

The Kanneh-Mason Family in Concert

Start time: 8pm

Approximate running time: 60 minutes, no interval

Please note all timings are approximate and subject to change

Programme

Dmitri Shostakovich Piano Trio No 1 in C minor, Op 8

Franz Schubert Impromptu No 4 in A-flat major, D899

Impromptu No 4 in F minor, D935

Pyotr Ilyich Tchaikovsky *Mélodie*, Op 42 No 3

Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart Piano Trio in B-flat major, K502 Mvt III

Samuel Barber Sonata for Cello and Piano, Op 6 Mvt III

George Gershwin Three Preludes

Eric Whitacre *The Seal Lullaby* (arr Simon Parkin)

Jerry Bock *Fiddler on the Roof* medley (arr Kanneh-Masons)

Harriet Smith unpacks the success of the seven talented Kanneh-Mason siblings.

What makes the Kanneh-Mason siblings so remarkable? Is it the fact that all seven of them seem equally obsessed with music? They are, by order of age, Isata (24), Braimah (22), Sheku (21), Konya (20), Jeneba (18), Aminata (15) and Mariatu (11), and all play either piano, violin or cello or a combination. Or is it the fact that their parents Stuart and Kadiatu – neither of them musicians but both musical – didn't go down the more obvious hot-housing route with specialist music schools but instead opted for state education in Nottingham at a school that truly integrated music into the curriculum? Or is it the fact that they are equally at home playing Bob Marley, Mozart or medleys from the musicals?

One of the most striking things about the family is the way that music is music – they are as comfortable in their trio arrangement of the African-American spiritual *Deep River* as performing the classical greats. They grew up listening to all varieties of music – reggae, rap, rock, country & western, as well as classical. That was undoubtedly the secret to their semi-final success in Britain's Got Talent in 2015, where, after their medley of Tchaikovsky, Prokofiev and Clean Bandit, even the famously prickly Simon Cowell waxed lyrical, commenting that the six of them (Mariatu was too young to participate at the time) were 'probably the most talented family in the world'. Fellow-judge Amanda Holden hit the nail on the head when she summed up their performance with the observation: 'So many younger people might think this music is stuffy and you give it personality and character and fun: I think you could probably introduce it to a whole new audience of people who have never really appreciated that kind of music before.'

How right she was, and in the five years since then the siblings have made their mark both individually and as a family. In 2016 cellist Sheku Kanneh-Mason was the first-ever black musician to win the coveted BBC Young Musician, a competition that has been running since 1978. But he's not the only one in the family to have made his mark there, with pianist sisters Isata and Jeneba reaching the keyboard finals in 2014 and 2018 respectively. The family have also performed at the BAFTAs and in 2018 Sheku reached an audience of two billion worldwide when he played at the wedding of Prince Harry and Meghan Markle. Sheku and Isata have both made best-selling recordings and all seven will shortly release a new album built around Saint-Saëns's *Carnival of the Animals* with new poems by Michael Morpurgo, of *War Horse* fame, read by Morpurgo and Olivia Colman, together with irresistible illustrations by Emma Chichester Clark.

But before we get carried away by the fairy-tale aspect of the Kanneh-Masons, let's not forget that this has come about through a mix of talent, hard work and a certain amount of sacrifice too, as Kadiatu relates in her recently published book *House of Music*. She doesn't like the word 'talent' very much though. 'I think all children actually have genius ... and it's all about championing that. What we saw in Isata, our eldest, was incredible facility and we decided to channel it in music, and absolutely encourage it.' She explains: 'Genius is something you really, really want to do, which is probably more important than something called "talent". It's loving something, wanting to do it, having the thirst to do it, and then channelling that hard work. It's not something you are born with, because if you do nothing about it, it goes nowhere.'

barbican

So clearly she's of the nurture rather than nature way of thinking. What impresses, whether watching the siblings perform together or as individuals, is a down-to-earth quality that is immensely engaging, which comes across very vibrantly in Alan Yentob's documentary about the Kanneh-Masons as part of BBC1's *Imagine* series created over Zoom during lockdown.

This period was clearly as intense an experience for the Kanneh-Masons as for any other family in the country (though with better music!). The siblings proceeded to stream concerts, as well as sharing, as restrictions eased, impromptu outdoor socially distanced busking sessions. As Isata explained to Alan Yentob: 'We've been kept sane by playing music together.' And it proved a time of opportunity as well as limitation, with pianists Isata and Jeneba learning all the Chopin studies between them. The arrangement from *Fiddler on the Roof*, for instance, with which today's concert ends, was also created during that time. It was a musical they watched a lot when growing up and, Konya says, 'we were thinking about new medleys that all of us could play so we didn't have to play Monti's *Czardas* for ever, so this one came to mind.' Perhaps the last word should go to Braimah: 'Music teaches you so much – listening, hard work, perseverance – whether you want to pursue music as a career or just for fun'. You can't say fairer than that.

Performers

Isata Kanneh-Mason piano

Braimah Kanneh-Mason violin

Sheku Kanneh-Mason cello

Konya Kanneh-Mason violin/piano

Jeneba Kanneh-Mason cello/piano

Aminata Kanneh-Mason violin

Mariatu Kanneh-Mason cello

Produced by the Barbican

This concert is generously supported by an anonymous donor



The City of London Corporation is the founder and principal funder of the Barbican Centre