

# SOUTHBANK CENTRE

## Abel Selaocoe, Seckou Keita & Chineke! Orchestra

Friday 12 May 2023, 7pm  
Royal Festival Hall

Welcome to Classical Music: Spring/Summer 2023. With this programme, we continue to celebrate classical music in all its forms with leading artists and ensembles from the UK and around the world.

In close collaboration with our dynamic family of Resident Orchestras and Resident Artists, we are presenting the full spectrum of classical music, as well as embracing new approaches to how we do so. We are thrilled to welcome such an incredible range of global artists to our spaces – and beyond – to perform, and you to see them.

Toks Dada, Head of Classical Music, Southbank Centre

### Repertoire

- Fela Sowande** Joyful Day, Nostalgia and Akinla from African Suite 16'
- Abel Selaocoe** Qhawe arr. Benjamin Woodgates for cello, percussion & string orchestra 7'
- Seckou Keita** Simply Beautiful Miro & Bamba, The Light of Touba from African Rhapsodies arr. Davide Mantovani for kora & orchestra 11'
- Abel Selaocoe** Tshepo, arr. Fred Thomas 5'

### Interval

- Samuel Coleridge-Taylor** Valse (Andante con moto) & Allegro molto from 4 Novelletten for string orchestra, Op.52 11'
- Abel Selaocoe, Seckou Keita & Barak Schmoool** Concerto for cello & kora (London premiere) 18'

### Performers

Chineke! Orchestra  
Kazem Abdullah *conductor*  
Abel Selaocoe *cello*  
Seckou Keita *kora*  
Sidiki Dembele *percussion*

This performance lasts approximately 2 hours with a 20-minute interval.

### Fela Sowande (1905-87)

#### African Suite

1. *Joyful Day*
2. *Nostalgia*
3. *Qhawe*
4. *Tshepo*
5. *Akinla*

We hear a lot about Western musicians being influenced by sounds from outside Europe and America, but very little about musical inspirations travelling in the opposite direction. Tonight's concert looks to redress that balance, celebrating composers from across Africa (and of African heritage) who have woven together their own rich musical traditions with the sonic possibilities of a Western orchestra.

Fela Sowande was a pioneer in that respect. Born near Lagos in 1905, the son of an Anglican priest, he was immersed in Nigerian church music early in his life, but also knew his country's older musical traditions intimately. He moved to London in 1934, initially to study civil engineering, before being drawn inescapably to music. He went on to forge an astonishingly broad and glittering career, forming a jazz septet with Caribbean musicians, working as a theatre organist for the BBC and as choirmaster at the Kingsway Hall in Holborn, and collaborating with Fats Waller, Paul Robeson and Vera Lynn, among many others.

He remembered the rhythms and melodies of his earlier life in his 1944 *African Suite*, written while German bombs were still falling on London, and broadcast on BBC radio that same year. In the opening *Joyful Day*, Sowande drops a catchy, buoyant melody by Ghanaian composer and musicologist Ephraim Amu into a rather polite, respectable Western-style setting, where it nonetheless manages to exert its distinctive personality. The passionate, at times tragic *Nostalgia*, in Sowande's words, 'expresses the nostalgic memories of "an African in England"'. The closing *Akinla* employs a traditional melody from southern Nigeria to propel the Suite to its dashing conclusion.

## Abel Selaocoe (b.1992)

### Qhawe

Born in the township of Sebokeng near Johannesburg, cellist, singer and composer Abel Selaocoe moved to the UK aged 18 to study at Manchester's Royal Northern College of Music. Since then, he has performed widely throughout the country (and is currently a Southbank Centre Resident Artist), his music refusing neat pigeonholing in its joyful melding of styles and genres.

'Qhawe' means hero in Zulu, and Selaocoe has dedicated the piece to his nephew, who he describes as 'the tonic to the family'. As well as celebrating the spirit and energy of children, the piece has a more specific inspiration in the role that young people play in South African church music. In the nation's Apostolic (or Postola) Church, it's largely children who are responsible for a service's music, providing the impetus for a congregation's worship. It's a feeling of joyful release that Selaocoe captures in the piece's syncopated rhythms and infectious, unpredictable pulse.

