



Sheku Kanneh-Mason in recital

2 & 4 December 2018 7.30pm,
Milton Court Concert Hall

Boccherini Cello Sonata No 6 in A major

Poulenc Cello Sonata

interval 20 minutes

Debussy Cello Sonata

Brahms Cello Sonata No 2 in F major

Sheku Kanneh-Mason cello

Isata Kanneh-Mason piano

Part of Barbican Presents 2018–19

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Welcome

A warm welcome to this evening's concert, which marks the Milton Court debut of siblings Sheku and Isata Kanneh-Mason, members of one of the UK's most outstandingly gifted musical families. Both initially caught the public's imagination at the BBC Young Musician competition, with Isata reaching the piano final in 2014 and cellist Sheku winning the overall prize two years later, performing at the Barbican Hall with the BBC Symphony Orchestra. Still only 19, he already has an exclusive recording contract and made many new friends when he played at the wedding of Prince Harry and Meghan Markle in May this year.

We begin with Boccherini, himself a great virtuoso on the cello, as is evident from the sheer difficulty of his A major Sonata. Poulenc's only Cello Sonata was begun in

war-torn France in 1940 and it's a typical mix of the profound and the playful.

Debussy's Cello Sonata is the product of the First World War, whose horrors were compounded by the composer's grave ill health. Yet he saw this work as a new beginning, marking a more pared-back style, and he planned a further five sonatas, though only lived to complete two more.

Sheku and Isata Kanneh-Mason end with one of the masterpieces in the cello literature: Brahms's vibrant and energetic F major Sonata.

It promises to be a very memorable concert. I hope you enjoy it.

Huw Humphreys, Head of Music, Barbican

Luigi Boccherini (1743–1805)

Cello Sonata No 6 in A major, G4 (publ 1771)

- 1 Adagio
- 2 Allegro
- 3 Affettuoso

‘Truly one of the most distinguished instrumental composers of his country’, opined the distinguished journal the *Allgemeine musikalische Zeitung* in an obituary of Luigi Boccherini. If we have tended rather to lose sight of that in the intervening centuries, save for a certain minuet made famous by its use in the Ealing comedy *The Ladykillers*, that is hardly the composer’s fault.

Boccherini was born into a musical family: his father played both cello and double bass and by the age of 13 Boccherini junior had made his debut as a child prodigy on the cello. Despite being born in Lucca, he spent much of his life in Spain, initially moving there in 1768, becoming cellist and composer within the household of the Spanish Infante two years later. He made his name, therefore, not (unlike Mozart) by his own performances as a touring virtuoso but (like Haydn) through the dissemination of his own music in authorised or pirated editions.

Boccherini’s output was prodigious – perhaps another reason why we have tended to overlook him – much of it devoted to chamber music, including no fewer than 93 published quintets for a line-up he appears to have created: two violins, one viola and two cellos. His sonatas for cello, on the other hand, were not intended for publication; there are various theories as to the reason behind this – the fact that they were relatively early works, their sheer difficulty or even the way they set an extremely virtuoso solo part against a relatively

simple accompaniment, which went against the prevailing fashion of chamber music being an egalitarian pursuit. As for that accompaniment, although it’s usually performed on piano or other keyboard instrument, in fact it was originally intended for a string instrument – cello or double bass. It’s no coincidence that Boccherini performed frequently with his father Leopoldo and it seems more than likely that these sonatas were designed for the two of them to play.

The sonata begins with an operatic-like Adagio, the accompaniment kept to a bare minimum in order to allow the cello line to seize the limelight. This takes the form of a passionate soliloquy, full of ornamentation that requires an easy dexterity from the string player. Though it’s precisely notated, the aim is surely to make the music sound improvised. In the second part of the movement, which is a variant on the first, it dips briefly into the minor, to touching effect.

The Allegro that follows is vivacious and full of playful charm, again demanding the utmost dexterity from the cellist. As in the first movement, Boccherini delights in high-lying writing and contrasts frenetic figuration with a kind of strutting figure that is recalled in the theme tune to *Blackadder* – whether by accident or design, who knows?

The finale, marked Affettuoso, is in the style of a minuet, offering an intimate and gentle sign-off to the sonata, though again it’s not without its challenges for the cellist.

