichord through highly effective electronic effects to conjure bold new colours.

Other highlights include Toru Takemitsu's *Rain Dreaming* (1986), a work that shifts repeatedly between the serene and the tumultuous in its striking evocation of water, and Kaija Saariaho's *Jardin secret II* (1986) which combines amplified solo harpsichord with electroacoustic sounds that sigh, stutter and tick amid virtuosic clusters of trills from the soloist.

"Mahan Esfahani—he's just such an amazing force and a polemicist for the harpsichord ... because although he's brilliant at Bach he refuses to let the harpsichord remain in an 'Early Music' box, and he's a great commissioner and performer of new music ... really good recorded sound as well ... it's brilliantly done."

**– BBC Record Review**

"*Musique?*, devoted to works composed between 1960 and 2018, [makes] a statement: Esfahani—an Iranian-born, American-raised evangelist for an archaic keyboard closely linked with centuries-old European music—elevates composers who deviate from convention. In acoustic works by Toru Takemitsu, Henry Cowell, and Gavin Bryars, he demonstrates the deft touch and technical bravura familiar from his celebrated Baroque interpretations. But, in electroacoustic pieces by Kaija Saariaho, Anahita Abbasi, and Luc Ferrari, Esfahani's exuberant lines, rapier-sharp thrusts, and bombastic explosions abandon courtly decorum, revealing an instrument strange and new."

**– Steve Smith, *The New Yorker***

"dazzling performances... an artist to be reckoned with, and this compelling new disc of contemporary music... finds him on

suitably fiery form.... Exploratory, imaginative and stylishly performed."

– Kate Wakeling **BBC Music Magazine**\*\*\*\*\*

"The adventurous harpsichord champion Mahan Esfahani has, for the first time, devoted an entire album to music of our time. To further stretch the boundaries of the known, three of the six compositions also contain an electronic component, often based on the harpsichord sound itself...Esfahani gently takes the listener by the hand, with Toru Takemitsu's concise, crystalline *Rain Dreaming*, and Henry Cowell's *Set of Four*, beautifully written for the sound of the harpsichord and the oldest work on the CD...*After Handel's 'Vesper'* by Gavin Bryars is so idiomatic for the instrument that it comes across as neo-baroque, but first we hear *Jardin secret II* by Kaija Saariaho, who's writing here appears more playful in this breath-inspired piece from 1986 than in much of her later work. Esfahani's compatriot, Iranian Anahita Abbasi, shows herself a composer with guts in the two-year-old *Intertwined Distances*. Alienating buzzing sounds and furious keyboard fists interspersed with gossamer string playing create a theatrical listening experience."

– Frits van der Waa, **de Volkskrant**\*\*\*\*\*

"This album of modern pieces for harpsichord will completely upend your idea of the instrument. This engrossing new release offers a collection of six modern pieces for the harpsichord played by the well-known American-born harpsichordist of Iranian extraction, Mahan Esfahani. The earliest was composed in 1960, the latest in 2018, and the composers hail from six different countries. The very idea of "modern music for harpsichord" seems a contradiction in terms, because there's something stubbornly antique about the sound of a harpsichord. Even when it's being used to play jagged little modernist fragments or hammered clusters like the ones in the *Jaws* soundtrack, the sound never quite shakes off its Baroque associations. Add to that the suggestively otherworldly sounds of electronics which are mingled into three of the pieces, and you have a disc that seems more like a gauntlet thrown down to the listener than an offer of enjoyment. That would certainly be in character. Esfahani likes to be provocative, and it probably gives him a gleeful pleasure to offer up a disc that so completely upends the common view of what a harpsichord is. But it's a risky move. Some listeners, faced with the question implied by the title *Musique?* – "Is this really music?" – will be tempted to answer with a resounding "non".

That would be a shame, because there's much to enjoy and be moved by on this disc. The first piece *Rain Dreaming* is one of those delightfully evocative and mournful evocations of nature the Japanese composer Toru Takemitsu wrote in his later years. The fact that the super-sharp recording allows you to hear the faint creakings and resonances of the harpsichord adds to the music's gentle water-streaked pathos. By contrast the *Set of Four* by that pioneer American experimentalist Henry Cowell makes overt nods to Baroque-era harpsichord music. The set contains a grand overture in the form of a Rondo, an angular little fugue, a pompous Chorale, and a moto perpetuo that occasionally sounds like atonal Handel. There are more Handelian echoes in the piece entitled *After Handel's Vesper* by British composer Gavin Bryars, though it is less musically satisfying.

Then there are the three pieces that combine the sharply defined sounds of the harpsichord with the more soft-edged, atmospheric ones of electronics. The contrast was especially acute in *Jardin Secret (Secret Garden) II* by the Finn Kaija Saariaho, where the electronic sounds were constructed from breathy recordings of the composer's own voice. More satisfying to me was the piece specially written for this record: *Intertwined Distances* by the Iranian female composer Anahita Abbasi. (Iran has produced several interesting female modernist composers in recent years – who would have thought it?) After a disconcertingly dry beginning it develops into a fascinating dialogue between opposites that sometimes come to within a hair's breadth of each other, only to part again.

Most rewarding of all is the longest and last piece on the disc, by the French composer Luc Ferrari. A series of flourishes on the harpsichord ushers in a faint electronic drone, which soon develops an insistent rhythmic pulse against which the harpsichord sometimes fights, sometimes yields, an idea projected with a sure sense of dramatic timing and telling variety of colour by Esfahani. The ending, in which he adds decorative wisps to a high cicada-like chirruping, is beautifully poetic. Putting together this CD has clearly been a labour of love for Esfahani; let's hope listeners respond with the curiosity and sympathy it deserves.

– Ivan Hewett **The Telegraph**\*\*\*\*\*

### **JS Bach – Brandenburg Concertos, Hong Kong City Hall (January 2020)**

"The second half of the programme began with the much loved fifth concerto, which contains a mammoth cadenza for harpsichord that elevates the instrument from accompanist to featured soloist. Mahan Esfahani, who played in all six concerti, made liberal use of rubato in his romantic, and technically flawless, interpretation of this extended passage."

– Dirk Newton, **South China Morning Post**

### **The Toccatas, Hyperion (CDA68244) released August 2019**

"Bach's seven keyboard Toccatas (BWV 910-916), written when he was in his twenties, may not be lofty masterpieces, but their rhetorical flourishes and playful diversity are easily enough to set Esfahani on fire. He's helped by his powerful modern

instrument, inspired by those built in Bach's time. Then there's the church acoustic, lively enough to give warmth and depth to something harpsichords aren't supposed to do well — let an individual note linger. The resulting sound is bold, dynamic and stupendous.

Mostly, though, it's Esfahani's force and interpretive flair that make this album so compelling. Feel his muscles in the proclamations of the first Toccata, a piece just as strenuous as its key signature, F sharp minor. Share his pain in the taut phrasing of the D minor Toccata, delightfully eased in the sprightly dance of its concluding fugue. The word "toccata", as Esfahani points out, derives from the Italian "toccare", meaning "to touch", and it's the physicality of his music-making that seems so right, both for his instrument and the music of a composer clearly delighting in muscle-flexing of his own."

**– Geoff Brown, *The Times*\*\*\*\***

"Esfahani's playing feels free and spontaneous without losing the underlying pulse of the music. The toccatas display their brilliance proudly. One can imagine the young Bach showing off his prowess just like this."

**– Richard Fairman, *The Financial Times*\*\*\*\***

"The album that has recently given me the most joy has been Mahan Esfahani's recording of Bach's early keyboard Toccatas (Hyperion). You tend to think of harpsichords as timid creatures, the sound always kept on a leash. Not here: Esfahani's new modern instrument, inspired by 18th century models, roars with a force and depth perfectly keyed to the power of his interpretations. Then there's the music itself...a wonderful indulgence!"

**– Geoff Brown, *BBC Music Magazine***

"[Mahan Esfahani's] new disc of Bach's Toccatas (Hyperion) conveys the spirit and expressive freedom of these seven early works, for which no single autograph source survives. Some serious detective work is required to address issues of ornamentation and phrasing, colour and clarity, which Bach would have expected to vary according to a performer's taste. Esfahani, who explains their complex history in a detailed essay, has made his own new performing edition and reveals these familiar pieces to have mysteries we may never have suspected."

**– Fiona Maddocks, *The Observer***

"Some of the most extroverted Bach I've ever heard forms this week's Recording of the Week, as Iranian-American harpsichordist Mahan Esfahani brings his customary panache to the seven toccatas for keyboard, BWV910-916. The intellectual side of Bach's finely-woven counterpoint sometimes draws contemplative, reticent accounts from performers, but from the very first flourish of BWV910, it's clear that Esfahani is not remotely interested in such an inward-looking approach. Indeed, the term "flamboyant" springs unbidden to mind at numerous points on this album.

Not only is Esfahani quite happy to apply generous quantities of rubato in order to emphasise the rhetorical gestures of the music, but he's also playing on an instrument that affords him a much wider range of expressive colour than one might normally expect of the harpsichord. ... There are points throughout the album when Esfahani manages to conjure from the harpsichord a bass roar evoking the sonorous reed stops of an organ.

That's not to say, of course, that the music is universally weighty; far from it. The middle of BWV912 is appropriately spiky, and most of the toccatas have at least one movement with a simpler, calmer mood. Here, not surprisingly, Esfahani discards the 4' and 16' stops and descends back down to the realm of mere mortals with a more conventional, and far lighter, sound. That being said, his decision to close one such passage, partway through BWV913, with an unexpected clanging pedal D on the 16' stop is surely a cheeky reminder that the richer and more powerful sounds are always just one tiny gesture away from returning in full force, and that the listener shouldn't get used to anything "normal" or "ordinary". This toccata has perhaps the most forceful ending of all seven – a fortissimo cadential figure that brooks no argument and, with the 16' heavy artillery once again deployed, brings the piece to a thunderous close worthy of an organ voluntary.

His rubato is again the tell-tale clue giving away just how much he is enjoying the music (a quality that isn't necessarily a given in recordings), but listening to the peerless counterpoint it's impossible to fault him for such self-indulgence; quite the reverse, indeed, as the music seems the better and the more alive for it.

It should come as no surprise that Esfahani is undaunted by such challenges, but what really sets this album apart is not his fingerwork but the way he exploits the capabilities of his instrument to also bring out the drama in these showy works. Perhaps best washed down with a ruminative Dowland pavan or two to lower one's pulse afterwards, his account of the seven toccatas is an exhilarating ride in the harpsichord equivalent of a souped-up sports car, driven by surely the finest and most assured driver alive today. I have no hesitation in predicting that this recording will scoop award after award."

**– David Smith, *Presto Classical***

"Bach's Toccatas carry a measure of mystery, in that definitive scores for this music are impossible to come by, leaving

performers ample latitude in ornamentation and other details. Harpsichordist Esfahani applies meticulous scholarship to this process yet has produced a vivid recording built on animated performances appropriate to the toccata form."

– **Howard Reich, *Chicago Tribune***

"Esfahani is, for many people, the greatest living harpsichordist, a musician of rare sensitivity and taste. This fine artist has considerable technique but he never flaunts it and all his gifts are here devoted to the service of Bach in performances of remarkably committed quality. Hyperion has given him a recording of first-class quality, and there is not a soiled note anywhere. A rare and, in its way, a thrilling and moving set of unbeatable performances."

