

Sheku and Isata Kanneh-Mason

Sheku Kanneh-Mason cello

Isata Kanneh-Mason piano

Johann Sebastian Bach (1685–1750)

Cello Suite No.2 in D minor, BWV 1008 (1717–23)

21'

- i. Prelude*
- ii. Allemande*
- iii. Courante*
- iv. Sarabande*
- v. Minuet I & II*
- vi. Gigue*

Benjamin Britten (1913–1976)

Cello Sonata in C, Op.65 (1961)

20'

- i. Dialogo. Allegro*
- ii. Scherzo-Pizzicato. Allegretto*
- iii. Elegia. Lento*
- iv. Marcia. Energico*
- v. Moto perpetuo. Presto*

INTERVAL

Sofia Gubaidulina (b.1931)

Chaconne for solo piano (1962)

9'

Dmitry Shostakovich (1906–1975)

Cello Sonata in D minor, Op.40 (1934)

25'

- i. Allegro non troppo*
- ii. Allegro*
- iii. Largo*
- iv. Allegro*

J.S. Bach: Suite for Cello No.2 in D minor

We have Mstislav Rostropovich to thank for the Britten Sonata in this programme. For the Bach Cello Suites we are indebted to the great early 20th-century Catalan cellist Pablo Casals. Though not 'lost', they were neglected and certainly not considered concert pieces until Casals spent twelve years working on them before presenting them in public. This devotion – and his superlative performances – established them for the first time as great music to rank alongside Bach's solo violin and keyboard works. They are now at the very core of the cello repertoire, touchstones for all latter composers of solo works for the instrument (including Britten's three suites). They are suites of dances, all grouped in the same home key – or at least starting in the same home key, since Bach's expressive chromatic wanderings often lead to other tonal regions, and the second of the two Minuets in this suite is in D major. Yet Bach conjures such variety from this restricted tonal palette, from the improvisatory, interrupted feel of the Prelude, the stately Allemande to the rumbustious concluding Gigue – a triple-time celebratory concluding flourish, albeit still in a minor key. It is the slow Sarabande that provides the still, calm centre of the work, starting in the deepest register of the instrument with aching, lingering dissonances and plaintive trills decorating the solo line.

Britten: Cello Sonata in C

Britten was first introduced to Russian cellist Mstislav Rostropovich by Shostakovich at a London concert in 1960 where the celebrated virtuoso was performing Shostakovich's first cello concerto. Britten was bowled over by Rostropovich's playing and readily agreed to write something for him. They premiered this sonata together in the Jubilee Hall as part of the 1961 Aldeburgh Festival. Writer and filmmaker John Bridcut writes that when it came to the first run-through of the piece, the two men were so nervous that, according to Rostropovich, they required 'four or five very large whiskies' before they could begin. 'We played like pigs,' the cellist confessed, 'but we were so happy.'

The first movement's title – Dialogo – could serve as a strapline for the whole work. It is a match of equals, albeit with Britten posing serious technical challenges for the cellist throughout, particularly with multiple stopping, harmonics and rapid pizzicato. There is real tenderness in the opening bars – a few shared fragments that are magically transformed at the recapitulation into a sweetly lyrical lullaby in piano octaves, with rocking cello triplets to accompany it. A scampering scherzo follows, nimble and brash, rhythmically complex, technically challenging. No such high-wire balancing acts in the Elegy: its implacable steady tread builds to melodies that conjure a real intensity despite – or perhaps because of – a remarkably narrow range, rocking between a whole tone or even just a semitone. A sardonic March follows, reminiscent in places of the music of their now mutual friend Shostakovich. The finale (Moto perpetuo) sees the protagonists share a vigorous syncopated theme against a sighing accompaniment, the cello part marked to be played 'saltando', the cellist's bow ricocheting from the strings. The breathless, scurrying unison statement of the material heralds the beginning of the end.

Sofia Gubaidulina: Chaconne

Sofia Gubaidulina's music has absorbed her strong religious faith and elements of mystical philosophy, improvisation, folk music and electronics. Amongst her formative influences she cites Shostakovich and, most appropriately in this context, Bach, for whom the chaconne – variants on an repeating harmonic sequence – was an oft-used compositional device.

In this tautly organised work, Gubaidulina uses all manner of contrapuntal wizardry to vary her thunderous opening chordal progression in 23 brief sections, often only a few bars long. Each segment has its own musical character; here there is a 'walking bass' in octaves, there a skittish jig, in another place a striking ostinato (repeating pattern) in the right hand. Although the piano writing is often redolent of Prokofiev at his most angular, or even that 20th-century master modernist Ligeti, it does, on occasion, begin to sound as though tiny fragments of Bach's keyboard suites have strayed into 1950's Russia; there is a delightful springy toccata and an urgent Bachian fugue. At almost exactly halfway comes the performing instruction 'smanioso' ('with furious excitement') – an excellent summary of this pianistic tour-de-force, whose ferocious energy eventually subsides into the piano's nebulous, murky depths.

Shostakovich: Cello Sonata in D minor

Shostakovich's sonata perches between two compositional megaliths – an opera and a symphony – in his composing career. The opera *Lady Macbeth of the Mtensk District* premiered earlier in 1934 – the same year as the sonata's completion. Initially hailed as a triumph, it was subsequently famously condemned by an article in *Pravda* as 'muddle instead of music', objecting to its lurid subject matter and musical aesthetic. Shostakovich became a marked man, his life (not just his artistic output) changed forever. At the time the article appeared, Shostakovich was writing his next large-scale work, the searing Fourth Symphony, whose music was written in an equally uncompromising modernist language.

The Cello Sonata seems remarkably conservative by comparison. It is laid out in the formal structure of a Baroque sonata (fast–fast–slow–fast) and the exposition of the first movement is even repeated as it would be in a Classical era sonata. But Shostakovich still wrings much expressive depth and compositional innovation from this eloquent, expansive work. The first movement contrasts two melodies, a meandering opening theme with a sweetly romantic counterweight. Towards its conclusion, the pace slows dramatically and the dynamic drops to 'piano' or below, the cello ruminating over the piano's sinister soft tread. The effect is quietly devastating. A demonic triple-time dance follows, a giddy carousel with decorated by skiddy cello harmonics. The Largo, the emotional heart of the work, unfurls an endless thread of cello melody underpinned by the piano's macabre slow processional from the first movement. The finale opens with a perky theme shared between the two instruments, before erupting into dizzying semiquaver flurries. It seems to end perfunctorily, an enigmatic sign-off that hints at things being left unsaid.

