

ISATA KANNEH-MASON IN RECITAL

12 OCTOBER 2026

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Sydney Opera House



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WELCOME

Welcome to **Isata Kanneh-Mason in Recital**, the fourth and final concert in the *International Pianists in Recital Series* for 2026.

As Presenting Partner of the *International Pianists in Recital Series* we are honoured to support the Sydney Symphony Orchestra in its mission to bring world-class artists to our stages, and are excited to witness the Australian debut of Isata Kanneh-Mason, a young artist of extraordinary talent.

Kanneh-Mason is part of a generation of artists redefining what classical music can be in the 21st century, presenting new interpretations of mainstream repertoire, broadening the definition of ‘mainstream’ by advocating for neglected composers and bringing new audiences into the concert hall through collaborations and exciting special projects.

Tonight is a showcase of much of that, with a program that includes two of the great composers in Beethoven and Ravel as well as a newer force on the world stage in Bulgarian-British composer Dobrinka Tabakova.

The Boston Music Intelligencer proclaimed Kanneh-Mason ‘the real deal’ – and by the end of tonight’s performance we are sure you will agree.

For more than twenty years, Theme & Variations has remained dedicated to nurturing a love of the piano and to presenting artists whose passion and artistry inspire audiences, students and fellow musicians alike.

We believe recitals like tonight’s are not only performances but shared experiences that celebrate the enduring power of music to connect us. Isata’s profound musicianship reminds us of the piano’s infinite possibilities, and we are delighted you can join us for what is sure to be an unforgettable evening.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Nyree Vartoukian', with a long horizontal flourish extending to the right.

Nyree Vartoukian
Co-Founder and Director,
Theme & Variations Piano Services

2026 CONCERT SEASON

ISATA KANNEH-MASON IN RECITAL

FROM DARKNESS INTO LIGHT

ISATA KANNEH-MASON piano

LUDWIG VAN BEETHOVEN (1770–1827)

Sonata quasi una fantasia in C sharp minor, Op.27 No.2,

Moonlight (1801)

- i. Adagio sostenuto –
- ii. Allegro – Trio
- iii. Presto agitato

MAURICE RAVEL (1875–1937)

Gaspard de la nuit (1908)

- i. *Ondine*
- ii. *Le Gibet* (The Gallows)
- iii. *Scarbo*

INTERVAL

DOBRINKA TABAKOVA (born 1980)

Nocturne (2008)

DOBRINKA TABAKOVA (born 1980)

Halo (1999)

- i. From Darkness
- ii. To blinding shine –
- iii. Calm and settled glow

LUDWIG VAN BEETHOVEN (1770–1827)

Sonata in C major, Op.53, Waldstein (1803–04)

- i. Allegro con brio
- ii. Introduzione (Adagio molto) –
- iii. Rondo (Allegretto moderato)

Monday 20 July, 7pm

International Pianists
in Recital

Concert Hall,
Sydney Opera House

Pre-concert talk

By Andrew Bukenya in
the Northern Foyer at 6.15pm

Estimated durations

Moonlight – 17 minutes
Ravel – 23 minutes
Interval – 20 minutes
Nocturne – 4 minutes
Halo – 12 minutes
Waldstein – 26 minutes

The concert will run for
approx. 2 hours

Cover image

By Karolina Wielocha

Sydney Symphony Orchestra
acknowledges the Gadigal
people of the Eora Nation,
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which we work and perform.
We pay our respects to their
Elders past and present.

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Isata Kanneh-Mason by Karolina Wielocha

ABOUT THE ARTIST

ISATA KANNEH-MASON piano

Isata Kanneh-Mason is first and foremost a pianist but is also a composer and arranger who is passionate about chamber music, romantic repertoire and loves to bring a range of styles and composers to her performances. She offers eclectic and stimulating recital programs with repertoire encompassing Fanny Mendelssohn and Clara Schumann, Chopin and Brahms, to Gershwin, Dobrinka Tabakova and Coleridge-Taylor. In concerto, she is equally at home in Felix Mendelssohn and Beethoven as in Prokofiev and Rachmaninov.

She says:

‘I want people’s perceptions of a piano recital to be expanded from the expected and conventional. I’d like people to leave the concert hall feeling curious about repertoire that was unfamiliar and more passionate and interested about the music they already knew. I think contrast in programming is vital for the survival of music old and new.’

Isata is in high demand from concert halls and orchestras worldwide. In July 2024 she was invited to perform at the First Night of the BBC Proms at the Royal Albert Hall with the BBC Symphony and conductor Elim Chan, a performance which resulted in stellar reviews in the mainstream press. Isata went on to appear as concerto soloist with the European Union Youth Orchestra and Iván Fischer in summer 2024 performing Dohnányi’s *Variations on a Nursery Tune* at New York’s Carnegie Hall.

