

Sheku Kanneh-Mason with Isata Kanneh-Mason

Wednesday, December 11, 2024 at 8pm

This is the 1,348th concert in Koerner Hall

Sheku Kanneh-Mason, cello

Isata Kanneh-Mason, piano

PROGRAM

Felix Mendelssohn: Cello Sonata No. 1 in B flat Major, op. 45

I. Allegro vivace

II. Andante

III. Allegro assai

Gabriel Fauré: Cello Sonata No. 1 in D Minor, op. 109

I. Allegro

II. Andante

III. Final: Allegro commodo

INTERMISSION

Natalie Klouda: "Tor Mordôn" (Canadian premiere)*

Commission by American Patrons of the Philharmonia Orchestra, London, Mr. and Mrs. William Jacob III.

Francis Poulenc: Sonata for Cello and Piano, op. 143

I. Allegro. Tempo di Marcia

II. Cavatine: Très calme

III. Ballabile: Très animé et gai

IV. Finale: Largo très librement – Presto subito – Largo

Commission by American Patrons of the Philharmonia Orchestra, London, Mr. and Mrs. William Jacob III

THE MICHAEL AND SONJA KOERNER FUND FOR CLASSICAL PROGRAMMING

The Royal Conservatory's mission to develop future generations of musicians and to bring the world's greatest performers to Toronto has been made possible, in large part, due to the generosity of Michael and Sonja Koerner. In 2022, the Koerners invested \$10 million to create The Michael and Sonja Koerner Fund for Classical Programming, securing the future of the finest classical music concerts at Koerner Hall and our other performance venues. This latest investment, along with the naming of Michael and Sonja Koerner Hall, support of Glenn Gould School students through The Michael & Sonja Koerner Scholarships, the donation of The Michael and Sonja Koerner Early Instrument Collection, the naming of The Alexandra Koerner Yeo Cello Program and The Alexandra Koerner Yeo Chair in Cello, and support of the annual 21C Music Festival, underscores the Koerner family's dedication to music and to the RCM.

Felix Mendelssohn

Born in Hamburg, Germany, February 3, 1809; died in Leipzig, Germany, November 4, 1847

Cello Sonata No. 1 in B flat Major, op. 45 (1838)

Though Mendelssohn rarely practiced, he was a skilled performer on several instruments – piano and organ as a soloist, and violin and viola in chamber music. As a pianist, his playing left a strong impression. “There was a grasp and an élan which almost took away one’s breath,” reported *Tinsley’s Magazine*, a popular British literary magazine of the time ... “a pleasurable electric shock passed through his hearers and held them spellbound.” But Mendelssohn did not reserve the piano for his most substantial compositions. He told his publisher in 1826 that sonatas and quartets held more interest for him. And a decade later, he wrote to his friend and colleague Ferdinand Hiller: “A most important branch of piano music, which is a particular favourite – trios, quartets, and other music with piano accompaniment – is quite neglected now ... It was with this in mind that I recently wrote the sonata for violin and one for cello.”

The Cello Sonata in B flat Major was the first of two that Mendelssohn would compose. Like the earlier *Variations concertantes*, it was written for his younger brother Paul, who was clearly a skilled cellist, though he eventually chose the family business of banking. Along with the later Sonata in D Major, the B flat Sonata stands as the most significant cello sonata between Beethoven’s five, which Mendelssohn knew well, and those of Brahms. Yet, Mendelssohn’s focus here is not on Beethoven’s dynamic contrasts or the inherent differences between the bowed cello and percussive piano. Instead, he explores how these instruments can best share civilised dialogue, emphasising what they have in common.

This approach results in a carefully balanced, somewhat restrained slow movement, crafted from a single rhythmic figure, and outer movements that are interwoven with shared musical ideas – the theme that dominates the first movement in close contrapuntal discussion is presented in an inverted version as the main theme of the finale. Both outer movements are imbued with Mendelssohn’s signature blend of lyricism and urgency, while virtuosity remains in service of the music’s joyous spirit. Schumann, commenting on the sonata, noted its classical clarity, remarking that it reminded him of Mozart. He called it “as fine and clear and original a sonata as has ever proceeded from the greatest of master hands; especially fitting for the most refined family circles.”

