

WIGMORE HALL

Tuesday 21 September 2021 7.30pm

Shanté Campbell director

Sean Mayes presenter

Sarah Whitfield presenter

Jonathan Andrew Hume singer

Esme Sears soprano



This concert is supported by the Canada-UK Foundation

J. Rosamond Johnson (1873-1954)

Will Marion Cook (1869-1944)

Traditional

Jerome Kern (1885-1945)

Alberta Hunter (1895-1984) & **Lovie Austin** (1887-1972)

Eubie Blake (1887-1983)

Traditional

William Benton Overstreet (1888-1935)

Lift Ev'ry Voice and Sing (1900)

Overture to *In Dahomey* (Piano selections) (1903) *arranged by Sean Mayes*

Standin' in the Need o' Prayer *arranged by John C. Payne*

Once in a Blue Moon from *Stepping Stones* (1923)

Downhearted Blues (1923)

Memories of You (1930) *arranged by Sean Mayes*

Weepin' Mary *arranged by Harry Thacker Burleigh*

There'll Be Some Changes Made (1921) *into Lift Ev'ry Voice and Sing* (Johnson) *arranged by Sean Mayes*

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Black performance practice was a vital and significant part of British musical theatre's history between 1900 and 1950. The story of the musical cannot be told without attending to this complex story of interweaving genres, consistently led by Black creative producers. Tonight's music and the discussion will explore what this means in practice, raise the difficult question of why these performers and their work have been neglected, and discuss what this might mean for the future.

'Lift Ev'ry Voice and Sing' **J. Rosamond Johnson**, words by James Weldon Johnson (1900)

Widely recognised as the Black national anthem in the US, and the NAACP's official anthem since 1919, the song was first written as a poem by James Weldon Johnson (1871-1938). Johnson's brother, John Rosamond Johnson, set it to music shortly afterwards. The brothers were leading figures in African American theatre, and here they manifested one of the staunchest anthems of pride, courage and perseverance that Black culture has claimed to date.

Overture to *In Dahomey* (Piano selections) **Will Marion Cook** (1903), arr. by **Sean Mayes** (2021)

It is no coincidence that W. E. B. DuBois's work on Sorrow Songs was published in the same year as Cook's musical opened. DuBois explains in spirituals 'there breathes a hope – a faith in the ultimate justice of things'.

Cook was a composer and activist, and *In Dahomey* featured the lyrical work of poet Paul Laurence Dunbar. Dunbar in turn influenced Samuel Coleridge-Taylor's musical output. Cook, though known for his Broadway contributions, conducted the orchestral overture to *In Dahomey* many times in the UK. This musical selection pays homage to Cook's resistant practice, and to his undying commitment to the collision of activism and art together.

'Standin' in the Need o' Prayer' **Traditional**, arr. **John C Payne** (c. 1920s?)

Payne's many arrangements are mostly assumed lost. This piece survives only as a recording, but preserves both Payne's arrangement and his singing voice. The compelling pacing of this version finishes with a brief moment of harmonically warming duet, uniting soloist with the accompanist in cadential closure. Payne appeared many times here at Wigmore Hall in the 1920s, a period in which he influenced musical theatre ensemble singing as both vocalist and choral director.

'Once in a Blue Moon' **Jerome Kern**, lyrics by Anne Caldwell (1923)

First written for the Broadway musical *Stepping Stones*, Mabel Mercer recorded this song in 1958. Mercer (1900-1984) preserved musical theatre repertoire through her extended cabaret work in New York. Though in later years Mercer lost some of her earlier vocal range, she retained her unique gift for phrasing and acting through song. Here,

the singer's wistful uncertainty is threaded through the accompaniment by hinting at a dramatic tonality beyond the audience's expectations; we are left with the distinct feeling we can't quite be sure either.

'Downhearted Blues' **Alberta Hunter and Lovie Austin** (1923)

Composed by Austin and Hunter, Bessie Smith's early recording of the song remains the best known. Nonetheless, Hunter's own vocal performance shapes every note of it. The song places the soloist in a position of power; she delights in her decision that though she has been hurt before, she will not be again.

'Memories of You' **Eubie Blake**, words by Andy Razaf (1930)

Blake's song was written with Andy Razaf (1895-1973) after Blake's long-standing partnership with Noble Sissle (1889-1975) ended. The song is certainly nostalgic, but the accompaniment's unmistakable rising harmonic sequence truly gives this tune not only its distinguishable charm, but a uniquely memorable distinction.

'Weepin' Mary' **Traditional** arr. **Harry Thacker Burleigh** (1917)

Burleigh (1866-1949) arranged this haunting version of the African American spiritual. In Burleigh's introduction to his published arrangements, he explained the defining feature of spirituals: 'the cadences of sorrow invariably turn to joy'. Here we reflect on systemic racism, and the pain of the past eighteen months, as synthesised through this Christian experience: a pillar of familiar traditional expression via spirituals of faith for the Black community. This arrangement was in Roland Hayes's repertoire; Hayes (1887-1977) also had a long association with Wigmore Hall. He was frequently accompanied by Lawrence Brown and occasionally by Roger Quilter. In later years, Brown accompanied Paul Robeson in performances and recordings (including this piece).

'There'll Be Some Changes Made' **Benton Overstreet**, lyrics by Billy Higgins, (1921) into 'Lift Ev'ry Voice and Sing' **J. Rosamond Johnson**, words by James Weldon Johnson (1900) arr. by **Sean Mayes** (2021)

In a new version for this concert, the promise of change is met by the musical power of the Johnson brothers' song of promise and vision. 'Lift Ev'ry Voice' shakes rafters in its anticipatory melodic and harmonic styling, a call to generations past and future alike to heed the call to peaceful arms and steadfast onward-ness. As we turn to the future - we must lift the voices of others that have been unheard. This arrangement, featuring both stylings of old and new, reminds us that new need not be unfamiliar or daunting for long. Our histories shape and light the future we seek to create: 'Facing the rising sun of our new day begun, Let us march on, 'Till victory is won'.

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