

# WIGMORE HALL

Saturday 23 September 2023  
7.30pm

Sheku Kanneh-Mason cello  
Plinio Fernandes guitar

Heitor Villa-Lobos (1887-1959)

Aria (Cantilena) from *Bachianas Brasileiras No. 5*  
(1938-45)

Radamés Gnattali (1906-1988)

Sonata for cello and guitar (1969)  
*I. Allegretto comodo • II. Adagio • III. Con spirito*

Leo Brouwer (b.1939)

Sonata No. 1 'The magic space' for cello and guitar  
(dedicated to Sheku Kanneh-Mason) (2020) world  
première  
*I. • II. • III.*

Rafael Marino Arcaro (b.1990)

Elegie à une mémoire oubliée (2015-6, rev. 2018-9)

Ástor Piazzolla (1921-1992)

From *Histoire du Tango* (1986)  
Café 1930 • Nightclub 1960



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The selection of works in this programme leads us through the significant compositional developments in a century of contemporary music driven by composers from Brazil, Cuba and Argentina. It is through their deep understanding and love of both classical repertoire and the popular music of their countries that they create compositions which communicate to us so powerfully and on so many levels of musical experience and pleasure.

The first of the *Bachianas Brasileiras* series by the Brazilian composer **Heitor Villa-Lobos** were completed in 1930: *Bachianas Brasileiras No. 1* for an orchestra of cellos, *Bachianas Brasileiras No. 2* for orchestra and *Bachianas Brasileiras No. 4* for piano solo. Their name succinctly defines what Villa-Lobos was aiming to express in his music: the full range of his own musical personality. The first movement of *Bachianas Brasileiras No. 5*, the *Aria (Cantilena)*, was not completed until 1938, but soon achieved the status of a classical 'hit' from its New York performance by Brazilian soprano Bidú Sayão (1902–1999) with Villa-Lobos conducting the ensemble of eight cellos and Leonard Rose (1918–1984) playing the lead cello part. Villa-Lobos made an arrangement of the *Aria* for solo guitar and voice for another leading Brazilian soprano and classical guitarist, Olga Prager Coelho (1909–2008). Her international touring included regular appearances as a soloist at Wigmore Hall; in a shared BBC Radio programme with the Wigmore Ensemble, on 10 November 1952, she performed the *Aria*, accompanying herself on classical guitar. Tonight, the soprano part, which is mostly a long 'ah', is played on solo cello; when words finally appear, they speak of rose-coloured clouds passing slowly at midnight, in the heavens – *tarde, uma nuvem rósea lenta e transparente, sobre o espaço*, with soft moonlight awakening painful longing – *suave a luz da lua desperta agora a cruel saudade*. *Saudade*, broadly defined as a kind of longing for something that does not or cannot exist, is essential Brazilian vocabulary.

The Brazilian composer and pianist **Radamés Gnattali** came a generation after Villa-Lobos and very much followed his approach, both in his musical collaborations and his compositional output, composing classical music imbued with popular styles. In his Sonata for cello and guitar, Gnattali explores the timbral combinations of the cello and the guitar, contrasting the pizzicato of the cello with the plucked strings on the guitar and then at times the muted *étouffée* of guitar against the pizzicato of the cello, or thick ten-note chords created together across both instruments. The conversation between the two instruments flows smoothly throughout the three movements, with the momentum driven by time signatures alternating between two and five time, among others, and dancing syncopations.

We are fortunate that the output of the Cuban composer and conductor **Leo Brouwer** has increased with his increasing years. He has long been inspired by individual performers and the Sonata No. 1 'The Magic Space', written for the duo of Sheku Kanneh-Mason and

Sheku Kanneh-Mason appears by arrangement with Enticott Music Management  
Sheku Kanneh-Mason records exclusively for Decca Classics  
Sheku plays a Matteo Goffriller cello from 1700 which is on indefinite loan to him

Plínio Fernandes, is a perfect example of his ability to combine his broad compositional palate with the musical sensitivities of the performers. As he explained to me: 'The Magic Space was dedicated to excellent cellist Sheku Kanneh-Mason and commissioned by the Royal Philharmonic Society together with Sonata No. 2 for solo cello, both pieces composed in parallel between July and December 2020. His special sound and professionalism, even at his young age, motivated me greatly to make my second sonata for this instrument and this piece for cello and guitar. I am equally grateful to the initial impulse of the Brazilian guitarist Plínio Fernandes, who played my music before. It is really very difficult for me to talk or write about my music, I prefer to compose it and not to explain it. Thanks to Mr James Murphy, Chief Executive of the Royal Philharmonic Society, for encouraging these projects in favour of the cello repertoire in the 21st Century and promoting young talents.'

Another work written especially for the duo of Sheku Kanneh-Mason and Plínio Fernandes is *Élégie à une mémoire oubliée* by the young Brazilian composer **Rafael Marino Arcaro**. About this lyrical work, the composer writes, 'with time, many of our dearest moments disappear as our memory fades. Loving times may forever vanish. This piece is an elegy, a lament for the departure of these memories lost.'

Arcaro, who is finishing his PhD at King's College, London, under the mentorship of George Benjamin, is building a substantial body of chamber music for cello and for the guitar, in ensemble and solo contexts, including two large-scale works: Sonata for cello and piano Op. 10 and *Concerto Apinayé* Op. 7, for guitar and orchestra.

The composer **Ástor Piazzolla** dedicated himself to preserving and continuing the tradition of the tango of his native Argentina. This decision was assisted by the advice of the outstanding teacher and conductor Nadia Boulanger (1887–1979) with whom he studied in Paris. Piazzolla composed his four-movement *Histoire du Tango* as a history of tango in music, with each movement dedicated to a different era. Here we have two of those periods in its history to compare: the 1930s tango contrasted against that of the 1960s. Originally written for flute and guitar, Piazzolla's choice of instruments reflected those used in the final decades of the 19th Century. By the 1930s, the tango style had been modified and Piazzolla's *Café 1930* has a semi-improvisatory feel to it with a freer rhythmic base. In contrast, during the 1960s, the rhythmic element tightened, with the Argentine tango and the Brazilian bossa nova swinging to a similar pulse, as we hear in *Nightclub 1960*. This rhythmic confluence serves as the perfect ending to a concert exploring the range and development of contemporary composition over the past century by classical composers from Brazil, Cuba and Argentina.

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