Gabriel Fauré

Born in Pamiers, Ariège, France, May 12, 1845; died in Paris, France, November 4, 1924

Cello Sonata No. 1 in D Minor, op. 109 (1917)

“Increasingly, I find myself working more swiftly and easily as I grow older,” wrote French composer Gabriel Fauré in a letter from September 1918. For lovers of chamber music, this was welcome news, as Fauré had recently turned his focus back to chamber music after a significant hiatus. In the final decade of his life, chamber music would become his primary focus. Still serving as Director of the Paris Conservatoire, Fauré, now approaching his seventies, faced a rapidly changing world that was still at war across Europe. His health, however, would soon make the demands of such a high-profile position unsustainable.

In the summer of 1917, during his summer break from Conservatoire duties, Fauré confidently completed a second violin sonata, coming four decades after his first. A year later, during a summer stay in Saint-Raphaël on the Côte d’Azur, he turned his attention to a cello sonata. This project likely stirred memories of his first attempt at such a work nearly 40 years earlier, which had resulted in a single movement – the elegantly sombre yet impassioned *Élégie*. “Now I am at an age, alas, where you cannot waste a minute!” he wrote to his wife. By the end of July 1918, the first two movements of the new sonata were finished. “It is up to the finale to maintain the atmosphere created by the first two movements,” Fauré remarked after sending them to his publisher in Paris. By mid-August, the sonata was complete.

The score exemplifies Fauré’s lifelong mastery of melody, now combined with a fresh approach to form and harmony. Subtle shifts in tonality and seamless transitions reveal his innovative thinking. Repurposing a theme from an abandoned symphony, the opening movement reflects the anxieties of war and death. The cello strives for lyricism amid a restless, often brusque and turbulent piano part. A contrasting second theme offers a brief sense of consolation as the composer deftly explores the tension between the two. The central slow movement opens with sparser textures and a melancholy theme that promises respite. After a moment of anguish, the movement resolves

into a calm major key, fading away in a whisper. In the finale, the restlessness of the opening gives way to a more genial and positive mood, as evolving themes build towards an optimistic and buoyant conclusion.

Natalie Klouda

Born in Suffolk, England in 1984

“Tor Mordôn” (Canadian premiere)

This work has two contrasting movements, and the name and inspiration behind it pays homage to Isata and Sheku’s Antiguan and Welsh heritage. In preparing to write it, I explored the folklore, myths, and legends of Eryri/Snowdonia (the Mabinogion) as well as Antiguan and Caribbean folklore. I was struck by the powerful oral storytelling traditions of both places and how human experience has been passed down and deeply enhanced the audience’s connection to the landscapes and to peoples of long ago.

“Tor Mordôn” literally means ‘sea mount of light.’ The name is derived from Brythonic languages and connects both Eryri and Antigua. The name combines three elements: the sense of enlightenment and inspiration that can be felt in the presence of the highest peaks; the sea/oceans for linking continents, and as the birthplace for those very peaks rising out of it. I chose the ancient Brythonic languages to highlight the vast swathes of time that can disappear through storytelling, and the wonder that people can enjoy those same landscapes and stories millennia apart.

The first movement has a contemplative start and explores my journey in discovering various mythical characters as well as the human connection to experiencing the vastness in time and presence of mountains. The second movement draws on the eccentric elements of the folktales as well as the more sinister drama and power of dramatic landscapes.

The work is dedicated to Isata and Sheku’s grandfather, Arnold Mason. He played the violin growing up in Antigua and it was with interest and a quiet dedication that he listened to Isata and Sheku’s rehearsals and practice at their home in Nottingham during his visits.

