

# WIGMORE HALL

Saturday 19 July 2025  
3.00pm

## The African Concert Series African Women

Maria Thompson Corley piano  
Nadine Benjamin soprano

L Viola Kinney (c.1890-1945)

Emahoy Tsegué-Maryam Guèbrou (1923-2023)

Shirley Thompson (b.1958)

Spiritual

Maria Thompson Corley (b.1966)

Errollyn Wallen (b.1958)

Nkeiru Okoye (b.1972)

Eleanor Alberga (b.1949)

Florence Price (1887-1953)

Mother's Sacrifice (pub. 1909)

Mother's Love (c.1963)

Psalm to Windrush: for the Brave and Ingenious  
(2018)

Sanctuary (2021) *arranged by Maria Thompson  
Corley*

Hold On (2022) *arranged by Maria Thompson  
Corley*

Grasping Water (2018)  
*My Heart is Awake • Violin*

Piano Man

I wouldn't normally say (2004)

Dusk from *African Sketches* (2003-4)

Jamaican Medley (1983)

Fantasia Nègre No. 1 in E minor (1929)



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This afternoon's programme, *African Women*, comprises songs and piano music by female composers from the last two hundred years, music often neglected by mainstream artists and concert organisations until relatively recently, heard alongside contemporary music by living composers.

Our recital opens with *Mother's Sacrifice*, a solo piano piece composed and published in 1909 by **Lady Viola Kinney** (c.1890-1945) – an American composer, pianist and educator, born in Missouri to working-class parents. Her musical gifts were soon noted, and she studied at the historically black college of Western University, Kansas.

Kinney wrote much music but only one of her solo piano pieces, *Mother's Sacrifice*, has survived. In F major, and not unlike a latter-day chorale prelude, Kinney's language is assured, owing little to her famous contemporaries. The piece inhabits a character of its own, demanding a finished technique from the pianist. Such is the music's quality that we may deeply regret the loss of much of Kinney's other works.

The 21st Century's acceptance of widening multiculturalism has alerted artists and music-lovers to the merits of **Emahoy Tsegué-Mariam Guèbrou**, one of the most remarkable African composers of the last hundred years. She was born in Addis Ababa in 1923 into a wealthy diplomatic family, and was educated largely in Switzerland. Returning to Ethiopia, she was captured and imprisoned during the second Italian-Ethiopian War, but on release once more, 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 now 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, appreciations of her work in that time have revealed her music to possess genuine qualities which have attracted growing attention. We hear these qualities in one of her better-known pieces, *Mother's Love* – displaying Emahoy's skilful yet natural unification of European and Ethiopian compositional techniques from which she wrote uniquely composed music of quite haunting character – conveying the warmly infused expressive mood implied in the title.

**Shirley Thompson's** *Psalm to Windrush: for the Brave and Ingenious* was commissioned for performance at Westminster Abbey commemorating the Windrush Generation in June 2018. She has said that the piece was written as a tribute 'to my Mother, Father, Aunts & Uncles who came to the UK during the Windrush period. They taught me everything I know about life, with their fathomless love of life and their culture that is rich, multi-faceted and expansive. The sense of humour and warmth of the Windrush Generation is remarkable. No matter their challenge they pushed on, with a smile and warmth in their hearts. My parents endured many difficulties when they arrived in London as migrants in the 1960s but

they converted their problems into a joyful existence. Their houses were always filled with the best Caribbean cuisine, drink, laughter and merriment. They told lots of stories that have provided the muse for my own work. I feel intensely fortunate to have been born to parents of the *Windrush*.'

*Sanctuary* and *Hold on* are two Spirituals, performed here in two justly-admired arrangements by today's pianist, **Maria Thompson Corley**; the first exudes a haunting character of destiny whilst *Hold on* has an inner strength, fully redolent of the human condition. These are followed by two pieces – 'My Heart is Awake' and 'Violin' from a unique group of songs, *Grasping Water* – to texts by Maria herself, following which Maria Thompson Corley performs *Piano Man*.