– **Robert Matthew-Walker, *Musical Opinion Quarterly*\*\*\*\*\***

"Mahan Esfahani is as thoughtful and provocative a writer as he is a musician. I've spent almost as much time reading and re-reading his booklet essays as I have listening to his performances. The reality is they're two sides of the same coin, informing each other in a way literary analyses and texts rarely do. Maybe that's because Esfahani is also a (re)creative artist, a co-creator. When, in the essay accompanying these remarkable performances, he writes of "scores so clearly in need of the (respectful) intervention – or, rather, participation – of a performer," this is what he's talking about... The use of generous fermatas, of an extremely flexible pulse, of phrasing, of embellishment is utterly consistent with a profound sympathy with Bach's temperamental love of freedom, of independence. Then I hear the fugues. And I hear exactly the same thing. This time, however, there's the sense Esfahani, as much as Bach, is intentionally labouring under self-imposed constraints in order to stimulate a heightened imaginative intensity. It's really something."

– **Will Yeoman, *Limelight***

### **Duo recital with Michala Petri, Bergen International Festival (June 2019)**

"Esfahani, meanwhile, proved a congenial and resourceful accompanist. ... His solo flourish came in a performance of Bach's Italian Concerto: big-boned, full-flavoured, rhythmically free (even slightly cheeky). Yes, he banishes daintiness from his keyboards – but not, thank goodness, subtlety or refinement."

– **Boyd Tonkin, *The Arts Desk***

### **JS Bach Goldberg Variations, Bergen International Festival (May 2019)**

"He plays through the work with almost improvisatory freedom, in addition to formidable technique. The fast, hair-raising virtuoso variations that require crossing hands sound, in his interpretation, with outstanding clarity."

Pianists who deal with such passages on a regular grand piano often make them sound dull and awkward. When Esfahani plays them on the two manuals of the harpsichord, they sound like they were originally supposed to be: two independent lines, two melodies that carelessly weave in and out of each other.

The technique, the dexterity, and the clear alignment are all very impressive, but the most amazing thing about Esfahani's interpretation of the Goldberg variations is actually how he works with the harpsichord's own sound. He uses the sound of the instrument itself to characterize and distinguish the individual variations from one another. If you thought you knew how a harpsichord sounds, think again. For Esfahani, all of the instrument's built-in mechanisms exploit the sound. He creates a palette of infinite colors. He uses octave ducts, lute registers and all sorts of other dampers to make his instrument blade like an organ, or chime like a harp. ... We have witnessed a musical miracle."

– **Bergens Tidende**

### **George Lewis, Anahita Abbasi, Miroslav Srnka, Luc Ferrari, BBC Scottish Tectonics Festival (May 2019)**

"The real kick-ass moments came ... in Mahan Esfahani's anarchic solo harpsichord programme, where the delicate instrument of Bach and Couperin – especially in George Lewis' Timelike Weave – became a liberated voice of rebellion."

– **Ken Walton, *The Scotsman***

### **JC Bach Concerto in E flat, Op 7 No 5 with the Royal Liverpool Philharmonic Orchestra (April 2019)**

"A dozen RLPO string players provided a spry, lyrical accompaniment to Esfahani's keyboard fireworks, decorated with his own cadenzas and the addition of two horns, which underlined the buoyant, hunting mood of the outer movements, graceful yet full of harmonic surprise. This composer's output is still being discovered and assessed: Esfahani included the horns in the light of a

neglected Berlin manuscript, his attention drawn by the British JC Bach expert Stephen Roe. We were certainly the first, for a couple of centuries, to hear it that way.

Esfahani, born in Tehran, raised in the US, long resident in London but now based in Prague, has made it his mission to bring the harpsichord to life, not only as a baroque instrument but as part of today's musical landscape. A natural performer (and a broadcaster too), he's a boisterous advocate. His programmes typically unite old with new or recent. He was also soloist in Poulenc's *Concert champêtre*, an enjoyable but frankly bonkers example of 1920s French neoclassicism, as if a Fragonard shepherdess had collided with a bunch of flappers on the Rive Gauche."

– **Fiona Maddocks, *The Observer***

### **Bach Gamba Sonatas with Pieter Wispelwey, Tonicle München (February 2019)**

"With the magnificent harpsichordist Mahan Esfahani, the three gamba sonatas became witty conversations between three voices that imitate each other, interlink into a web or (in the slow movements) lead pensive and intimate dialogues and triologies – especially powerfully in the Andante in the G major sonata. Both artists played mindful of transparency and with mutual understanding – features that make complex music exciting and gripping. In the D minor toccata, Esfahani portrayed how the young Bach (during his Weimar period) ... [showed] off his virtuosic skills on the keyboard and his enthusiasm for passionate expressivity. The duo thanked the audience for the big applause with a fine da capo of the Andante of the D major [sonata]."

– **Harald Eggebrecht, *Süddeutsche Zeitung***

### **D'Anglebert, Srnka, JS Bach, Gibbons and Reich, Marianischer Saal Lucerne (February 2019)**

"You don't have to go far to understand why the sensational recital of harpsichordist Mahan Esfahani at the Marian Hall was full bar a few seats. The Iranian-American brought his wonderful sounding instrument to perform early to late baroque works, and benefited from the original sound of the harpsichord. However, he also opened up music of the future by playing Steve Reich's "Piano Phase" and a work by the Czech Miroslav Srnka which involved electronics. This gave the live performance a modern image. Esfahani explained the function of the E-Bows, the vibrations of the strings as ethereal tones over speakers which reverberated around the room. Before the athletic and virtuosic last encore by Domenico Scarlatti, he removed his jacket and loosened his shirt and tie like you would before a fight. We heard the old music in a completely new light. At the beginning of the Jean-Henry d'Anglebert suite, he is present from the first note and the profound bass sound spreads like one heavy, gold, sensual perfume accompanied by weightless trills and ornaments in the treble register. With flexible and playful rubato and metre, and boldly splayed and clouded harmonic twists, this music succeeds in the modern day.

The rock bass and baroque ancestor, Bach's Italian Concerto, played on the Italian harpsichord model, helped him to find contrasting sounds. Where abrupt and surprising brakes were found in the first accents, he tore through with unrestrained momentum in the final movement. Different again was the Orlando Gibbons, composed around 1600: archaic-simple meditative dance patterns were combined with a fast drive that sounded like endlessly fluttering ribbons pulled over the pounding bass. For those well acquainted with music between baroque and modern genres, this was exciting new music, especially in Gibbons' repetitive and rocking bass line amidst a program which focuses on contemporary works.

In Steve Reich's Piano Phase, we were reminded of the d'Anglebert effects as the repetitive and intermeshed live patterns were dazzlingly tight and rhythmically precise. Srnka's Triggering began with attacks on the keyboard, as if the iron bars inside the instrument were shaking. The other sections, however, exhausted themselves within the music samples and were more restrained tonally. The e-bows with which Esfahani plays individual strings to create the murmuring effect of flutes creates mysterious but quiet effects. This experimental programme showed the new possibilities that the harpsichord could open up. It is up to Esfahani how he lets us contribute to this journey."

– **Urs Mattenberger, *Luzerner Zeitung***

### ***The Passage Mesures, Music of the English Virginalists, Hyperion (CDA68249)***

"But all revivals can still benefit from rejuvenation, and that's what Mahan Esfahani provides. Listening to this Iranian-American wheeling at speed through 16th and 17th-century English delights is as exhilarating a musical experience as I know.

He makes his double manual harpsichord — a modern version of a 1710 original — sound as resourceful as an orchestra. It's richly textured, bubbling with colours, able to whisper and shout as well as most stages in between. As for virtuoso flair, even Liszt would doff the cap at Esfahani's furious arpeggios and decorative flourishes, fingers flying at the speed of light.

Such enriching repertoire too. *The Passinge Mesures* takes its title from a Byrd pavan and galliard — ancient dance forms bustled into dizzying, sometimes dissonant new shapes. Other pieces, especially by Farnaby, build complex, compelling, emotional fantasies out of simple popular songs and dances, creating in music something akin to what Shakespeare and the metaphysical poets achieved with words. Two thirds of the way through, a quieter, smaller instrument arrives, the virginals, with equally enlivening results. I suspect that Esfahani would make magic even if playing a penny whistle. This is definitely one of my albums of the year.”

– **Geoff Brown, *The Times***

“Looking back now on the Elizabethan age, one reads “curious” in both senses of the word. Especially when confronted with the mysterious music contained on this latest recording from that most skilful and curious – again, in both senses of the latter word – of musicians, Iranian-American harpsichordist Mahan Esfahani.

Subsequently immersing himself not just in this music but “the art, literature and history” surrounding it, he began to feel it was something he was “born to play”. Listening to this extraordinary recital, one can believe it. Maybe a good interpreter does just two things: reveal a world in a grain of sand; and try to communicate the “music” as opposed to just the music – that is, some intimation of the powerful subjective correspondences and resonances that arise from the collision between science and the imagination.

What won’t escape you in these utterly masterful performances is Esfahani’s ability to bring out the full expressive potential of this oft-underrated music by 16th and 17th-century masters such as Gibbons, Tomkins, Byrd, Farnaby and Blow. ... Take, for example, Gibbons’ Pavin *M. Orlando Gibbons*, the trills, shakes and divisions as sensitively phrased as the larger sentences and paragraphs which are allowed to breathe through the agency of beautifully judged agogic accents and silences. ... Such dark, brooding meditations are offset by lighter dances – galliards and giges – and virtuosic divisions like those of Farnaby’s *Woody-Cock*. But the dominant mood, the presiding rhetoric, is the same as that of the age itself: melancholy.”

– **Will Yeoman, *Limelight Magazine (Recording of the Month)***

“Elaborations on such ballads perhaps represent the most distinctively English contribution to the early literature of keyboard music, and incite their composers to an eclectic array of variations, grounded upon the idiomatic melodic and harmonic profiles of the songs used as their starting point. Again Esfahani rises superbly to the challenge of forging a coherent whole out of their varied sequences of shifting moods and technical explorations. Farnaby’s ornamentation of ‘Woody-Cock’ is particularly successful in that respect, whilst those by the same composer on ‘Why aske you’ are attractively decorous just as, in the anonymous elaboration of Dowland’s ‘Can she excuse my wrongs?’, Esfahani ensures that the gracefulness of the original vocal melody remains paramount.

He explains – rather than excuses – his use of a double-manual harpsichord, copied after those by Fleischer of Hamburg, as offering a range of timbres and colours that can do justice to this varied repertoire and creating for modern ears something of an equivalent thrill with which the earliest audiences would have experienced it, given that audiences now will be more blunted to the effects of the less-ambitious instruments those composers would generally have had access to themselves. This harpsichord’s quarter-comma meantone tuning offers some arresting harmonic turns, for example in the almost bluesy effect of a surprising modulation at the sudden slowing down of the tempo in Tomkins’s Pavana.

Although he does not explain his use of the virginal in four pieces it affords enticing contrast with its sprightlier, more immediate twang in the lively (and Anonymous) The Scottish gigue, and in the charming ingenuousness of (another Anon) Variations on the Romanesca, and the trills which open William Ingham’s set on ‘The leaves bee greene’.

Ultimately it is the vitality and integrity of Esfahani’s performances, which are very well recorded, that stand out in bringing this ancient music to life.”

– **Curtis Rogers, *Classical Source***

“These works have sometimes been handled as trifles or decorative minatures. But Iranian-American harpsichordist Mahan Esfahani treats them as profoundly expressive and introspective works. Here measured, there free, his readings highlight the ebb and flow of their poetry and prose; phrases are rhetorically articulated. Esfahani’s muscular technique enhances the robust rhythms of popular dances like the gilliard, jig and romanescas, and his response to Byrd’s hexachord fantasy is visceral rather than cerebral ... Though the choice is anachronistic – the instrument beefing up what would have been a more intimate soundworld – Esfahani’s performances are so persuasive that it is hard to raise any strong objection.”