Highlights of the 2025/26 season included Rachmaninov’s Third Piano Concerto with Bar Avni and the Netherlands Radio Philharmonic at the Amsterdam Concertgebouw, and with Petr Popelka with the Prague Radio Symphony at the Rudolfinum and she went on tour with the Budapest Festival Orchestra. Isata also appeared in solo recital and in chamber music at Wigmore Hall, with further solo recital appearances at the Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum in Boston, the Brucknerhaus in Linz, Powell Hall in St Louis, De Bijloke in Ghent, the Howland Music Circle in New York, Norwegian National Opera in Oslo, and returned to the Philadelphia Chamber Music Society among others.

The 26/27 season sees Isata give a much-anticipated recital tour in Australia and New Zealand, which also includes performances with the NZ Symphony Orchestra. She makes debuts with the Athens (Greece) State Symphony, the Cincinnati Symphony, Malmö Symphony, and the Minnesota Orchestra and returns to the Toronto Symphony and the Royal Philharmonic Orchestra. She has solo recitals at the Heidelberger Frühling Festival and Tivoli Copenhagen and has chamber music engagements with the Academy of St Martin-in-the-Fields.

Isata is a Decca Classics artist and has recorded four solo albums for the label – *Romance* (2019), *Summertime* (2021), *Childhood Tales* (2023), *Mendelssohn* (2024) and *Prokofiev* (2026).

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 released two albums of her favourite works for intermediate and advanced piano students through ABRSM Publishing in 2023.

A close-up photograph of a man with grey hair and a beard, wearing a dark suit, playing a double bass. The image is heavily stylized with a blue and yellow color scheme. The man is looking down at his instrument, and his hands are visible on the strings and body of the bass. The background is a solid yellow color.

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ABOUT THE MUSIC

By moonlight

The **‘Moonlight’ Sonata** is not your typical piano sonata. It shows the 30-year-old **Beethoven** throwing convention to the wind, and the first clue is in his title: ‘Sonata quasi una Fantasia’ – this is a sonata in the manner of a fantasia, free-ranging and almost improvisatory in character. The second clue is in the (Italian) instructions he gives the pianist: ‘This entire piece must be played with the utmost delicacy and without dampers.’ And above the left-hand part, confirming this radical request: ‘always very soft, always without dampers.’

To put it another way, at a time when it was still unusual to provide *any* pedalling instructions in piano music, the performer is asked to place their foot on the damper pedal and leave it down for the whole of the first movement. Beethoven’s intent is a blurred sound, as the accumulating reverberations of undamped harmonies overlap. It would be a brave move today to hold a Steinway pedal down without relief for the entire movement as directed, but even with the necessary compromises, it’s still possible to hear the impressionistic effect that Beethoven had in mind.

The first movement (*Adagio sostenuto*) meets all the thematic and harmonic expectations of sonata form. But Beethoven adopts a constant texture – unfolding from an undulating accompaniment figure – that diverts attention from the tensions and drama of the sonata principle and instead emphasises the floating tranquillity of this nocturnal fantasia. Think of it as Chopin circa 1801.

After this uncharacteristically delicate and meditative movement, Beethoven writes a jewel-like scherzo (*Allegretto*) before plunging into the restless and powerful finale (*Presto agitato*). But it’s the first movement that defines this sonata-fantasia and which inspired its enduring nickname. ‘Moonlight’ was not Beethoven’s title; it dates from after his lifetime when, in 1832, the German critic Ludwig Rellstab compared the *Adagio* to ‘a boat passing the wild scenery of Lake Lucerne in the moonlight’. It wasn’t long before German publications were referring to it as the ‘Mondschein-sonata’ and the English followed suit.



Detail from a c.1804 portrait of Beethoven by German artist Joseph Willibrord Mähler (1778–1860). Source: Archiv für Kunst und Geschichte, Berlin/Wikimedia Commons.

Dreaming at the piano

The ‘Moonlight’ Sonata was a piano nocturne ahead of its time – pre-empting those by John Field and Frédéric Chopin by more than a decade – and it sets the tone for a recital program that takes us from darkness to light.

A nocturne is literally ‘night music’ and the name is an old one, dating back at least to the 18th century when terms such *notturno* and *Nachtmusik* referred to orchestral serenades. (The most famous of these is *Eine kleine Nachtmusik* by Mozart.) For pianists, however, ‘nocturne’ has very specific connotations and Chopin is the name that springs to mind. Listen to any of the 21 nocturnes by this great pianist-composer and the genre defines itself: a lyrical and dreamy character combined with an idiomatic approach to piano writing that exploited the generous and sustained tone of the new pianos of the early 19th century. Deliberately fragmentary, allusive and poetic, the piano nocturne embodied the Romantic spirit, and virtually every major composer of the period adopted the genre if not the exact title. Franz Liszt, for example, wrote *Liebesträume* (love dreams); Robert Schumann *Nachtstücke* (night pieces).

ABOUT THE MUSIC

Gothic fantasies

In the following century, **Maurice Ravel** gave pianists a very different kind of night music. His ***Gaspard de la nuit***, subtitled 'Three poems for piano according to Aloysius Bertrand' retains the poetic motivation by choosing three of Bertrand's 'gothic fantasies' as inspiration, but this work inhabits a darker and more sinister world in which the mysterious 'Gaspard of the night' is Satan in disguise.

