

FINANCIAL TIMES

A voyage round the cello

London cello festival is launched; a prodigy is presented with a precious instrument

January 3, 2017

By Richard Fairman



Cellist Maya Beiser is among those offering programmes at Kings Place's 'Cello Unwrapped' festival © Keith Saunders/ArenaPAL

Imagine a photo of a cellist. The chances are that it shows an attractive young woman in the full flow of making music, her body arching in an outpouring of physical energy, her expression like a spirit possessed. That photo is of Jacqueline du Pré, the musician who captivated hearts in the 1960s before she succumbed to the tragic onset of multiple sclerosis.

The image is so well known that it has become symbolic of everything a cellist is. Similarly, if a music-lover is asked to name one cello recording, it is likely to be du Pré playing Elgar's

Cello Concerto, a performance accorded classic status. But there is so much more to the cello than the half-dozen romantic concertos endlessly played in concert halls, more too than any one cellist could encompass in a lifetime.

It is time for the cello to take a solo turn on the catwalk. Each year Kings Place in London embarks on a 12-month festival exploring a single theme, the subjects of previous surveys including the music of Mozart, Bach and, more generally, minimalism. These involved programming that was more notable for its exhaustive scale than its imagination, but the 2017 festival — “Cello Unwrapped”, curated by Hellen Wallace — promises something more. Over the course of 49 events, 34 cellists and the group Cellophony will give their instrument a portrait in the round, a 360-degree perspective that takes in early and contemporary cello, cello and voice, jazz cello, cellos with electronics, and everything above and beyond.

If a single festival could scotch the idea that romantic concertos are the sum total of what matters in the cello repertoire, this is it. It helps that Kings Place is too small for the full-size symphony orchestras that play in concertos such as the Dvořák and Elgar, so there is no place for them. The stage is free for the small and the adventurous, the neglected and the innovative.

Considering that most cellists start out by learning the standard classics, it is surprising so many find their way to the extremely diverse styles of playing that “Cello Unwrapped” has in store. What is the route from student Bach to cello tango? How do performers get skilled for evenings of “cello and laptop” or “cello with sarod and tabla”?

One musician who stands with a foot in several camps is Nicolas Altstaedt, the French-German cellist who was a BBC New Generation Artist at the start of the 2010s. His two concerts in “Cello Unwrapped” are poles apart. One is traditional Haydn; the other features the first UK performance of a new work by Hauschka, the former hip-hop musician Volker Bertelmann, best known for his improvised music for prepared piano.

“Through your life you need to process a variety of styles, if you are going to express yourself fully,” says Altstaedt. “The body follows your vision. It is not like putting on a new suit, but something more inward, like an actor playing different roles. Hauschka’s new piece calls for what I might term a singing style from the cello rather than speaking. It is based on a semi-autobiographical Fellini film and the music has the smell of the cinema about it. Unusually for Hauschka, the music is written down, but we might try some improvisation in future performances, which would be a dream come true for me. The film portrays a world between life and death and there are transcendental moments in the music where you don’t have your feet on the ground. It is music without gravity.”

Back on terra firma, many cellists find that a good way of earning a livelihood is to play continuo, the Baroque composers’ favoured form of accompaniment, using a figured bass most commonly realised by cello and harpsichord. David Watkin has made a speciality out of this under-appreciated art. He runs a cello continuo clinic in Scotland and will be bringing a day-long version of that to Kings Place, as well as a session exploring Bach’s solo cello suites.

“We have become obsessed with the cello as a solo instrument,” he says. “All cellists are trained to be soloists, though many of them will go on to join orchestras where they will face endless repeated notes in Mozart and Beethoven. Playing continuo in Baroque music is an opportunity to become musical, rather than sitting around waiting for the phone to ring with a booking for the Dvořák concerto. Every time I play the bass line in Pachelbel’s Canon I make it different, which is a lot more fun. This is not just an academic discipline, as there is so much freedom. Realising a figured bass in Bach seems to some people an almost miraculous achievement, as it is a complex art where there is never just one answer. What is important is that we are being re-creative artists.”

What he says is true of most of the performers in “Cello Unwrapped”. Maya Beiser started out playing classical pieces, but as a teenager would secretly listen to Janis Joplin and David Bowie, and later started to become immersed in visual art and theatre. “The cello is laborious to learn, like most classical instruments,” she says. “It is difficult to make a break after it has taken years and years to perfect your art, but I knew I wanted to open up, not adhere to preconceived notions. I wanted to bring all these other interests into my cello performances.”

Here is just one way in which “Cello Unwrapped” is pointing to the future. “My Kings Place programme is special because all the pieces have been written by friends or regular collaborators,” says Beiser. “The back-and-forth of the collaborative process is something I love, as it changes the way one performs. There is a premiere from Julia Wolfe, who was a classmate of mine at Yale. And Cello Counterpoint by Steve Reich is a work I commissioned from him. It has seven pre-recorded tracks, which introduced me to multitracking, a form Reich pioneered. This meant diving into the whole notion of pairing my beautiful old cello with the latest technology. I am artist-in-residence at MIT now, where I am working with scientists to see if we can expand the vocabulary further.”

From January 7 throughout 2017, kingsplace.co.uk/cello-unwrapped

His previous cello was made by a former plumber who had taken a course in instrument making, writes Hannah Nepil. Now Sheku Kanneh-Mason, the winner of the BBC Young Musician of the Year Award 2016 — and the first black musician to win the competition — has been presented with a 400-year-old Amati Brothers cello, on permanent loan. Made in 1610, the instrument is half a century older than the earliest known Stradivarius.

In fact, Kanneh-Mason had already played it at the final of the competition in May: Florian Leonhard, the Hampstead-based world authority on fine string instruments, had been so impressed by the 17-year-old that he provided him with the venerable cello for the occasion. Then Leonhard worked hard to find someone to buy the instrument and lend it to Kanneh-Mason indefinitely: a generous sponsor who wishes to remain anonymous.

Kanneh-Mason is one of six musically talented children from a Caribbean family based in Nottingham. For the past eight years, he and his mother, a university lecturer in English, have taken the 5am train every Saturday from Nottingham to London, where he attends the Junior Academy of Music and studies cello with Ben Davies. He holds the Academy's ABRSM Junior Scholarship; he also studied piano with Druvi de Saram at the Academy. His violinist brother Braimah and pianist sister Isata both study at the conservatoire's senior department.

He began studying the cello at the age of six and at nine he won the first of a dazzlingly long list of awards: the Marguerite Swan Memorial Prize for the highest marks in the UK for Grade 8 cello. In 2016 he also scooped the Royal Philharmonic Society Young Instrumentalist Duet Prize.

Kanneh-Mason is a member of the junior branch of the Chineke Orchestra, which was established in 2015 as the first professional orchestra of black and minority ethnic musicians in Europe, the brainchild of the campaigning Nigerian-Irish double-bassist and professor of music Chi-chi Nwanoku.

Of the Amati Brothers cello, Kanneh-Mason says: "It projects very well, and it also responds easily to whatever I'm doing, which means that it's easy to create a range of colours." He continues, "If I was going 60 miles an hour in a rubbish car, I'd feel like I was really pushing, whereas if I was in a Ferrari I'd feel like I had more in reserve. This cello is like a Ferrari."

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