– **Kate Bolton-Porciatti, *BBC Music Magazine*\*\*\*\*\***

“The instrument’s expanded colour range allows the performer to contain the music’s magnificent sprawl of evolving variations into more contained chapters ... Esfahani’s playing is colourful and magnetic, the fingerwork in the more virtuosos works



absolutely clean and articulate. The mean-tone tuning gives the accidentals and chromatic outliers in the more harmonically meandering of the pieces a wonderfully piquant twang.”  
– **Phillip Kennicott, *Gramophone***

“While this music belongs to the domain of Renaissance specialists, and may seem primarily of academic interest, **Esfahani** finds powerful emotions and compelling musicality in these works, and plays them with comprehensive knowledge and passion. From the dramatic opening of **Tomkins’** flashy Barafostus Dreame to the closing Variations on the Romanesca, **Esfahani** displays robust energy and powerful virtuosity, and the whole album exudes his enthusiasm through his lively rhythms and sparkling embellishments, which make this body of work just as appealing as anything by the later keyboard masters of the Baroque era. Highly recommended.”  
– **Blair Sanderson, *AllMusic***

“Mr Esfahani is an all-too-rare presence in the harpsichord world. First, he is erudite and indefatigable in his study of the context surrounding the music he plays. (His far-reaching liner notes excite me as much as his performance.) Second, he has amazing technique, amply illustrated by many tracks on this recording, including the notoriously fiendish Barafostus Dream of Tomkins. And finally, he never allows the often doctrinaire world of historically-informed performance to interfere with his musical instincts and his search for a truly expressive solution to every phrase he plays. This program is an ideal introduction to the world of the English virginalists but also the kind of compilation that would thoroughly please the most seasoned aficionado. ... Each performance is as close to perfection as I can imagine, so I will concentrate on just a few. The Byrd hexachord fantasia takes what is usually a very dutiful contrapuntal exercise and turns it into a small, perfect world containing a shifting procession of the most varied emotions. The pavans, while played with virtuosic panache, also respond well to the intimate, somewhat wistful expression that these works always require. And even in a kind of throwaway work like the Scottish Gigg, he balances the simple pleasures of such music with an intelligent and utterly persuasive sense of its overall shape. Here, as elsewhere, he accomplishes these miracles with the traditional gifts of any great musician, historical, mainstream, or legendary—a variety of touch, a surprising but always musical sense of phrasing and timing, and boundless technical mastery.”  
– **Haskins, *American Record Guide***

“This recording provides further confirmation of Mahan Esfahani’s status among the finest keyboard players of his generation. For listeners who relish challenging material and interpretations on the harpsichord, he is perhaps the most exciting exponent in the present day. Here he presents a varied and well-chosen selection from a repertory which, as he makes passionately clear in the accompanying booklet, is close, if not closest of all, to his heart and mind: music by Bull, Byrd, Giles and Richard Farnaby, Gibbons, Ingloft and Tomkins. There could hardly be a better programme; different, certainly, but not better.

Esfahani’s commitment to this repertory is absolute. He plays it because of how it affects himself, but also with missionary zeal because he wants it to affect other people as profoundly. Thankfully this does not result in an evangelical harangue. There are passages of gentleness and even humour alongside those exhibiting a dazzling technique and some powerful projection.

Finally, as for Esfahani’s overall performance, he responds stylishly and elegantly to this music that evidently means so much to him, responding with panache to glittering cascades of notes when given the opportunity by the composers where they let their creativity exuberantly rip. ... I found that Esfahani’s interpretations on his chosen instruments gave me fresh insights into pieces by composers with whom I am very familiar. I hope other readers will investigate this thoughtful, stimulating and quite outstanding record.”  
– **Richard Turbet, *Early Music Review***

“Esfahani offers an interesting programme of diverse works by a variety of composers. The fifteen tracks on the Fleisher harpsichord copy explore music with great potential in terms of dramatic quality, colour and expressive range. ... [In Passing mesures,] Esfahani treats the ornamentation not merely as decoration, but miraculously weaves it into the music’s line. The effect is spellbinding.

I always find the Concert Hall, Wyastone Estate, Monmouthshire a warm, sympathetic and pleasing acoustic. It truly lives up to its reputation here. It confers just the right amount of resonance. This is an attractive disc, offering satisfying variety. It wins my whole-hearted recommendation.”  
– **Stephen Greenbank, *MusicWeb International***

## **Steve Reich, Michael Nyman and J.S. Bach: Japan Century Symphony Orchestra (December 2018)**

“Initiated in 2006, Sumida Triphony Hall’s “Goldberg Variations” series is a long-term project where performers are invited to create programmes and combine Bach’s masterpiece with works of their choice. This evening, it was the turn of the Iranian-American harpsichordist Mahan Esfahani. Only in his mid-30s, this is his third visit to Japan (10 December).

The concert was exceptional in every way. First to note: the extraordinary programme – Bach's epic work was preceded with minimalist, repetitive music of the late 20<sup>th</sup> century! Steve Reich's *Piano Phase* and Michael Nyman's Harpsichord Concerto both required exceptional concentration.

In *Piano Phase*, Esfahani performed against a track he had pre-recorded himself. The aim of the piece, originally written for piano, is to enjoy the same phrases subtly shifting in and out of sync, but this performance took a new life on the harpsichord. The sharp and piquant sounds of the instrument created a highly charged atmosphere which was full of tension.

Under conductor Kentaro Kawase, and accompanied by the Japan Century Symphony Orchestra, Nyman's Harpsichord Concert saw the solo part weaving in and out of the string fabric, moving rapidly forward almost endlessly. Esfahani's energetic and uncompromising touch was striking and effective; he emphasized the bold harmonies and rock rhythms, and his tempo shifts can be likened to a smooth changing of gears. It was the highlight of the evening.

Finally, in the feature item of the programme, Bach's *Goldberg Variations*, Esfahani stunned us in the opening aria by stripping away all the ornaments from the melody and making it sound somewhat folk-like. A gentle lyricism was heard in Variation 13, and the plucking in the sweetly sounding high register suitably added colour in Variation 19. His playful manner could be heard in all thirty variations via his clear and slightly hard tone which felt contemporary. Towards the end, the faster variations were taken at even quicker tempi. With a reasonably long concert lasting two and a half hours, it was thrilling to be taken on this roller-coaster ride. Esfahani is indeed an exceptional talent."

– **Miyuki Shiraishi, *Asahi Shimbun***

### **The Modern Man: Rameau, Lynch, Bryars, Powell, Bach (November 2018)**

"In the past decade, Esfahani has taken the musical world by storm with his creative programming, performing the music by the usual suspects such as Bach, Couperin and Rameau, as well as modern composers such as Ligeti and Reich. ... Esfahani's mastery of the harpsichord, including the essential ability to portray dynamics and emotion on an instrument that inherently has no dynamic range because of its fixed plucking mechanism, is complete. ... Even without using all of the gadgetry, he creates a plethora of expressions, through give and take in tempo, and cleverly judged ornamentation. ... Esfahani's towering musicianship came to the fore in this performance, which would have convinced any sceptic that notwithstanding its limitation in volume and dynamics, the harpsichord can produce an exciting range of sounds that shows off Bach's genius completely."

– **Mervin Beng, *The Straits Times***

### **Byrd, Berio, Bryars, Alexander, Reich, Bach, Abbasi, Musis Sacrum, Arnhem (November 2018)**

"In the four-hundred-year-old *Lachrimae Pavan* by William Byrd, Esfahani gripped the audience with free and richly decorated playing. He straightened his back in *The Carman's Whistle* and very subtly we saw how the rhythms of the piece were translated to his body – his hands dancing across the two manuals of the Titus Crijnen harpsichord... With electronically manipulated harpsichord sounds played on tape, an extremely exciting dialogue arose between that and the harpsichord on the stage. A bass line which sounded like animals growling emitted from the speakers, cleaved by the tinkling harpsichord tones in Abbasi's magical discourse that breathed freedom."

– **Biëlla Luttmer, *de Volkskrant***

### **Bach, Bryars, Lynch, Alexander, St. George's Bristol (October 2018)**

"If you can get on board with Esfahani's compelling ancient-meets-modern, interpreter-meets-composer vision, there were far more treats than tricks on offer. The trio of contemporary works — Graham Lynch's *Admiring Yoro Waterfall*, Gavin Bryars's *After Handel's Vesper* and Haim Alexander's *Improvisation on a Persian Folksong* — were played with finesse. Yet the focus was Bach: four Duets, the C minor Partita and the Overture in the French Style, all played with an attentive ear for counterpoint and colour."

– **Rebecca Franks, *The Times***

## **Poulenc *Concert champêtre*, Royal Northern Sinfonia, Birthday Gala at The Sage, Gateshead (September 2018)**

"After the break out came the Sinfonia's famous bravura. The harpsichordist Mahan Esfahani was unleashed too. Together they made a delicious feast of Poulenc's thoughtfully droll *Concert champêtre*, animated with the crispest of colours and attack."

– **Geoff Brown, *The Times***

"Poulenc's *Concert champêtre* for harpsichord and orchestra was fronted by Mahan Esfahani, who enjoyed a natural repartee with the RNS in a scintillating performance. Rapturous applause was rewarded with a delightful gem by Purcell."

– **Gavin Engelbrecht, *The Northern Echo***

"[Mahan Esfahani] entertained us with his on-stage patter almost as much as he did with his astonishing Bach playing."

– **Oliver Condy, *BBC Music Magazine***

## **Bach *Goldberg Variations BWV 988*, Musikfest Erzgebirge, Mauersberger-Aula (September 2018)**

"The much in demand harpsichord player Mahan Esfahani played Bach's *Goldberg Variations* with as much defiance as there was wonderful beauty, and with as much discipline as there was freedom of thought."

– **Manuel Brug, *Die Welt***

## **Bach *Brandenburg Concerto No. 5*, BBC Proms, Swedish Chamber Orchestra, Royal Albert Hall (August 2018)**

"A performance by Esfahani would be something to treasure."

– **Anna Picard, *The Times***

"The Bach performances were at their best when the soloists were let free and put to the fore. Several have been mentioned already, but one who made a real mark on this event was Mahan Esfahani. His way of clarifying and making musical sense of the antics of the cadenza from Brandenburg Concerto No. 5 was a genuine highlight of this very long day."

– **Sebastian Scotney, *theartsdesk.com***

"The Fifth Brandenburg Concerto was for me the unquestioned highlight of the first concert and indeed of the Bach performances as a whole. Here, it seemed, the soloists, especially Esfahani, took the lead...and turned what they were doing into a performance in the living, emphatic sense. The first movement was lively and breathed, its contours and formal dynamism not only apparent but felt, experienced. Esfahani's way with the cadenza not only impressed, but reminded us what astounding music this is. It would be foolish to imitate Furtwängler, even on the piano, but his incredible recorded 1950 performance from Salzburg remains the model here. Esfahani proved a worthy successor. The second movement was true Kammermusik: flexible, beautifully balanced, with all the give and take one might have hoped for between harpsichord, flute, and especially violin. Bach's closing Allegro danced with far greater ease than any of those aforementioned self-conscious 'Baroque Dance Lessons' and, naturally, went far deeper. These were not soloists who, again to borrow from Adorno, said Bach yet meant Telemann. Its contrapuntal complexity was embraced; that complexity embraced both performers and audience in return."

