

CLASSICAL

Mahan Esfahani

Music at Paxton



“Daunting” was how harp-sichordist Mahan Esfahani described Bach’s Goldberg Variations in the engaging Q&A session he led before his performance of the work at the Music at Paxton festival.

He meant daunting for himself and his listeners alike – and it’s not hard to see why. Not only is the piece a catalogue of intricate keyboard demands for the player, but it also takes the listener on a journey of emotions, as Bach puts his innocuous theme through 30 vivid rethinks.

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.

Which led, of course, right back where the piece had started – and Esfahani delivered that Aria, which both opens and closes the work, unadorned and hesitant at first, but with such freedom it almost felt improvised, only later adding the familiar ornamentation as the music itself seemed to grow in confidence.

He sparkled in Bach’s showy variations, scampering lithe-ly up and down the keyboard, but it was never show for its own sake. Likewise, his famous “black pearl” minor-key variation was hearty and thoughtful rather than simply tearful, focused clearly on its shifting harmonies, and all the more rewarding as a result.

Maybe not daunting after all – but demanding, certainly. And also – the adjective Esfahani finally decided was more appropriate – overwhelming.

DAVID KETTLE