

# WIGMORE HALL

Friday 26 July 2024  
7.30pm

Abel Selaocoe cello

Abel Selaocoe (b.1992)

Ka Bohaleng (2021)

Marin Marais (1656-1728)

Les Voix Humaines (pub. 1701) *arranged by Abel Selaocoe*

Traditional

Tsohle Tsohle *arranged by Abel Selaocoe*

Abel Selaocoe

Improvisations (based on cosmic overtones and throat singing)

Johann Sebastian Bach (1685-1750)

Sarabande from Cello Suite No. 3 in C BWV1009 (c.1720)

Abel Selaocoe

Improvisation  
Qhawe (2021)

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Passion, the emblem of individual suffering, has become a synonym for striving and commitment, all too often touted as the prerequisite for success in sport, business or politics. The notion of compassion, of suffering with the other, is much harder to sell, especially so at a time when hearts harden to rolling news reports of human tragedies and escalating despair. While **Abel Selaocoe's** upbringing under testing conditions in South Africa contained cause for heart-hardening, his worldview was shaped above all by the strength of fellow-feeling and joy cultivated at home by his family. Those genuinely compassionate qualities find expression in his programme this evening, with its finely balanced blend of European Baroque music, traditional songs from Africa and new pieces inspired by the cellist's life and faith.

*Ka Bohaleng* is dedicated to all mothers, 'source of strength and good counsel' in Abel's words. He describes his song as 'an ode to strong women who nurture with power and raise their family through tough circumstances'. The composition's surging energy flows from the saying 'Mosadi o tshwara thipa ka bohaleng', a familiar proverb in the South African language of Sesotho, which translates as 'a woman holds a knife on the sharp side'; in other words, women shoulder burdens and make sacrifices for others. 'In the old days the father was the one going away to work, so it was our mothers that taught us to be men', notes Abel. Children are able to grow thanks to the strong hands of their mothers; nobody sows a seed like the mother of Africa, observe the song's lyrics. *Ka Bohaleng* ends with the affirmation 'Humanity has arrived!'

**Marin Marais**, the son of a Parisian shoemaker, received early lessons as a chorister at the church of Saint Germain-l'Auxerrois. He almost certainly studied viol with Monsieur de Sainte-Colombe, a virtuoso and pioneer of the bass viol, who lived next door to Saint Germain-l'Auxerrois, and subsequently studied with Lully. Around 1679 Marais became an *ordinaire* of the *musique de la chambre de roi*, the king's elite company of musicians, and soon branched out as a composer. His first book of pieces for viol, published in Paris in 1686, was followed by four more volumes over the next 39 years. Marais's solemn *Les Voix Humaines*, belatedly published in 1701 together with over 140 other pieces in his *Deuxième livre de pièces de viole*, evokes the spirit of human voices engaged in compassionate dialogue. Originally conceived for viol, the piece uses rich sonorities to sustain its prevailing mood of sorrow.

The word 'tsohle' translates from Sesotho as 'all things' or 'everything'. It provides the focal point of *Tsohle Tsohle*, a joyful song of thanksgiving to God, the creator of all things. Its lyrics amplify St Paul's Letter to the Romans, in which faith in Christ is presented as the source of salvation and Christians

are called upon to be 'devoted to one another in love'. *Tsohle Tsohle* paves the way to a sequence of cello improvisations overlaid with sounds from the so-called cosmic or universal overtone scale and a style of throat singing rooted in the Xhosa culture of *umqokola* or *umngqokolo*. The latter unlocks overtones that ride above the main sung melody to create contrapuntal lines, sometimes running in parallel, sometimes in contrary motion.

**Bach's** cello suites supplied an early litmus test for the quality of Abel Selaocoe's playing. While he practised them at home, his mother would add countermelodies in what he describes as 'a very South African hymn-singing way'. Those spontaneous sessions 'became a part of my experience of these pieces, something that felt as if it was missing later on, as I furthered my studies in the UK, but the flavour of it never left me. It informs my very personal approach to them to this day'.

Improvisation begins with song. 'You have to sing inside of yourself and then your personality starts to come out', observes Abel. 'And when you improvise, there's no time to be self-critical, just as when you speak you can't really look back at every word, every sentence, you just speak and express yourself and possibly reflect later on what you said. It's an opportunity for free-flowing expression of your own uniqueness. Sometimes you lose control of it, and that is a wonderful thing. I start from the voice, then go from the voice to the cello, then begin to let this sound reflect my thoughts or the world around me'.

*Qhawe*, the Zulu or Xhosa word for 'hero', is dedicated to one of its composer's nephews, who came to stay with the Selaocoos and brought joy and life to the family. He left them with fresh insights into what children have to offer the world. 'I think children have a real part to play in the community in terms of the messages that they bring from our ancestors', says Abel. 'We see them as the closest to our ancestors out of all members of the family. In many ways, they speak a spiritual language which they sometimes don't even realise themselves. And we must listen carefully as adults to decipher some of the meanings that come from how they see the world. I think it's very important to give that a chance'. Children, he adds, are highly valued within the Apostolic Church of South Africa, not least as singing messengers of God's grace. *Qhawe* connects with the compassionate voice of the *postola* songs Abel sang as a boy. 'It was a beautiful responsibility to sing for others', he recalls. 'And it made you understand your role in society as a kind of speaker of wisdom, a carrier of an understanding of the world, even though you were so young'.

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