– **Mark Berry, *Seen and Heard International***

## **Bach *6 Little Preludes, Sonata in C, Toccatas in G & C minor and English Suite No. 5*, Wigmore Hall (May 2018)**

"Esfahani, while delivering exceptionally detailed and nuanced playing, captured [the Preludes] smooth and rounded nature. In contrast, the *Sonata in C major, BWV966* that followed revealed just how versatile a player he is, and how disparate the demands the piece places on an interpreter who is well versed enough to appreciate them. At times he drove the sound to an extent that scarcely seemed possible on a harpsichord, while at others he languished in phrases to a notable degree. There were also moments when the pace seemed just a fraction slower than might have initially seemed appropriate for the section, but this was also planned to perfection because it introduced a real sense of tension."

– **Sam Smith, *musicOMH.com***

**Górecki *Harpsichord Concerto*, Münchener Kammerorchester, Pinakothek der Moderne, Munich (January 2018)**

"Soloist Mahan Esfahani played the immutably fast-paced yet strangely static solo voice with stunning fluency."

– Rita Argauer, *Süddeutsche Zeitung*

**Byrd, Bach, Cowell, Reich, Saariaho, Menil Collection, Da Camera, Houston (December 2017)**

"Banishing the harpsichord's stereotype as the piano's jingly, stiff ancestor, Esfahani brought vigor, color, expression and atmosphere to his performances."

– Steven Brown, *Texas Classical Review*

**Bach *Goldberg Variations BWV 988*, Dialoge Festival, Mozarteum, Salzburg (December 2017)**

"The recital was concluded by a very supple interpretation of Bach's *Goldberg Variations* BWV 988, articulated with a breath so personal that it felt like they were being rediscovered."

– Anaclase.com

**Haydn *Concerto in D Major*, Musica Saeculorum, Kölner Philharmonie (September 2017)**

"Esfahani played elegantly, supply and with sensitivity for the music."

– Markus Schwering, *Kölner Philharmonie*

**D'Anglebert, W.F. Bach, J.S. Bach, Edinburgh International Festival, St Cecilia's Hall (August 2017)**

"He seems to be on a mission to demonstrate the expressiveness of his instrument – and judging by his remarkably fluid, fresh, almost improvisatory playing and rhythmic suppleness, he's pretty much succeeded. It was as joyful as it was revelatory – and, it goes without saying, deeply expressive."

– David Kettle, *The Scotsman*

**Bach *Goldberg Variations BWV 988*, Music at Paxton, Paxton House (July 2017)**

"Esfahani's Goldbergs were a deeply human experience, brimming with humour and wit, cool objectivity, deep tragedy and startling joy. He managed a near miraculous balance in injecting each piece with its own vivid character, yet shaping their succession into a meaningful journey."

– David Kettle, *The Scotsman*

**Poulenc *Harpsichord Concerto*, Hamburger Symphoniker, Laeiszhalle Hamburg (May 2017)**

"Esfahani, who has also already performed Steve Reich's minimalist music on the harpsichord, knows all the finesses and it is not for nothing that his efforts to revive the harpsichord (also in the contemporary dimensions) are supported by his record label... The finale [of the Poulenc] with its rapid runs and passages was performed with extreme virtuosity by Mahan Esfahani, who delivered a piece of "early music" by Henry Purcell as an encore."

– Helmut Peter, *Welt.de*

**Bach, Rameau, Cowell, Saariaho, Utzon Room, Sydney Opera House (April 2017)**

"Esfahani's playing is engagingly imaginative and captures the freshness of instrumental texture. His artistry, musicianship and ability to communicate make him an ideal champion for the harpsichord's heritage and potential... American composer Henry Cowell's neoclassical suite, *Set of Four*, rediscovered Baroque form and texture with a strikingly original voice, and Esfahani brought out its harmonic density and expressiveness with deeply empathetic understanding... Bach's *Concerto in the Italian Style*, BWV 971 explored rich diversity of sounds in the slow movement and the finale romped with buoyant exhilarating momentum."

– Peter McCallum, *The Sydney Morning Herald*

"This is one of those heavenly melodic solos that abound in Bach's works, more often for voice, violin or oboe, and in this instance over a repetitive six-note bass figure. Esfahani gave the two repeated final notes such a variety of timings – here slightly rushed, there lingering and delayed – that the feel behind the lovely melody in the right hand was one of wistful hesitancy. It set up the Presto finale beautifully, this being taken at breathless speed with a suspicion of Baroque barrelhouse in the left hand."

– **Steve Moffatt, *Limelight Magazine***

### **Tomkins, Cowell, Kalabis, Reich, 92<sup>nd</sup> Street Y, New York (March 2017)**

"Yet even the most disparaging listener could only have admired Mr. Esfahani's discipline and close concentration as he moved out of phase with the taped performance in minuscule increments and then, ever so slowly, drifted back in. The ovation was intense and seemingly universal."

– **James R. Oestreich, *The New York Times***

### **Coll, De Falla, Stravinsky & Scarlatti, Britten Sinfonia, Milton Court, London (February 2017)**

"Esfahani was the easily agile soloist in [the Stravinsky] concerto, too, and he also contributed a group of four sonatas by Domenico Scarlatti (Italian by birth, Spanish by adoption), which he dispatched with almost nonchalant brilliance."

– **Andrew Clements, *The Guardian***

"The Iranian-American harpsichordist Mahan Esfahani is one of a kind, and his event with the Britten Sinfonia under Thomas Gould's was fruitfully provocative."

– **Michael Church, *The Independent***

### **Bach Goldberg Variations BWV 988, Wigmore Hall, London (December 2016)**

"It was Esfahani's curiosity and delight as an interpreter, and a listener, that shone. Speeds were impulsive: sometimes Esfahani swooshed past a treacherous canon as if trying to break a downhill skiing record. At other times — as if on the peak of the mountain — there were delicious moments of repose where we could stop and see the treetops... Bach's music is very often mesmerising. It's very rarely this fun."

– **Neil Fisher, *The Times***

### **Bach Goldberg Variations BWV 988, Deutsche Grammophon (0289 479 5929 8)**

"This is a disc I've wanted to hear ever since I first heard Esfahani play the *Goldbergs* back in 2010. The intensity and virtuosity are every bit as evident here as then, and the instrument sounds beautiful."

– **Martin Cullingford, *Gramophone* (Editor's Choice)**

"He takes you on an arresting journey through Bach's *Goldberg Variations*, where his sophisticated virtuosity, stylistic aplomb and strong personal profile give fresh and meaningful voice to this well-travelled score... In his booklet-notes, Esfahani plays down his own abilities in the face of past luminaries...don't believe Esfahani's modesty for one second. His *Goldberg Variations* clearly belongs in such company, and in all serious Bach collections."

– **Jed Distler, *Gramophone***

"Everyone wants to record Bach's Goldbergs, but not many show as much piercing insight as harpsichordist Mahan Esfahani. The surprises begin at once with a slightly simplified Aria and then some unusual tempi – the canons at the unison, third and octave are slow – and an unevenly tempered tuning for the harpsichord. Esfahani shows amazing rhythmic freedom at times, sometimes teasing us with a long pause before a repeat starts. The final sequence of variations 26 to 29 accumulates brilliant excitement, after which the folk songs of variation 30 are a touching relaxation, and the Aria finally emerges intact. A hugely stimulating account of one of the peaks of western music."

– **Nicholas Kenyon, *The Observer***

"Given such constraints from the composer, one might assume little is left but to play the notes. Mahan Esfahani...proves otherwise. His contributions are the extraordinary range and delicacy of touch and his scrupulous attention to matching phrasing... His touch draws a remarkable variety of tone, density and resonance from his instrument."

– **George Pratt, *BBC Music Magazine* (Editor's Choice)**

"Straight to the top of the chart, Mahan Esfahani's recording of this perennial favourite is unmissable." – **BBC Music Magazine**

"Esfahani excels in the Mount Everest of harpsichord music... There is something uniquely magical in the way Esfahani eases one into this most thrilling and sacred of musical journeys by first presenting the near-naked. That is, leaving most of the customary ornaments to the repeats – and with that gentle extra forward momentum gained by stylishly arpeggiating bass and treble, before opening up delicate vistas of unalloyed joy on the first variation and thus setting the tone of things to come."

– **Limelight Magazine**

"The best Bach recordings tend to be the ones in which it is completely irrelevant whether or not the performance conforms to historical practice. That is the case with this recording of the Goldberg Variations, played on harpsichord by Mahan Esfahani. Who cares if it's historically informed or not when it's as convincing as this? The Goldberg Variations are the Holy Grail for all keyboard players: an incredibly beautiful aria, thirty variations, rounded off by the same aria. Overwhelmed by Bach, some musicians turn this into a heavy and serious task. Esfahani, however, turns it into one big party. Each variation is a world in itself, as if Esfahani is telling us a short story each time... He makes the harpsichord sing and achieves endless variation in the sound. Is this the ultimate recording? Not when it's down to Esfahani. He aims to make more, and expects to discover new stories in each work throughout his life."

– **Sandra Kooke, Trouw**

"Esfahani's recording of the Goldberg Variations must be one of the best of that widely recorded work. He elicits a beautiful silvery tone from the harpsichord. His virtuosity is astonishing in the more rapid passages. His tempi are sensible – not too slow in slow sections nor exaggeratedly fast in the quicker sections... His rhythmic control is excellent. In all respects, his playing fully reveals the greatness of this masterpiece of Bach."

– **Richard Gate, Fine Music Magazine**

"Every 10 years or so a recording of J.S. Bach's *Goldberg Variations* arrives that significantly changes the way you hear the piece. So it is with Mahan Esfahani, the 32-year-old Iranian harpsichordist whose interpretation was just released on the Deutsche Grammophon label. It's a high-personality performance – anything but Glenn Gould's later, detached, structure-minded recording but with high-spirited expressive discoveries in nearly every phrase. It's bound to be controversial. Rarely have a harpsichordist's two hands had such minds of their own, periodically threatening to go their separate ways, creating much inner tension. Add to that Esfahani's brilliant finger work and flexible tempos, and you have a performance that won't let go of your ears, even as you're disagreeing with it."

– **David Patrick Stearns, Philly.com**

### **Dutilleux *Les citations*, Seattle Symphony Orchestra/Ludovic Morlot, CD SSM1012 (September 2016)**

"This timbrally supple performance, graphically recorded, springs into life as Mahan Esfahani's louche harpsichord enters furtively and cuts across the prevailing ensemble flow with gestures that outline stolid Baroque grandeur and notes that collapse architecture from the inside."

– **Philip Clark, Gramophone**

### **Bull, *Kalabis*, d'Anglebert, Saariaho, Kidane, Scarlatti, Wigmore Hall, London (July 2016)**

"John Bull's *Chromatic (Queen Elizabeth's) Pavan and Galliard* contrasted interiority and brilliance, while the Bull Fantasia at the end of the set lived up to its name, Esfahani vividly conveying its improvisatory qualities. In between we were thrust into the world of communist Czechoslovakia, courtesy of Viktor Kalabis's three *Aquarelles*... He delighted in their range — from the sparest of textures to sheer motoric brilliance — and a sly humour too."

At the keyboard, he led us from the glories of d'Anglebert, which included a sumptuous reading of the *Passacaille d'Armide*, to the unflinching *Tarocco* of Danish modernist Axel Borup-Jørgensen... Kaija Saariaho's *Jardin Secret II* for harpsichord and tape, on the other hand, was a deliciously sinister sonic adventure.