Ravel would later say that that *Gaspard* was 'the very devil to write', but he could easily have said that it was 'the very devil to play'. Composed for a friend, the concert pianist Ricardo Viñes, it's filled with virtuoso challenges that give the paradoxical impression of an orchestral transcription for the piano.

Gaspard is cast in three movements. *Ondine* is part mermaid, part siren, and her seductively mournful song is showered in cascades of notes that echo the watery effects of Ravel's *Jeux d'eau* (Fountains). *Ondine* is marked *Lent* (slow) but gives the impression of perpetual motion for the fingers. By contrast, *Le Gibet* is marked *Très lent* (very slow) and sounds so to the ear. Ravel also provides an instruction in the manner of Beethoven, telling the pianist that the movement must be muted throughout – that is, the *una corda* pedal is to be used. This very slow, very soft music paints a picture of a corpse hanging from a gallows at sunset, and in the centre of the shifting harmonies is the unrelenting tolling of a distant bell as the note B flat is repeated 153 times.

Scarbo is the kind of goblin that lurks under beds and in chimneys: 'Oh! how often have I heard and seen him, Scarbo, when at midnight the moon glitters in the sky like a silver shield on an azure banner strewn with golden bees.' *Scarbo* is as fiendish as its namesake – as Vladimir Jankélévitch, one of Ravel's first biographers, describes it: 'a diabolical encyclopedia of all the traps, obstacles and tricks that an inexhaustible imagination can place beneath the fingers of the virtuoso.' Or, as Ravel wrote on the sheet music for a student: 'Quelle horreur!'



1907 portrait of Ravel by French photographer by Pierre Petit. Source: Wikimedia Commons.

Modern nocturnes

After interval, Ravel's nightmare world is countered with a lullaby: a **Nocturne** by Bulgarian-born **Dobrinka Tabakova**. In the spirit of Beethoven's 'Moonlight' Sonata, there's a special pedal instruction for the performer, who is asked to 'only half change' the damper pedal, ensuring 'a gentle haze of sound throughout the piece, without blurring too much'. Above this haze, Tabakova suspends mesmerising cross-rhythms: the right hand outlining patterns of three notes above groups of four in the left.

Like Beethoven and Ravel, Tabakova is both pianist and composer, and while her output includes numerous major works for orchestra and large ensemble, the piano was central to her early work, including ***Halo***, composed when she was 18 years old.

The inspiration was a beautiful halo that Tabakova had observed around the moon one summer's night. The resulting three-movement work describes the 'hypothetical life of a halo' and, on a technical level, explores the ways in which a piano can achieve harmonics (overtones that are heard in the sound but not played).

ABOUT THE MUSIC

The first movement, *From Darkness*, sees the birth of the halo: high clusters of sound spilling out of dramatic, low chords in explosive and erratic statements before resolving into a gently dancing theme. In *To blinding shine*, Tabakova writes, ‘the full strength of light is evoked through rapid repetitive figures, and the extreme registers of the piano’. The music then literally settles, as blinding brilliance is transformed into lustrous serenity for *Calm and settled glow*. Gently rocking syncopations and minimalist gestures bring the work to a wistful conclusion as the last delicate piano chord is allowed to die away.



Dobrinka Tabakova. Photo by Ben Ealovega, courtesy Schott Music.

Light and shade

After *Halo*, the program emerges into the ‘light’ of C major with the quietly drumming opening chords of the **Beethoven’s Op.53 ‘Waldstein’ Sonata**. Just a few years separate this sonata from the ‘Moonlight’, but already Beethoven’s style has found a new grandeur and expansiveness – he has embarked on a new path.

The nickname comes from the dedicatee Count Ferdinand Ernst von Waldstein, one of Beethoven’s longstanding patrons, but the inspiration for many of the musical features was a practical one: in 1803 the composer had taken delivery of a new Erard piano with its extended compass, increased tonal range and foot-operated pedals. (The damper ‘pedal’ in the ‘Moonlight’ would have been operated by a knee lever.) A lesser composer might have been tempted to exploit the Erard’s power at every opportunity, but the ‘Waldstein’ Sonata is striking in that each movement begins quietly, with *pianissimo* markings, and there is as much shade as there is light in the musical expression. The ‘Waldstein’ is brilliant and monumental, true, but above all it captivates the ear with its contrasts and subtleties.

At nearly half an hour, the ‘Waldstein’ Sonata is long. It would have been even longer, but Beethoven replaced the original ‘grand Andante’ slow movement with a shorter, almost improvisatory ‘Introduction’ (*Adagio molto*) that leads directly into the finale. (Tonight, this mysterious, pensive central movement could be heard as the final ‘nocturne’.) The *Rondo* is muscular and life affirming as it builds from the unhurried ‘Allegretto moderato’ of its opening measures to a thrilling and jubilant ‘Prestissimo’ – as fast as possible!

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