



## Distance – Mario Brunello plays Bach, Cage & Weinberg at the National Gallery in London



*The Incredulity of Saint Thomas* (1502-4), by **Giovanni Battista Cima da Conegliano**

**Mario Brunello** (cello, below)

**J.S. Bach** Solo Cello Suite no.5, BWV1011 (c1720s)

**Cage** 4'33" (1952)

**Weinberg** Sonata for Solo Cello no.1, Op.72 (1960)

Room 61, The National Gallery, London;

**Thursday 7 December 2017**

Written by **Ben Hogwood**

A rare treat indeed – the chance to witness a concert in the very heart of the National Gallery. Given by cellist **Mario Brunello**, the hour of music was entirely inspired by the **Cima** work *The Incredulity of Saint Thomas*, a powerful and colourful depiction of the apostle's doubting of Christ's resurrection.

Brunello chose three pieces to bring the work to musical life, the first of which was entirely appropriate. Cellists such as Steven Isserlis have long held a belief that the six suites for solo cello by **Johann Sebastian Bach** carry a parallel with the story of the crucifixion and resurrection, and in choosing the *Fifth Suite* Brunello picked the one most closely associated with Christ's death. The *Sarabande* in particular is some of Bach's most extraordinary music, a single line portraying in vivid detail the darkest of moments, dispensing almost entirely with obvious rhythms or harmonic movement. The solemn prelude and faster dance music tends to occupy the lower registers of the instrument, and here it found a perfect match in the rich baritone of Brunello's 1600 Maggini cello. Meanwhile the wispy lines of the second *Gavotte* were especially effective, tracing invisible lines around the performing space.

The second piece was a performance of **John Cage's** 4'33", a work that will divide opinions for eternity it seems. Never failing to raise a smile or a more extreme reaction, the three movements of silence – each conducted in by Brunello, as the composer instructs – were here an effective postscript to the Bach.

While inevitably there was some extraneous noise from people walking around in the gallery, and a brief solo from a vibrating phone in the middle distance, the period of reflection if anything enhanced the impact of the Bach that had gone before, whilst enabling us to focus afresh on the painting behind Brunello's left shoulder. I did not time the 'performance', though it felt a lot longer than the specified duration – perhaps an indication that, in a busy city, 4'33" can be a surprising length of time.

Coming out of the silence with the *Suite no.1 for solo cello* by **Mieczysław Weinberg** was a fascinating move. Only in the last five or so years has the music of this Soviet / Polish composer gained recognition, thanks in part to Brunello's close associate **Gidon Kremer** and the Kremerata Baltica. Brunello grew the first movement out of nothing to a powerful apex before dropping back to the low note where it started, while the second movement was a charming yet muted dance, played as though the real drama was being held back. And so it proved, for the final movement started with such ferocity as to knock the listener back in their seat. Three powerful bow strokes of unison 'C's – the same tonal centre of the Bach – brought all manner of parallels with the three hours between crucifixion and death, though the violence was also portraying Thomas's disbelieving prods at Christ's side.

Either way this was incredibly powerful in its realisation, Brunello making up for the occasional tuning idiosyncrasy with a forceful tone which seemed to grow ever more powerful as the range went higher. Weinberg's music carries great meaning, given the composer's responses to the tragedies of his personal life, and its use here with Bach and Cage put it in the best possible context. Even the weather responded in kind – when we entered the gallery it was raining, but we emerged blinking into powerful sunshine. A true darkness to light experience.

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