

Sheku & Isata Kanneh-Mason

Start time: 8pm

Approximate running time: 80 minutes, no interval

Please note all timings are approximate and subject to change

Programme

Frank Bridge Sonata for Cello and Piano in D minor

Benjamin Britten *Tema Sacher*

Sergei Rachmaninov No 1 'The Muse' & No 7 'It Cannot Be' from Fourteen Romances, Op 34

Frank Bridge No 2 'Spring Song' from 4 Short Pieces

Mélodie for Cello and Piano in C-sharp minor

Scherzo

Benjamin Britten Cello Sonata

Musical partnerships comprising siblings are not especially uncommon, but it's their relative youth and the current focus of their repertoire that distinguishes the Kanneh-Mason duo, says Leon Bosch.

The most important ingredient in any duo partnership, individual technical and musical prowess notwithstanding, is the quality of the rapport enjoyed by its two participants. Pianist Isata is in no doubt that the collaboration with her brother and cellist Sheku is a relationship of equals, and that a lifetime of performing together has enabled their collective musical radar to be transformed into something akin to telepathy. She goes on to say, 'When we're on stage, it's almost as if I know what Sheku is going to do, even before he's done it'.

In their programme of just over an hour's duration, the opening and closing pieces are substantial sonatas by two British composers, one a neglected master, and the other iconic. And in between the two sonatas is a selection of salon pieces by the composers of the sonatas, plus two songs by Rachmaninov, both freely adapted for cello by Sheku himself.

The Kanneh-Mason duo commits itself to performing repertoire of interest to them musically, and they aim to 'create vivid performances that embody a vision the audience can embrace'.

Frank Bridge's Sonata for cello and piano has been a part of the duo's repertoire since Sheku was introduced to it by Hannah Roberts, his cello professor at the Royal Academy of Music.

This richly romantic, turbulent and emotionally gripping sonata in two movements took four years to complete, and was first performed at the Wigmore Hall in 1917 by two of Bridge's friends, the cellist Felix Salmon and pianist Harold Samuel.

The first movement was started, and seemingly completed in 1913, before the outbreak of war. But by the time Bridge finally completed the sonata in 1917, plans for an elegiac slow movement, a scherzo and finale had metamorphosed into the single and tumultuous second movement that now concludes the sonata.

As a pacifist Frank Bridge was deeply disturbed by the First World War. Some of his contemporaries suggested that this despair over the utter futility of war led to him wandering around the streets of Kensington in the early hours of the morning, unable to sleep. And, that it was during this time that the ideas for this second movement of the sonata crystallised.

Then, after this extended wartime lament, Sheku remains centre-stage for the brief but arresting *Tema Sacher* for unaccompanied cello by Benjamin Britten, who was Frank Bridge's only composition student. *Tema Sacher* was originally intended as the basis for a set of variations by other distinguished contemporary composers, as a seventieth birthday tribute to the Swiss conductor and impresario Paul Sacher, but it now enjoys an independent existence.

Performing musical miniatures can be a treacherous pursuit, especially in view of the prevailing disdain for the genre, and the extraordinary accomplishments of the great artists of the twentieth century, who transformed the

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performance of such miniatures into a highly specialised art form. Articulating a persuasive musical vision in such brief compositions requires imagination, confidence, and nonchalant technical command.

Emulating other 20th-century artists who made their own transcriptions of music that resonated with them, Sheku has adapted two contrasting Rachmaninov songs, from the set of fourteen romances Op 34 that concludes with the famous song without words, 'Vocalise'.

Frank Bridge's skill as a composer was immeasurably enhanced by his prowess as a violinist and viola player, and the insight that this afforded him into the finer nuances of string playing. His miniatures for cello are exquisite, and the Kanneh-Masons have chosen three for their programme: *Mélodie*, *Scherzo* and *Spinning Song*.

Spinning Song, from a set of four pieces for violin or cello and piano is by far the most popular and has long been a part of the duo's repertoire. Sheku has also recorded it with the Heath string quartet, in an arrangement by the British composer Simon Parkin.

Benjamin Britten's terse and idiomatic Sonata Op 65 in five movements, commissioned by the legendary Soviet cellist Mstislav Rostropovich, was first performed at Aldeburgh in 1961, with Benjamin Britten himself at the piano. And sixty years later, the recording they made for Decca shortly after its successful premiere remains a benchmark performance.

Each of the five movements exploits a particular strength that Britten identified in Rostropovich's playing, and this vivid musical portrait of 'Slava', as he was affectionately known, is as much fun to watch as it is to listen to.

The opening Dialogue takes the form of a respectful conversation between the two protagonists, with outbursts of lyrical intensity, technical wizardry and wit. The challenging second Scherzo pizzicato movement is reminiscent of Debussy's Sonata for cello, and the third movement Elegy is a poignant lament. The Fourth movement is a characteristic Britten March, and the fifth and final Moto perpetuo movement is a virtuosic tour de force. It demands extraordinary bravura, with the pianist hurtling around the keyboard, and the cellist executing sophisticated jeté and ricochet bow strokes at breakneck speed.

In addition to inspiring him to compose five substantial works for the cello, Britten's musical relationship with Rostropovich also enabled him to persuade Rostropovich to perform other great British repertoire with him. Their recording of Frank Bridge's Sonata, also on the Decca label is, like their recording of Britten's own Sonata, another benchmark performance.

The Kanneh-Mason duo's musical tastes, and enthusiasm for unjustly neglected masterpieces that rarely find their way into programmes nowadays, may well transform them into latter day champions of this rich vein of twentieth century British music.

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Performers

Sheku Kanneh-Mason cello

Isata Kanneh-Mason piano

Sheku and Isata Kanneh-Mason appear by arrangement with Enticott Music Management

Sheku Kanneh-Mason records exclusively for Decca Classics

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