

WIGMORE HALL

Saturday 20 July 2024
7.30pm

African Concert Series An Evening of African Choral Music

Imbube Singers
Lichfield Gospel Choir
Themba Mvula director
Gabriella Liandu associate musical director

Enoch Sontonga (c.1873-1905)
Trad/South African
Traditional
Osibisa
Trad/Mandingo
Trad/West African
Isaiah D Thomas
Kirk Franklin (b.1970)
Gregory Porter (b.1971)

Nkosi sikelel' iAfrika (1897)
Hlohonolofatsa
Glory Glory
Woyaya (1971) *arranged by Black Voices*
Kayra Sillo *arranged by Fred Onovwerosuoke*
Abanije *arranged by Fred Onovwerosuoke*
I will bless the lord (2002)
Be like him (2000) *arranged by Themba Mvula*
Revival (2020) *arranged by Themba Mvula*

Interval

Samuel Wilkinson
Trad/South African
Simphiwe Dana (b.1980)
Kirk Franklin (b.1970)
Trad/Zulu
Anon
Foy Vance (b.1974)
Labi Siffre (b.1945)

Ingoma
Vuma
Ndiredi (2004) *arranged by Themba Mvula*
Melodies from Heaven (1996)
Thula mama
This Little Light Of Mine
Guiding Light (2013) *arranged by Themba Mvula*
(Something Inside) So Strong (1984) *arranged by Themba Mvula*
All Around (2002)
Shosholoza

Israel Houghton (b.1971)
Trad/South African

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The final programme in today's African Concert Series takes the form of a collaboration between two much-admired vocal groups: the Imbube Singers, a traditional South African folk ensemble, and the Lichfield Gospel Choir. The programme will therefore convey a fusion of music and of complementary performance styles, united in the repertoire of music emanating from – or initially inspired by – the African continent.

In several of the numbers to be performed, the music may date back centuries to the high-water era of Spirituals and before, of gospel songs, hauntingly original ethnic folksongs which have clearly existed and evolved from much earlier periods in the continent's history, as well as modern original songs arranged for vocal groups. In every case, the music speaks of humanity, of nature in all its forms, of human congress, conflict and daily life, identifying struggles that, even today, cannot be said to have been fully won.

Not every piece however is contemporaneous with earlier events. Many have been composed or arranged in recent decades, but whatever their provenance, the fact of singing together, often unaccompanied by musical instruments, produces a genuine feeling of vital, living humanity on the part of the performers, feelings of life itself – expressions which are manifestly conveyed to the listening audience.

This is what music can do, especially sung music, as from one person to another. Such natural positivity is profoundly human, and in tonight's very varied programme the work of much later individual songwriters and choral composers demonstrates that the essential message of coming together not only results in a fusion and acceptance of styles of singing but also demonstrates the continuing humanity of our existence. Such humanity crosses all musical frontiers – it is found everywhere from unaccompanied work-songs to classical musical landmarks such as Michael Tippett's oratorio *A Child of Our Time* and the American Morton Gould's *Spirituals for String Choir and Orchestra*.

An improvisatory singing style, appearing quasi-spontaneous, characterises performances by the Lichfield Gospel Choir – and we should point out that the songs might not always be performed in the order printed. And as the conductor of tonight's concert, **Themba Mvula** – whose much-admired arrangements of several of the individual items will also be heard – will introduce each song, individual detailed programme commentaries are unnecessary.

It is clear that the singing-styles of tonight's music will draw upon traditional performance practices, from the various composers and regions of the African Continent where such songs are known to have originally emanated and evolved, including arrangements of ethnic folk material. Even when heard in concert, the aesthetic power of such music transcends time and place, affording a unique experience to those members of the audience encountering this music for the first time.

