

WIGMORE HALL 125

Saturday 21 March 2026
3.00pm

The African Concert Series African Songs

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Gweneth Ann Rand soprano
Allyson Devenish piano

Fred Onovwerosuoke (b.1960)

12 African Songs (2009)

*Aiszonge! (Celebration) • Aleluya! (Alleluia) •
Duniya (Mystic Universe) • Esato (Eight) •
Herero Folktales • Kaleeba (Look out!) •
Luwah (Bitter tears) • Mshila (Guiding spirits) •
Ne Nkansu (Healing chant) • Ngulu (Moving along) •
Oluwa L'Oluso Agutan Mi (Psalm 23) • Wunya Amane A
(Faithful friend)*

William Grant Still (1895-1978)

Songs of Separation (1949)

*Idolatry • Poème • Parted •
If You Should Go • A Black Pierrot*



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Senior amongst Nigerian composers today, **Fred Onovwerosuoke**, born in Second-Takoradi, Ghana in 1960 to parents from the Igbo tribe, grew up in Ghana and Nigeria, before gaining a scholarship to study music at Principia College, Illinois. Now an American citizen and a successful composer, his compositions exhibit African, Cuban and Caribbean characteristics – he is also known internationally for his chant *Bolingo*, which featured in the 2006 Robert de Niro film *The Good Shepherd*.

Onovwerosuoke's 12 *African Songs* constitute the most significant song-cycle by an African composer and today's performance will be the world première performance of all 12 in a single recital programme. The following comments are based upon the composer's preface to this major contribution, composed in New Orleans in 2009. Onovwerosuoke comments: 'Each song accentuates a unique cultural perspective in providing new insights into the concept of melody, harmony, rhythmic and overall musical organization. The challenge, naturally, was how to offer pieces that fit the familiar concept of form and structure, yet uniquely nuanced in new ideas and refreshing rhythms for which much of African-derived music has earned its mark. Another daunting task was that of representing a continent as vast and diverse as Africa – definitely an impossible venture – but thankfully I had ready comfort in the abundant resources available at the St Louis African Chorus archive.'

The composer continues: 'The collection opens with 'Aiszone', which draws from some of Cameroon's many dance traditions. The song captures the lighter mood of celebration and merriment. 'Luwah' is also from Cameroon but a bit more somber. It's more of a dirge and should be approached as such. Everyone has a lingering memory of losing a loved one. In 'Aleluya' (Hareruya) I have tried to recapture an endearing tradition I observed in Shona-speaking Gospel churches around Zimbabwe. The spirit of exhilaration, that special moment of optimal joy and total abandon in the worship of God, for his perfect son, Jesus, the Christ. It is an acclamation of God's unconditional love, celebrating the birth, life, passion and resurrection of Jesus. Such celebration usually would be complete with the mystical sounds of the *mbira* thumb piano for which Zimbabwe's musical contribution has become legendary. In fact, pitching the piece in the key of F sharp enables the accompanist to reinforce that tactile effect of the *mbira*. 'Herero Folktales' weaves three folksongs with what I call "a cohesive rhythmic thread". The story of the graceful gallops of the "Himba" herdsman on his horse is punctuated by two lullabies, representing the southern Africa folk tradition of song and what I like to call surrogate or descriptive accompaniment – the gracefully galloping horse is unmistakable in the piano part. 'Duniya' taps from *griot* vocal traditions from the Mali/Senegambia sub-region of West Africa, and draws accompaniment ideas from the four-string *kontingo* and the robust low drones of the also multi-stringed *kamelangoni*. The song draws from ancient Mandinka poetry about the unsurpassed wisdom of an Almighty, Supreme God, who must be the true and only architect

