

Pianist Isata Kanneh-Mason stuns at Severance Music Center (Mar. 17)



By Daniel Hathaway|Cleveland Classical

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CLEVELAND, Ohio — Isata Kanneh-Mason, at 29, the eldest of the seven siblings who constitute one of England’s most distinguished musical families, walked onstage at Mandel Concert Hall at Severance Music Center promptly at 7:30 on

Tuesday evening to begin her Cleveland solo recital with an immaculate performance of Beethoven’s “Moonlight” Sonata.

Like the program’s theme of darkness moving into light — an attractive forward motion coursed just underneath the surface in everything she played. She began Sonata No. 14 deliberately, with hauntingly beautiful long lines, well-balanced voicing, and subtle dynamics, all of which contributed to a hypnotic effect.

Her Allegretto was elegant and her Presto Agitato spirited, with clean technical passages and well-calculated, explosive accents.

Introducing *Gaspard de la nuit*, Kanneh-Mason told the large crowd that Ravel’s three-movement work is a favorite of hers because of its connection to Aloysius Bertrand’s evocative nocturnal poetry. In other hands, its complexities can often make Ravel’s music sound amorphous, but the British pianist sought out and found the hidden rhythms that are present throughout.

“Ondine,” the Nymph, floated smooth as ice, Kanneh-Mason never losing track of the musical line. In “Le Gibet,” the darkest of the movements, omnipresent, B-flats

represented a bell that tolls from inside the walls amidst wonderfully voiced chords that magically fade away at the end. In “Scarbo,” describing the Goblin that comes out at night, the pianist made thick sounds exciting and transparent.

The program’s second half began with a set of short pieces by the Bulgarian-British composer Dobrinka Tabakova that served as a contrasting entremet. *Nocturne* lasts a mere two and a half minutes but transmits great beauty in its simplicity. *Halo* makes use of the harmonic effects created by raising the dampers on the piano’s hammers while holding keys down with the arm. “From Darkness” repeats a melodic line and “To Blinding Sunshine” is minimalist and repetitive. “Calm and Settled” ends the little suite with a serene, glowing ring.

Isata Kanneh-Mason ended her recital as she began it — with Beethoven, this time with the “Waldstein Sonata.” Her Allegro had plenty of brio, thanks to its perky tempos, beautiful colors, sparkling runs and exciting ending.

The brief middle movement formed a wonderful bridge to the Rondo with its beautifully voiced chords. That Rondo found the composer so enamored with his theme that its reiterations and permutations nearly outstayed their welcome — but through no fault of Kanneh-Mason, whose playing remained delightful to the final note. She offered an encore, Prokofiev’s Prelude No. 7, Op. 12, “The Harp.”

Her recital provided an especially civilized ending to a mid-March day in Cleveland that was otherwise distinguished by the conjunction of snow plows and St. Patrick’s Day revellers and the explosion of a 7-ton meteor over our heads. Just another day on America’s North Coast!

Photo by Yevhen Gulenko

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