The *Six Etudes* of 30-year-old Daniel Kidane brought us right up to the present, offering textures of great finesse and shards of Ligetian playfulness (even adding an intentionally jarring hotel reception bell to the sixth). We ended with Scarlatti and here too Esfahani offered something new, unveiling a couple of recently discovered sonatas. He eschewed the obvious crowd-pleasers, instead choosing sonatas such as the G major, Kk260, with its zany harmonies. As an encore came Richard Rodney Bennett's *Little Elegy*, borrowed from the piano and given with great tenderness."

– **Harriet Smith, Financial Times**

### **Scarlatti, Kuhnau, Froberger, Schloßkonzerte Bad Krozingen (May 2016)**

"When Esfahani plays he never holds back, always going all out. In Alessandro Scarlatti's variations on the "La Follia" he risked everything, taking the tempo to its limits so that the simultaneousness of his hands threatened to waver. But it was this expressivity that made his playing so exciting and attractive. In Johann Kuhnau's "Biblische Historie" based on "Saul who was cured by David's music" he created fantastic characterisations. Saul's rage gushed out in a passionate fugue, the healing sound of David's harp unfolded its effect in intensely rubato consecutive thirds: this was really illustrative music.

There was a Dionysian spell over this programme, which Esfahani concluded with six sonatas by Domenico Scarlatti, which delight in experimenting in the sound world (e.g. in the long suspended notes) and in the modulations. Esfahani celebrated all of this in often bold tempi. There was huge applause at the end – apparently there was nobody from Cologne in the audience."

– **Alexander Dick, *Badische Zeitung***

### **Recital with Thomas Hobbs (tenor), London Festival of Baroque Music, St John's, Smith Square, London (May 2016)**

"Esfahani, if you don't know him already, approaches concerts with an impromptu flourish and some in-built randomness: not in his virtuosic playing but in the rest of the proceedings. It keeps you alert, which is not always true of an evening of harpsichord music. From a rich offering of the largely unfamiliar, the Sonata II, "Of Saul, Whom David Cured by Means of Music" (1700) by Johann Kuhnau stood out: flamboyant, expressive and ingenious."

**Fiona Maddocks, *The Observer***

### **Frescabaldi, Bach, Rameau, etc., Brisbane Baroque, QPAC Concert Hall, Brisbane (April 2016)**

"Where to begin with Mahan Esfahani. Breathtaking? Hypnotic? Try gobsmacking. The young Iranian-American harpsichord virtuoso is all of these, and more. An intense, expressive presence at the keyboard, he's also an exceptional communicator, whether via the music itself, in interview, or through the informative, wide-ranging 'programme notes' that he delivers live to enhance the understanding of sections of his recital... Good for Brisbane Baroque, then, which had the smarts to present the Australian debut of this fascinating and multifaceted artist. And he didn't disappoint either, in an absorbing, penetrating and passionate couple of hours that left the audience as breathless as the performer... This was a generous recital, topped off by some superb Rameau (the Gavotte from his A Minor Suite). Judging from conversations on the way out, I was not alone in feeling I'd witnessed something very special."

– **Clive Paget, *Limelight***

### **Farnaby, Bach, Bartók et al, Wimbledon International Music Festival, London (November 2015)**

"No one has done more to popularise [the harpsichord] as a concert instrument in the present day than Iranian-American virtuoso Mahan Esfahani. He began his recital at the Wimbledon International Music Festival with three pieces from the Fitzwilliam Virginal Book, in which the infectious rhythms of the delightfully named Nobodies Gigge by Richard Farnaby were adroitly dispatched. Each movement of JS Bach's magnificent E minor Partita, the finest of the set, was characterised appropriately – the flamboyant Toccata, the fluent Allemande, the poignant Sarabande – while the unsettled, even frenzied quality of his son Carl Philipp Emanuel's Sonata in G was stylishly projected. There were also sparky miniatures by Bartók and Martinu, and death-defying cross-hand leaps in a Scarlatti encore, all flawlessly executed."

– **Barry Millington, *Evening Standard***

### **Bach, Powell and Reich, St George's, Bristol (October 2015)**

"Harpsichordist Mahan Esfahani's virtuosic flair is at once nonchalant and scintillating. In his later recital, he delivered JS Bach's Chromatic Fantasia and Fugue, and the Toccata in C minor with impeccable clarity of line and expressivity. He went on to make a subtle link with the cello suites in his own arrangement of the two gavottes from the Cello Suite No 5. And dance they did.

Works by Bach's sons, Wilhelm Friedemann – the under-approved, as Esfahani put it – and Carl Philipp Emanuel – the over-approved – neatly illustrated the sons' inevitable transition into a new era. Making the shift from Bach to 20th-century minimalism was an altogether greater departure, as the harpsichord's distinctive pungency was brought to bear on Steve Reich's Piano Phase. Yet, in duet with his own tape recording, Esfahani made the point that, in their patterns and their circularity, Bach and Reich were part of the same continuum. Mel Powell's vibrant play on past and present, Recitative and Toccata Percossa,



offered a final brilliant flourish."

– Rian Evans, *The Guardian*

### **Górecki *Harpsichord Concerto*, BBC Symphony Orchestra/Wit, Barbican Centre, London (October 2015)**

"The programme's most consistently impressive item was the relatively brief Harpsichord Concerto, whose neo-classical motor rhythms were brilliantly articulated by soloist."  
– George Hall, *The Guardian*

"Mahan Esfahani, the soloist, played this with a fine ear for pulse and colour."  
– Anna Picard, *The Times*

"The short and spiky Harpsichord Concerto, rippling along in the hands of Mahan Esfahani."  
– John Allison, *The Telegraph*

"An excellent performance, though, from the ever-versatile Mahan Esfahani, his technique clearly unchallenged by the music, which he presented with a lot of class."  
– Gavin Dixon, *theartsdesk.com*

"Esfahani rendered this engaging piece with suitably deadpan elegance."  
– Richard Whitehouse, *classicalsource.com*

"In almost complete contrast, Gorecki's miniature *Harpsichord Concerto* of 1980 was played with dizzying aplomb by Mahan Esfahani, accompanied by a chamber-sized string ensemble. Often seen as a light, skittish, work, the concerto has a darker aspect to its nine-minute duration. Esfahani, who recorded the work last year, has detected Gorecki's feelings of frustration under Communism in the first movement's tug between the harpsichord's chordal shifts and the dead hand of the strings' repeated rhythm. Even the last movement's manic gaiety seems to suggest a Schnittke-like sarcasm."

– John-Pierre Joyce, *musicomh.com*

### **J.S. Bach *Well-Tempered Clavier (Book 1)*, Kilkenny Arts Festival, St John's Priory (August 2015)**

"Esfahani, who was born in Tehran in 1984, makes music like someone who has an old head on young shoulders. He played the first book of the *Well-Tempered Clavier* over two recitals as if there were nothing to be shown except the music itself, at once abstract and concrete, sober and flamboyant."  
– Michael Dervan, *The Irish Times*

### **J.S. Bach *Three Sonatas for viola da gamba & harpsichord*, BRQ Festival, Church of Saint Lawrence, Vantaa (August 2015)**

"Luolajan-Mikkola and Esfahani's interpretations were perfect in all respects. Luolajan-Mikkola played with a smooth singing voice that caressed the ear, whilst Esfahani's enthusiastic responses were equally enjoyable. Although originally composed for organ, their instruments made Bach's Trio Sonata in d minor sound superb. The applause echoed throughout the packed church."  
– Hufvudstadsbladet

### ***Time Present and Time Past*, Deutsche Grammophon (0289 479 4481 2 CD DDD AH)**

"If you buy only one record of harpsichord music in your life — and that's a decision I would have some sympathy with — buy this sensational album. The 30-year-old Iranian-American Mahan Esfahani has been making waves among connoisseurs for several years. Now he emerges as a superstar whose musicianship, imagination, virtuosity, cultural breadth and charisma far transcends the ivory tower in which the harpsichord has traditionally been placed.

Taking his inspiration from TS Eliot's *Four Quartets* ("Time present and time past/Are both perhaps present in time future/And time future contained in time past,"), Esfahani spans the centuries to disclose timeless connections. The main one is the idea of repetition. From the 17th and 18th centuries he skims, sizzles, stamps and serenades his way through three works incorporating variations on the ancient "La Follia" melody — by Alessandro Scarlatti, CPE Bach and Francesco Geminiani.

Between these baroque staples are two excursions into modern-day minimalism: a style also built on repetition. The first is Henryk Górecki's 1980 harpsichord concerto, which Esfahani interprets as a portrait of life under totalitarianism, at first terrifying in its crushing, machine-like momentum and clangorous textures, then absurdly frenetic. The other is his own arrangement for multitracked harpsichords of Steve Reich's *Piano Phase*: 16 minutes of nonstop semiquavers that phase in and out with themselves literally thousands of times. Its perpetual jangle may weary some ears. It mesmerised mine.

Where necessary, Esfahani is brilliantly accompanied by Concerto Köln. Even their final performance — of JS Bach's Vivaldi-inspired harpsichord concerto in D Minor, with its plangently lyrical slow movement — has a delicious twist. In the last movement Esfahani inserts a flamboyant cadenza by Brahms, of all people. A truly magical mash-up of times past, present and future."

– **Richard Morrison, *The Times***

"A model recording for any instrument, not just the harpsichord. Concertos? Three, one by Gorecki, one by Geminiani, another by J.S. Bach, all weightily played by the Concerto Köln. Florid, stylish solo works? Two, both — like the Geminiani — based on the ancient "La Folia" theme, by Alessandro Scarlatti and C.P.E. Bach. Mesmerizing novelties? Of course: Steve Reich's "Piano Phase," rearranged and overdubbed for single harpsichord. Exhaustingly brilliant."

– **David Allen, *The New York Times***

"Lest we should think that the harpsichord exists merely to execute music of olden times, the brilliant young Iranian harpsichordist Mahan Esfahani here intersperses his Scarlatti and Bach with Henryk Górecki's Harpsichord Concerto of 1980 and a harpsichord version of Steve Reich's Piano Phase of 1967, originally conceived for two pianos...Esfahani at his vibrant and expressive best."

– **Geoffrey Norris, *The Telegraph***

"Mahan Esfahani's new CD – the first harpsichord recital on the DG label in three decades – is, in a way, a concept album. Equating minimalism and baroque music is not new, but Esfahani, always a sparky and searching player, juxtaposes them here so as to create an unusually direct link. Three of the works from Time Past – by Alessandro Scarlatti, CPE Bach and Geminiani – are obsessive variations on the tiny sequence La Follia, and he and the robust yet elegant players of Concerto Köln end with Bach's Concerto in D minor. In between comes Time Present, or at least Time Recent. Gorecki's 1980 Harpsichord Concerto is initially heavy-going, with an oppressive first movement relaxing into something approaching joy in the second. More beguiling is Esfahani's two-track recording of Steve Reich's Piano Phase, in which the harpsichord creates new textures and effects, including moments when the music seems to leap out in 3D."

– **Erica Jeal, *The Guardian***

"CPE Bach's quirkily inventive *La folia* Variations, where Esfahani's subtle overlapping *legato* fingerwork and intuitive grasp of the composer's mood-swings are deeply impressive."

– **Jed Distler, *Gramophone***

"The bewildering phase shifts in Steve Reich's Piano Phase are simply spectacular. Esfahani performs them by playing together with a tape recording of himself. A common thread in the baroque works is La Follia, an often used ostinato theme, spinning circles in endless variations through the same chord scheme. However, the CD is first and foremost a special one because of Esfahani's superior musicianship. His sparkling playing overcomes the image that is still sometimes attached to the harpsichord: that of a monotonous one-dimensional instrument."