This work takes the form of a keyboard chiaroscuro against which the text is spoken, almost as a 21st-century declamation poem. The words, by Shani Osiro, comprise a uniquely modern 'take' as it were, on a rare genre of musical art.

A similar comment may be made regarding the following piano piece, by the distinguished British composer **Errollyn Wallen**, *I wouldn't normally say* – 'For my sister Karen'. This salsa-type work is from 2004, inspired by a visit to Venezuela. Described as being 'very funky and danceable utilising Afro-Cuban rhythms and big chords' it creates a soaring, exhilarating melodic fabric.

**Nkeiru Okoye's** 'Dusk', from her suite *African Sketches*, is a recollection inspired by her childhood years in Nigeria, in the form of a tribute – gently-pulsed and beautifully arched – to her first music teacher. This is followed by *Jamaican Medley* – another 'tribute' piece – with various sideways glances, a nod in the direction of the great John Holt.

The British composer **Eleanor Alberga** was born in 1949 in Kingston, Jamaica, but has lived in England since her studies at the Royal Academy of Music began in 1970. Now highly regarded as a composer of serious concert, orchestral and operatic works, her earlier musical life embraced playing the guitar and being a member of the Jamaican Folk Singers group. Her *Jamaican Medley* for piano dates from 1983 and is an affectionate tribute to modern musical folk-art which has made such a significant global impact.

The American composer **Florence Price** was born in Little Rock, Arkansas in 1897. She was the first African-American woman to be established as a serious orchestral composer, writing over 300 works, including symphonies and concertos. The work that established her reputation was her first *Fantasie Nègre* in E minor, from 1929. It remains arguably her most well-known music, based on the spiritual *Sinner, don't let this harvest pass* whilst retaining the emotional power of musical truth after almost 100 years.

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## For Michael

This tribute was supposed to be in verse, but how can I write a poem for you, my elegant, hazel-eyed prince?

*You were poetry.*

Poetry and harmony; a glorious cantata of fearless truths proclaimed in the Queen's English or a down-home Virginia blaccent as the situation demanded, undergirded with kindness, a hint of shyness, and, if necessary, a perfectly placed eyeroll.

You were a genteel warrior for justice, an eloquent advocate for inclusion, wrapping your steely determination in velvet, delivering a coup de grace with a disarming grin.

Witty? I think it's fair to place partial blame for my permanent smile lines on your verbal virtuosity, which always found its fullest expression in your elaborate, teasing responses to the annual videos of my family singing Christmas carols.

Despite the aforementioned wrinkles on my face, I have nothing but gratitude for your presence in my life. Thank you for being a safe place to share my random thoughts and feelings. Thank you for including me as one of the many composers and artists for whom you were a dedicated champion. Thank you for the superhuman patience you displayed while giving me my one and only voice lesson with you (I didn't have the temerity to ask for another!). I was beyond nervous and the sounds I created were fit for a shower, at best, but you never seemed to be frustrated. Your instruction made me a better church choir director, and, years later, helped me to finally achieve a lifelong wish: singing with confidence and joy, despite my imperfect instrument. Lastly, at least for this tribute, thank you for introducing me to an international community of 'powerful women', as you named our WhatsApp chat thread, and for getting me to stop spinning plates for an hour or so to connect with you and whoever else was available for our periodic Zoom meetings. Those times of refreshment are even more precious now that you have crossed over.

Even if our friendship had gone no further, I would always have been grateful for the sweet memory of our first meeting: falling in step with each other after an African American Art Song Alliance seminar, deciding to

have dinner together, then searching for a restaurant by following GPS directions, only to realize we were circling the parking lot of our hotel. I had such a crush, even after I found out you were gay, that I wrote a poem about you. I didn't have the nerve to tell you until just before the end. You told me the crush was mutual, saying we were 'two giddy teenagers that entire weekend,' and you asked me to tell the story. And so I have. 'My Heart Is Awake' will always be your song, dear Michael.