Whilst the manner of today's performance practices naturally reflects the evolved stylisation of contemporary

implementation, there can be no doubt that such a capella technique is profoundly natural. It is given to many performers, and survives in the ethnic influence of folk-based vocal music. This is still, even today, a relatively unknown aspect of African music, which is often conflated with that arising from the forcible enslavement of people taken from West Africa to the Territories and States of the American South, which reached its zenith in the second half of the 18th Century. As the States grew in number, this vile practice led to a Civil War between the northern-based Unionists and the Confederacy of the southern States, before being abolished in the 1860s. Traces of this deep stain on American history may be taking longer to eradicate, but the abiding musical legacy of African-American religious folksong – often referred to as Spirituals – is now recognised as the most significant and lasting of all influential strains in American music.

The melodic lines and harmonies of the Spirituals were often derived from age-old folk roots. The texts of almost all Spirituals derive from Biblical sources, the term itself being clearly inspired by St Paul's Epistle to the Ephesians – 'Speak to yourselves in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing and making melody in your heart to the Lord'.

It is a fabulously rich musical heritage, and its influences are found even today. Several so-called 'freedom songs', such as Bob Marley's 'Redemption Song', share musical roots with Spirituals, and several songs by the great reggae singer John Holt can also be traced to this tradition. In tonight's original material and concert arrangements, it is the powerful melodies and simple but telling harmonies that produce the deepest emotional impact, a memorable series of haunting musical expressions that, even in some cases at the distance of several centuries, speak to all with a directness of utterance that remains immortal. Such significant, contemporaneous concert arrangements assert an unstated sense of genuine pride in African musical art – that which is understood and shared by all sympathetic listeners.

Our programme, from both choral groups, ranges far and wide, opening with music by the South African composer **Enoch Sontonga** (c.1873-1905) who is best known for writing the Xhosa hymn *Nkosi Sikelel' iAfrika* ('God bless Africa'), which, in abbreviated version, has been sung as part of the national anthem of South Africa since 1994. It was also adopted by South Africa's newly formed northern neighbour, Zimbabwe. Following this, *Hlohonolofatsa* means 'respect' or 'honour' – a powerful expression of supplication and reverence for God.

And so, throughout tonight's programme, we can experience the wide artistic influence and emotional range of the continuing impact of African vocal music – from traditional songs to the contemporary British artist **Labi Siffre**: it is a profound artistic legacy, as vital and meaningful today as it was when such music was first sung.

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Imbube Singers

Luyanda Lennox Jezile
Prudence Dineo Jezile
Elizabeth Nonhlanhla Fortunate Makhubela
Wandile Candice Ncube
Nokulunga Ntombenhle Zikhali
Benhilda Ngwenya

Lichfield Gospel Choir

Liz Fitzgerald soprano
Annemarie Fraser soprano
Hilary Ford soprano
Kate McLoughlin soprano
Fiona Edwards soprano
Sandra Derrick soprano
Anne Rushton soprano
Shirley Martin soprano
Judy Barker soprano
Pam Cherry soprano
Joy Rose soprano
Emma Sykes soprano
Carol Kobylanski soprano
Caroline Allen soprano
Ann Clarke soprano
Carole Roberts soprano
Kay Barnes soprano
Jan Webb soprano
Ann Bakewell soprano
Alison Stephens soprano
Marian Lowther soprano
Sarah Rogers soprano
Kate Slater alto
Marion McGinnis alto
Kate Courage alto
Evelyn Hartley alto
Leonie Paterson alto
Iona Chisholm alto

Emily Bacon alto
Catherine Farrington alto
Karen Thomson alto
Liz Slater alto
Jean Rawle alto
Anne Mapley alto
Michael Bown tenor
Peter Hardy tenor
Peter Bacon tenor
Andy Paterson tenor
Fiona Maguire tenor
Peter Hancox tenor
James Strong tenor
Judith Holbrook tenor
Paddy Ruske bass
David Bodin bass
John Branch bass
Philip Mapley bass
Andrew Maguire bass
Gerbo Huisman bass
Alan Hallsworth bass
John Rooker bass
Henry Drake bass
Bob Harrison bass
Warren Bardsley bass