

Isata, Mariatu & Braimah Kanneh-Mason

Cheltenham Town Hall

Thur 9 July

Isata Kanneh-Mason *piano*

Mariatu Kanneh-Mason *cello*

Braimah Kanneh-Mason *violin*

Beethoven	Piano Sonata No. 14 in C-sharp minor, Op. 27 No. 2 "Moonlight"	15'
Mozart	Violin Sonata No. 21 in E minor, K. 304	12'
Tchaikovsky	Méditation from Souvenir d'un lieu cher, Op.42	10'
<i>Interval</i>		
Dobrinka Tabakova	Nocturne	3'
Dobrinka Tabakova	Halo	5'
De Falla	Nana from Siete canciones populares españolas	3'
Rachmaninov	Cello Sonata in G minor, Op. 19: III. Andante	6'
Beethoven	Piano Sonata No. 21 in C major, Op. 53 "Waldstein"	24'

About the Programme

Ludwig van Beethoven (1770-1827) - Piano Sonata No.14 in C-sharp minor, Op.27 No. 2 "Moonlight"

The first years of the nineteenth century were, for Beethoven, a time of both personal and artistic upheaval. The realisation of his increasing deafness was pushing him towards the despair which he poured out in the letter which he wrote in October 1802, while staying in Heiligenstadt (at the time, a village near Vienna, now a suburb of the city). It was addressed to his two brothers, but never sent; it later became known as known as the 'Heiligenstadt Testament'. His music from this period, though, is less concerned with looking inward, than with taking the classical forms which he had inherited from Mozart and Haydn, and bending, re-shaping, and sometimes simply disregarding, them to suit his expressive purposes.

The three piano sonatas Op.26 and Op.27, Nos 1 and 2, dating from 1801, represent his most radical rethinking so far of the balance and character of the separate movements. He subtitled both of the Op.27 Sonatas 'Quasi una fantasia', drawing attention to their innovative form. Neither of them has a conventional first movement, and the weightiest of the three movements is not the first, but the last. Familiarity has tended to dull our appreciation of just how original the first movement of No.2 is. On paper, nothing could be more monotonous: slowly changing harmonies, one unvarying mood, a constant triplet rhythm and an almost complete absence of conventional melody. The alchemy of Beethoven's imagination transforms this unpromising material into one of the most mesmerically atmospheric movements in his entire output. Its popularity owes much to the imagery that seems to have been suggested by the poet Ludwig Rellstab, who compared it to moonlight on Lake Lucerne. Liszt, on the other hand, likened the second movement to "a flower between two abysses", which places the Sonata in a wholly different perspective. The Allegretto itself is a graceful, moderately-paced scherzo, with wayward syncopations providing a hint

of the tensions which come to the boil in the ferocious last movement. The vehemence of this finale is so extreme as to suggest it has some non-musical significance. If it does, Beethoven never disclosed it.

Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart (1756-1791) – Violin Sonata No.21 in E Minor, K.304

Note by Misha Donat

Among the six violin sonatas of 1778, it is the quietly tragic Sonata in E minor, K304—Mozart's only composition in this key—that leaves the deepest impression. Both the austere character of its opening movement and the haunting nostalgia of its minuet-style finale place it apart from its companions. When Mozart begins a work with a theme in subdued bare octaves, as he does here, that beginning more often than not presages an unexpected harmonization of the same theme at a later stage. In this case, the harmonized version occurs at the start of the recapitulation. It is, indeed, so intensely chromatic that it momentarily gives the impression that the preceding development section is continuing. The sotto voce minuet theme of the second movement, with its descending bass line (chromatically intensified in the melody's second half), is one that carries an infinite feeling of melancholy. Even so, the theme is surpassed in expressive intensity by the movement's major-mode middle section. The return to the minor brings with it a new accompanimental figure in smooth triplets, though its more flowing motion serves only to set in relief a coda whose halting phrases seem stricken with grief.

Pyotr Ilyich Tchaikovsky (1840-1893) – Méditation from Souvenir d'un lieu cher, Op.42

Souvenir d'un lieu cher (memories of a dear place) is a collection of three pieces for violin and piano. The first - Méditation - was written in Clarens in Switzerland in March 1878. Tchaikovsky originally intended it to be the slow movement of his violin concerto but later replaced it with the more substantial Canzonetta and recast it for violin and piano. The other two movements were composed in May of the same year on the estate of his benefactress, Nadeja von Meck at Brailovo in Ukraine which is the "dear place" of the title. It was published in May 1879. There is no record of the first performance. The original manuscript was given to Nadeja von Meck. In an accompanying letter Tchaikovsky wrote "I have left my pieces with Marcel (the estate manager) to give to you. In my opinion, the first of these is the best, but it gave me the most trouble; it is called Méditation and is to be played a tempo Andante. The second is a very brisk scherzo, and the third - Chant sans paroles. On giving these pieces to Marcel I experienced an indescribable melancholy, which stayed with me even as I sat down to write this; until I saw the lilacs still in full bloom, the grass still long, and the roses only just starting to blossom!"