For many of you, Michael Harper was an eminent figure in British music, an esteemed teacher of voice known for his oratory and his passion for the cause of Black people in general and, by extension, Black performing artists, including composers, which resulted in the establishment of the Williams-Howard prize. But to me, he was a sweet, gentle, honest to a fault friend whose sense of humor endured until his last day, despite the deep wounds casual prejudice had inflicted on him. I want everyone to know that even those of us who seem to have overcome the odds have those scars, and so do those of us who seem to justify the idea that a meritocracy exists and therefore all remedies for discrimination are unnecessary.

Michael, I can't recall if I learned about your sarcoidosis the day we met, but I know you told me about it very early on. I also can't recall if you mentioned that it was incurable, but I remember reading an article about the seriousness of the condition that let me know that our time would be limited. I saw you short of breath the time we met in Philadelphia on a damp and chilly March day a few years ago and chose to believe that your illness would always be manageable. I told myself the same, reassuring story when I learned about your final hospitalization. I didn't want to imagine a world without you in it. I still don't. And yet, I am grateful that you are free of all earthly struggles, dear friend. I can imagine you enjoying a gourmet meal in a beautiful garden, breathing in the fragrant scent of blooms cultivated by your expert hands. I hope you are singing up there, too, joining your soulful, exquisite voice with the chorus, then stepping forward to do a solo.

Your legacy lives on, Michael, but I will always miss you. Rest in peace, my darling.

**Maria Thompson Corley**

**L Viola Kinney** (c.1890-1945)

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**Shirley Thompson** (b.1958)

**Psalm to Windrush: for the Brave and Ingenious** (2018)  
*Shirley Thompson*

The ship anchored forth, the waves stood high.  
To the Motherland, we set our sights.  
Holding dreams, and hopes, and plans,  
Our heads held high!  
And there you were Lord, Your arms around us,  
Your nest held strong so we could learn to fly!  
Your house stood strong, so we could learn to fly.

We worked and we toiled to build this land.  
To your Service we were honour bound.  
Through it all we learned to keep your Grace always.  
And there you were Lord, Your arms around us  
Your nest held strong so we could learn to fly  
Your house stood strong so we could learn to thrive.

Blessed are those whose strength is in you.  
My soul yearns e'en faints for your courts.  
Hear our pray'r Lord,  
Look on us with favour.  
Hear, our Pray'r, Dear Lord!

And now we pass the baton on.  
To our children and their children grown.  
Holding dreams, and plans and hopes,  
Their heads held high.  
And there you are Lord,  
Your arms around us  
Your nest holds strong, so we can always fly.  
Your house stands strong, so we will always thrive.

We thank you and Praise, to you Our Father,  
Give Thanks and Praise for evermore!

**Spiritual**

**Sanctuary** (2021)  
arranged by Maria Thompson Corley

**Hold On** (2022)  
arranged by Maria Thompson Corley

**Maria Thompson Corley** (b.1966)

**Grasping Water** (2018)  
*Maria Thompson Corley*

**My Heart is Awake**

My heart is awake,  
roused by the exhilarating melody  
my brain seeks to ignore  
in its quest  
for sleep's sweet stasis.

My heart's sparks  
are frequently foolish and futile.  
My brain,  
cold water in hand,  
basks a moment in the warm embers' glow  
and smiles.

**Violin**

Though  
closed  
and  
latched,  
your  
case  
opened  
easily.  
You lay inside it,  
burnished and brown,  
perfectly seasoned with age.  
My fingers danced gently, firmly  
along your neck. Your body  
vibrated, resonated,  
amplifying your  
melodious moans  
as I stroked your  
strings in my imagination.  
Precious treasure, you are not  
mine, but your exquisite  
voice still sings a jazz  
lullaby in my  
dreams.

**Piano Man**

**Errollyn Wallen** (b.1958)

**I wouldn't normally say** (2004)

**Nkeiru Okoye** (b.1972)

Dusk from *African Sketches* (2003-4)

**Eleanor Alberga** (b.1949)

Jamaican Medley (1983)

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Fantasie Nègre No. 1 in E minor (1929)

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