

WIGMORE HALL

Sunday 3 April 2022 7.30pm

Chineke! Chamber Ensemble

Meera Maharaj flute

Armand Djikoloum oboe

Mebrakh Haughton-Johnson clarinet

Linton Stephens bassoon

Francisco Gomez french horn

Hannah White violin

Natalia Senior-Brown viola

Ashok Klouda cello

Leon Bosch double bass

Gerard Aimontche piano

CLASSIC *f*M

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William Grant Still (1895-1978)

Folk Suite No. 1 (1962)

I. Bambalele e Espin Garda •

II. Sometimes I Feel Like a Motherless Child • III. Two Hebraic Songs

Joseph Rheinberger (1839-1901)

Nonet Op. 139 (pub. 1885)

I. Allegro • II. Menuetto. Andantino • III. Adagio molto • IV. Allegro

Interval

Deborah Cheetham (b.1964)

Ngarrgooroon (2022) *UK première*

Samuel Coleridge-Taylor (1875-1912)

Nonet in F minor Op. 2 (1893)

I. Allegro energico • II. Andante con moto •

III. Scherzo. Allegro • IV. Finale. Allegro vivace

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William Grant Still was educated in Arkansas alongside Florence Price and worked as an arranger before studying with Varèse, who championed Still's music. In 1931 the Rochester Philharmonic performed Still's 'Afro American' Symphony No. 1, the first symphony by a Black American composer to be played publicly by a major orchestra. Supported by a Guggenheim Fellowship, Still moved from New York to Los Angeles and devoted himself to the composition of a wide range of works, including eight operas. He inscribed his scores with the words: 'With humble thanks to God, the Source of Inspiration.' Still was prolific, with a highly discerning taste for different stylistic sources; alongside his lyric gift, which Varèse particularly prized, Still drew upon folk music and Spirituals, later preferring the blues because, in his words, they, 'unlike many Spirituals, do not exhibit the influence of Caucasian music'.

Still composed a number of folk suites, including a series of *Folk Suites from the Western Hemisphere*, reflecting the folk revival of the 1960s. The Folk Suite No. 1, originally for violin and piano, demonstrates the sheer breadth of Still's materials. The work opens with his treatment of two syncopated Brazilian songs, 'Bambalele' and 'Espin Garda'. 'Sometimes I Feel Like a Motherless Child' is a Spiritual that originated with the slaves forced to work on American cotton plantations, and became an anthem of the Civil Rights movement in the 1960s – when Still made this arrangement, in all its solemn, mournful dignity. The suite ends with the distinctive rhythms and modal inflections of *Two Hebraic Songs*.

The Nonet in E flat Op. 139 by Liechtensteiner composer **Joseph Rheinberger** was composed at the same time as Coleridge-Taylor's, although it is a reworking of an earlier composition, Rheinberger's Octet, written 20 years before. Rheinberger was a diligent composer and generous teacher immersed in the Classical tradition; he did not like the music of Wagner or Liszt, for example, but never tried to sway his students in their tastes. Rheinberger's thorough knowledge of Classical precedents is evident in his own compositions, which often display structural coherence and contrapuntal vigour. These qualities are apparent in Rheinberger's Nonet, which opens with a genial *Allegro* in which horn calls create a pastoral, outdoors atmosphere, whereas the elegant *Menuetto* suggests the refined, witty conversation of the drawing room, contrasted with a more introspective minor-key trio section. A lyrical, rather wistful *Adagio* follows, and the Nonet concludes with a bustling finale.

Deborah Cheetham is an Aboriginal Australian composer, playwright, actor and soprano who was appointed Professor of Practice at the Sir Zelman Cowen School of Music at Monash University in 2019, and Composer in Residence at the Melbourne Symphony Orchestra in 2020. Her second opera, *Parrwang Lifts the Sky* – sung in the Wadawurrung language – was premièred at Victorian Opera in 2021.

Commissioned by Chineke! for their debut appearance at the Adelaide Festival in 2022, *Ngarrgooroon* is the sixth in Deborah

Cheetham's *Woven Song, Embassy Tapestry* series, a collaboration with Short Black Opera that celebrates works of art from an ancient culture, reinterpreted by the weavers of the Australian Tapestry Workshop. The project symbolises the interwoven nature of the arts in communicating knowledge between the generations of the indigenous people of Australia. Roles are shared in a manner that mirrors the versatility of Cheetham's own career: the singer is the dancer, the dancer the painter and the painter the storyteller.

Ngarrgooroon, which is the subject of the Embassy Tapestry that resides in the Australian Embassy in Dublin, is inspired by the language, art and culture of senior Gija artist Patrick Mung Mung, and tells the story of an ancient country and its connections, which have been maintained for millennia.

Samuel Coleridge-Taylor studied violin and, with Charles Villiers Stanford, composition at the Royal College of Music. Coleridge-Taylor's first piece was published when he was 16, and he went on to become Professor of Composition at the Guildhall School and Trinity College of Music. After meeting poet PL Dunbar, Coleridge-Taylor became increasingly interested in promoting the dignity of people of African descent. He was commissioned by the Three Choirs Festival at the insistence of Elgar: 'I wish, wish, wish you would ask Coleridge-Taylor to do it. He still wants recognition, and he is far and away the cleverest fellow going'. Elgar's friend, the publisher August Jaeger, proclaimed Coleridge-Taylor to be 'a genius'.

Coleridge-Taylor's Nonet in F minor, Op. 2 (1895) was first performed at the Royal College of Music with its director, Charles Groves, in attendance. In his biography of Coleridge-Taylor, written at the request of the composer's widow, WCB Sayers wrote of the Nonet's première, which took place on 5 July 1895: 'At the conclusion of the piece, the applause was very great, and there were demands for the composer. He, however, was not forthcoming, and, the applause continuing, Sir George himself went in search of Coleridge-Taylor. Although he [Coleridge-Taylor] had found the courage to face an audience in his own town, at college so great had been his dread ... he had fled upstairs and hidden himself in the organ room, whence Grove dragged him forth.'

Coleridge-Taylor's Nonet is a work of precocious maturity, opening with a mellow clarinet solo and showing deft handling of an ensemble that could be unwieldy. Similarly, the *Andante con moto* exhibits a depth of feeling and organisation of texture well beyond Coleridge-Taylor's years, and is followed by a *Scherzo* of symphonic scope contrasted with a deliciously lyrical trio section. The mood lightens for the *Finale*, in which Coleridge-Taylor's skill for thematic integration and melodic imagination is delivered with a remarkable lightness of touch.

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