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# ISATA KANNEH-MASON

Saturday 25 April, 7.30pm  
Djanogly Recital Hall

## PROGRAMME

Piano Sonata No.14 in C sharp minor, Op.27 No.2  
'Moonlight'

Ludwig van Beethoven

Gaspard de la nuit

Maurice Revel

**Interval**

Nocturne & Halo

Dobrinka Tabakova

Piano Sontata No.21 in C major, Op.53 'Waldstein'

Beethoven

Please ensure all mobile phones are switched off. Photographs and videos of the performance are not permitted. There is a Sennheiser Infrared enhanced hearing system in the Djanogly Recital Hall; please request a headset from our front-of-house staff to enhance your enjoyment of this evening's concert.

Please ensure hearing aids are switched to the appropriate concert setting.

Tonight's artist will be signing CDs after the concert.

## PROGRAMME NOTES

Piano Sonata in C sharp minor (Sonata quasi una Fantasia), Ludwig van Beethoven (1770-1827)  
Op.27 No.2, 'Moonlight'

1. *Adagio sostenuto*;
2. *Allegretto*;
3. *Presto agitato*.

The first years of the nineteenth century were, for Beethoven, a time of both personal and artistic upheaval. The realisation of his increasing deafness was pushing him towards the despair which he poured out in the letter which he wrote in October 1802, while staying in Heiligenstadt (at the time, a village near Vienna, now a suburb of the city). It was addressed to his two brothers, but never sent; it later became known as known as the 'Heiligenstadt Testament'. His music from this period, though, is less concerned with looking inward, than with taking the classical forms which he had inherited from Mozart and Haydn, and bending, re-shaping, and sometimes simply disregarding, them to suit his expressive purposes.

The three piano sonatas Op.26 and Op.27, Nos 1 and 2, dating from 1801, represent his most radical re-thinking so far of the balance and character of the separate movements. He subtitled both of the Op.27 Sonatas 'Quasi una fantasia', drawing attention to their innovative form. Neither of them has a conventional first movement, and the weightiest of the three movements is not the first, but the last.

Familiarity has tended to dull our appreciation of just how original the first movement of No.2 is. On paper, nothing could be more monotonous: slowly changing harmonies, one unvarying mood, a constant triplet rhythm and an almost complete absence of conventional melody. The alchemy of Beethoven's imagination transforms this unpromising material into one of the most mesmerically atmospheric movements in his entire output. Its popularity owes much to the imagery that seems to have been suggested by the poet Ludwig Rellstab, who compared it to moonlight on Lake Lucerne.

Liszt, on the other hand, likened the second movement to "a flower between two abysses", which places the Sonata in a wholly different perspective. The *Allegretto* itself is a graceful, moderately-paced scherzo, with wayward syncopations providing a hint of the tensions which come to the boil in the ferocious last movement. The vehemence of this finale is so extreme as to suggest it has some non-musical significance. If it does, Beethoven never disclosed it.

**Gaspard de la Nuit**

**Maurice Ravel (1875-1937)**

1. *Ondine*;
2. *Le Gibet (The gallows)*;
3. *Scarbo*.

Beneath the cool, polished surface of Ravel's music lurks a more fantastic, almost macabre streak that occasionally becomes more overt. Nowhere does it do so more powerfully than in these three pieces, written in 1908, and featuring some of his most virtuosic piano writing.

*Gaspard de la Nuit* suggests someone who guards the night's treasures, or reveals its secrets. Ravel's work is the dark counterpart of *Ma Mère l'Oye (Mother Goose)*, originally a set of five pieces for piano duet, composed in the same year for the children of friends. *Mother Goose's* world of childhood fairy-tales, which Ravel was able to enter with a complete lack of adult self-consciousness, is here supplanted by the gothic imagination of Aloysius Bertrand (1807-1841), a writer strongly influenced by Edgar Allan Poe.

Bertrand's prose-poems were published in 1842, and Ravel had first been attracted to them as a student. His early enthusiasm was later rekindled when the Spanish pianist Ricardo Viñes drew his attention to a newly-published edition. Ravel told Viñes that he had at first intended a caricature of romanticism, but added "perhaps I got carried away." In particular, the music inherits a style of piano writing that derives from Liszt, a link Ravel hinted at when he described the work as "three poems of transcendental virtuosity", an implied reference to Liszt's set of twelve *Transcendental Studies*, composed in 1851.