– **Frits van der Waa, *de Volkskrant***

"Esfahani begins with Scarlatti's Variations on "La Follia." The player is learned, stylish, and bold. Virtuoso, too (although anything can be made pristine and slick in a studio). From Esfahani's playing comes tremendous life or flash. The Górecki piece is a Concerto for Harpsichord and String Orchestra. It is in two movements, both of them fast: Allegro molto and Vivace. But the movements have completely different characters. The first is driving and virile; the second is lighter, peppier. Reich's piece is *Piano Phase* for two pianos. Come again? It has been arranged for harpsichord—just one of them—by Esfahani...This performance is a feat of concentration and dexterity, and Esfahani's arrangement is impressive.

*Time Present and Time Past* is an appealing disc, and it's interesting to know that, even in the twenty-first century, people are falling in love with the harpsichord and its possibilities, and expanding those possibilities."

– **Jay Nordlinger, *The New Criterion***

"It's brilliant, abrasive, sometimes demented, but signals the arrival of a highly original artist."

–**David Patrick Stearns, *Philly.com***

"Unifying them even more, though, is the bullish spirit of Esfahani's playing: this is intense, fiery, explosive musicianship, delivered with ferocious conviction, virtuoso flair and never a hint of academic meekness. Concerto Köln match his galvanising drive with sounds that are raw, lean and impassioned, whether in Bach's brooding D minor concerto or the anarchic, obsessive and

thoroughly startling Górecki. It's an audacious and visionary project...Esfahani more than proves the versatility and colourful nature of the harpsichord....At this rate he'll simply leave others standing – or, perhaps, combing through the embers."

– **Jessica Duchon, *Sinfini Music***

### **Poulenc *Concert champêtre*, Chicago Symphony Orchestra / Harry Bicket, Chicago Symphony Center (May 2015)**

"The dashing soloist, playing a lovely-sounding, two-manual harpsichord, was the Iranian-born, British harpsichordist Mahan Esfahani, substituting for Kristian Bezuidenhout, who had withdrawn for health reasons. He tossed off the animated sprays of notes with deft rhythmic attack and seemingly infallible fingers, setting the delicate timbres of his instrument in clear relief against the surrounding accompaniment. Esfahani follow[ed] the concerto with a solo encore: Rameau's "Gavotte and Variations," which gave his virtuosic mettle full rein."

– **John von Rhein, *Chicago Tribune***

### **Duo Recital with Avi Avital (mandolin), Ageas Salisbury International Arts Festival (May 2015)**

"Compared with the mandolin's exquisite personal quality, the jangly mechanism of the harpsichord with its unvarying dynamic could have seemed very clunky, like listening to a dry Enlightenment philosopher next to a rhapsodic poet. It's a tribute to Esfahani's artistry that it never seemed that way. He made his harpsichord as spontaneous and romantic as Avital's mandolin, by bending phrases in an expressive way, and using lightning-fast changes of registration to change the instrument's colour."

Most importantly, these two players have learned to breathe and move as one. In the encore, an exotic slow movement from a Vivaldi flute concerto arranged by Avital, there were numerous sensuous ornamental notes, shared between the two. The fact that often you couldn't tell who was playing what made the music even more delicious."

– **Ivan Hewett, *The Telegraph***

### **UK-DK, Michala Petri and Mahan Esfahani, OUR 6.220611 (SACD: 66:27) (February 2015)**

"A wonderful advert for this instrumental pairing and for virtuosity in general."

– **Rickards, *Gramophone***

"Throughout the programme, well recorded in a Copenhagen church, Petri plays with immaculate tuning and finger technique, crisp tonguing and well-shaped melodic lines; Esfahani matches her with well-judged colours and phrasing."

– **Anthony Burton, *BBC Music Magazine***

"The OUR Recordings engineering team has balanced them against each other perfectly, but the success really is Petri's and Esfahani's, because they clearly are in synch with each other...Esfahani is an unusually expressive, colorful player, and I look forward to hearing him in a solo role—I probably will check out those Hyperion releases, now that I have heard him here."

– **Raymond Tuttle, *Fanfare***

"I've gone on at some length without referring, except in passing, to the performances themselves. Perhaps that is because it goes without saying that anything this superstar pairing puts its hands to will be extraordinary."

– **Ronald E. Grames, *Fanfare***

### **Rameau *Pièces de Clavecin*, Hyperion Records CDA68071/2 (November 2014)**

"A key factor in determining the longevity of an interpretation is the degree to which the performer succeeds in characterising the music and, on this point alone, top marks must go to Mahan Esfahani, who seems always to have its measure and brings unflinching wit, affection, fluency and pacing to his interpretations...Having just won a *Gramophone* Award for his superlative CPE Bach recording, Esfahani has surely trumped it with Rameau's solo harpsichord works."

– **Julie Anne Sadie, *Gramophone* (Editor's Choice)**

"Mahan Esfahani's second Hyperion recording comprises Rameau's keyboard works. This is stylish playing but rarely showy, firm but never heavy in dance movements, imbued with a natural wit in the character pieces. I could easily have picked his delightful disc of C. P. E. Bach's Württemberg Sonatas as well."

– **David Allen, *The New York Times***

"I found his playing delightful, intelligent and insightful. He has pleasingly clean articulation throughout and can play with

muscularity or delicacy, (or both) as each piece demands. His is a really impressive account of Handel-inspired *Gavotte* and *six doubles* (variations) and the A minor Suite, where he never lets momentum sag and builds up to a thrilling climax. By contrast, his *Les Soupirs* from the D Major Suite is gossamer light and seems to suspend time in dreamy nostalgia. Ravishing! [...] Esfahani's set is, on balance, very successful and can be recommended to diehards and neophytes alike."

**– Andrew O'Connor, *International Record Review***

"Gramophone-Award-winning harpsichordist Mahan Esfahani has recorded Rameau's *Pièces de clavecin* in the historic setting of the Music Room at Hatchlands Park in Surrey. This is a masterclass for the instrument, confirming this young artist as a truly great player...This double album comprises the whole of Rameau's output of keyboard suites, and Esfahani rejoices in its wealth of genius, its excitement and drama. Rameau is a composer whose revival is ongoing, and his unique combination of the witty and the cerebral, the light and the curmudgeonly, abounds throughout his harpsichord music."

**– Philippe Ramin, *Diapason***

"Esfahani is the poet of the harpsichord. For people who don't like harpsichordists he is the one that will convince you to listen. He's such a beautiful player and he is totally natural. He understands the dramatics of each movement and he projects it and, for me, it is totally persuasive."

**– Richard Morrison, *BBC CD Review***

"The *Pièces de Clavecin* (1724) and *Nouvelle Suites de Pièces de Clavecin* (c1729-30) [are] brilliant displays of wit and invention...Mahan Esfahani brings such portrayals vividly to life, and also offers sparkling accounts of less exotic items, such as the 1729 A minor suite's sad, dignified Allemande and fragile Sarabande...The set opens with the single-suite *Premier Livre de Pièces de Clavecin* (1707), so all of Rameau's essential solo works are included; and, thanks to Esfahani's persuasive and charming advocacy, they sound utterly entrancing here."

**– Graham Lock, *Early Music Today***

"The Composer Years were Jean-Philippe Rameau's (250th anniversary of his death) and C.P.E. Bach's (300th birth anniversary), and breaking harpsichordist Mahan Esfahani proved nothing short of revelatory in the music of both. His recording of Rameau's complete *Pièces de clavecin* (Hyperion) makes it clear that he's the equal of Christophe Rousset in this repertoire, and very much his own man. And his Hyperion CD of the second-greatest Bach's *Wuerttemberg Sonatas* was widely considered the best of the C.P.E. celebrations."

**– Tim Pfaff, *The Bay Area Reporter***

## **Corelli Six Sonatas opus 5 no. 7-12, OUR Recordings 6.220610 (November 2014)**

"Petri and Esfahani's is an invigorating ensemble effort, each sparking off the other to foster a captivating directness whether sparkling or soulful. Nothing is safe or reverential, and yet there's no iconoclastic agenda either. Preludios are ideally urbane; an almost Bachian dialogue invades No. 8's Giga, while *La Folia* emerges beautifully paced, artfully embellished and vividly characterised."

**– Paul Riley, *BBC Music Magazine* (Chamber Choice, February 2015)**

"Petri and Esfahani still manage to sound absolutely bewitching throughout this uncannily beautiful recording from Copenhagen's Garnisonskirken. Such is the musical chemistry between them that one soon becomes fully attuned to hearing this familiar music performed on the recorder... Equally, if you're happy enough with just harpsichord accompaniment alone, then look no further than Petri's and Esfahani's immaculately played and diligently prepared new accounts, which seem in every way the last word in tasteful and elegant musicianship, with a magical recording to boot."

**– Michael Jameson, *International Record Review***

"It's rare to experience the level of artistic rapport heard on this recording from Danish recorder player Michala Petri and Iranian-born harpsichordist Mahan Esfahani. Corelli's op.5 provides the framework for a remarkable demonstration of not only rich, idiomatic possibilities for transcriptions from violin to recorder but, significantly, the extraordinary levels of dialogue (trs 1 and 15) and genuine inspiration of the moment it inspires."

In Petri's capable hands, the recorder becomes a medium through which she conveys a more vocal interpretation of thematic material than ever a violin could. From Corelli's logical, elegant bass-lines, Esfahani crafts the most imaginative and engaging accompaniments and repartee I have ever heard, each phrase, sections and movement a skillful and stylish response (trs 1 and 14), to which he brings an astonishing range of techniques (trs 8 and 9) and instrumental colour (trs 13,17 and 19). The musical chemistry between the two musicians is palpable and most evident in the quick exchanges in the faster movements (trs 5,9,11 and 20). While there are movements of both sublime simplicity and compelling declamation (tr12), equally there is joyfulness and banter. Together, Petri and Esfahani take the application of ornamentation to new levels of sophistication (trs 2,3 and 16),

exploring the implications of the music itself, commenting and reflecting on it by the way they choose the embellish repeats and points of imitation.

This is a recording that will repay repeated listening as a masterclass in musical collaboration. It breaks new and higher ground."  
– **Julie Anne Sadie, *Gramophone* (Editor's Choice)**

"[Petri] and Esfahani bring an extraordinarily lively rhythmic flair to this music, clearly reveling in its dance roots. The music is always going somewhere, it always has momentum and a sense of direction. Esfahani is a true partner in this effort, taking a lead role where the music calls for it (the opening of the Gavotte from op. 5/11, for instance), and applying the same degree of imagination to phrase-shaping and to ornamentation as Petri does."  
– **Henry Fogel, *Fanfare Magazine***

"A very well produced album. Here are two different types of artist playing in astonishing harmony. Six beautiful sonatas performed and with equal ease and many frills."  
– **Søren Schauser, *Berlingske Tidende***

"Esfahani is a wonderful harpsichordist who follows with as much taste and self-confidence as his partner."  
– **Carsten Dürer, *The Ensemble***

"These players make an absolutely terrific duo in transcriptions that seem to fall so naturally to these instruments. The very fine recording from Garnisonskirken, Copenhagen, Denmark gives a nice acoustic around the players whilst retaining detail and clarity."  
– **Bruce Reader, *The Classical Reviewer***

"Fresh, communicative, joyful music-making...I do hope that they will do more together."  
– **Andrew McGregor, BBC Radio 3 *Building a Library***

### **C.P.E. Bach, Benda, JG Graun Recital, Brecon Baroque (October 2014)**

"The tercentenary of the birth of Bach's second son, Carl Philipp Emanuel, was an added festival focus, and it's a mark of its present calibre that no less a figure than harpsichordist Mahan Esfahani should give a recital with violinist Bojan Čičić. They brought finesse, virtuosity and insight to sonatas for violin and viola d'amore by Franz Benda and JG Graun as well as CPE Bach.

