

Royal Liverpool Philharmonic Orchestra November 17 programme complementary content

Pianist Isata Kanneh-Mason returns for a second season as the Royal Liverpool Philharmonic Orchestra's Young Artist in Residence, and opens her residency in playful fashion with a pair of November concerts.

She will perform Dohnányi's irresistible *Variations on a Nursery Tune* as part of two delightful programmes of music.

In addition, this companion page draws together a range of complementary content that we hope will help shine further light on the pieces, the people who composed them and the performers bringing them to life here in Hope Street.

Isata Kanneh-Mason

Isata Kanneh-Mason's first experience of working with the Royal Liverpool Philharmonic Orchestra came not in the concert hall, but in the recording studio at The Friary in Everton.

"It was when I recorded the Clara Schumann concerto," the pianist recalls. "That was on my first album, so that was quite a special occasion."

"It was amazing, because I only met them on the first day of recording and it just worked instantly. It was a really great first meeting."

That was in April 2019 and led to the release of *Romance* – Kanneh-Mason's first solo album, which celebrates the music of Clara Schumann and reached the top of the UK classical charts. One music critic wrote of the collaboration that it was like "music-making between friends".

Those friends reconvened again last March (this time in the Philharmonic Hall itself) to collaborate on her second album *Summertime*, a collection of pieces by American composers from Barber and Gershwin to Earl Wild and Amy Beach, along with work by the African-British composer Samuel Coleridge-Taylor.

And that burgeoning music-making relationship has also manifested itself in the 26-year-old being invited to become Young Artist in Residence at Hope Street over the past two years.

For 2022/23, that means four concerts in Liverpool Philharmonic Hall and next May, Kanneh-Mason will play a recital with members of the Orchestra in St George's Hall Concert Room.

First up is this pair of November performances, where she will play Ernő Dohnányi's *Variations on a Nursery Tune* under Domingo Hindoyan's baton.

On his original manuscript, Dohnányi subtitled his 1914 work "for the enjoyment of friends of humour, and the annoyance of others" and his imaginative treatment of a favourite childhood song has certainly struck a chord with English audiences in particular.

"It's something that I saw in concert about five years ago," Kanneh-Mason explains. "I was watching a fellow student play it in a concert and I knew nothing about the piece."

"I remember this huge, dramatic opening from the orchestra, and I kept thinking 'when's the piano going to come in?' Then the piano came in with 'Twinkle, Twinkle, Little Star', and I remember the audience bursting into laughter. I just thought that was such an amazing opening to a piece."

“I loved the piece from then on and wanted to play it. So as soon as I got the opportunity, I put it forward.

“It’s a very funny piece and has lots of surprises, and I think it’s an exciting concert experience if you don’t know what to expect as well.”

Conversely, her concerts with the Orchestra and Hindoyan in April will see Kanneh-Mason play one of her own favourites, Prokofiev’s *Piano Concerto No 3 in C major*, a work which carried her through a difficult moment as an 18-year-old in her first year at the Royal Academy.

She explains: “I was in a motivational slump in terms of not wanting to practise, and then I heard this piece, and I was so amazed and inspired by it and it gave me my drive to practise back and got me out of my slump.

“I think it’s natural, even if you love something there are going to be days where you’re just tired, and you have to find ways to just bring that back when it goes away for a bit.”

Taking yourself away from your instrument to walk, read or watch a film can all help, but Kanneh-Mason admits that what has often worked best for her has “been pieces of music, like for example the Prokofiev, just watching some concerts or listening to recordings of people playing.”

The eldest of the famous musical siblings, her first memory of playing the piano was as a five-year-old on holiday in the Caribbean and sitting in front of her grandparents’ instrument.

Each of the seven young Kanneh-Masons started by learning piano before taking up another instrument – with Isata also playing violin and viola. In addition to cellist Sheku, her brother Braimah is a violinist, while sisters Konya and Aminata play both piano and violin, and Jeneba and youngest sibling Mariatu play cello and piano.

All of them received their first musical education at their state primary and secondary schools at home in Nottingham, travelling to London on Saturdays for additional lessons at the Royal Academy of Music’s Junior Academy.

Kanneh-Mason decided she wanted to be a professional pianist early on.

She smiles: “I was always thinking about what I wanted to be, I had a whole long list of things. I think I was about eight and I said ‘oh, is being a pianist something you could do for a job?’ and my parents said yes. Then I decided I wanted to do that.”

So, what else was in the running?

“I think I had gymnast, mountain climber, artist...everything I was enjoying as a hobby were things I was going to be. But they all fizzled out quite quickly apart from pianist.”

That has proved to be a wise choice, with Kanneh-Mason forging a reputation for expressive performance and virtuoso technique. It’s seen her in increasing demand nationally and internationally, both as a soloist and recitalist, with a string of commitments abroad keeping her busy since January.

So it was unusual for the entire Kanneh-Mason family to come together for a tour of key Australian cities this summer, performing together on stage to fulfil dates that had been postponed for the best part of two years because of the pandemic.