Viñes gave the first performance of the pieces in Paris in January 1909, but he seems not to have fully grasped what Ravel was attempting. As the composer wrote to a colleague some years later, Viñes “assured me that if he observed the nuances and the tempo that I indicated, ‘Le Gibet’ would bore the audience. And nothing would make him change his mind.” It was the last time that Viñes premiered any of Ravel’s music.

‘Ondine’ is a portrait of a seductive water-nymph – in flickering right-hand figuration and a plaintive left-hand melody, both of them in the upper part of the keyboard – as she tries to seduce the poet with a ring and the promise of an underwater kingdom. When he replies that he already loves a mortal woman, she becomes angry, sheds a few tears, then dissolves, laughing, in a shower of spray that runs down the poet’s window.

‘Le Gibet’ is a scene of grisly stillness, with a corpse swinging from a gallows in the setting sun. The repeated note that tolls continuously at the centre of the texture focuses the quietly obsessive quality of music whose dynamic level never rises above moderately quiet and, as Ravel explicitly instructs in the score, is to be played with no variation in tempo.

‘Scarbo’ is the most flamboyantly virtuosic of the three pieces, described by one writer as “like a fiendish encyclopaedia of all the traps, obstacles and snares that an inexhaustible imagination can devise for the pianist’s fingers: repeated notes, trills, alternating chords, headlong leaps, passages of wrist staccato...The hand can never settle.” A brilliant scherzo, it conjures up the image of a malevolent dwarf who appears in the poet’s moonlit bedroom, leaping from place to place with bewildering quickness, before suddenly disappearing like a snuffed-out candle.

## Nocturne

Dobrinka Tabakova (born 1980)

### Halo

1. *From Darkness;*
2. *To blinding shine;*
3. *Calm and settled.*

Born in Plovdiv, Bulgaria, Dobrinka Tabakova settled in London in 1991. At the age of fourteen she won the Jean-Frédéric Perrenoud Prize at the International Competition of Music in Vienna, going on to study at the Royal Academy of Music, the Guildhall School of Music and Drama, and King’s College, London. She also attended master classes with, among others, John Adams, Louis Andriessen, Alexander Goehr, and Iannis Xenakis. She was Composer in Association with the Leicester International Music Festival in 2007, Composer in Residence with the BBC Concert Orchestra in the 2018-19 season, and the Halle Orchestra’s Artist in Association in 2022-23.

Composed in 2008, *Nocturne* is based on gently insistent rippling figures, which taper away at the end..

*Halo* dates from 1999. Tabakova has described how it was prompted by the sight of a halo (a ring of light reflected by ice crystals in the Earth’s atmosphere) round the Moon one summer’s night. The three movements suggest the halo’s “hypothetical life”, starting with “its birth from darkness”, then “the full strength of light”, and ending with “a mature and settled halo”.

The first movement emerges from the opposition of low, strident chords and soft high-pitched chimes. A quietly propulsive, high-lying dance rhythm then takes over. The second movement is energised by rapidly repeated notes, against isolated gestures, before more dance, this time with a distinct Bulgarian flavour to the rhythm. The third movement is more static, centred on a repeated rising and falling phrase, suggesting a constant circling motion, which gradually winds down towards the end, rising to the top of the keyboard.

## Piano Sonata No.21 in C major, Op.53 'Waldstein'

Ludwig van Beethoven

1. *Allegro con brio*;
2. *Introduzione. Adagio molto*.
3. *Rondo. Allegretto moderato – prestissimo*.

Beethoven began composing his 'Waldstein' Sonata in November 1803, soon after finishing work on the 'Eroica' Symphony. Inevitably, the symphony's unprecedented time-scale and heroic style carried over into his work in other genres. The Sonata stretched the capabilities of both player and instrument, with its heightened virtuosity, expansive scale, wide dynamic variation and extended range of high notes. All of this reflects Beethoven's acquisition of a new piano by the French maker Erard, at just the moment when its extra power answered his expressive needs.

The Sonata takes its nickname from Count Ferdinand Waldstein, a Bonn aristocrat who had been one of Beethoven's earliest patrons (it was Waldstein who bid farewell to Beethoven, when he left Bonn to settle in Vienna in 1792, with the words "With the help of assiduous labour you shall receive Mozart's spirit from Haydn's hands"). Although their association had long since ended, Beethoven dedicated the Sonata to him in 1805.