Esfahani embodies the latter's trademark expressive and sensitive *Empfindsamer Stil*, but this concert will also be unforgettable for his bewitching performance of the Harpsichord Sonata in F Sharp Minor, abruptly halted when a lady in the front row collapsed in a faint. Esfahani helped others lift her from the floor and carry her out. After returning to reassure the audience, he duly completed the final allegro. The gesture was another facet of the great humanity he brings to his music-making."

– **Rian Evans, *The Guardian***

### **J.S. Bach *Well-Tempered Clavier* (Book 1), Snape Maltings (August 2014)**

"Mahan Esfahani's performance of the first book of Bach's *Well-Tempered Clavier* was even more riveting. For the gentle harpsichord to fill this venue is already an awesome task; the lighting was dropped almost to darkness, and Esfahani created a balance of tensions that shifted from calm to highly wrought, the singing lines emerging with consummate clarity. Serene, cerebral, playful, knotty, soulful, sometimes unashamedly virtuosic – Bach embraced everything. And by way of underlining the beautiful physics of it all – a prelude and fugue in each of the 12 keys rising semi-tone by semitone – Esfahani followed the final fugue in B minor with a return to the beginning, the now doubly ethereal Prelude No 1 in C major completing the circle. In a crazy world, something was made perfect. The message to take home, suggested Esfahani by way of quelling the applause, was that Bach is a way of life."

– **Rian Evans, *The Guardian***

### **Couperin, CPE Bach, Takemitsu, et al., Wigmore Hall (July 2014)**

"He's a brilliant player — two days after this recital I'm still tingling over his forensic attack and silk-smooth arpeggios — but he also knows about friendly presentation... Dashing eloquent, dizzyingly skilled, Esfahani makes the harpsichord seem an instrument reborn."  
– **Geoff Brown, *The Times***

"We were flung into dramatic scenarios, agitated disputes, ardent sermons, all brought to vivid life through the apparently dry,

tinkly sound of a harpsichord...his passionate engagement with the music was totally captivating." – **Ivan Hewett, *The Telegraph***

"This was a splendid recital."

– **Mark Berry, *Seen and Heard International***

### **Recital at Aldeburgh Music Festival, Aldeburgh Parish Church (June 2014)**

"There was more virtuosity again at Aldeburgh's parish church, where the harpsichordist Mahan Esfahani embraced music from early 17th-century Bull and Gibbons to Bartók and Ligeti. In the latter's *Continuum*, seeing the effort expended was like watching someone pushing himself to the limit on a weight-machine in a gym, with an added aesthetic agenda. Esfahani's disarming ability to talk his listeners through the before-and-after of the experience matched his extraordinary technique."

– **Rian Evans, *The Guardian***

"And, at Aldeburgh Parish Church in the afternoon, the Iranian harpsichordist Mahan Esfahani gave a revelatory recital in which, in each half, the quiet focus of pieces by John Bull and Orlando Gibbons intensified what was to come: extraordinary performances of extraordinary works by Martinů, Bartók (*Three Dances in Bulgarian rhythm*), and Ligeti — his *Passacaglia ungharese* and a mechanistic *Continuum* which made Esfahani grimace in pain and his audience in unmitigated pleasure."

– **Hilary Finch, *The Times***

### **Byrd, Bach & Ligeti, Wigmore Hall, Wigmore Hall LIVE – WHLive0066 (April 2014)**

"With an instinctive sense of rhythm and a gift for interpretation, Esfahani has firmly established himself as one of today's most thrilling harpsichordists."

– **Martin Cullingford, *Gramophone* (Editor's Choice)**

"Byrd's *Walsingham* variations are enlivened by Esfahani's animated pacing, incisive fingerwork and effortless distinction between legato and detached phrasings... Highly recommended."

– **Jed Distler, *Gramophone* (Editor's Choice)**

"Esfahani marches and dances, sings, swaggers and prays, with a sensitive balance of delicacy and vigour. He brings intelligence and grace to the *Ricercars* and a canon from Bach's *Musical Offering*, their contrapuntal lines spun with limpid clarity. But perhaps most striking are the dazzling realizations of three harpsichord pieces by György Ligeti. These eclectic soundscapes are splashed with the exotic colours of Hungarian folk music and the acidulous tunings of mean-tone temperament; they pulsate with the syncopations of jazz or the rhythmic complexities of late 14<sup>th</sup>-century *ars subtilior*, and they hypnotise with the ever-turning ground basses of Baroque laments or the repeating chord patterns of rock and pop. Esfahani communicates all this, and more, with giddy technique and a perceptive understanding of Ligeti's mongrel idiom. His two harpsichords glimmer radiantly in the Wigmore's fine acoustic."

– **Kate Bolton, *BBC Music Magazine* (Editor's Choice)**

"He is a simply superb player. His technique is beyond criticism and his inherent musicianship goes far deeper than mere surface understanding... It is difficult not to warm to such a musician, and when one hears his performances of these Byrd pieces – so musical, so essentially re-creative in the best sense, with each note and phrase fully part of the piece itself – one can only applaud the young man's artistry. His sensitivity is of the highest, and the brilliance of his playing – especially in the *Galliard to the Fife Pavian* and the *Marche Before the Battell* – is breathtaking. Both the *Fantasia* (No. 52 of the *Fitzwilliam Virginal Book*) and the concluding piece in this selection, *Walsingham*, demonstrate the finest harpsichord playing I have ever heard, so much so that on hearing them at first, I was compelled to repeat the experience several times.

Esfahani's part-playing in the three J.S. Bach pieces, especially the *Ricercar* a 6, is positively enviable, a combination of clarity and expressivity of the subtlest kind, which makes this CD an urgent acquisition for lovers of seventeenth- and eighteenth-century music.

This music is more than interesting, and no composer could ask for more committed or enthralling accounts than these... By any standards, this is a recording of great distinction."

– **Robert Matthew-Walker, *International Record Review***

### **Recital at the Library of Congress, Washington DC (April 2014)**

"Whenever the music offered fast-moving scales and figuration, as in J.S. Bach's "Chromatic Fantasy and Fugue," Esfahani ran with it, his agile fingers making remarkably clean and accurate contact with every key."

– **Charles T. Downey, *The Washington Post***

## **Recital at Zürich Tonhalle, Zürich, March 2014**

"Esfahani gave a really exciting interpretation of CPE Bach's Wurttemberg Sonata No.2, where he was really in his element. He attractively peeled out the fickle nature of the first movement, cultivated the sensitive style of the Adagio and realised the effervescent virtuosity of the third movement... His interpretation of J.S. Bach's Partita No.2 in c minor again illuminated the personality of the musician."

– **Thomas Schacher, *Neue Zürcher Zeitung***

## **CPE Bach, *Double Concerto for Harpsichord and Fortepiano*, Orchestra of the Age of Enlightenment, Queen Elizabeth Hall, London, February 2014**

"The graceful phrases passed back and forth between soloists Mahan Esfahani and Danny Driver were lovingly shaped, and the contrast between the harpsichord's silvery tinkle and the fortepiano's drawing-room intimacy was a delight."

– **Ivan Hewett, *The Telegraph***

## **CPE Bach, *Württemberg Sonatas*, Hyperion CDA67995, January 2014**

"The Sonatas are remarkably varied. No. 1 opens with a dramatic 'Sturm und Drang' (storm and drive) as Esfahani takes subtle liberties with the pulse to emphasise moments of silence. His exceptional sustained touch creates a warm legato in the second movement, while the third is alive with sparkling staccato."

He's at his most expressive in the slow movements – the *Adagio* of the Third Sonata, the charming trio of No. 4, worked out as precisely as the three-part Sinfonias of CPE Bach's father. The Fifth Sonata has barely established its home key before winding sinuously into noticeably remote areas. But the final Sonata, in B minor, is the most overtly expressive of all: the first movement becomes a rhythmically perplexing fantasia as powerful off-beat chords destroy the opening pulse; the second movement mixes languid sighs with questioning pauses; while the finale is a refreshingly simple two-part invention.

This, his first solo disc, provides a particularly welcome introduction onto the world stage for an artist matching, in 'expression', CPE Bach himself."

– **George Pratt, *BBC Music Magazine* ('Recording of the Month' – \*\*\*\*\*)**

"He combines giddy technique with a supple rhythmic pacing and a huge variety of colour [...] If anybody embodies the future of this instrument, it's Esfahani."

– **Helen Wallace, *BBC Music Magazine***

"The elusive fusion of thematic intricacy, 'Baroque' rhetoric and 'proto-Classical' *Sturm und Drang* offered by the instrument are caught perfectly by Esfahani's supple touch and disarming sense of rhetorical pacing."

– **David Vickers, *Gramophone* (Editor's Choice)**

"In this winning performance by the young American-Iranian harpsichordist, one is taken aback by the avant-garde effects and abrupt changes of tempo and mood. The sound of his instrument — a reproduction based on models by the Berlin court harpsichord-maker Michael Mietke (d 1719) — enjoys a wide-ranging spectrum of timbres in Esfahani's dexterous hands, but it is the verve of his allegros and the affecting pathos of his slow movements that mark him out as a special interpreter of this fascinating composer's music in his tercentenary year."

– **Hugh Canning, *The Sunday Times* ('Album of the Week')**

"Esfahani's performances wonderfully convey the sense of the younger Bach flexing his muscles in the new musical language that he was involved in creating. The instrument Esfahani plays them on, a modern copy of a harpsichord from the beginning of the 18th century, and the way it is tuned, seem to emphasise the transitional feel of the music, too; there's an almost fortepiano-like solidity to the sound, with crisp definition in both the high and low registers that matches its expressive ambitions perfectly."

– **Andrew Clements, *The Guardian***

"As for his playing, in the best sense it is anything but unpredictable: sure-minded and vividly realized, it holds the attention with ease and is a pleasure to hear. This is an excellent recording and it can be thoroughly recommended. The harpsichord may never quite be mainstream material, but you sense that, if it were ever to get there, Esfahani might just be the man to make it happen."

– **Peter Lyman, *International Record Review***



"The best of [CPE Bach's] music reflects his personal sophistication, with no shortage of creative genius to turn this wide cultural awareness into excellent pieces that deserve a hearing. Such as the six Württemberg Sonatas on this new Hyperion album, featuring the truly exceptional, London based Iranian harpsichordist Mahan Esfahani. All six are lively and exuberant, full of youthful joie de vivre, and sometimes stunning technical effects, all of which are brought out by Esfahani's light touch. The playing here is miles away from the clangorous, congested sound once so typical of harpsichord recitals, which caused the instrument to be denounced by Sir Thomas Beecham as like listening to 'copulating skeletons'. Hopefully, we will get more new recordings from Esfahani. I'd love to hear him in some of Emanuel's many keyboard concertos."

- **David Mellor, *The Mail on Sunday***

"Mahan Esfahani here plays six fine early sonatas, delivered with glitter and glamour on the harpsichord. His intelligence, flair and freshness make the music leap off the page into powerful life. There's a conviction here that demands recognition of the rebel Bach's still underrated genius."

- **Jessica Duchen, *Sinfini Music***

"His sense of musical freedom sets him apart from some of the more dogmatic players of previous generations. He allows the music plenty of room to breathe and lets the listener appreciate the often rhetorical or humorous nature of these sonatas. The E Flat Major is a case in point: the first movement's question and answer elements are well delineated while the superbly lyrical second movement unfolds with admirable serenity... This fresh and insightful recording is a very welcome offering in this 300th anniversary year of CPE's birth. More please."