“Only my dad had been previously for work, but for everyone else it was the first time so that was exciting to experience that together,” she says.

“We play together less often now. Also, playing together very often was never a main thing for us, we played together in smaller groups – duos and trios mainly.

“But in terms of all playing together in concerts, that was only something we all started doing about six years ago and it was never going to be a serious thing.

“It was nice to come back together and play together as a seven, but I think we kind of felt that’s the last time we want to do that.”

It seems we won’t be seeing the Kanneh-Masons together on stage at Liverpool Philharmonic Hall any time soon.

But Isata isn’t the only member of the family appearing in Liverpool this season. Mum Kadiatu will take over John Suchet’s mantle to present the Spirit of Christmas concerts in December.

“I think she’s really looking forward to doing that,” Kanneh-Mason says. “If we all end up doing different things for Liverpool, that will be nice.”

Could there perhaps be a third album in the pipeline?

“I haven’t got any concrete plans yet,” she says.

“But I do hope to do more stuff in Liverpool because I have such a base there now that I’m always going to come back at some point, and it feels like a home to record in.”

Domingo Hindoyan

Domingo Hindoyan was born in Caracas in 1980 to a violinist father and a lawyer mother. He started his musical career as a violinist in the ground-breaking Venezuelan music education programme, El Sistema.

He studied conducting at Haute école de musique in Geneva, where he gained his masters, and in 2012 was invited to join the Allianz International Conductor’s Academy, through which he worked with the London Philharmonic and the Philharmonia Orchestra, and with conductors like Esa-Pekka Salonen and Sir Andrew Davis.

He was appointed first assistant conductor to Daniel Barenboim at the Deutsche Staatsoper Berlin in 2013 and in 2019, he took up a position as principal guest conductor of the Polish National Radio Symphony Orchestra.

In the same year, he made his debut with the Royal Liverpool Philharmonic Orchestra and was appointed as successor to Vasily Petrenko in 2020, taking up this position last September.

Bela Bartók

When Bela Bartók began what became his grand one-act pantomime ballet *The Wooden Prince* in 1914, it marked the end of a three-year hiatus in his career.

The Hungarian composer had been disappointed by the reaction to his opera *Bluebeard’s Castle*, composed for – but spurned by – the Hungarian Fine Arts Commission in 1911. He spent the intervening years mostly collecting and arranging examples of folk songs.

Rejected by the Austro-Hungarian army because of poor health, he turned to composing once more and the fairytale which had been outlined by Hungarian writer, poet and film critic *Béla Balázs* – librettist of *Bluebeard’s Castle*.

A prince falls in love with a princess but is frustrated by a fairy who uses a raging forest stream to separate them. The prince puts his cloak and crown on a pole to attract her attention, but after the sprite brings the ‘wooden prince’ to life the princess goes away with him instead.

Incidentally, when *The Wooden Prince* was premiered at the Budapest Opera in 1917 it proved enough of a success to spur the venue to look at *Bluebeard's Castle*, which it then staged the following year.

Bartók later created two leaner orchestral suites from the work.

Ernő Dohnányi

Pianist, composer and conductor Ernst von Dohnányi, also known as Ernő Dohnányi, was born in Pozsony (now Bratislava) in 1877 and received his first music lessons from a cathedral organist and from his father, who was an amateur cellist.

He went on to study piano and composition at Budapest's Royal National Hungarian Academy of Music.

Less influenced by his country's folk music than his contemporaries Bela Bartók and Zoltan Kodaly, he instead looked to the late-Romantic style of composers like Brahms – swayed, in part, by composition tutor Hans von Koessler who was a particular devotee.

And in fact, Brahms himself was so impressed by the 18-year-old Dohnányi's *Piano Quintet* that he arranged to have it played in Vienna.

Dohnányi may not be remembered or played today in the way Bartók and Kodaly are, but he was a versatile composer who wrote works for orchestra, chamber orchestras, piano, choirs and the stage.

He composed perhaps what remains his best-known work, *Variations on a Nursery Tune*, in 1914 while he was a teacher at the Hochschule in Berlin.

Did you know? Dohnányi's son Hans was a member of the German secret service, the Abwehr, but was also a leading member of the anti-Nazi resistance and helped Jews to escape the country. He was involved in plots to kill Hitler and was executed in April 1945.

Antonin Dvořák

On October 1, 1892, four days after his arrival in America, Antonin Dvořák set foot inside New York's National Conservatory of Music for the first time.

He had been enticed across the Atlantic by the conservatory's founder Jeannette Meyer Thurber and an impressive annual salary of \$15,000 – as well as the lure of discovering American music – and would spend a total of three years as director of the East 17th Street venue.

Dvořák was contracted to work three hours a day, six days a week with four months off over the summer.

Within a few months he had received a commission from the New York Philharmonic to write a new symphony. And the idea for what would become one of the world's best known and most popular pieces of classical music started to take shape.

Symphony No 9 'From the New World' was premiered by the Philharmonic at Carnegie Hall on December 16, 1893.