Francis Poulenc (1899–1963)

Cello Sonata (1940–8)

1 Allegro: Tempo di marcia

2 Cavatine: Très calme

3 Ballabile: Très animé et gai

4 Finale: Largo, très librement – Presto subito – Largo

If Boccherini was naturally inclined to write for an instrument on which he excelled, the same could not be said of Poulenc. He claimed to prefer writing for wind instruments, and there's no doubt that the sonatas he produced for flute, clarinet and oboe are among the gems in their respective instruments' repertoire. But, as is so often the case with this composer, the truth is more nuanced.

Though on first appearance his particular brand of barbed playfulness might seem ill-suited to the cello, in fact the sheer range of effects and the imagination with which he treats the instrument are quite extraordinary. While writing the sonata he consulted the cellist Pierre Fournier, the work's dedicatee, who gave him valuable advice; in this regard he was following in an illustrious tradition – just think of Brahms and the violinist Joseph Joachim.

From the off we get Poulenc showing his Janus-like personality. After a sparky opening on the piano, the composer makes the most of the cello's range, and demands not only manual but mental dexterity from both musicians: accented and *forte* one moment, *piano* and *très expressif* the next. Also beguiling are Poulenc's characteristic shifts of harmonies, that can change the mood in an instant. A couple of minutes in, things turn gentler still, with the piano introducing a languorous melody (*Très sensiblement plus calme*), which is followed by more martial writing, pizzicato-infused. After a gentler section we get a return to the opening idea and the movement is brought to an abruptly fizzing conclusion, shut down with a final pizzicato.

The Cavatine, in which the piano sets the scene, is in the sharp-drenched key of F

sharp major, though Poulenc's harmonies give it a slightly modal feel. Poulenc instructs the keyboard player to use the sustaining pedal liberally to create a drench of sound, halo-ing the hymnic quality of the chords themselves. It's this idea, and variants of it, that fuels the whole movement, Poulenc adding variety by diversifying the accompaniment (flowing semiquavers in the piano, which are then taken up in the cello) and playing with contrasting registers to telling effect.

Throughout, this is very much a conversation between equals. When we return to *tempo* 1 the piano's introductory chords are now *forte*, while Poulenc colours the cello line with the most sinuous glissandos. The final marking, *excessivement calme*, with both instruments playing extremely quietly, brings the Cavatine to a shimmeringly beautiful close.

All solemnity is swept away in the Ballabile (which translates as 'suitable for dancing'). This seems to be channelling the playfulness of Poulenc's ballet *Les animaux modèles*, which also occupied him in the 1940s, not least the farcical third movement, 'The middle-aged man and his two mistresses'.

The Finale opens with strenuous chords on both instruments that seem almost to be channelling the gesture with which Stravinsky opens each movement of his Violin Concerto (Stravinsky was a composer Poulenc revered). He contrasts this with a mysterious high-lying tremolo on the cello that could have come out of a film soundtrack. And then, typical Poulenc, he changes tack again, with a Presto that seems to say 'only joking', cello and piano engaging in a game of musical chase. This gives way to

a strutting march again, all mock seriousness. Then there's another switch in mood and tempo (to 3/4 time), with hushed, rocking chords in the piano, out of which a heartfelt melody arises on the cello. This is banished by the Presto idea

once more, followed by the more consoling idea. But the piece closes with a return to the caustic chords from the start of the movement, sounding an ominous note of disquiet.

interval 20 minutes

Claude Debussy (1862–1918)

Cello Sonata (1915)

- 1 Prologue
- 2 Sérénade
- 3 Final

Just as Poulenc's career ended with chamber music, with the Oboe Sonata and Clarinet Sonata dating from a year before his death, so too did Debussy's. In fact he completed only three of a purported set of six sonatas before his premature death from cancer in 1918. The plans for the remaining three are tantalising indeed: a line-up of oboe, horn and harpsichord in the fourth, trumpet, clarinet, bassoon and piano in the fifth and a veritable chamber orchestra in the last one. Had he completed the set, they'd have had an almost Brandenburgian range – not inappropriate, as Debussy was aiming in these late sonatas to pay homage to the French Baroque, and Rameau and François Couperin in particular.