## Seckou Keita (b.1978)

### African Rhapsodies

#### 2. *Simply Beautiful Miro*

##### 10. *Bamba, The Light of Touba*

Born in Ziguinchor, southern Senegal, Seckou Keita travelled to the UK in 1999 and is currently based in Nottingham. He's a famed singer, composer and virtuoso of the kora, a 22-string lute/harp whose exquisite, intricate sound ripples through his supremely lyrical music. Keita has collaborated widely with musicians from many different traditions, but always dreamed of music that would combine his instrument with a Western orchestra – a kora concerto, perhaps. Rather than obeying the strictures of that Western classical form, however, what Keita ended up creating was the ten-piece suite *African Rhapsodies*, which lines up his kora and an orchestra as equal partners rather than competitors.

Tonight's concert features two pieces from *African Rhapsodies*. In the Mandinka language of West Africa, 'miro' means thought. Accordingly, *Simply Beautiful Miro*, based around a melody carried by Selaocoe's cello, encourages positivity and optimism in our thoughts and actions, even in the face of challenges and obstacles that the world might throw in our paths, delivered through warm, poignantly beautiful music that slowly builds in richness and expressiveness.

*Bamba, the Light of Touba* celebrates the life and beliefs of Cheikh Ahmadou Bamba Mbacké, founder of the Mouride Order of mystical Sufi Muslims, whose base is in the small city of Touba in central Senegal (where Bamba is also buried). One of the most influential spiritual leaders in West Africa, Bamba devoted his life to his faith and also to social activism, encouraging a peaceful struggle against French colonisers, and a dedication to pacifism, hard work, courtesy and respect.

## Abel Selaocoe

### Tshepo, arr. Fred Thomas

*Tshepo* forms one movement of the larger-scale *Four Spirits* that Selaocoe recently premiered, bringing together his own cello and vocal expertise with a symphony orchestra. Its title means faith in the southern African Sesotho language, but Selaocoe is keen for us to consider faith in a universal rather than specifically religious sense – as an expression of hope, and as a safeguard against life's challenges and unpredictabilities. The piece begins with Selaocoe both

singing and playing, accompanying his elegant vocal melody with a cello bassline, before slow-moving, almost hymn-like harmonies, and a richer return for his opening music.

*Tshepo* was commissioned by Manchester Collective in partnership with the Royal Philharmonic Society.

## Samuel Coleridge-Taylor (1875-1912)

### 4 Novelletten

#### 3. *Valse (Andante con moto)*

#### 4. *Allegro molto*

We leap back in time to 1902 for the *Novelletten* written by the 27-year-old Samuel Coleridge-Taylor. Born in London to an English mother and a father from Sierra Leone, he gained his unusual name because of his mother's love for the poetry of Samuel Taylor Coleridge, and entered the Royal College of Music at the age of just 15, where he studied composition under Stanford and was greatly admired by Elgar.

His *Novelletten* may have been inspired by Schumann's piano miniatures of the same name, but were surely influenced, too, by Coleridge-Taylor's own prowess as a concert violinist, which he puts to good use in 'Valse'. It features a solo violin from the start, whose lofty melody slowly drifts back down to earth, and, following a livelier, brighter central section, returns to bring the piece to a wistful close. It's followed by the *Novelletten*'s finale, dramatic and urgent in its mood, with hard-edged, driving rhythms propelling the music along to its joyful conclusion.

Programme notes © David Kettle, 2023

## Abel Selaocoe, Seckou Keita & Barak Schmool

### Double concerto for kora, cello and orchestra (London premiere)

This 18-minute piece starts with a simple but beautiful melody that builds and develops to bring the audience on a fascinating exploration through multiple musical dimensions. One can call it a 21st-century concerto where the two incredible soloists, Seckou Keita and Abel Selaocoe (also the composers), create an intertwined soundworld of *lento* and *allegro* moments before bursting into a musical firework.

The result is a beautiful journey through times that celebrates the Baroque era and the new-found freedom it brought to music, and musicians, and the rightful space for improvisation that developed at this time. But this concerto is also a journey through space, wrapping rhythms and melodies from Western Africa to the Southern shore of the continent into the piece alongside the Baroque.

There is no need to fasten your seatbelts here... you are in for a treat and an incredible musical ride.

Programme note © Abel Selaocoe, 2023

### Find out more

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