of the universe. 'Esato' is based on an Igbo whimsical lament. It takes after ancient Igbo poetry on wishes, daydreams and unfulfilled desires. How rich must a man be to charm his love and win his heart's desire? I thought to reprise the ingenuity of some of Africa's most celebrated forebears of the art song, as exhibited in 'Wunya Amane A' by JH Kwabena Nketia of Ghana. Here, Kwabena Nketia, who is also a celebrated Ghanaian bard, draws text from one of his many poems. I had originally transcribed and arranged Christopher Ayodele's piece, 'Oluwa L'Oluso Aguntan', for organ and mixed voices, but have now revised it for solo voice and piano for inclusion in this collection. 'Oluwa L'Oluso Agutan Mi' paraphrases the Twenty-Third Psalm from the Bible. 'Mshila', from the Congo, draws lyrics from a popular lullaby among the Pende peoples. It revisits that tender moment when a mother coos her baby until the child drifts into dreamland. 'Ngulu' really is a work song from Kamba speaking peoples of Kenya. Although it alludes to farming, diligence in planting season and the attending rewards of a bountiful harvest, variants of the song are used in that same universal lullaby tradition. In 'Ne Nkansu', I have liberally drawn from an ancient healing dance and chant from the "Forest Peoples" of the central Africa region. 'Kaleeba' alludes to the magical bird who charms an entire village to "dance away" their sorrows. At each encounter the bird persuades its audience to dance to a mythical tune. First, it was the little girl who danced and abandoned her water pitcher and danced back to the village. Then a young lady, and finally a company of women, who all met the same fate – abandoned their water pitchers and danced back to the village.'

William Grant Still was the most prominent Afro-American composer of his generation. He took violin lessons and taught himself to play other instruments which eventually led to him studying composition with George Chadwick and Edgar Varèse. Still took a deep interest in early jazz – in 1916 he arranged WC 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 and is often considered to have been the Dean of African American Music. Still's *Songs of Separation* is a significant work in his output. Composed in 1949, the series of five settings for voice and piano of texts from African American poets also exists in versions for voice with string quartet and piano, or voice with orchestra. The cycle has much emotional depth of utterance; the poems chosen are: *Idolatry* by Arna Bontemps; *Poème* by Philippe Thoby-Marcelin; *Parted* by Paul Laurence Dunbar; *If You Should Go* by Countee Cullen and *Black Pierrot* by Langston Hughes.

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Fred Onovwerosuke (b.1960)

12 African Songs (2011)

Aiszonge!

Based on Mokpe-Bakweri
(Cameroon) traditional
folktale collected by
Lyombe Eko

Aiszonge!
Na wolene, nge!
Zhi liki no yowe ya
Nwar’elenga’ngon’do
No janea wow ase wo le
Nwanya’Hfa ko
Zhi liki’mo o weya
Nya—ma’mbenga mwan ja
Zhiliki no yoweya
Nwar elen ga’ngondo
Si ewana moto lem be?
Ais—on ge!
Si lembe!
Si kumba!

Aleluya!

Based on Shona
(Zimbabwe) Traditional
Gospel

Aleluya, Halle
Jeso kunda dzim ba hwe
Mwari wa kan di da
Jeso wa kan di da
Jeso muno denga, Halle
Kristu kunda dzim ba hwe
Narinhi, Kristu
Mupenyu, Yio
Jeso akauya
Jeso a’ak’taridza
Jeso a’akunda
Kristu’akakunda
Jeso akamuka
Kristu muno denga
Aleluya

Celebration!

Have a good time!
I’m into it, indeed!
Zhiliki, tell her how much
I’m in love
I’ll bring you wild honey
From Mount Hfako
Zhiliki, tell her how much
He’s in love
Zhiliki, tell her how much
I’m in love
Ain’t the musicians great?
Have a good time!
Put your hands together!
Give them another hand!

Alleluia!

