

# SOUTHBANK CENTRE

## Sheku Kanneh-Mason & Philharmonia Chamber Players

Wednesday 26 April 2023, 6pm & 8.30pm  
Queen Elizabeth 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

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### Repertoire

#### Johann Sebastian Bach (1685–1750)

Nun komm' der Heiden Heiland, BWV.659  
arr. Kanneh-Mason for cello quartet

5'

Adagio from Toccata, Adagio and Fugue in C, BWV.564  
arr. Kanneh-Mason for cello quartet

5'

Komm, süsßer Tod, BWV.478  
arr. Kanneh-Mason for cello quintet

3'

#### Johannes Brahms (1833–1897)

String Sextet No.1 in B flat, Op.18

38'

### Performers

Sheku Kanneh-Mason *cello*

Philharmonia Chamber Players

Benjamin Marquise Gilmore *violin*

Annabelle Meare *violin*

Benjamin Roskams *viola*

Gijs Kramers *viola*

Karen Stephenson *cello*

Richard Birchall *cello*

Eric Villeminey *cello*

Deirdre Cooper *cello*

In the last decade of his life, J.S. Bach began to look back over his career and consider his legacy. Works such as the Mass in B minor – a compendium of music old and new – ensured that the world would be left in no doubt as to the depth and range of his skill. In what may have been a similar spirit, Bach set about gathering together earlier compositions into collections such as his *Great 18 Chorale Preludes* or *Leipzig Chorales* – compiled in Leipzig but composed during the early part of his career working at the Weimar court.

A chorale prelude is an organ work based around an existing chorale or hymn tune. Bach's Leipzig collection includes three chorale preludes based on the 16th-century Lutheran Advent hymn *Nun komm' der heiden Heiland* (Come now, Saviour of the Heathen): BWV.659, 660 and 661. Heard here in Sheku Kanneh-Mason's arrangement for cello quartet, the first of these is one of the highlights of the set, with its distinctive walking bass, flexible inner voices, flowing sequences and expressive suspensions, the melody unfolding almost like an aria.

The Toccata, Adagio and Fugue, BWV.564, also arranged for cello quartet, dates from Bach's later Weimar years (probably c. 1710–17) and exhibits a remarkably mature treatment of different styles. The introductory section features dialogue between the voices, followed by material that draws on both Germanic and Italian idioms. The German organ tradition is represented in the opening prelude-style passage with its dramatic pauses and sustained pedal notes. In the original version this is answered by something new and unique in Bach's output: the longest pedal solo in the repertory. The influence of the Italian Baroque concerto is apparent in the structure of this first movement, in which solos are contrasted with contrapuntal tutti sections, and in the clearly articulated lower lines and Italianate chromaticism of the second movement. This movement, Adagio-Grave, is unusual for its very existence; it was not the norm to include a slow movement in a piece of this type. The third movement is a four-voice fugue culminating in an expansive coda characterised by rapid, fluid arpeggiated figures.

Each performance this evening lasts for 1 hour and there is no interval.

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This performance is dedicated to the loving memory of Sir David Sieff.

A number of Bach's chorale settings were included in Georg Christian Schemelli's *Musicalisches Gesangbuch* of 1736; according to the preface, some were entirely his own compositions, while for others he edited the figured bass. *Komm, süsßer Tod* (Come, sweet death), BWV.478, is serenely beautiful and has inspired a number of arrangements, including versions by Bridge and Britten – and now Kanneh-Mason's transcription for five cellos.

Brahms wrote his first chamber work for strings, the String Sextet No.1, in 1859, in the wake of the most emotionally turbulent years of his young life. The relationship between Brahms and Clara Schumann is well documented, and by the end of 1856 had reached a shattering conclusion: while Clara now openly loved Brahms, and was free to do so following the death of her husband, Robert, Brahms himself made it clear that he had no intention of marrying her despite having loved her for so long. Soon after this crisis, in the summer of 1858, Brahms was introduced to Agathe von Siebold. When Clara caught Johannes and Agathe embracing, she lamented: 'He left me alone with words of love and devotion, and now he falls for this girl because she has a pretty voice'. The friends who had introduced Brahms to Von Siebold even hinted that her reputation was at risk unless he proposed; which he duly did, and was accepted.

The reception of Brahms' music, such as his Piano Concerto No.1, was to strike a fatal blow to the relationship with Von Siebold, however. Brahms had already experienced misgivings about his ability as a provider when faced with the prospect of supporting Clara and her children; now he faced a similar quandary, as he later recalled:

'At the time I should have liked to marry, my music was either hissed in the concert hall, or at least received with icy coldness. Now for myself, I could bear that quite well, because I knew its worth, and that some day the tables would be turned... But if, in such moments, I had had to meet the anxious, questioning eyes of a wife with the words "another failure" – I could not have borne that! For a woman may love an artist ... ever so much ... still she cannot have the perfect certainty of victory which is in his heart. And if she had wanted to comfort me – a wife to pity her husband for his lack of success – ach! I can't stand to think what a hell that would have been.'

This attitude prompted a fateful note to Von Siebold: 'I love you! I must see you again! But I cannot wear fetters!' Much of their

correspondence was burnt by both protagonists, but these words were quoted by Von Siebold in a novel written about herself and Brahms. He was full of remorse, telling a friend: 'I have played the scoundrel towards Agathe.' It was not long after this series of events that Brahms wrote his String Sextet No.1. This was his first chamber work for strings; he was reluctant to begin with a quartet, which would have drawn comparisons with his hero, Beethoven, but the fuller sonority of the sextet also suited Brahms' love of rich textures. The presence of a second cello also allowed for the exploitation of the first instrument's melodic capabilities, which Brahms clearly valued (as in the exquisite cello solo opening the Second Piano Concerto's Andante).

The Sextet begins with a cello theme, answered by first violin and first viola in octaves. This sonority was suggested by violinist Joseph Joachim, who led the work's premiere in Hanover in October 1860 in the presence of Brahms and Clara Schumann – for whom Brahms made a piano arrangement of the second movement as a birthday present. The first movement, based on a lilting Austrian Ländler folk dance, surges forward on a current of imitative rhythms. The slow movement begins with a sombre, studied theme that undergoes a series of variations in which Brahms' learned execution is tempered by stormy Romantic gestures – the whole lightened by the fourth and fifth variations, when lyricism and levity creep in. The Scherzo has all the joie de vivre of Haydn's, or indeed Beethoven's, most extrovert quartet-writing, and while Joachim suggested amendments to the expansive rondo finale, requesting more contrast between the themes, Brahms left the original untouched, evidently content with its amiable, unhurried, folk-like character.

**Programme note © Joanna Wyld, 2023**

#### **Find out more**

- ▶ Sheku Kanneh-Mason
- ▶ Philharmonia Chamber Players
- ▶ [southbankcentre.co.uk](https://southbankcentre.co.uk)

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