

WIGMORE HALL 125

Monday 27 October 2025
7.30pm

Jeneba Kanneh-Mason piano

- Johann Sebastian Bach (1685-1750) Partita No. 5 in G BWV829 (pub. 1731)
*I. Praeambulum • II. Allemande • III. Corrente •
IV. Sarabande • V. Tempo di Minuetto •
VI. Passepied • VII. Gigue*
- Ludwig van Beethoven (1770-1827) Piano Sonata No. 17 in D minor Op. 31 No. 2 'Tempest' (1801-2)
I. Largo - Allegro • II. Adagio • III. Allegretto

Interval

- William Grant Still (1895-1978) Summerland from *Three Visions* (1935)
- Claude Debussy (1862-1918) La fille aux cheveux de lin from *Préludes Book I* (1909-10)
Bruyères from *Préludes Book II* (1911-3)
- Florence Price (1887-1953) Fantasia Nègre No. 1 in E minor (1929)
- Fryderyk Chopin (1810-1849) Ballade No. 3 in A flat Op. 47 (1841)
Ballade No. 4 in F minor Op. 52 (1842)



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Johann Sebastian Bach's six Partitas, published in 1731 as the first volume of his *Clavier-Übung* ('Keyboard exercise'), followed the pattern of his English Suites yet surpassed them in terms of their inventive brilliance and technical demands. The Partita No. 5 in G BWV829 prefaces its sequence of five dances with a beguiling *Praeambulum* in the form of a fantasia. Its playful opening idea returns between virtuoso scale passages which are distinguished by ostentatious hand crossings and intricate two-part counterpoint. The *Allemande*, a stylised German dance, introduces rhythmic and melodic variation to add complexity to an essentially simple initial idea. Simplicity reigns in the *Corrente*, the flowing semiquavers of which run in the right hand in the movement's first half and descend to the left hand in its second half.

Bach's *Sarabande* suggests nostalgia, perhaps even a lament, for the old world of courtly music making that had shaped his early career. It yields to the ingenuity of the *Tempo di Minuetto*, in which lively quavers are often grouped to suggest a minuet in two rather than three time, and the unequivocally three-in-a-bar progress of the *Passepied*. Bach ends with a thrilling *Gigue*, formed as a double fugue in which both fugue subjects are combined towards the movement's close.

Beethoven swept conventional practice aside in his three Op. 31 piano sonatas. The second of the set, completed in the summer of 1802, begins with a radical contrast of ideas, the first recitative-like, the second charged with an unsettling nervous energy, both improvisatory in nature. The 'tempest' of the work's nickname breaks out after a repeat of the two opening themes, reiterating elements of each before signalling the development section with a return of the slow arpeggios from the introduction. Three arpeggios provide space for solemn reflection before the tempest stirs again in the recapitulation only to dissolve into an exquisite recollection of the opening arpeggios and the emergence of a single singing line, unlike anything heard before in a keyboard sonata's first movement. Poetic expression continues in the lyrical *Adagio*, launched like its predecessor with a rising arpeggio. Here Beethoven creates light and shade by exploiting sudden contrasts between different registers of the piano, thus heightening the emotional impact of the right hand's singing line. The finale, cast in sonata form like the opening movement, concentrates what the Beethoven scholar Lewis Lockwood describes as its 'demonic fury' into a near-unbroken run of semiquavers, transcending the character of a technical exercise to deliver an intensely dramatic conclusion to the work.

In her pioneering book, *The Music of Black Americans*, first published in 1971, Harvard professor Eileen Southern described **William Grant Still** as 'the dean of Afro-American composers'. Her enthusiastic appraisal of his work was supported by its presence at the time in programmes performed by professional, student and community-concert groups throughout the United States. 'His music,' noted Southern, '[had]

truly become a music of the people.' Still's studies at university and privately with George Whitefield Chadwick and Edgard Varèse prepared the ground for early works, *From the Land of Dreams* and the jazz-infused *Levee Land* among them, that drew critical acclaim. His *Three Visions* of 1935, a suite of pieces for solo piano, belong to a series of compositions rooted in African-American culture and the shared experience of a people searching for dignity and respect within the self-proclaimed 'land of the free'.

The sublime second movement of Still's suite portrays the soul's journey after death and its entry into heaven or 'Summerland'. His eternal vision leads naturally into 'La fille aux cheveux de lin', from **Debussy's** first book of *Préludes*, the contemplative beauty of which rises from a simple pentatonic melody complemented by an accompaniment of ideally spaced chords. 'Bruyères' from his second book of *Préludes* seems to capture the very fragrance of a field of heather, evoked in music of rapt affection and tenderness. **Florence Price** marked her debut as a professional composer in 1930 with the first of four neo-Romantic *Fantasies nègres*, performed by her friend Margaret Bonds at the 12th annual convention of the National Association of Negro Musicians. The work's enchanting fantasy, driven by powerful rhythms and Chopinesque shifts of mood, develops from the spiritual 'Sinner, please don't let this harvest pass', a heartfelt expression of unshakeable faith in God's redeeming grace.

Literary Romanticism and the tradition of Polish narrative ballads inspired **Chopin's** four Ballades, an expansive new keyboard genre that projected what one early reviewer described as 'stories in sound'. His first Ballade dates from the early 1830s, composed following Russia's brutal suppression of the Polish uprising of 1830-1 and perhaps influenced by Adam Mickiewicz's collection of *Ballads and Romances* of 1822. Jeneba Kanneh-Mason ends her programme with the Ballades Nos. 3 & 4, respectively composed in 1841 and 1842. While the third Ballade has the feel of a charming story, told in discursive fashion, it rests on a strong structure in which the singing theme of its introduction and a second idea that grows from it are developed and recalled as the composition unfolds. The work's light spirit survives a sudden diversion into the key of C sharp minor, thanks not least to an ingenious transition back to the initial singing theme's final statement. Like its predecessor, the fourth Ballade makes telling use of thematic transformation to convey the impression of a story told in sound. The composition's two themes evolve within an overarching sonata form, complete with the exposition, development and recapitulation of two themes, to which Chopin introduces complex variations and contrapuntal invention to amplify the music's emotional turbulence.

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