



Audio Description Pre-Show Notes: Simone Young & Sheku Kanneh-Mason, Elgar's Cello Concerto

These pre-show notes are provided by the Sydney Symphony Orchestra in collaboration with the Accessibility team at the Sydney Opera House.

The Venue

This performance by the Sydney Symphony Orchestra takes place in the Concert Hall. The Concert Hall sits inside the Sydney Opera House's largest set of white, sail-shaped "shells" on the western half of its box-like granite "Podium".

The Sydney Opera House is entered from the covered opening underneath the "Monumental Steps" that stretch across the southern end of the Podium. Once inside, the venue is up two flights of internal stairs, through the Box Office level and the theatre's Southern Foyer, a light-filled space enclosed by expansive concrete and glass structures.

The Concert Hall itself is the largest and grandest internal venue at the Sydney Opera House, seating over 2,600 people in tiered seating rows which are divided into separate, walled sections that surround a low, open stage or "platform".

These sections include the Stalls lower down and closer to the Stage, the Upper and Lower Circles raised up behind the Stalls, and the rectangular boxes stretching along each side of the Stage and Stalls at the same height as the Circle. Directly behind the stage are the stepped rows of Choir Stall seating.

The Concert Hall has a light and warm atmosphere, almost every surface made of timber. The walls and floor are a deep, honey-coloured brush box, with a unique timber pattern based on the soundwaves created by a middle C. This pattern, like the ripples on a pond, helps diffuse the sound to all parts of the hall equally.

The seat frames and ceiling are made of a lighter, cream-coloured white birch. Bright magenta or purplish-pink upholstery on the seats creates a sea of vibrant colour throughout the space.

The vaulted ceiling of the Concert Hall reaches its highest point around 30 metres directly above the stage, culminating in a circular section known as the Crown. Angular segments radiate out from the Crown, stretching over the audience before cascading down to meet the edges of the space, almost reaching the seats in the very back row of the Circle.

Suspended from the crown are 18 large fiberglass acoustic reflectors, shaped like petals. They are the same vibrant magenta colour as the seats and have a glossy sheen that reflects parts of the stage below.

The height and angle of these “petals” can be adjusted to reflect sound back to performers on stage. For an orchestral performance, they are often arranged in a horizontal layer about halfway between the stage and the Crown.

Situated high above the stage is the Grand Organ, the largest mechanical-action organ in the world. The visible pipes and bells of the organ’s façade are housed in rectangular recessed cabinets, arranged in a stepping pyramid pattern that spans the wall above the Choir Stall.

The Stage and Instruments

The golden brush box floor of the Concert Hall stage is segmented in a concentric semi-circular formation of height adjustable “stage risers”. When all the risers are level with the stage, they create a rainbow-shaped pattern of arcs on the floor.

For an orchestral performance, the risers are arranged into tiered sections to allow unobstructed views between the orchestra, conductor and audience.

The central semi-circle riser is level with the stage. Tiered sections fan out from this central point, each slightly taller than the one in front. The final section at the back is 1 metre above the level of the stage.

The Conductor stands on a short square podium at the front and centre of the central semi-circle, facing the orchestra with their back to the audience.

The orchestra is arranged on the risers around them in 4 distinct sections: Strings, Woodwinds, Brass and Percussion.

The Strings take up most of the space at the front of the orchestra, filling the central semi-circle and climbing up the risers in two strips to either side.

Curving around from left to right, the First Violins sit closest to the front left of the stage, with Second Violins and Violas in the centre and Celli with Double Basses behind them both sitting closest to the front right.

The Woodwinds sit behind the Strings in 2 short rows just above the central semi-circle. Flutes and Oboes share the first row, with Clarinets and Bassoons behind them.

The Brass sit behind the Woodwinds in a long row. From left to right sit French Horns, Trumpets and then Trombones. The Tuba sits behind the Trombones.

At the very back of the orchestra is Percussion. In the middle of the back row are the Timpani, 4 large, tuned drums in a small arc around a player. Between the Timpani and the Tuba are a collection of other Percussion instruments such as snare drum, crash cymbals, glockenspiel, and bass drum. Players may move between these instruments throughout the performance.

Some of the instruments on stage will change between each piece in this performance.

Elgar, Cello Concerto

As the soloist for this piece, cellist Sheku Kanneh-Mason is seated at the front of the orchestra, on a short podium to the left of the Conductor.