Alleluia
Jesus conquered the grave
God loves me
Jesus loves me
Jesus in heaven, Alleluia
Christ loves us
Christ, forever
Live forever
Jesus was born [to save]
Jesus led the way
Jesus overcame
The Christ overcame
Jesus rose from the grave
Christ in us is heaven
Alleluia

Duniya

Based on
Mandinka/Bambara
(Gambia/Mali) poem co-
edited with Sankung Susso

Alisalam aleka
Fa, duni y’Allah
Allah sum i’llahi
Fa, duni ya, lon man di
Allah sum ilahi’
Allah, akubar!
E, kuba jama le
Tambita wala sum

Esato

Based on Igbo (Nigeria)
Traditional Melody

Ogini tchatoro ne lu?
Utuisa toei!
Ye ghe, ye ghe
Utuisato
Utu characha!
Ogini nu’o na kpotu
no,
O bia no chato ko,
Chato ko,
biko’e,
Utu chara cha

Herero Folktales

Based on Herero (Namibia) Folksongs

Itupuka kembeper
Jomundu Omuhimba
Mama u andje’
Tere tjinene
Eye u avera, vere tji
Okanatje, okatiti,
Oketamba Okatiti
Kuketamba Mopanaje

Mystic Universe

Peace be upon you
Behold, God’s universe
Of God, the Merciful
God’s universe beyond
Understanding
Great God
Grand designs
Are forever

Eight

Are these ripe fruits I see?
Eight peaches, juicy ripe
Ripe, juicy ripe!
Eight peaches
Peaches fair and ripe!
What stops us from
plucking,
Then comes this one,
Please let my wish come
true,
Ripe peaches, mature

Kaleeba

*Based on Baganda
(Uganda) Folktale*

Nkyo, kyo, noo nya
wange
Nyonyi se nyase maase kyo,
Nkyoro chi, sema, se
ma
Muwala wange, e,
Ka leeba
Nyambi ra'aba'lieka,
Kinyonyi ki ri ku lu
zi,
Kyambade'ensimbi,
Ensimbin'obutiti,
Kyokyi, kyuka n'ondeeba,
Mukazi wange, e, Kaleeba
Sebakazi wange, Kaleeba

Luwah

*Text based on Mokpe-
Bakweri (Cameroon)
traditional folktale collected
by Lyombe Eko*

Lu wah'e- e-e-e,
Wu la-aszre na zhi
Whiyelu we
Lu wah'e- e-e-e,
E kweli yenga na,
Na lute ya;
Nanga na ka ma

Mshila

*Based on Pende (Congo)
Traditional lullaby*

Ayi we ye-ye!
Diba dia'mshila

Tenda'ngungu.
O, yaya tende, e-
Tende yeye,
Yei ye ayiwe!

Look Out!

See, I'm watching you my
dear
I'm just a bird
[Scatting] To mean
surely, gently
Hey, young girl passing by,
Look at me [pay attention]
Take this message home
From the little bird at the
well,
Wearing cowry shells
Cowries and fine beads
Turn around and see
Attention, dear maiden
Attention, dear ladies

Bitter Tears

Hear my lament,
I've never cried
Like this before
Hear my lament
This great loss
Saddens me
And startles me

Guiding Spirits

Calling on imaginary beings
May the Spirits/
Ancestors protect
Protect you gently.
In my arms
Gently
In my arms!

Ne Nkansu

*Based on Banda (Central
African Republic) 'Forest
People' healing chant*

Ne'Nkansu dima,
weiyo, mameh, paeh
Ne'Nkansu eh,
Ne kubuko dima
Ne kubuko eh
Dima, d-ma'nsobuela

Ngulu

*Based on Kamba (Kenya)
traditional melody*

Ngulu i ngulu
Mwelela'ngu lu
I ngu lu, mwai wa
E, Wanga o
Wakasimbili,
Malenge mene
Mwa te mangi e
O, Wan ga o
Wakasim bi li

Oluwa L'Oluso Agutan Mi (Psalm 23)

*Yoruba (Nigeria)
Paraphrase of the Twenty-
Third Psalm*

Oluwa L'Oluso
Agutan mi
Emi ki yio se
Alaini o
Omumi dubule
Ninu papa
Papa o,
K'otutu nini
Ire ati anu,
Oluwa wa
Ki o w a pelu wa
Bi moti lenrin
Ninu ojiji iku
Jesu so mi, o