After the interval, the Orchestra will also perform Dvořák's *Slavonic Dance* as a tribute to Libor Pešek KBE. Libor was Principal Conductor and Music Director of the Royal Liverpool Philharmonic Orchestra from 1987 until 1997, and sadly passed away last month.

About the Music

Béla Bartók (1881-1945): Suite from *The Wooden Prince*

Composed: 1914-16

First Performed: 12 May 1917, Budapest Opera.

The outbreak of World War I put an end to Bartók's extensive folksong-collecting expeditions in Eastern Europe and the Balkans, which had so enriched his own musical style and outlook. Instead, it forced him to concentrate on composition. The ballet *The Wooden Prince* is the biggest score he produced at this time, not just in length but in its huge, colour-enhanced orchestration – the score features saxophones, cornets as well as trumpets, and plenty of percussion. Musically Bartók was partly looking backwards – to Wagner, Richard Strauss and Debussy in particular – but at the same time he was focusing his attention on new directions, drawing on and transforming the rhythms of the folk music he'd researched, and adding scintillating dissonance to the glittering orchestral colours.

As for the story, it could be seen as a happier follow-up to Bartók's opera *Bluebeard's Castle* (1911) – mind you, operatic love stories don't come much sadder than *Bluebeard*! In the fairy-tale story, a prince dresses a tree in his clothes to attract the attention of a beautiful princess; but alas, she falls in love with the tree and brings it to life! Like Bluebeard, the Prince falls into despair, but the Princess takes pity on him, returns the 'wooden prince' to tree-form again, and the two happily unite – well, we can hope.

Ernő Dohnányi (1877-1960): *Variations on a Nursery Tune*

Composed: 1914

First Performed: 17 February 1914, soloist, Dohnányi

Unlike his modernist compatriot Bartók, Ernő Dohnányi wasn't a radical, nor did he explore dark, disturbing psychological territory. In his orchestral, chamber and operatic music he was largely content to enrich the forms and styles handed on by the greats of the 19th century rather than subvert them or pull them apart. But enrich them he did, especially in his chamber music. But there is one striking exception to all this: the *Variations on a Nursery Tune*. In this delightful piece, a very well-known tune (don't worry, you'll recognise it!) is led through a series of musical adventures, at times recalling the fantastically inventive scores for the great *Tom and Jerry* and *Bugs Bunny* cartoons. Composers well-known at the time – Brahms, Liszt, Richard Strauss, Tchaikovsky and others – are parodied, on the whole affectionately, but you don't have to identify them to enjoy the fun. Just don't expect anything to turn out quite as you might anticipate.

Antonín Dvořák (1841-1904): *Slavonic Dance Op 72 No 2 in E minor*

Composed: 1886

Symphony No 9 in E minor, Op 95, *From the New World*

1. Adagio – Allegro molto
2. Largo
3. Scherzo: Molto Vivace
4. Allegro con fuoco

Composed: 1893

First Performed: 16 December 1893, Carnegie Hall, New York, New York Philharmonic, cond. Anton Seidl

Before we hear the *New World* Symphony, the Royal Liverpool Philharmonic Orchestra pay tribute to their former Music Director, Libor Pešek, with a performance of one of his countryman Antonín Dvořák's most popular *Slavonic Dances* – music that distils the spirit of Dvořák and Pešek's native land in a deliciously melancholic dance tune. It's the kind of music to which Libor Pešek unfailingly brought unique love and insight.

Having shown his fellow Czechs how to write truly ‘national’ classical music in his *Slavonic Dances*, Dvořák set out to do the same for the much younger nation of the USA in his Ninth Symphony, composed while he was director of the newly-formed New York Conservatory. As in his native country, Dvořák hoped to show how turning to indigenous folk music could provide the roots of a national American style, and in a newspaper article he argued that it was the music of Black and Native Americans that provided the most vibrant and fertile examples. Dvořák wasn't prepared for the indignation this provoked, much of it unashamedly racist in character. But he soldiered on: if white America wouldn't accept his thesis expressed in words, would it be different if he expressed it in music?

It turns out he was right. The premiere of the *New World* Symphony was a sensational success, and it has been hugely popular – and influential – ever since, and not just with classical musicians. Steeped in folk music from boyhood, it's not surprising that Dvořák could create ‘Czech’ melodies of his own at will. What is really surprising is how much he was able to do the same with North American music, particularly Black American spirituals. The beautiful cor anglais melody in the Largo sounds so ‘authentic’ that for years it was taken to be a genuine spiritual – one that Dvořák had perhaps heard sung by his Black pupil Harry Burleigh. The debt to Native American music is less obvious, but apparently the pounding rhythms of the Scherzo were inspired by seeing and hearing native dancers at the Czech community in Spillville, Iowa. What is most remarkable though, is the way Dvořák draws all these elements together into a panoramic symphonic statement – there's so much more to this than a collection of musical postcards.

But finally a question: what about the ending? The symphony seems to be powering to a loudly affirmative conclusion, but the final chord dies away slowly, on winds. Not so affirmative after all? Is doubt mixed in with the hope? Given the way race relations developed (or failed to develop) in the 20th Century, this could be genuine foresight.