

WIGMORE HALL

Saturday 26 April 2025
7.30pm

Sheku Kanneh-Mason cello
Isata Kanneh-Mason piano

Felix Mendelssohn (1809-1847) Cello Sonata No. 1 in B flat Op. 45 (1838)
I. Allegro vivace • II. Andante • III. Allegro assai

Gabriel Fauré (1845-1924) Cello Sonata No. 1 in D minor Op. 109 (1917)
I. Allegro • II. Andante • III. Finale. Allegro comodo

Interval

Natalie Klouda (b.1984) Tor Mordôn (2024)
I. Flowing and expressive • II. Con fuoco
Commissioned by American Patrons of the Philharmonia Orchestra, London,
Mr and Mrs William Jacob III

Francis Poulenc (1899-1963) Sonata for cello and piano (1940-8, rev. 1953)
*I. Allegro – Tempo di marcia • II. Cavatine •
III. Ballabile • IV. Finale*

*Sheku and Isata Kanneh-Mason appear by arrangement with Enticott Music Management.
Sheku Kanneh-Mason and Isata Kanneh-Mason record exclusively for Decca Classics.
Sheku plays a Matteo Goffriller cello from 1700 which is on indefinite loan to him.*



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Like Sheku and Isata Kanneh-Mason, **Felix Mendelssohn** came from a family whose lives revolved around the joy of making music together. As well as his older sister Fanny, a virtuoso pianist and an extraordinarily gifted composer, Felix had a younger sister, Rebecka, a much-admired singer, and a younger brother, Paul: a banker who in later life acted as financial advisor to the Prussian government, and an accomplished amateur cellist for whom Felix composed both his cello sonatas. He completed the first in January 1838, while he was working in Leipzig as director of the Gewandhaus orchestra, and shortly before his wife Cecile gave birth to their first child, Karl Wolfgang Paul – the last name a tribute to the boy's uncle.

Mendelssohn had achieved international fame at the age of 20 through his performances of JS Bach's *St Matthew Passion* in Berlin, the first since the composer's death. His enthusiasm for reviving forgotten repertoire informed his programming at the Gewandhaus, where his 'historical concerts' during 1838/39 included music by Haydn, Mozart and Beethoven, as well as by composers such as Viotti, Cimarosa and Salieri whose work has now fallen back into neglect. Mendelssohn's immersion in music from earlier generations left its mark on this sonata, which is classical both in its formal structures and its clarity of texture, albeit with a piano part more elaborate than most from the classical era. Its buoyant first movement is followed by a wistful *Andante* in the relative minor and a rondo-like finale which builds in excitement before reaching a peaceful conclusion.

Although **Fauré** composed for the cello throughout his long career, and probably intended his famous *Élégie* of 1880 as the slow movement of a sonata that never materialised, it was not until 1917, when he was in his 60s, that he completed a sonata for the instrument, following it with a second in 1921. The D minor sonata was composed in Saint-Raphaël, the Côte d'Azur resort to which Fauré frequently repaired to escape the pressures of Paris and his position as Director of the Conservatoire. An anxiety not so easy to suppress was that over the progress of the war in which his younger son, Philippe, was fighting, and the sonata's skittish opening, with its unpredictable cross-rhythms and syncopations, reflects his agitated state of mind.

This first theme recalls the prelude to the third act of *Pénélope*, Fauré's opera of 1913, in which the orchestra depicts the anger of the returning Ulysses at encountering Penelope's suitors; both themes derive from the opening of the D minor symphony that Fauré composed in 1884 but quickly disowned. The sonata's *Andante* displays more of the lyricism and grace with which Fauré is generally associated: the cello's yearning melody is accompanied by poignant bell-like figures in the piano. The finale is outwardly optimistic, in the tonic major, but melancholy is not far below the surface. It includes a passage composed as a strict canon between the two instruments, demonstrating

the fundamentally classical instincts that underpin Fauré's idiosyncratic style.

The British composer **Natalie Klouda** wrote *Tor Mordôn* for Sheku and Isata Kanneh-Mason, who gave the world première at the 2024 Highgate International Chamber Music Festival, followed a few days later by the American première at New York's Carnegie Hall. The work is dedicated to Sheku and Isata's grandfather, Arnold Mason, who played the violin as a child in Antigua and supported his grandchildren's musical endeavours on his visits to their home in Nottingham. Klouda drew inspiration from the mythology and folklore of two regions of the world important to the Kanneh-Mason family's heritage: Eryri/Snowdonia in Wales, and Antigua and the Caribbean. She was struck, she writes, 'by the powerful oral storytelling traditions of both places', establishing a 'connection to the landscapes and to peoples of long ago'. The work's title literally means 'sea mount of light' and is drawn from the ancient Brythonic languages of Welsh, Cornish and Breton. *Tor Mordôn* has two contrasting movements: the first begins contemplatively and explores, in Klouda's words, 'the human connection to experiencing the vastness in time and presence of mountains'; the second 'draws on the eccentric elements of the folktales as well as the more sinister drama and power of dramatic landscapes, which takes centre stage right from the start'.

Like Fauré, **Poulenc** embarked upon a cello sonata in the midst of a world war: he began to sketch it in 1940 in Bordeaux, where he had been assigned to join the Anti-Aircraft division, though his mobilisation was ended after only six weeks by the accession of Marshal Pétain's Vichy government. It was not until 1948 that Poulenc completed the sonata, which he dedicated to the great French cellist Pierre Fournier, who helped him with technical issues and gave the première with him in 1949. Its style is melodious and accessible, and its four movements follow the familiar classical pattern: a sonata-form *Allegro*, a slow *Cavatine*, a scherzo with the unusual title 'Ballabile' (literally, 'suitable for dancing') and a fast finale, albeit preceded with a *Largo* introduction whose portentousness belies the exuberance of what follows.

Poulenc seems to have had some reservations about the piece and its uncharacteristically conventional shape, judging from his comment in 1957 about 'how correct the Turin critic was to write ... "It's amazing that the composer of *Les Biches* should borrow his form from d'Indy's *Schola Cantorum*".' But his interpretation of the piano part the following year deeply impressed the 19-year-old cellist Rohan de Saram, who performed it with him in Oxford, where Poulenc was receiving an honorary degree: 'One felt he was continually listening to what he was doing, and his tone was so transparent you felt you could do anything – it was wonderful.'

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