Dobrinka Tabakova (1980-) – Nocturne (2008) and Halo (1999)

Note by Lakeside Arts

Born in Plovdiv, Bulgaria, Dobrinka Tabakova settled in London in 1991. She was Composer in Association with the Leicester International Music Festival in 2007, Composer in Residence with the BBC Concert Orchestra in the 2018-19 season, and the Halle Orchestra's Artist in Association in 2022-23. Composed in 2008, Nocturne is based on gently insistent rippling figures, which taper away at the end. Halo dates from 1999. Tabakova has described how it was prompted by the sight of a halo (a ring of light reflected by ice crystals in the Earth's atmosphere) round the Moon one summer's night. The three movements suggest the halo's "hypothetical life", starting with "its birth from darkness", then "the full strength of light", and ending with "a mature and settled halo". The first movement emerges from the opposition of low, strident chords and soft high-pitched chimes. A quietly propulsive, high-lying dance rhythm then takes over. The second movement is energised by rapidly repeated notes, against isolated gestures, before more dance, this time with a distinct Bulgarian flavour to the rhythm. The third movement is more static, centred on a repeated rising and falling phrase, suggesting a constant circling motion, which gradually winds down towards the end, rising to the top of the keyboard.

Manuel de Falla (1876-1946) – Nana from Siete canciones populares españolas Note by Dr. Richard E. Rodd

When Manuel de Falla was preparing his opera La Vida Breve for its first Paris performance, at the Opéra Comique on December 30, 1913 (it had been premièred in Nice on April 1), he received two requests—one from the soprano Luisa Vela, who was performing the leading role of Salud in the cast of La Vida Breve; the other, from a Greek singing teacher. Vela was planning a series of solo recitals during the coming months, and she asked Falla to provide some songs in Spanish style for her programs. The Greek singing teacher wanted advice about the appropriate accompanimental style for some melodies from his homeland. Falla experimented with setting one of the Greek songs, and discovered that he could extrapolate a suitable harmonic idiom from the implications of the melody itself. He tried out this new technique in the songs he was preparing for Vela, which he had decided would be settings of seven popular indigenous melodies culled from various regions of Spain. The Siete Canciones Populares Españolas were largely completed by the time he retreated to Spain in 1914 in the face of the German invasion of France; he and Vela gave their première at the Ateneo in Madrid on January 14, 1915. Nana is an Andalusian lullaby.

The mystic aspect to Rachmaninov's art can be felt strongly throughout his Cello Sonata, his most famous piece of chamber music. While there are no obvious quotations from any Orthodox hymns, the style of many of the themes, with their close intervals, their incense-filled colours, the passionate, almost obsessive repetition of single notes (particularly in the main theme of the slow movement), and the frequent bell-like sonorities, owe a huge debt to the music of the Russian Church that was such an important influence on the composer's life. Written in 1901, the year after the perennially beloved Second Piano Concerto, the Cello Sonata reflects, perhaps, the state of Rachmaninov's heart and mind. Having suffered a nervous breakdown after the catastrophic failure of his First Symphony in 1897, Rachmaninov had fought his way back to mental and creative health. Surely it is not fanciful to hear an echo of this in the struggles of the first movement, with its conflict between semitones and whole tones; in the dark night of the Scherzo; and then in the blazing joy of the Finale? No bearded Russian priest with his Easter cry 'Christ is Risen' can ever have sounded more triumphant than the cello does as it announces the glorious second theme of this movement. The whole sonata, imbued as it is with the classical discipline that is so vital a feature of all Rachmaninov's music, encompasses a vast range of romantic emotion—a journey of the soul.