The Cello Sonata, written at speed, is the work with which he launched his new chamber music manifesto, in which simplicity would be uppermost. Indeed, he wrote to his friend and publisher Jacques Durand on 5 August 1915: 'It's not for me to judge its excellence but I like its proportions and its almost classical form, in the good sense of the word'.

The piano's initial harmonies, which are based around open fifths, giving the music an archaic feel, are answered by a noble soliloquy on the cello. The movement seems to play with

the notion of time itself, feeling far more epic than its compact span would suggest; this comes in part from the continual succession of melodic fragments, sometimes closely related, sometimes in high contrast, but underpinned by a sense of moving inevitably forwards, finally closing on the open fifths that set the work in motion.

The unnerving 'Sérénade' finds the cello by turns imitating a supersized guitar and a mandolin in passages which contrast with agitated bowed phrases, as if in some dark parody not just of the serenade generally but of all those Spanish-inspired pieces Debussy had composed up to this point. The effect is deeply discomfiting – intentionally so.

In the Finale a bittersweet folk-song-like mood is rudely interrupted by a passage marked *Molto rubato, con morbidezza* ('smoothly, with a flexible tempo') that virtually stops the music in its tracks. Even a return of the opening music can't wholeheartedly dismiss the lasting impact of this interruption. What's most extraordinary about this sonata, however, is the way Debussy packs such an enormous emotional punch with a work lasting a mere 12 minutes.

Programme notes © Harriet Smith

Johannes Brahms

Cello Sonata No 2 in F major, Op 99 (1886)

1 **Allegro vivace**

2 **Adagio affettuoso**

3 **Allegro passionato**

4 **Allegro molto**

Put the opening of the First Cello Sonata beside that of Sonata No 2, and you might well conclude that the latter is the work of the young Brahms while the former is a product of his ripely melancholic creative autumn. The Second Sonata begins with a joyously exuberant *Allegro vivace* (unusually for Brahms, no restraining ‘*ma non troppo*’) high up on the cello’s bright A string. The high-soaring agility demanded here at least partly reflects the fact that this time Brahms was writing for a professional: Robert Hausmann, cellist in Joseph Joachim’s famous quartet. Hausmann had done Brahms a huge service by taking up the First Cello Sonata at a time when hardly anyone else had shown interest in playing it – even Brahms’s then publishers Breitkopf & Härtel had turned it down. Granted, the Second Sonata was written during a remarkably productive summer holiday at the Swiss resort of Hofstetten, near Lake Thun, in 1886: the Second Violin Sonata, Op 100, and the C minor Piano Trio, Op 101, also emerged during those fertile summer months. But what it was in particular that inspired the 53-year-old Brahms to such an unseasonal display of youthful vigour in the first movement of this sonata remains a mystery.

As before, Brahms called this work ‘Sonata for Piano and Violoncello’, and again a democratic spirit is at work when it comes to sharing the interest between the two solo parts. At the beginning, as in the First Sonata, the cello initially takes the lead, with the piano supplying a thunderous *tremolando* as accompaniment – not an obvious opportunity for role-reversal, one might have thought; but at several points

in this movement the cello takes over the tremolos while the piano declaims or sings.

There is a similar ‘Will they? Won’t they?’ quality about the opening idea of the slow movement. The piano sings a rising hymn-like phrase while the cello picks out a walking pizzicato bass, deep below, each instrument apparently wrapped up in its own peculiar sound world and personal thoughts. Yet after only four bars the roles swap deliciously: the cello hymns, the piano picks out the former pizzicato figure, but recreated in true pianistic terms with warm supporting harmonies. This sharply contrasted dialogue is developed and enriched throughout the movement, the two instruments only really singing as one in the wistful concluding bars.

Normally Brahms avoids energetic Beethovenian scherzos in his large-scale works, but the turbulent *Allegro passionato* that follows is a stirring exception. Having thus purged himself of dark Romantic sentiment, Brahms allows himself to relax in the finale – despite the again uncharacteristic marking *Allegro molto*. The coda of this movement is the best riposte to those who say Brahms had no sense of humour: the easygoing first theme is transformed into an absurdly tiptoeing pizzicato for cello, complete with so-called ‘Scotch snaps’ (though for the timorous amateur Brahms does suggest an alternative bowed version). Anything less like the sonorous severity of the First Sonata’s ending would be hard to imagine.