- **Tom Way, *Limelight***

### **Bach *The Musical Offering*, RNCM Chamber Music Festival, Manchester Cathedral, January 2014**

"The high point of the concerts I attended came the next evening in that same chilly space: a performance by the Academy of Ancient Music of JS's *The Musical Offering*, and particularly its central six-part ricercar, played on the harpsichord by Mahan Esfahani. The audience could not have been more attentive. The musical thought was as loftily sustained as the building itself. I had a sudden feeling of the sublime."

- **Paul Driver, *The Sunday Times***

### **Handel Concert, Academy of Ancient Music, Kölner Philharmonie, September 2013**

"As organist and harpsichordist, [Esfahani] gave a flawless performance of music by Handel with the Academy of Ancient Music at the Kölner Philharmonie – highly virtuosic improvisations and joyously delivered with some breakneck speeds."

- **Kölner Stadtanzeiger**

### **Byrd, Bach and Ligeti, Wigmore Hall, London, May 2013**

"With a programme of Byrd, Bach and Ligeti, and using two very different instruments, he shed light both on the harpsichord's first heyday and on its second as 1970s avant-gardists awoke to its unique possibilities. And if this Iranian-American has carved out a niche as his instrument's leading champion – his harpsichord Prom in 2011 was the first in that institution's history – his success is founded on remarkable artistry. The Ligeti pieces were off-the-wall, and that was how he played them..."

- **Michael Church, *International Piano Magazine***

### **Bach *Goldberg Variations*, St George's, Bristol (March 2013)**

"Bach wrote that he 'prepared it for the soul's delight'. Esfahani's performance certainly achieved this for the audience seemed wrapped in inner contemplation. He played on a two manual harpsichord. His keyboard technique is dazzling: he played some of the variations at incredible speeds but with such clean articulation that not a note was lost. He gave the work a spiritual quality and the performance certainly explained why Esfahani is so admired. His overall conception of the work as a journey towards peace and enlightenment was exactly right."

- **Helen Reid, *The Bristol Post***

### **Recital at Bath Bachfest, Guildhall, Bath, February 2013**

"Such virtuosity and disarming presentation suggests that Esfahani could inspire a whole new appreciation of the instrument."

- **Rian Evans, *The Guardian***

### ***The Art of Fugue* (Bach, Arr. Esfahani), Academy of Ancient Music, Cadogan Hall, July 2012**

"Harpsichordist Mahan Esfahani's arrangement of *The Art of Fugue*, premiered by Esfahani and members of the Academy of Ancient Music, made Bach's counterpoint glisten so brightly you could imagine – faint hope – you could comprehend its intricate workings."

– **Fiona Maddocks, *The Observer***

### **Recital at Paxton House, near Berwick-upon-Tweed, July 2012**

"It would be hard not to be impressed by Iranian harpsichordist Mahan Esfahani . . . In a beautifully chosen programme of Gibbons, d'Anglebert, Couperin, Ciaja and Bach, Esfahani's touch was always insightful and, above all, visceral."

– **Kate Molleson, *The Guardian***

### **Soloists of Oxford Philomusica: Baroque Music at St George's, Bristol, July 2012**

"Esfahani carefully explained the importance of the first movement's harpsichord solo from the perspective of a "lowly musician", contrasting his reading of Bach with that of academia. He went on to give the passage a thorough and passionate treatment, worthy of its importance. Without obstructing the flow of the concert or distracting from its content, he may just have advanced the argument that music is better listened to than analysed".

– **Edward Whitney, *bachtrack.com***

### **Recital at the Frick Collection, New York City, April 2012**

"Mr. Esfahani offered an imaginative rendition of Rameau's Gavotte and Variations, played with soulful flair and a sense of spontaneity...a colorful performance of William Croft's Ground in C minor... Mr. Esfahani's confident, characterful playing and tasteful ornamentation...Mr. Esfahani's excellent performance of five Scarlatti sonatas, beginning with an elegant rendition of the Sonata in F minor (K. 462). Mr. Esfahani demonstrated impressive technique during the Sonata in G (K. 124) and again during the rapid-fire Sonata in D minor (K. 141)"

– **Vivien Schweitzer, *The New York Times***

### **Recital at the Cleveland Museum of Art, April 2012**

"Esfahani established his credentials as a thoughtful, elegant player in four very different works by William Byrd...Esfahani found sense and structure everywhere while dazzling us with his digital prowess. J.S. Bach's *English Suite No. 3 in g* was sheerly delightful under Esfahani's fingers...Those who had already digested Esfahani's witty and evocative program notes probably tried to follow along with his game of assigning narratives to each of the pieces. Expressive rubatos, wild runs and arpeggios and sudden accelerandos only served to make their imagined stories more vivid. You could probably listen to these pieces all day without risking boredom...Esfahani is a quiet figure at the keyboard, but one who draws you powerfully into his own, personal intensity. His facial expressions are as arresting as his playing. The large audience responded more enthusiastically than I can ever remember for a harpsichord recital and Esfahani responded with a highly ornate, aria-like encore by Cimarosa. He needs to be invited back soon."

– **Daniel Hathaway, *Cleveland Classical***

### **J.S. Bach *Goldberg Variations*, Halifax Philharmonic Club, December 2011**

"The ideal interpreter of Bach's astonishing genius... The harpsichord as an interpretative instrument never sounded so expressive. Mahan Esfahani's wondrous technique, musicality and intensity of concentration made for an enthralling evening."

– **Julia Anderson, *Halifax Courier***

### **York Early Music Festival, July 2011**

"Mahan Esfahani had earlier switched effortlessly between harpsichord and the more intimate virginals in toccatas, toyes and fancies from Elizabeth and Jacobean England. Always one to live dangerously, he took on some of the toughest pieces, notably Byrd's Walsingham variations, and won the day with dazzling virtuosity. A maestro already, and still only 27"

– **Martin Dreyer, *York Press***

## Wigmore Hall recital with James Bowman, May 2011

"Mahan Esfahani, who is quickly establishing himself as the leading harpsichordist of his generation. Esfahani opened the recital with a vibrant, even effervescent, performance of J.S. Bach's 'Ouvverture nach französischer Art', sweeping through the successive dances – Courante, Gavottes, Passpieds, Sarabande, Bourrées and Gigue – with a rhythmic muscularity that was both shocking and exhilarating. He relished the drama of this music, emphasising the rhetorical flourishes of the Courante, while also bringing control and clarity to the more intricate cadences of the Passpieds. Esfahani is physically involved with his instrument, delighting in the sounds of its mechanism; rising from his seat as if his whole body is contributing to the production of sound, he positively foregrounds the instrument's mechanism. Never does technique, albeit astonishing, outshine the music: an astounding array of tones and shades was matched by an attention to the expressivity of the dense counterpoint, and a concern to convey the power of harmonic tension and release. Ornamentation provided both decorative elegance and forward momentum, as Esfahani revealed his mastery of the architecture of the form, injecting a relentless energy into the streams of even, running semi-quavers and triplets to convey a sense of the composer's effortless creative outpouring. After the interval, Esfahani explored the rich resonances and full textures of Bach's Adagio in G (BWV 968), presenting the repeating rhythmic motifs with weight and majesty, and eloquently declaiming the delicate cadential features. The Prelude and Fugue in A Minor (BWV 984) gave new meaning to the cliché, tour de force. The relentless unravelling of the ceaseless passage work was not marred by a single hesitation or stumble, yet there was no sense of perfunctory note-spinning, and every contrapuntal dialogue was crystal clear – a true conversation of musical voices. It was as if Esfahani believed that the composer had presented him with an entity, a musical 'being', which must be both intellectually and physically overcome and mastered. The major cadences which concluded both Prelude and Fugue were both triumphal and celebratory.

– **Opera Today**

"27-year-old Mahan Esfahani is poised to lead a new generation of harpsichordists into the early-music scene. Opening the concert with Bach's Overture nach Französischer Art, he balanced the mournful solemnity of the opening movement with quite the most abandoned Echo I have heard, its jets of scalic release all the more striking for being entirely out of character with the controlled efficiency of the rest of the suite."

– **TheArtsDesk.com**

## Sir Jack Lyons Concert Hall, York University

"The work has a sarabande theme which frames 30 variations. They range from gentle doodles to lightning flashes. Esfahani was equal to them all. He varied the registrations on his two-manual instrument. But extra colours never clouded the clarity of the voices, even in Variation 10's fugue. He maintained this transparency in the whirlwind of Variation 12. His approach to the slower movements was extremely elastic, yet always persuasive, making the melancholy modulations of Variation 25 sound positively modern. Elsewhere, his fingerwork was dazzling, throwing off the impossibly speedy Variation 20 almost nonchalantly and making a startling toccata of Variation 29. This man has special powers. Bist Du Bei Mir (Stay By Me) as an encore was in keeping with the near-religious atmosphere he conjured. For this was nothing short of an act of worship."

– **The Press**

## J.S. Bach Goldberg Variations, Old Town House of Haddington

"The young harpsichordist Mahan Esfahani, in the Old Town House of Haddington, gave a wonderfully personal performance of the *Goldberg Variations*; sound and physicality both reflective of an individual emotional path taken through this most refined of works."

– **Gramophone Magazine**

## York Early Music Festival, July 2010

"The Friday YEMF lunchtime recital (Unitarian Chapel) hosted a wide range of 17th and 18th-century harpsichord music by the excellent Mahan Esfahani. The programme opened with a Froberger toccata with dazzling keyboard skills, resulting in a polished and very animated performance. Indeed, as the Couperin confirmed, Mahan Esfahani is a consummate performer, playing with vitality, drive and authority... The opening of the Bach English Suite No.2 was like stepping into a musical Rolls Royce, the music sublime, the playing simply imperious."

– **The Press**

## Wigmore Hall recital, April 2010

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Rayfield Allied acts as agent only and can  
accept no responsibility as principal

"..once seated at the keyboard, he becomes amazingly animated, his face registering every quiver of emotion, his right knee flying up when things get really animated...As for Esfahani's playing, it makes maximum use of the harpsichord's main expressive resources...the opening Adagio from Handel's F major Suite, an impassioned song over a pacing left hand, took on a wonderful elastic quality. When the line arched upwards, the beat seemed momentarily pulled back; when it tumbled down, it urged forward, but never in a way that seemed mechanical. This was music, not the aural equivalent of a switchback."

- **The Telegraph**

### **New Generation Artists at Cadogan Hall, September 2009**

"I hope Esfahani will sometimes allow himself to play a Steinway grand as well as harpsichord and fortepiano: he is a quite exceptionally gifted accompanist as well as soloist."

- **Hilary Finch, The Times**

"...a stunning concert by Iranian-born harpsichordist Mahan Esfahani of Domenico Scarlatti sonatas, carefully chosen and paired, and played with both a sensitivity and vibrance that will send me running to the box office when I next see his name in a concert programme."

- **Early Music Today**

"Finally, two solos by Mahan Esfahani deserve special mention - Sweelinck's Mein junges Leben hat ein End, a tour de force on the harpsichord, and his dramatic improvisation on the organ... the audience went wild."

- **San Francisco Classical Voice**

"...nothing could have prepared me for the brilliance and artistry of Mahan Esfahani, who, despite his young age, played with the musicality and virtuosity of a master. Specializing in early keyboards, Mahan more than breathed life into rarely-played works by Dufay, Scarlatti, J.S. Bach, and Purcell - using recreations of Renaissance and Baroque organs and harpsichords, he breathed fire into them. Not a single phrase lacked purpose or direction the entire evening."

- **Keyboard Magazine**