- Natalie Klouda

Francis Poulenc

Born in Paris, France, January 7, 1899; died there, January 30, 1963

Sonata for Cello and Piano, op. 143 (1940/1948)

Known for his witty, urbane compositions, French composer Francis Poulenc was often reluctant to write for strings, famously stating, “Nothing could be further from human breath than the stroke of a bow.” Despite this, his Cello Sonata emerged as a notable collaboration with virtuoso cellist Pierre Fournier, who played an integral role in crafting the work’s cello part. Composition was interrupted by the German occupation of France, leaving the work incomplete for several years. Poulenc revised his draft in 1948, injecting a distinctive blend of the humorous and the lyrical, all woven into a structure that resists traditional development in favour of thematic restatement and juxtaposition. Melodies often recall his affection for French chanson, evoking the human voice despite his scepticism about the bow’s capacity for vocal expression.

The opening movement is filled with sharp contrasts, as lyrical, expansive themes give way to sudden shifts in mood, tempo, and a sense of unpredictability, a hallmark of Poulenc’s style. The lovely second theme is one of Poulenc’s grand operatic gestures, expansive, lyrical, and built over sinking harmonies and repeated patterns in the accompaniment. The tender Cavatine is a genuine outpouring of the deepest feeling and one of the most touching slow movements in the repertoire. The Ballabile follows, its title suggesting dance, though the movement is more about physical energy than graceful motion. This delicious, featherlight, scherzo-like movement demands dexterity from both cello and piano, with music that has the flavour of Parisian cabaret rather than the ballroom, reflecting, perhaps, Poulenc’s enduring love of popular entertainment. The finale, beginning with a solemn introduction, bursts into life with a whirlwind of ideas. True to Poulenc’s penchant for contrast, the music is constantly shifting, offering moments of athleticism alongside the reprise of a lush, lyrical theme. The sonata ends with a flourish, reinforcing its place as a complex, vibrant work that defies easy categorisation – much like Poulenc himself.

- Mendelssohn, Fauré, and Poulenc program notes copyright © 2024 Keith Horner

Sheku Kanneh-Mason

Cello

Cellist Sheku Kanneh-Mason's mission is to make music accessible to all, whether that is performing for children in a school hall, at an underground club, or in the world's leading concert venues. Highlights of the 2024-25 season include the Konzerthaus Berlin as Artist-in-Residence, Lucerne Festival 2024 as Artiste Étoile, Czech Philharmonic in Prague and on tour with both Jakub Hruša and Semyon Bychkov, Zurich Tonhalle Orchestra with Paavo Järvi, WDR Symphony Cologne with Cristian Măcelaru, Orchestre National de Lyon with Leonard Slatkin, Sinfonia of London with John Wilson on tour in the UK, SWR Symphony Stuttgart with Christoph Eschenbach, Camerata Salzburg on tour, Pittsburgh Symphony with Manfred Honeck, New World Symphony with Stéphane Denève, Philadelphia Orchestra with Yannick Nézet-Séguin, and City of Birmingham Symphony with Kazuki Yamada.

With his pianist sister, Isata, he makes his duo recital debut at New York's Carnegie Hall Stern Auditorium in a program featuring a newly commissioned piece by Natalie Klouda. The pair also appear on tour in Bordeaux, Rome, Cincinnati, Toronto, Philadelphia, Dublin, Munich, Berlin, Antwerp, Haarlem, the Rheingau Festival, and at London's Wigmore Hall. Sheku also appears with duo partners guitarist Plinio Fernandes and jazz pianist Harry Baker.

Since his debut in 2017 Sheku, a Decca exclusive artist, has performed every summer at the BBC Proms, including as soloist at the 2023 Last Night of the Proms with the BBC Symphony Orchestra and Marin Alsop. In 2024, his family-friendly Proms appearances with the Fantasia Orchestra were designed to introduce orchestral classical music to a new generation of music lovers.

After winning the BBC Young Musician competition in 2016, Sheku's performance at the wedding of the Duke and Duchess of Sussex at Windsor Castle in 2018 was watched by two billion people worldwide. He plays a Matteo Goffriller cello from 1700 which is on indefinite loan to him.

Isata Kanneh-Mason

Piano

Pianist Isata offers eclectic and interesting recital programs 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.

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. 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 also gives performances with bass-baritone Gerald Finley in the Czech Republic and Germany.

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 Rachmaninov 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.

Isata Kanneh-Mason and Sheku Kanneh-Mason made their Royal Conservatory debuts on May 6, 2022.