Programme note © Stephen Johnson

About the performers



Lars Borges

Sheku Kanneh-Mason

Sheku Kanneh-Mason cello

Sheku Kanneh-Mason, one of the brightest young stars on the classical music scene, became a household name worldwide in May 2018 after performing at the wedding of the Duke and Duchess of Sussex at Windsor Castle, reaching a global audience of nearly two billion people.

He came to wide attention when he won the 2016 BBC Young Musician competition, and is already in demand from major orchestras and concert halls worldwide, combining an increasingly busy concert schedule with his studies as a second-year student at the Royal Academy of Music in London.

In January, he released his debut recording for Decca Classics, *Inspiration*, featuring Shostakovich's Cello Concerto No 1 with the City of Birmingham Symphony Orchestra under Mirga Gražinyte-Tyla. The album reached Number 1 in the Classical Chart. In June this year he received the Male Artist of the Year and the Critics' Choice awards at the Classic BRITs, and the following month became the first recipient of the BRIT Certified Breakthrough Award.

He has already performed with many of the UK's leading orchestras, in addition to which, this season and beyond, he makes debuts with the Atlanta, Frankfurt Radio and Seattle Symphony orchestras, the Orchestre Philharmonique de Radio France and the Netherlands Chamber Orchestra, as well as giving a concert at the Vienna Musikverein with the Japan Philharmonic.

In recital, he made his London debut at Kings Place in October last year; as well as his current appearances at the Barbican (to which he returns next year), he also appears at the Wigmore Hall, Zurich Tonhalle and Lucerne Festival, and undertakes a major tour of the USA.

He made his debut at the BBC Proms in 2017, returning there this year. As the first London Music Masters Junior Ambassador, he firmly believes that music should be accessible to all and is a strong advocate of the importance of music education in schools. This season he is Young Artist-in-Residence at the Royal Liverpool Philharmonic.

In 2017 Sheku received the South Bank Sky Arts Breakthrough Award and in February this year, he performed 'Evening of Roses' at the BAFTA Awards show at the Royal Albert Hall, with four of his six siblings, the first time any artist has been invited to perform during the ceremony two years running.

Sheku Kanneh-Mason is a full-time ABRSM Scholarship student at the Royal Academy of Music, studying with Hannah Roberts. He plays an Antonius and Hieronymus Amati cello c1610, kindly on loan from a private collection.



Isata Kanneh-Mason

Isata Kanneh-Mason piano

Isata Kanneh-Mason is a postgraduate student at the Royal Academy of Music, studying piano with Carole Presland, having been awarded the Gwendoline Reich Memorial Scholarship.

She performed with Elton John in Los Angeles in 2013, and was awarded the prestigious Elton John Scholarship for her undergraduate studies at the Royal Academy of Music, where she studied with Hamish Milne.

She reached the piano final of BBC Young Musician in 2014, winning the Walter Todds Bursary for the most promising musician. She

has also won the Royal Academy's Iris Dyer Piano Prize four times and the Mrs Claude Beddington Prize 2016 for outstanding recital results at the Royal Academy. Earlier this year she won the Royal Academy's Christian Carpenter Recital Prize.

She has performed extensively around the UK and abroad, with concerto appearances, solo recitals and performances with chamber ensembles at the Wigmore Hall, Royal Festival Hall, St Martin-in-the-Fields, Kings Place and Nottingham's Royal Concert Hall. She has performed in the Portland Piano Series in Oregon, in the Barbican's 'Sound Unbound' series, and at the Colour of Music Festival in South Carolina and at the Hebden Bridge and Lincoln festivals, as well as in the Netherlands, the Caribbean, the Cayman Islands and Canada.

Highlights this season include appearances at the Lucerne Festival, Montreux's Septembre Musical, the Zurich Tonhalle, Wigmore Hall, Amsterdam Concertgebouw and Saint-Denis Festival in Paris, and an extensive US tour, including a performance at Carnegie Hall.

Isata Kanneh-Mason has performed several times on BBC television and radio. She is grateful to the Nottingham Soroptimist Trust, to Mr and Mrs John Bryden, to Frank White and to Sir Elton John.