Healing chant

(Free translation)
Mother Earth owns the
herbs
That feed, heal
And make whole

Moving Along

(Free translation)
Farming,
Planting
With dilligence
Moving along
Thus yielding
To good harvest

The Lord is my Shepherd

The Lord
Is my shepherd;
He watches over me.
I shall lack nothing.
He keeps me steadfast
No matter what,
No matter what.
I will fear
In God I fear no evil.
Our God,
Be with us.
Faced with dread,
Even the darkness of death
Jesus will lead me.

Wunya Amane A

Transcribed and edited by
Fred Onovwerosuoke

Onipa’ee tie no yiye o
Y ɔn ko pa nea sɛm oo
Wunyaamane na ɛka
Won ko mm ɔ b’r ɔ fo po a
Wo d ɔ fo begyina w’a kyi
As ɔ w’a de soa no mu ama wo
Wunyaama ne
ɔkan ni wunyaamane
Na wo hu wo d ɔ fo
ankasa.
ɔkan ni asɛm to wo a,
Onipa pɛ wo
y ɔnkoa
Be re’asɛm aba na
wobehu
Y ɔnko pa yeade
kɛ se
Ma wo nipa
nuae,
ɔkan ni asɛm to wo a,
Na wohu wo d ɔ fo
Na wohu wo d ɔ fo

Faithful Friend

Friend, listen carefully
A good friend is priceless
When you’re in trouble
Or without put down
Your loved one will stand
By you, support you
When you’re in trouble
It is when you’re in trouble
That you know who loves
you,
When you have a problem,
When in danger that you
know
Who really comes in
friendship
It is when you have a
problem
That you know who’s with
you,
When you have a problem,
That you know
Who really loves you

William Grant Still (1895-1978)

Songs of Separation (1949)

Idolatry

Arna Bontemps

You have been good to me, I give you this:
The arms of lovers empty as our own,
Marble lips sustaining one long kiss
And the hard sound of hammers breaking stone.

For I will build a chapel in the place
Where our love died and I will journey there
To make a sign and kneel before your face
And set an old bell tolling on the air.

Poème

Philippe Thoby-Marcelin

Ce n’était pas l’aurore
Mais je m’étais levé
En me frottant les yeux.
Tout dormait alentour.

Les bananiers sous ma
fenêtre,
Frissonnaient dans le clair
de lune
Calme.
Alors, j’ai pris me tête dans
mes mains
Et j’ai pensé à vous.

Poem

It was not dawn yet
but I had got up
rubbing my eyes.
The world around me slept.

The banana trees under
my window
shivered in the
moonlight’s
calm.
Then I took my head in
my hands
And thought of you.

Parted

Paul Laurence Dunbar

She wrapped her soul in a lace of lies,
With a prime deceit to pin it;
And I thought I was gaining a fearsome prize,
So I staked my soul to win it.

We wed and parted on her complaint,
And both were a bit of barter,
Though I’ll confess that I’m no saint,
I’ll swear that she’s no martyr.

If You Should Go

Countee Cullen

Love, leave me like the light,
The gently passing day;
We would not know, but for the night,
When it has slipped away.
Go quietly; a dream,
When done, should leave no trace
That it has lived, except a gleam
Across the dreamer’s face.

A Black Pierrot

Langston Hughes

I am a black pierrot: She did not love me,
So I crept away into the night and the night was black,
too.
I am a black pierrot: She did not love me,
So I wept until the red dawn dripped blood over the
eastern hills
and my heart was bleeding, too.
I am a black pierrot: She did not love me,
So with my once gay colored soul shrunken like a balloon
without air,
I went forth in the morning to seek a new brown love.
I went forth in the morning to seek a new brown love.
I went forth in the morning, I went forth in the morning,
I went forth in the morning to seek a new brown love.

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