

WIGMORE HALL

Saturday 15 March 2025
3.00pm

The African Concert Series

Violin Music of the African Diaspora

Aisha Syed-Castro violin
Rebeca Omordia piano

William Grant Still (1895-1978)

Suite for Violin and Piano (1943)

*I. African Dancer • II. Mother and Child •
III. Gamin*

Florence Price (1887-1953)

Adoration (1951)

Wynton Marsalis (b.1961)

Fiddle Dance Suite

*I. Sidestep Reel • II. As the Wind goes •
III. Jones' Jig • IV. Nicola's Strathspey •
V. Bye-Bye Breakdown*

Samuel Coleridge-Taylor (1875-1912)

Petite Suite de Concert Op. 77 (1911)

*I. Le caprice de Nannette • II. Demande et
réponse • III. Un sonnet d'amour •
IV. La tarantelle frétilante*



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The second concert in Wigmore Hall's fifth African Series is devoted to music for violin and piano by composers descended from the West African Diaspora generations, the programme concluding with a work by the most famous British composer of African descent.

We begin with the Suite for Violin and Piano by **William Grant Still** (1895-1978), the most prominent Afro-American composer of his generation. Still's life is a touchstone for the emergence and acceptance of what might be termed Black American Art Music – he took violin lessons and taught himself to play several other instruments and his cultured musicianship eventually led to him studying composition with George Chadwick and Edgar Varèse. Still took a deep interest in early Jazz – in 1916 he arranged W. C. Handy's *St Louis Blues* for its first acoustic recording – and Still's first Symphony, subtitled Afro-American, was the first such work by a Black American composer to be performed by a major American orchestra (in 1931, by the Rochester Philharmonic under Howard Hanson, followed by performances in Berlin, Paris and London). Still was a prolific composer, leaving nine operas and five symphonies amongst many other works, which include this Suite for Violin and Piano, dating from 1943.

The Suite was inspired as a result of contemplating three sculptures by Afro-American artists who were all part of what became known as the Harlem Renaissance Movement. The first movement, 'African Dancer' (sculpted by Richard Barthé), combines various tempos (dances) into a basic structure – each capturing the essential choreographed movement of the Dancer, at the same time as contrasting the implied variety of movement against which the sculpted piece of course can only infer.

For the slow central movement, Still presents an extended contemplation, citing Sargent Johnson's 'Mother and Child' (Johnson gave that title to several works, any one of which could have been the inspiration). This movement has been likened to a gently rocking lullaby; it soon achieved a life of its own, away from the Suite, in Still's own transcription for string orchestra.

Doubtless inspired by the première of Still's 'Afro-American Symphony' in 1931, two years later, **Florence Price** became the first black female composer to have a symphony played by a major national orchestra when the Chicago Symphony performed her Symphony No. 1. In the same concert, her pianist friend and contemporary Margaret Bonds also made history as the first black female soloist with the orchestra - she would later go on to premiere Price's Piano Concerto.

Price and Bonds were twin leaders in the Black Chicago Renaissance movement during the 1930s. The strength and determination of Florence Price, together with the undoubted quality of her music, were pivotal in the establishment of a black composer's voice in American Classical Music concert-giving that continues to resonate today. Her gifts were such that - wholly exceptionally – she graduated from the New England Conservatory of Music with honours in 1906, aged 19.

Florence Price's 'Adoration for violin and piano', however, is a late work. It was composed in 1951, two years before her passing at the age of 66. Originally written for organ (Price's own instrument), and having the character of a contemplative prayer, this emotionally direct music achieved wide acceptance in a variety of arrangements – this authentic version for violin and piano has become one of her most memorable her works, the essential D major tonality subverting an emotional statement, subtly conveyed by a hint – no more - of traditional blues melodic phraseology.

Wynton Marsalis was born in New Orleans in 1961. He is one of the most significant Afro-American musicians currently before the public, having achieved international successes as a trumpeter and composer in both Jazz and Classical repertoires. He has sold over 7 million discs, having recorded concertos by Jolivet and Tomasi with the London Philharmonic Orchestra, and concertos by Haydn, Hummel and Leopold Mozart with the English Chamber Orchestra, alongside many Jazz albums with leading musicians. He is the only musician to have been awarded nine Grammy Awards in both Jazz and Classical categories in the same year. Marsalis has composed four Symphonies and a Violin Concerto, recorded by the Scottish-born Nicola Benedetti, for whom Marsalis's 'Fiddle Dance Suite for Solo Violin' was also composed, the work's five movements being: 'Sidestep Reel', 'As the Wind Goes', 'Jones' Jig', 'Nicola's Strathspey' and 'Bye-Bye Breakdown' – each containing identifiable allusions to hoedown, jig, reel and hornpipe styles, as well as exhibiting, as Marsalis says, 'a homegrown concoction of commonality between traditional fiddle tunes, the Baroque, ragtime, bebop, the quartal melodies of modern jazz and the fancy variations on themes as popularized in the 19th Century.'

Samuel Coleridge-Taylor (1875-1912), the son of a doctor from Sierra Leone and an English lady, was born in London. He studied violin, piano and composition at the Royal College of Music, and was soon recognised as a composer of great promise after his *Hiawatha's Wedding Feast* was premièred at the College in 1898, conducted by Stanford. Coleridge-Taylor completed a Hiawatha trilogy, as well as much other choral vocal and chamber music and a Violin Concerto. Alongside these more serious compositions, he wrote a series of lighter works, of which his 'Petite Suite de Concert' of 1910 has never left the repertoire. The music's grace and ineffable charm is immediately apparent in the initial movement, 'La caprice de Nanette', redolent of *fin-de-siècle* melody. It is followed by the most popular movement, 'Demande et réponse', a genuine inspiration of alluring grace, which Coleridge-Taylor later arranged separately as a song. The third movement, 'Un sonnet d'amour' ('A Sonnet of Love'), is another melodic gem, and the final movement, 'La tarantelle frétilante' ('Frisky Tarantella') ends the work in suitably brilliant fashion.

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