

Wethersfield Chamber Concerts

12 May 2019 – 4pm

Isata Kanneh-Mason Piano

PROGRAMME NOTES *by John Woollard*

Clara Schumann (1819-1896): Piano Sonata in G.minor

- i. Allegro (G minor)
- ii. Adagio (Eb major)
- iii. Scherzo (G major)
- iv. Rondo (G minor)

Clara Schumann (1819–1896) was a child prodigy and received comprehensive musical training from her father, Friedrich Wieck, who had studied theology but was a great success as a music dealer and piano teacher. In addition to piano lessons, her training included instruction in composition, improvisation, musical analysis, ear training, violin and voice. She composed her first pieces at age eight, and her first published work appeared in 1831. Her early musical career is documented in a meticulously kept diary, intended not only to provide documentation and act as an incentive but also to serve as a means of monitoring her progress. By the 1830s the young pianist was busy playing concerts that took her to the large musical cities of Germany and abroad as well. In 1837 she made her first appearance in Vienna, where the notoriously severe critic Eduard Hanslick wrote: “Not a wunderkind – yet still a child and already a wonder.”

The following year the Vienna court gave her the honorary title of k. u. k. Kammervirtuosin (“imperial and royal chamber virtuoso”). Her marriage to Robert Schumann in 1840 was against her father’s will and required a court ruling to make it possible. In the years that followed, household duties took an increasing share of Clara Schumann’s time. But despite the birth of eight children she continued to teach and play a reduced number of concerts. In these years, however, she wrote few

compositions, and the last of her pieces was published in 1853.

Clara Schumann’s piano compositions are technically demanding, some of them even virtuoso. In addition to a few formally large compositions, her small, intimate works in particular distinguish her as a poetically inspired and imaginative artist. Characteristic of her music is a rich chromaticism and a compositional style that requires the pianist’s hands, especially the left, to span wide intervals.

The story behind Clara Schumann’s only piano sonata is a highly personal one. At Christmas in 1841 she gave her husband, Robert, a manuscript that was entitled *Sonatine* and contained the “Allegro” and “Scherzo” of the present work. On the last page of the manuscript she held out the prospect of completing the sonata. Only a few weeks later she had completed the slow movement, which now became the second, and the final “Rondo”. The first movement is in the traditional sonata form, but has a number of individual characteristics, with development-like elements already included in the exposition. The upbeat main theme of the second movement picks up the thematic thread of the first movement’s coda. This brief movement is also in three-part form and offers a harmonic surprise after only a few bars: the main theme is first presented in E-flat major and then repeated in E-flat minor. The cheerful “Scherzo” in G major is the only movement in the sonata that appeared in a printed edition, with minor deviations from the manuscript. Clara Schumann included it as number four in the collection *Quatre pièces fugitives*. The final “Rondo” rounds out the cycle with its return to G minor. It is a virtuoso piece full of pianistic effects.

Clara Schumann (1819-1896): Piano Sonata in G.minor, Op. 11

The Three Romances, Opus 11 were composed in 1838/39 and published by Mechetti in Vienna in 1840. These are romantic character pieces in which the musical content has been compressed into an extremely small space. Only a short time later Schumann composed the cycle that was to be published by Breitkopf und Härtel in Leipzig as *Quatre pièces fugitives*. Although there is some temptation to

understand the title as referring to “fugue-like pieces” (a mistake that Breitkopf und Härtel made in a later edition), “fleeting” or “elusive” better expresses the character of the works. They are quite different in character, and in the 19th century they were among the composer’s best-known pieces.

Robert Schumann (1810-1856), trans. Clara Schumann: *Widmung & Mondnacht*

Two transcriptions of songs of her husband.

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Clara Schumann (1819-1896): Scherzo No. 2 in C minor

A projected concert tour centred in Paris could well have sparked off her first D minor Scherzo of 1838, a work in which concessions to that city's notorious delight in virtuosity are made not in the old, mechanically patterned way but with a Mendelssohnian lightness and charm. Its

success was immediate enough for her to write home to Robert begging him to attempt something similar. On the C minor Scherzo of 1844, her allegiance returns to Chopin, alike in the urgency of the opening and closing sections and the flowing, chordal assuagement of the trio.

