

Isata Kanneh-Mason

Start time: 7.30pm

Approximate end time: 9.30pm, including a 20-minute interval

Please note all timings are approximate and subject to change.

Programme

Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart Twelve Variations on 'Ah vous dirai-je, Maman'

Fanny Mendelssohn *Easter Sonata*

1. Allegro assai moderato.
2. Largo e molto espresso - Poco più mosso.
3. Scherzo: Allegretto.
4. Allegro con strepito.

Claude Debussy *Children's Corner*

1. Doctor Gradus ad Parnassum
2. Jimbo's Lullaby
3. Serenade for the Doll
4. The Snow Is Dancing
5. The Little Shepherd
6. Cakewalk

Eleanor Alberga *Cwicseolfor*

Robert Schumann *Kinderszenen*

1. Von fremden Ländern und Menschen (Of Foreign Lands and Peoples)
2. Kuriose Geschichte (A Curious Story)
3. Hasche-Mann (Blind Man's Buff)
4. Bittendes Kind (Pleading Child)
5. Glückes genug (Happy Enough)
6. Wichtige Begebenheit (An Important Event)
7. Träumerei (Dreaming)
8. Am Kamin (At The Fireside)
9. Ritter vom Steckenpferd (Knight Of The Hobbyhorse)
10. Fast zu ernst (Almost Too Serious)
11. Fürchtenmachen (Frightening)
12. Kind im Einschlummern (Child Falling Asleep)
13. Der Dichter spricht (The Poet Speaks)

In tonight's recital Isata Kanneh-Mason explores the potent themes of childhood and memory.

For her Barbican debut, Isata Kanneh-Mason, eldest sibling of what *The Guardian* has described as 'seven musical marvels', takes us on a nostalgic journey back to childhood in a programme of music inspired by the imaginations and experiences of children.

It was in childhood where Isata's love of classical music first blossomed. 'The pieces in this programme carry with them a certain nostalgia, and I feel almost a sense of longing for childhood in some of them. That wistfulness for childhood is something that I wanted to express in this programme, as I think it's a time when one's love of music is at its most uncomplicated.'

Mozart's Variations on the French song 'Ah, vous dirai-je, Maman' immediately takes us back to childhood with its instantly recognisable theme, known to many of us as 'Twinkle, Twinkle, Little Star'. Mozart transforms this simple melody – of the kind a young piano student might master – through 12 sophisticated and inventive variations. These test the mettle of the pianist with a surprising range of technical and expressive challenges, including a brief, wistful minor-key interlude, without ever losing sight of the original theme.

For a woman in the 19th century to compose a piano sonata was a challenge, to say the least, but to write such a complex, energetic and adventurous work as Fanny Mendelssohn's *Easter Sonata* – and at the age of just 23 – was quite remarkable.

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Yet this ambitious piece, along with most of Fanny Mendelssohn's music, was forgotten for 140 years until the manuscript, signed 'F Mendelssohn', was found in France in 1970. It was assumed to be by Fanny's brother Felix, but in 2010 the manuscript was examined by an American musicologist, who recognised Fanny's handwriting, and the work finally received its premiere, with its correct attribution, in 2012.

Grand and sweeping in scale, with distinct influences of Beethoven and Bach, this strikingly volatile, sometimes violent four-movement work depicts the Easter story, replete with a rumbling tremolo in the final movement, a reference to the biblical account of Jesus's resurrection, which is said to have caused an earthquake, before a calming 'Easter Chorale' finally brings serenity.

We return to the innocent world of children in Debussy's *Children's Corner*, composed between 1906 and 1908 and dedicated to 'my beloved little Chouchou', Debussy's affectionate nickname for his daughter Claude-Emma. This enchanting suite of six short pieces portrays the experiences of childhood and the nostalgia of watching a child growing up (and Debussy loved being a father). The first movement, 'Dr Gradus ad Parnassum', is a tongue-in-cheek piano exercise, which grows ever more complex. 'Jimbo's Lullaby', inspired by Chouchou's toy elephant, has heavy, sleepy footsteps of falling and rising notes in the lower register of the piano. 'Serenade for the Doll' celebrates Chou-Chou's favourite toy and uses a Chinese pentatonic scale with clipped grace notes to create light, strummed textures.

'The Snow is Dancing' delightfully evokes the experience of a snowstorm from a child's point of view, with playful cascading notes and swirling effects. For Isata 'The Little Shepherd' is particularly special: 'I played this for one of my grade exams, and so it carries with it the memory of me learning it as a young child'. The piece opens with a haunting rustic tune followed by a hypnotic little melody that imitates a shepherd boy playing his flute to his flock and dancing around the meadow. Its melancholy mood is quickly dispelled by 'Cakewalk', a colourful, slapstick finale with syncopated rhythms, snappy grace notes and banjo-like effects inspired by the American ragtime music that was popular at the time. The middle section makes a satirical allusion to Wagner's *Tristan und Isolde* and turns the famous 'Tristan chord' into a jaunty, offbeat arpeggio.

Commissioned by the Barbican and ECHO, and written especially for Isata, Eleanor Alberga's *Cwicseolfor* takes its name from the Old English spelling of quicksilver, or mercury. The composer explains: 'As a child, I remember being fascinated with watching mercury in a container: how it didn't adhere to anything and moved and changed direction rapidly. There was also an almost unbelievable brilliance on the surface of this stuff.' This virtuosic piece mimics those qualities through brilliantly shifting moods, tempos and a constant variation of the material.

Written as reminiscences of childhood rather than pieces for children, Robert Schumann's *Kinderszenen* ('Scenes from Childhood') was a gift to his beloved Clara Wieck in 1838, two years before they were finally married. This collection of 13 short pieces, the most famous of which is the central one, 'Träumerei' (Dreaming), is a touching tribute to the universal memories and experiences of childhood from a nostalgic adult perspective, portrayed through Schumann's rich and poetic musical imagination. Robert urged his wife Clara to 'forget yourself as a virtuoso' when playing them, yet they demonstrate, in microcosm, the full range of Schumann's creativity.

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Performers

Isata Kanneh-Mason piano

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