

WIGMORE HALL

Tuesday 12 July 2022 7.30pm

Sheku Kanneh-Mason cello

Isata Kanneh-Mason piano



This concert is part of the CAVATINA Chamber Music Trust ticket scheme, offering free tickets to those aged 8-25

Frank Bridge (1879-1941)

Cello Sonata in D minor (1913-7)

I. Allegro ben moderato • II. Adagio ma non troppo - Molto allegro e agitato

Benjamin Britten (1913-1976)

Cello Sonata in C Op. 65 (1960-1)

*I. Dialogo. Allegro • II. Scherzo-Pizzicato. Allegretto •
III. Elegia. Lento • IV. Marcia. Energico • V. Moto perpetuo. Presto*

Interval

Karen Khachaturian (1920-2011)

Cello Sonata (1966)

*I. Recitativo. Adagio • II. Inventio. Allegretto •
III. Aria. Andante • IV. Toccata. Allegro con fuoco*

Dmitry Shostakovich (1906-1975)

Cello Sonata in D minor Op. 40 (1934)

I. Allegro non troppo - Largo • II. Allegro • III. Largo • IV. Allegro

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This programme brings together teachers and their pupils, closely in the case of Bridge and Britten, more generic in the case of Shostakovich and Khachaturian, and it is also layered with connections of influence and friendship. **Bridge** was raised, strictly and very thoroughly, in a musical family and very quickly had to make his own way. Like Britten, he was a 'complete' and supremely pragmatic musician, a composer, conductor, teacher and gifted chamber musician (violin and viola). Bridge was born in 1879 and, under the guidance of Stanford at the Royal College of Music, he started out as a conservative, Brahms-leaning composer, but after the First World War this changed. Influenced by Alban Berg, his embrace of chromaticism shifted towards atonality; his desire that Britten, his only private composition pupil, should go on to study with Berg came to nothing, giving rise to one of the great 'what-ifs?' of modern British music.

It took Bridge four years and most of the war (1913-7) to complete his two-movement Cello Sonata in D minor. The expansive first movement was finished in 1913, but the more complex and anguished second movement did not flow as easily. As a pacifist (like Britten), Bridge was appalled by the conflict, and this is reflected in the character of the Cello Sonata. The first movement is romantic, lyrical and at times English pastoral, with a huge role for piano balancing a cello part that plays to the instrument's expressive strengths. The second movement combines an *Adagio* and scherzo (marked *Molto allegro e agitato*) and is notably haunted and even more chromatically extreme. The coda reworks the opening of the first movement.

Aptly named, Bridge had a revelatory effect on the precocious child **Britten**, first with his tone-poem *The Sea*, which the ten-year-old Britten heard in 1923 at the Norwich Triennial Festival, and then Bridge's *Enter Spring* at the next Norwich Triennial in 1927, which clinched Britten becoming Bridge's pupil. And there is another major influence at work behind Britten's Cello Sonata in C. In 1960 Britten and Shostakovich had sat together for the première of the Russian composer's first Cello Concerto, with Mstislav Rostropovich as soloist. The concert marked the start of a remarkable friendship, with Rostropovich a regular at the Aldeburgh Festival, where he and his wife Galina Vishnevskaya eventually bought a house.

That first meeting immediately led to a commission, and the result was the Sonata in C for cello and piano, the première of which he and Britten gave at the 1961 Aldeburgh Festival. The Cello Symphony and the three Cello Suites, all written for Rostropovich, followed over the next ten years, giving the Russian cellist the status of muse. In effect, the Cello Sonata is a sequence of pieces based on the soloist's elusive, mercurial and meditative character, with the opening sonata-form *Dialogo* dominated by a halting cello phrase and a rising, scale-like figure that gathers in substance. The *Scherzo-Pizzicato* treats the cello like a guitar and has the spectral quality of Bartók's night music. The *Elegia*'s lament rises to a searing climax, one of Britten's most powerful in his chamber music, making the *Marcia*'s Shostakovich-like sardonic bite all the more eruptive. The *Moto perpetuo* finale is a dazzling *Presto* daring both players to keep the music on track.

Britten would return to the Cello Sonata's sparer style following his next, and biggest, work, the *War Requiem*.

Karen Khachaturian, like his more well-known uncle Aram Khachaturian, was an Armenian composer most of whose output was created under the censorious influence of the Soviet cultural central committee. He was born in Moscow in 1920, three years after the Armenian Genocide, a crime still denied by Turkey, and two years before Armenia was absorbed into the then USSR. He studied at the Moscow Conservatory under Myaskovsky, Shebalin and Shostakovich, and later was Head of Orchestration at the Conservatory. Unlike his uncle, Karen Khachaturian's music was never denounced as anti-Soviet, and his work gathered a fair number of awards, both during and after the Soviet era. He died in Moscow in 2011. He wrote scores for ballet and film, concertos, four symphonies and much chamber music, including this Cello Sonata, written in 1966. A suggestion of Shostakovich at his most sorrowfully heroic makes itself known in the opening *Recitativo*, initially a solo cello lament, later expanded on piano. The following *Inventio* is an *Allegretto* introduced by piano, then folding in the cello in a vivid scherzo marked by aggressive syncopations and emphatic accents. The *Adagio* is an *Aria* with a yearning cello melody nudged along by the piano, subsiding into a Shostakovich-like evaporation in the closing bars, then blown away by the fierce *Toccata* finale. Rostropovich championed this work.

The year 1934 was a good one for **Shostakovich**, or so he thought. His opera *Lady Macbeth of the Mtsensk District* was a major success, and he followed it with the Cello Sonata, which quickly made its way into the repertoire. He was only 27, and the white-hot hope of Russian music. Then, early in 1936, Comrade Stalin saw the opera and Shostakovich's life changed completely. Stalin hated it, praised only two years previously for its Soviet values, and the Committee of Artistic Affairs launched their attack on 'formalist' tendencies. Shostakovich was denounced in the infamous *Pravda* article 'Muddle instead of Music'. It is a miracle that the composer survived this and Stalin's Great Purge that got into gear that same year.

The Cello Sonata is a fearsomely virtuoso work for both instruments, a classically shaped piece with its four-movements free of any allusive titles. The opening *Allegro non troppo* has a *Largo* coda that transforms the first theme into a sinister slow march, over an invasive three-note shape that some commentators have likened to the dreaded knock on the door in the early hours of the morning. Shostakovich mischievously referred to the second movement as a minuet, but it is more like a heavy scherzo with a cello line recalling the third movement of Mahler's 'Resurrection' Symphony. The Beethovenian *Largo* includes a reference to the convicts' march that brings the *Lady Macbeth* opera to its bleak conclusion. The rondo opens with an artless little melody that goes madly over the top, and, as is typical of Shostakovich, creates any number of responses.

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