Sheku's instrument is an antique Matteo Goffriller cello from 1700. Its hollow, curved hourglass body is made of a warm-coloured wood, dark varnish streaked with age. A narrow black neck extends from the top of the body to a curved wooden "peg box" with a decorative coiled "scroll" at the top. 4 strings are stretched vertically over the neck and body, held off the wood by a small arched "bridge" of light-coloured timber in the centre. Curling "f-holes" are carved into the body on either side of the bridge. They look like a mirrored pair of decorative lower-case f's.

Sheku sits with the cello between his knees in front of him. A retractable rod or "endpin" holds the base of the instrument above the podium floor. The body of the cello leans back into Sheku's body, resting between mid-calf and chest. The cello's neck hovers above Sheku's left shoulder, tucked in beside his own neck.

He plays the cello using a bow, a slender wooden rod strung with horsehair. Sheku uses his right hand to move the bow back and forth, drawing the tensioned horsehairs across the strings between bridge and neck. To adjust pitch, he uses the fingers of his left hand to press down the strings at different points along the neck. Gently shaking his left hand while pressing a string creates an undulating "vibrato" sound.

Strauss, An Alpine Symphony

For this piece, additional players are added to each section of the orchestra so that it almost doubles in size, crowding the risers.

The Woodwind players add piccolo, cor anglais, bass clarinet, contrabassoon, and even a heckelphone, which looks like a large oboe with a rounded bell.

At the back of the stage, a second set of timpani are added beside the first. Percussion used in this piece includes a wind machine, which is a sheet of canvas draped over a slatted wooden barrel. A handle is used to rotate the barrel, which rubs against the canvas to create a whooshing sound.

The Horns spill over onto a second riser level. Some of the Horns also play Wagner tubas, which look like a cross between a French Horn and a Tuba.

Between the Horns and Timpani at the back of the stage are two alphorns, which produce a low and boomy sound. They are 3.5 metres long, tapered wooden tubes with a trumpet-like mouthpiece at one end and a hockey-stick bend curving into a round opening at the other end. The players stand holding the mouthpiece end, with the opening resting on a short wooden stand on the floor 2-3 metres in front of them.

An offstage band of Brass players is also added to provide a distant effect.

A celeste player sits behind the First Violins at the front left. The celeste looks like a small upright piano. Its box-like body is made of light-coloured timber with mesh windows. Unlike a piano, it contains tuned metal bars instead of strings, producing an ethereal bell-like sound.

Two harps sit on the riser next to the celeste.

The Grand Organ is also played during this piece. The player is up in the Organ Loft, a small balcony protruding from the bottom of organ façade in the centre. They sit with their back to the audience, facing the Console, a complex system of keyboards, pull stops, buttons and pedals.

The Performers

Simone Young, Conductor

Simone Young is an Australian woman with Irish and Croatian ancestry and describes herself as having a Mediterranean appearance. She is in her 60s, with an average height and athletic build. She has light skin and blue eyes. Her long Brunette hair is often worn loose, flowing over her back and shoulders.

When conducting, Simone Young tends to wear loose-fitting black tunics over black pants.

Her conducting style is precise and graceful, infusing clear directions with the emotion of the music. She often uses both arms, holding the baton in her right hand and mirroring its movements with her left. Her arms bounce, roll, and flow in time with the music. She tends to stand on one spot throughout but lets the music move through her body in subtle, rhythmic ways. She might sway gently or lean in toward the orchestra. She might bounce with her knees or heels. She might shift her weight between her feet or lift herself up to full height on her toes as the music changes.

Sheku Kanneh-Mason, Cellist

Sheku Kanneh-Mason is a Black British man with Welsh and Afro-Caribbean heritage, describing himself as having a mixed-race appearance. He is in his 20s, tall and athletic. He has dark skin and very dark brown eyes. His dark hair is buzzed into a very short skin fade.

He wears a small gold hoop in his left earlobe. When performing, he usually wears trousers and a colourful patterned shirt.

Sheku Kanneh-Mason plays the cello in a calm and focussed way. Apart from his arms and head, his body remains quite still, occasionally rocking from side to side in unison with his cello. His head wanders between looking up at the ceiling and down into the body of his cello. His face expresses thoughtfulness, with a brow furrowed in concentration. He often purses, chews, and sucks in his lips in response to the music.

The Sydney Symphony Orchestra

The Sydney Symphony Orchestra, or SSO, is a large and diverse group of musicians. Over 100 musicians will take part in this performance. They will be dressed in formal concert attire. The men will be in “white tie”, wearing a black tailcoat suit with crisp white shirt and bow tie. The women will wear a mixture of black dresses, skirts, dress pants and blouses.