----- Interval -----

Frederic Chopin (1810-1849): complete preludes

Frédéric Chopin's 24 Preludes were published in mid-1839, immediately after the composer's wintertime stay with writer George Sand on the island of Majorca. Chopin had been paid 2,000 francs for the copyright by Parisian publisher Camille Pleyel, son of the more famous Ignaz Pleyel. Evidence, some of it in the composer's own correspondence, seems to indicate that the majority of these works were composed in 1837 and 1838. For many of these pieces, the title Prelude can be a misleading one. The practice of "preluding" was very much alive during this period, and Chopin's preluding abilities are well-documented. During a live performance, preluding was a way of preparing the atmosphere of the major work by means of a brief, usually improvised, introductory piece that often made a modulation from the key of the preceding work to the key of the next. And while it is on record that Chopin did in fact employ some of the Preludes in this way, it seems indisputable that the real intent was for the Preludes to stand on their own, preferably in a complete

performance. The selection of title may also be a nod in the direction of J.S. Bach, whose own Preludes and Fugues in all the major and minor keys, better known as the two books of the Well-Tempered Clavier, exerted a heavy influence on Chopin.

The gamut of emotions contained within the collection of 24 preludes is impressive. None of them is particularly long, and some of them, like the very first, are of almost disconcerting brevity. The truncated formal structures and abbreviated phrase patterns that result from this general miniaturization, far from diminishing the works' expressive power, actually serve to focus each of the pieces in an extraordinarily effective way. On a large scale, the 24 Preludes are organized by key group: C major, its relative minor A minor, G major, its relative minor E major, and so on, moving up the circle of fifths until the final Prelude in D minor.

ARTIST BIOGRAPHY

Isata Kanneh-Mason is a Postgraduate at The Royal Academy of Music, studying piano with Carole Presland, having been awarded the Gwendolyn Reiche Memorial Scholarship.

Isata was in the Piano Category Final of The BBC Young Musician 2014, winning The Walter Todds Bursary for the most promising musician before the Grand Final. She has won The Royal Academy Iris Dyer Piano Prize four times and won the Mrs Claude Beddington Prize 2016 for outstanding recital results at The Royal Academy. She is also winner of The Royal Academy Christian Carpenter Recital Prize 2018, The Howard Craxton Chamber Music Prize 2018 and the Wilfred Parry (Brahms) Prize 2018 at The Royal Academy.

Isata held the prestigious Elton John Scholarship for her Undergraduate studies at The Royal Academy, performing with Sir Elton John in Los Angeles in 2013. She also held the Elsa and Leonard Cross Scholarship at The Royal Academy of Music, Junior Department, studying piano with Patsy Toh. She won two ABRSM Gold Awards at age 10 and 11 for the highest marks in the UK for grades 7 and 8 Piano.

She has performed around the UK and abroad, with concerto appearances, in solo recitals and in chamber ensembles, including at the Wigmore Hall, The Royal Festival Hall, St Martin-in-the -Fields, The Duke's Hall

(Royal Academy), The Royal Concert Hall, Nottingham, Kings Place and Milton Court, Barbican in London. She has performed in The Portland Piano Series in Oregon, USA, in The Barbican Sound Unbound Series, The Colour of Music Festival in South Carolina, The Hebden Bridge and Lincoln Music Festivals, in Amsterdam, the Netherlands, the Caribbean, The Cayman Islands, Canada and Switzerland.

Highlights this season include appearances at the Lucerne Festival, Montreux's September Musical, the Zurich Tonhalle, Wigmore Hall, Amsterdam Concertgebouw, Saint-Denis Festival in Paris, and an extensive US tour, including a performance at Carnegie Hall.

Isata has performed several times on BBC television and radio, including Radio 3 In Tune, Radio 3 RPS Awards, BBC2 The Proms Extra, Radio 4 Woman's Hour, Al Jazeera TV, BBC World Service, Channel 4, The One Show, the BBC4 documentary: Young, Gifted and Classical, ITV Born To Shine, BBC2 Classroom Heroes, BBC Young Musician, and a documentary for Sunday Morning by CBS Television (USA).

Isata is grateful to The Nottingham Soproptimist Trust, to Mr and Mrs John Bryden, to Frank White, to Awards for Young Musicians and to Sir Elton John.

We hope that you will join us for our concerts next year - on 5 April, 19 April & 10 May 2020