

# SOUTHBANK CENTRE

## Isata Kanneh-Mason & Maxwell Quartet

Friday 27 January 2023, 7pm  
Queen Elizabeth Hall

Welcome to Classical Music: Autumn/Winter 2022/23. This new edition, the first under my curatorship since arriving as Head of Classical Music, celebrates classical music in all its forms with artists and ensembles from the UK and around the world.

Having spent the majority of my life immersed in classical music, it is a tremendous honour to be leading the programme at the Southbank Centre, and flying the flag for this incredible art form. We look forward to welcoming you to our spaces.

Toks Dada, Head of Classical Music, Southbank Centre

### Repertoire

#### Felix Mendelssohn

Piano Trio No.2 in C minor, Op.66 30'

#### Eleanor Alberga

Clouds for piano quintet 23'

#### Interval

#### Ernő Dohnányi

Piano Quintet No.1 in C minor, Op.1 30'

### Performers

#### Maxwell Quartet

Colin Scobie *violin*

George Smith *violin*

Elliott Perks *viola*

Duncan Strachan *cello*

Isata Kanneh-Mason *piano*

#### Felix Mendelssohn (1809–47)

Piano Trio No.2 in C minor, Op.66

I Allegro energico e con fuoco

II Andante espressivo

III Scherzo: Molto allegro quasi presto

IV Finale: Allegro appassionato

There are thankfully few composers for whom a piece written at the age of 36 qualifies as a 'late' work. But Felix Mendelssohn was to die two years after he completed his Piano Trio No.2 in 1845, aged just 38. His brief life was one of blazing achievements and creativity as a revered composer, pianist, conductor of Leipzig's Gewandhaus Orchestra, and founding director of the city's music conservatoire.

Indeed, his hectic lifestyle was beginning to make its mark on Mendelssohn's health at the time he wrote the Trio, while taking a break from his Leipzig responsibilities in Frankfurt. 'I want to stay here quietly through winter, spring and summer sans journey, sans musical festival, sans everything,' he wrote to his sister Rebecka. In Frankfurt, however, word quickly spread that the great musician was in town, and Mendelssohn was besieged by visitors. The composer enlisted one of them – an English youngster named William Smith Rockstro – to play through his new Trio, with himself and his great friend, violinist Ferdinand David, concertmaster at the Gewandhaus Orchestra.

The piece probably pushed Rockstro to his technical limits: Mendelssohn had specifically set out to write dazzling, demanding music that treated his three players very much as equals. The first movement opens with stormy, churning figurations for all three instruments, before the violin and cello begin to sing the movement's main melody. Mendelssohn cranks up the intensity even higher in the movement's second main theme. In contrast, his second movement is a gently rocking lullaby, though his darkly playful third movement barely keeps a lid on its irrepressible energy (Mendelssohn himself described it as 'a trifle nasty to play'). His finale returns to the churning energy of the first movement, though Mendelssohn devotes calmer passages to a semi-quotation of a 16th-century Genevan psalter melody (perhaps better known to British listeners as 'All people that on Earth do dwell'), which begins solemnly on the piano, but returns in a brighter incarnation to lead the Trio to its sonorous close.

#### Eleanor Alberga (b. 1949)

Clouds for piano quintet

I Scudding

II Drifting

III Looming

IV Storming

Eleanor Alberga was born and initially studied in Kingston, Jamaica, later winning a scholarship to continue her studies

at London's Royal Academy of Music, and now lives in Herefordshire. Her particularly rich, idiosyncratic musical style – bringing together jazz, contemporary techniques, Jamaican musical references and plenty of colour and rhythm – is almost impossible to pigeonhole, should you even want to.

Alberga wrote her first piano quintet, *Clouds*, in 1984, as a dance score to a commission from London Contemporary Dance Theatre, a company with which she enjoyed a long relationship, initially as improvising pianist and later as Music Director. LCDT's Artistic Director, Robert Cohan, gave Alberga free rein to compose whatever music she wanted (he later choreographed the Quintet as his dance work *Skywards*). For initial inspiration, Alberga returned to some of her earliest childhood memories: of lying on her back on the front lawn of the family house in Kingston, gazing up at the cumulus clouds gliding across the sky.

It is that image that Alberga evokes in her carefree, luminous opening movement, *Scudding*, which conjures intricate textures of interlocking melodies from its initial pulsing violin figures. The second movement, *Drifting*, imagines far-off cirrus clouds floating across the stratosphere in strangely magical, delicate sounds from slithering string lines and caressed piano strings. The sky grows more overcast in the threatening third movement, *Looming*, which serves as an extended introduction to the turbulent drama of the Quintet's finale, *Storming*, whose surging textures later calm for a return of the brighter, more optimistic music that opened the piece.

### **Ernő Dohnányi (1877–1960)**

Piano Quintet No.1 in C minor, Op.1

- I Allegro
- II Scherzo: Allegro vivace
- III Adagio, quasi andante
- IV Finale: Allegro animato

In many ways, Ernő Dohnányi is an unsung hero of Hungarian music in the 20th century. As well as a celebrated composer, he was a much-admired conductor and pianist, Director of the Budapest Music Academy (where he himself had studied), and for many years head of music at Hungarian Radio. He was just five years older than his better-known compatriots Béla

Bartók and Zoltán Kodály, though his music is a world away (a possible reason why he's been somewhat overlooked). Rather than joining Bartók and Kodály in gleefully colliding together vigorous modernism and the richly flavoured folk music of his own nation, Dohnányi looked back instead with reverence and fondness to Schumann, Dvořák and Brahms.

It was none other than Johannes Brahms, in fact, who took one look at Dohnányi's Piano Quintet No.1 and remarked: 'I couldn't have done better myself.' Not bad for a piece that Dohnányi wrote while he was still a student, and which would later be published as his official Op.1 (though by that stage he had already produced a further 67 works). And it was Brahms who, following the Quintet's premiere in Budapest in June 1895, went on to arrange for a high-profile performance in Vienna, with himself tackling the fiendish piano part, which provided Dohnányi with one of his career-defining early successes.

Indeed, the youthful Dohnányi was clearly out to announce his arrival with this fiercely demanding, exuberant and intense music, which at times feels like an orchestral score crammed into a piece for just five players. A march-like theme – first on piano, then taken up by unison strings – launches the expansive opening movement. The restless, somewhat sinister scherzo that follows has a melody that seems intent on disregarding the rhythm's strong beat, though its restrained, hymn-like central section provides respite. Dohnányi entrusts the song-like melody of his slow third movement to the viola, and his dashing finale contrasts a strutting, lopsided march with a refined waltz melody, initially from the solo cello. A brief memory of the music that opened the Quintet drives the piece to its joyful conclusion.

**Programme note © David Kettle, 2023**

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Fantastical flair and ambitious arrangements come together in this bewitching programme from the award-winning pianist Federico Colli.

### **Alice Sara Ott & Friends: Schubert's Trout Quintet**

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Baritone Benjamin Appl and pianist Alice Sara Ott lead a programme celebrating the joys of the countryside with music by Beethoven, Schubert and Vaughan Williams.