All three movements begin quietly, and it is easy to forget how much of the Sonata is played at a low dynamic level. In the first movement, this focuses attention on the forward impetus of the opening repeated chords. These play a major role in driving the music onwards, but quick running figures, for both hands, also contribute, while the tender, chorale-like second theme provides a lyrical contrast.

The original slow movement was removed by Beethoven at a late stage and published separately with the title *Andante Favouri*. The brief slow movement that replaced it is one of those structurally ambiguous passages that would feature in a number of Beethoven's later works. It is not really long enough to be an independent movement in its own right, but it is too substantial to be merely a slow introduction to the finale, although this follows without a break.

The finale's relaxed, expansive rondo theme builds an extraordinary degree of momentum, which carries it through a powerful minor-key episode. The music then seems inexplicably to run out of steam, but this is just a drawing in of breath to prepare for the rapid coda, which speeds up the rondo theme to an almost manic degree. Even here, the music is mostly quiet, the sudden loud explosions standing out all the more starkly as a result.

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## ISATA KANNEH-MASON

Pianist Isata offers eclectic and interesting recital programmes with repertoire encompassing Haydn and Mozart, Fanny Mendelssohn and Clara Schumann, Chopin and Brahms to Gershwin and beyond. In concerto, she is equally at home in Felix Mendelssohn and Clara Schumann as in Prokofiev and Dohnányi.

Isata is in high demand from concert halls and orchestras worldwide. Following her phenomenally successful concerto debut at the BBC Proms in 2023, she was invited to open the festival in July 2024 with the BBC Symphony and conductor Elim Chan, a performance which resulted in stellar reviews in the mainstream press. Isata appears as concerto soloist with the European Union Youth Orchestra and Iván Fischer in summer 2024 performing Dohnányi's Variations on a Nursery Tune at Carnegie Hall, New York, the Grafenegg Festival, and Bolzano Festival Bozen.

Highlights of the 2024/25 season include Beethoven's Fourth Piano Concerto at the Junge Deutsche Philharmonie's FREISPIEL festival and at the Ulster Orchestra's season opening concert; and Prokofiev's Third Concerto with the Chineke! Orchestra on tour at Hamburg's Elbphilharmonie, Konzerthaus Berlin, Brussels's BOZAR and London's Queen Elizabeth Hall. Solo recital appearances include the Lucerne

Festival, Piano aux Jacobins Toulouse, the Schumann-Haus Düsseldorf, PHIL Haarlem, and on tour across the USA. In concerto performance, Isata appears with the London, Bergen, Bremen, and Duisburg philharmonics, the North Carolina Symphony, and on tour with the Staatskapelle Weimar, and the Residentie Orkest.

Isata continues her longstanding duo collaboration with her cellist brother, Sheku, with performances in the UK and on tour across Europe, the USA, and Canada. She will also give performances with bass-baritone Gerald Finley in the Czech Republic and Germany.

In 2023/24, Isata gave performances with the Philadelphia Orchestra, National Arts Centre Orchestra Ottawa, NCPA Orchestra Beijing, Royal Philharmonic Orchestra on tour in the USA and Germany, Cleveland Orchestra, Toronto Symphony, and Stockholm Philharmonic among others. She appeared in solo recital at the Beethoven Bonn and Rheingau festivals, and venues around the globe such as London's Wigmore Hall, New York's Carnegie Hall, Boston's Jordan Hall and the Konzerthaus Dortmund.

Isata is a Decca Classics artist and has recorded four solo albums for the label – *Romance* (2019), *Summertime* (2021), *Childhood Tales* (2023), and *Mendelssohn* (2024). Her latest release presents music from two Mendelssohn siblings, including the glittering First Piano Concerto by Felix and the long-lost 'Easter Sonata' by his exceptionally talented but overlooked elder sister Fanny, alongside transcriptions of some of Felix's most famous music by Rachmaninoff and Liszt.

Isata has received many awards, including the coveted Leonard Bernstein Award from the Schleswig-Holstein Festival and an Opus Klassik award for best young artist. She also enjoys composing and arranging and released two albums of her favourite works for intermediate and advanced piano students through ABRSM Publishing in 2023.