

WIGMORE HALL

Saturday 15 March 2025
11.30am

The African Concert Series

Piano Music from Ethiopia

Girma Yiflashewa piano

Emahoy Tsegué-Maryam Guèbrou (1923-2023)

Mother's Love
The Homeless Wanderer

Girma Yiflashewa (b.1967)

The Shepherd with the Flute
Ambassel
Chewata
Sememen
Eliita



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There can be little doubt that it is only since the dawn of the 21st Century that the discovery of and growing interest in art music by composers from the African continent and of African ethnicity has come to be recognised as a genuinely rich field for performance, appreciation and study. In this programme, the distinguished Ethiopian pianist-composer **Girma Yifrashewa** plays a representative selection of this repertoire, and opens his recital with music by **Emahoy Tsegué-Mariam Guèbrou**, one of the most remarkable – if virtually unknown – African composers of the last 100 years. She was born in Addis Ababa in 1923 into a wealthy diplomatic family, and was educated largely in Switzerland. On returning to Ethiopia, she was captured and imprisoned during the second Italian-Ethiopian War, but returned once more, where she was refused permission to attend the Royal Academy of Music in London for political reasons. In 1944, she became a nun for ten years, in her vow taking the name by which she is known; she later settled in Jerusalem where she died, two years ago, at the age of 99.

Known as 'Emahoy', political pressures of all kinds conspired to prevent her music being performed or even being made available for many years; it is only during the last 20 years or so that Emahoy's music has become generally known. She composed over 150 works – largely songs and piano pieces – during her lifetime, in a remarkable style which embraces popular thematic ideas within stricter forms, uniting classical and jazz structures alongside Ethiopian folk-techniques. Half-a-century ago, Emahoy's music began to appear on recordings, but her later – frequently officially-enforced – reclusive lifestyle saw her music recede from public perception, contributing to its neglect, which she did little to promote.

Appreciations of her work in the last 20 years or so have revealed her works to possess a personal directness of utterance which has attracted growing attention. To open this recital, Girma Yifashewa plays two of Emahoy's better-known pieces – 'Mother's Love' and 'The Homeless Wanderer' – both of which clearly demonstrate Emahoy's skilful yet natural unification of European and Ethiopian compositional techniques in which she produced uniquely composed music of quite haunting character – the titles conveying the infused expressive moods of both.

Girma Yifrashewa's programme follows with a group of his own solo piano compositions. Girma was born in Addis Ababa in 1967 and his earliest musical interests were soon recognised. This led to him being accepted as a pupil at the Yared School of Music in the Ethiopian capital, his success there being such that in 1986 he was awarded a major scholarship to the Sofia State Conservatory of Music in Bulgaria – which was one of the finest and most successful such institutions in the entire Eastern European bloc at that time. His studies in Bulgaria were interrupted for a couple of years in the wake of the eventual collapse of the Communist state in 1989, but he completed a Master's degree in piano performance in

Sofia under Professor Anatas Kurtev before proceeding to further studies at the Royal Academy of Music in London and the Hochschule für Musik in Leipzig under Helgcheide Schmidt. After finally graduating as a pianist, Girma Yifrashewa returned to East Africa in 1995.

He has subsequently pursued a successful twin international career as a much-admired concert pianist and composer throughout Africa, the United States and Europe. Girma Yifrashewa is especially notable for his performances of the music of Bach, Mozart and Beethoven, and also for his original compositions, particularly of solo piano music, which have been widely performed by himself and others. His very individual approach to composing for the piano has caused his own music to be compared with that of Emahoy Tsegué-Mariam Guèbrou, in that his thematic-harmonic utilisation of the Ethiopian pentatonic scale, whilst adhering to the more formal concepts of Western art musical structures, and embracing more direct thematic and harmonic language, has ensured the comprehension of his work as being part of the contemporary international keyboard repertoire.

The haunting study 'The Shepherd with the Flute' was written in 1998, and is dedicated to Professor Ashenafi Kebede, whose own music was an inspiration for this piece. The tempo indicated is a simple Moderato, and is more than a moving reworking of Kebede's original. Yifrashewa's refraction adds his own thoughts on the music of his admired forbear in such a manner as to weave at times a delicate tapestry of fascinatingly original yet essentially contemplative texturalisations, the emanating flute line threaded within a keyboard texture of no little variety of space and *chiaroscuro*, done with such subtlety as to ensure that the fluent melody – self-generating and widely expressive – is always perceptible, as well as seemingly surrounded with a contemporaneous evocation of the lone countryside musician and his responsive hymn to nature.

The following three pieces – 'Ambassel', 'Chewata' and 'Sememen' – are no less characteristic. Each carries a varied, if quite subtly composed, refraction of similar material. Here is the individual composer setting before us the playful 'Chewata' and the spiritual 'Sememen' which both equally carry convincing mastery in organic linear construction. Yet it is not the technical command of counterpoint and evolving harmonic treads that together distinguish Girma Yifrashewa's original compositions – his music possesses the expressive and communicative natures of the genuine composer – nowhere perhaps more self-evident than in 'Eilila' ('A song of Joy'), an individually popular piece composed in 2006. This is, self-evidently, an outward-looking composition of no little technical challenge, which has been well described as 'a celebration of happiness' by the Swiss musicologist Louis Bernard.

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