

# WIGMORE HALL

Saturday 19 July 2025  
7.30pm

## The African Concert Series African Odyssey

Gerald Eze oja flute  
African Cultural Group  
Moussa Dembele balafon  
Richard Olatunde Baker percussion  
Rebeca Omordia piano

Ubuntu Ensemble  
André Swanepoel violin  
Claudia Dehnke violin  
Louise Lansdown viola  
Elliott Bailey cello  
Aristide du Plessis cello  
Leon Bosch double bass

### Traditional

Oja Praise  
Egwu Oja  
Omalugo  
Inine  
Enyi

Christian Onyeji (b.1967)

Ufie (Igbo Dance) (2002)  
*I. Moderately fast • II. Slow • III. Fast*

Nneka Cummins (b.1993)

Jiri agba (With colour) (2025)  
The development of this work was kindly supported by the  
Hinrichsen Foundation

Fela Sowande (1905-1987)

African Suite (1945) *arranged by Robert Matthew-Walker*  
*Interval*

Fodé Lassana Diabaté (b.1971)

From *Sunjata's Time* (2015) *arranged by Jacob Garchik*  
Nana Triban • Bara kala ta

Mokale Koapeng (b.1963)

Tshimologo from *Malatsi a Bosh* - *Days of thy Youth* (2010)

Salim Dada (b.1975)

Danse Zaydan from *Miniatures Algériennes* (2009-10)

Titus Ogunyemi (b.1980)

Ifeanyi Chukwu, Igbo Music (2016)

### Traditional

Udenguma  
Mmirioma  
Akachi  
Uchu



### UNDER 35S

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As the Director of the African Concert Series Rebeca Omordia explains: 'This concert introduces a new African instrument to Wigmore's audience – the Oja Flute of the Igbo people of Nigeria. I have a very personal connection to this instrument as my paternal grandfather was a famous Oja musician. For this concert we are joined by renowned Oja player Gerald Eze, accompanied by percussionist Richard Olatunde Baker.'

A particularity of African art music is combining Western and African instruments. This programme features the Ubuntu Ensemble, led by double bassist Leon Bosch, who will perform a programme of African chamber music for Western instruments in combination with African instruments. The programme features the *African Suite* by **Fela Sowande** (arranged for piano quintet by Robert Matthew-Walker), arguably one of the most well-known African composers, founder of Nigerian art music, alongside works for string quintet by Mokale Koapeng (South Africa) and Salm Dada (Algeria), selected movements of Malian Fode Lassana Diabate's string quartet and Sunjata's *Time* for strings with balafon (played by Moussa Dembele), and Titus Ogunyemi's *Ifeanyi Chukwu, Igbo Music* for string quintet with added oja flute. This concert also premières a new work for piano quintet by the young composer Nneka Cummins.

The programme opens with a selection of pieces traditionally associated with the Oja – a wooden wind instrument of the Igbo people of south-eastern Nigeria, its role often referred to as a speech surrogate instrument; highlighting how they use it in praise, greetings, admonitions, communication, contemplation communal festivities, and communion with the spirits of departed ancestors. *Oja Praise* is an anthropological appreciation of the Igbo Oja. Ogbuoja is the master performer of Oja, while Ogbuoja-Eze refers specifically to Gerald Eze and his experiences as Oja Master performer.

**Christian Onyeji** has studied and worked almost entirely within the African continent, being appointed Professor of Music at the University of Nigeria in 2009, specialising in Research-Composition, the application of ethnomusicological procedures in creating modern African art music. He is a prolific composer, and his Igbo Dance, *Ufie*, is an excellent example of his natural compositional style, arising from his lifetime's-work. Amongst his pupils is the composer **Nneka Cummins**, whose new composition *Jiri agba* (With colour) for piano quintet follows, about which they write:

'My intention was to create a percussive work that was colourful in the techniques and ornaments deployed. I weave the melodic lines like threads and allow the harmony to organically unwind.

With the assistance of an Igbo-speaking translator, I found a phrase that could communicate the idea of a colourful work. Professor Christian Onyeji informed me

that the translation was a formal or less common way of communicating the idea. He told me the meaning of colour here is not something artificial, but colours generated from nature. That the words have depth. That the colours themselves have their own symbols and meaning. He told me to keep the title, but to hold the title in my thoughts as I finished the work. I quite like that the imperfection of the translation is a reflection of my truth. I'm culturally disconnected from my Nigerian heritage and it's probably a lifetime's work to bridge the gap.

My lessons with Professor Onyeji were primarily in 2021-2 when I reached out to him to supplement my learning at Trinity Laban. I had the pleasure of having some further sessions with him whilst writing this piece.

An element of my practice is how I find ways to write contemporary classical music that is influenced by West African music – in a way that is authentic to my reality. An important part for me has been focusing on rhythmic counterpoint and groove which is not always centralised in contemporary classical music. There is a dance-element which often comes to my work naturally, and it was wonderful to have the chance to emphasise and celebrate this. In our final session, Professor Onyeji explained how the music never stops, it just pauses because people have to go home. The ending in *Jiri Agba* expresses this idea, and is inspired by how Professor Onyeji concludes his own piece *Ufie*, which precedes my work.'

There are two arrangements by Jacog Garchik from *Sunjata's Time* – 'Nana Triban' and 'Bara kala ta' – originally composed by **Fodé Lassana Diabeté**, which are followed by a movement from the five *Miniatures Algériennes* by the noted composer **Salim Dada**, who was born in the regional capital of Laghouat in 1975 and studied composition with the French composer and academic Jean-Luc Kuczynski in Saintes, Charente-Maritime; he has also studied medicine at the faculty of Medicine in Algiers.

A staunch advocate of the humanities, Dada's music attempts to be a means by which a natural message of peace and dialogue may exist between the Arab-Muslim world and European civilisations. His five *Miniatures Algériennes* were first composed in 2010 for string ensemble. Each movement creates sound-pictures, fully displaying the composer's natural command of the modern-day post-Impressionist school.

**Mokale Koapeng** is the last composer represented here, through his notable 'Tshimologo' from the collection *Malatsi a Bosha - Days of thy Youth*, an endearing work of notable character, before four traditional pieces of Igbo provenance end our programme.

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