Ludwig van Beethoven (1770-1827) – Piano Sonata No. 21 in C major, Op. 53 "Waldstein" by Mike Wheeler

Beethoven began composing his 'Waldstein' Sonata in November 1803, soon after finishing work on the 'Eroica' Symphony. Inevitably, the symphony's unprecedented time-scale and heroic style carried over into his work in other genres. The Sonata stretched the capabilities of both player and instrument, with its heightened virtuosity, expansive scale, wide dynamic variation and extended range of high notes. All of this reflects Beethoven's acquisition of a new piano by the French maker Erard, at just the moment when its extra power answered his expressive needs. The Sonata takes its nickname from Count Ferdinand Waldstein, a Bonn aristocrat who had been one of Beethoven's earliest patrons (it was Waldstein who bid farewell to Beethoven, when he left Bonn to settle in Vienna in 1792, with the words "With the help of assiduous labour you shall receive Mozart's spirit from Haydn's hands"). Although their association had long since ended, Beethoven dedicated the Sonata to him in 1805. All three movements begin quietly, and it is easy to forget how much of the Sonata is played at a low dynamic level. In the first movement, this focuses attention on the forward impetus of the opening repeated chords. These play a major role in driving the music onwards, but quick running figures, for both hands, also contribute, while the tender, chorale-like second theme provides a lyrical contrast. The original slow movement was removed by Beethoven at a late stage and published separately with the title *Andante Favouri*. The brief slow movement that replaced it is one of those structurally ambiguous passages that would feature in a number of Beethoven's later works. It is not really long enough to be an independent movement in its own right, but it is too substantial to be merely a slow introduction to the finale, although this follows without a break. The finale's relaxed, expansive rondo theme builds an extraordinary degree of momentum, which carries it through a powerful minor-key episode. The music then seems inexplicably to run out of steam, but this is just a drawing in of breath to prepare for the rapid coda, which speeds up the rondo theme to an almost manic degree. Even here, the music is mostly quiet, the sudden loud explosions standing out all the more starkly as a result.

Artist Biographies

Isata Kanneh-Mason *piano*

Pianist Isata Kanneh-Mason offers eclectic and stimulating recital programmes with repertoire encompassing Haydn and Mozart, Fanny Mendelssohn and Clara Schumann, Chopin and Brahms to Gershwin and beyond. In concerto, she is equally at home in Felix Mendelssohn and Beethoven as in Prokofiev and Rachmaninoff. Isata is in high demand from concert halls and orchestras worldwide. In July 2024, she was invited to perform at the First Night of the BBC Proms at the Royal Albert Hall with the BBC Symphony and conductor Elim Chan, a performance which resulted in stellar reviews in the mainstream press. Isata went on to appear as concerto soloist with the European Union Youth Orchestra and Iván Fischer in summer 2024 performing Dohnányi's Variations on a Nursery Tune at New York's Carnegie Hall. Highlights of the 2025/26 season include Rachmaninoff's third piano concerto with Bar Avni and the Netherlands Radio Philharmonic at the Amsterdam Concertgebouw, and with Petr Popelkaway with the Prague Radio Symphony at the Rudolfinum. Isata makes further debuts with the Naples Philharmonic and Seattle Symphony, and returns to the City of Birmingham Symphony, the BBC Scottish Symphony, Detroit Symphony, and National Arts Centre Orchestra Ottawa. Isata continues her collaboration with her brother, Sheku, for a European duo recital tour in February, taking in Paris, Madrid, Barcelona, Berlin, Geneva, Turin, Amsterdam, and London's Wigmore Hall. In the Americas, the duo will perform in Rio de Janeiro, São Paulo, Montevideo, Boston, Washington D.C., Cleveland, and New York's Lincoln Center. Isata also appears in solo recital

and in chamber music at Wigmore Hall, with further solo recital appearances at the Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum in Boston, Powell Hall in St Louis, De Bijloke in Ghent, the Howland Music Circle in New York, Norwegian National Opera in Oslo, and a return to the Philadelphia Chamber Music Society among others. In 2024/25, Isata gave performances with bass-baritone Gerald Finley in the Czech Republic and Germany, appeared in solo recital at the Lucerne Festival, Piano aux Jacobins Toulouse, the Schumann-Haus Düsseldorf, PHIL Haarlem, and on tour across the USA, and performed with the London, Bergen, Bremen, and Duisburg philharmonics, the North Carolina Symphony, and on tour with the Staatskapelle Weimar, and the Residentie Orkest. Isata is a Decca Classics artist and has recorded four solo albums for the label – *Romance* (2019), *Summertime* (2021), *Childhood Tales*, and *Mendelssohn* (2024). Her most recent release presents music from two Mendelssohn siblings, including the glittering First Piano Concerto by Felix and the long-lost 'Easter Sonata' by his exceptionally talented but overlooked elder sister, Fanny with transcriptions of some of Felix's most famous music by Rachmaninoff and Liszt. Isata has received many awards, including the coveted Leonard Bernstein Award from the Schleswig-Holstein Festival, an Opus Klassik award for best young artist. She also enjoys composing and arranging and released two albums of her favourite works for intermediate and advanced piano students through ABRSM Publishing in 2023.

Mariatu Kanneh-Mason cello

Mariatu is seventeen years old and the youngest of the Kanneh-Mason siblings, she attends Trinity Catholic School in Nottingham. An exciting presence on the concert stage, in June 2026 Neil Fisher of *The Times* described her as having 'the forceful tone of a soloist with personality' and that "her rich timbre sparked shivers". She studies cello with Ben Davies, and piano with Fiona Harris at Junior Royal Academy of Music and will be taking auditions for full-time conservatoire study in the Autumn of 2026. At age 10, she gained Grade 8 distinction on the cello and holds a piano diploma distinction (ARSM). She has performed with the Kanneh-Masons in a series of concerts around the UK, Europe, Australia, USA, Canada and in Antigua and Barbuda. Also with her siblings, Mariatu performed at The Royal Albert Hall for the 2021 BBC Proms, and for The Prince of Wales and The Duchess of Cornwall in March 2017, at St Johns Smith Square in 2018, at The Times and Sunday Times Cheltenham Literature Festival and the Barbican in 2020. She recently joined her family at the Barbican to perform a concert including Carnival of the Animals with Michael Morpurgo and played in recital with three of her siblings at Wigmore Hall in June 2026. Mariatu has appeared on several television and radio programmes with her siblings, including BBC *World Service*, *Al Jazeera TV*, Channel 4, BBC 1 *The One Show* (in 2016 and 2025), *Sunday with Laura Kuenssberg*, and the BBC4 documentary, *Young, Gifted and Classical*. She has featured, with the Kanneh-Masons, in a documentary for Sunday Morning CBS Television (USA), *Royal Variety Performance* (ITV), *Strictly Come Dancing* (BBC1), The BBC Proms (BBC2 and BBC4), and the *Imagine* documentary for BBC1, *This House is Full of Music*. Mariatu is featured, with her family, in CBS *Sixty Minutes*, first aired in December 2025. She acted as co-presenter as part of The Kanneh-Mason Family Takeover series on Classic FM. She has also recorded for the Decca Classics album, *Carnival*, and on the new family album, *River of Music*. Mariatu plays a fine French cello and bow kindly on loan from Beares International Violin Society.

Braimah Kanneh-Mason violin

The second eldest of the Kanneh-Mason siblings, Braimah Kanneh-Mason is a dynamic and engaging violinist who has performed throughout the UK, Europe, USA and the Australia as a soloist and as a chamber musician. In recent seasons he has played concerti with the Bournemouth Symphony Orchestra, the London Philharmonic Orchestra and the Bath Philharmonia. An avid chamber musician, Braimah is a member of the Kanneh-Mason Piano Trio, Festival Academy Budapest Ensemble and Kaleidoscope Collective. He has performed at venues and festivals such as London's Wigmore Hall and Barbican Hall, Melbourne Symphony Hall, Verbier Festival, Highgate International Chamber Music Festival, Leicester International Chamber Music Festival and collaborated with artists such as Nicola Benedetti, Tom Poster and Priya Mitchell. In 2024 he appeared in two concerts at the BBC Proms with his brother Sheku, Brazilian guitarist Plinio Fernandés and Fantasia Orchestra, conducted by Tom Featherstonhaugh. He also played Coleridge Taylor's violin concerto in the USA with the Canton Symphony and Illinois Symphony Orchestras. Through playing and presenting Braimah has recorded an episode in the BBC series, *In the Studio*, has co-presented a radio programme for Classic FM and recorded as a soloist for BBC Radio 3 and performed on BBC Radio 4's Loose Ends show. Braimah is a passionate advocate for equal opportunity and diversity in music education and is a Cultural Ambassador to Antigua and Barbuda and a Junior Ambassador for Music in Secondary Schools Trust. He has been a mentor at Sistema England, Junior Music Works and a mentor for consecutive years for the Antigua and Barbuda Youth Orchestra (ABYSO). Most recently, Braimah has studied with Barnabás Kelemen and Eszter Perenyi at the Franz Liszt Academy of Music in Budapest. He is a graduate of the Royal Academy of Music where he was a scholarship student with Mateja Marinkovic and Jack Liebeck, winning the Harold Craxton Prize, the John McAslan Prize and the Dame Ruth Raiton Chamber Music Prize. Braimah plays a Matteo Goffriller violin on generous loan from a private sponsor through Florian Leonhard Fine Violins.