

The music

Ayo Bankole	Variations for Little Ayo Egun Variations
Christian Onyeji	Ufie (Igbo dance)
Nabil Benabdeljalil	Nocturnes no4 and no6
Fred Onowwerosuoke	24 Studies in African Rhythms: Aye Dance 1, Aye Dance 2, Sanza, Pende, Raging River Dance 2
INTERVAL	
Onowwerosuoke	5 Kaleidoscopes: no3 Larghetto espressivo
Girma Yifrashewa	Elilta (Cry of Joy)
Salim Dada	Miniatures Algériennes: - Danse Zaydan - Soirée au Hoggar
Mokale Koapeng	Prelude in D flat
Grant McLachlan	Senzeni Na?
Florence Price	Fantasie Nègre no1 in E minor
Majoie Hajary	Surinaamse Rapsodie

A gifted pianist, organist and composer **Theophilus Ayoola ‘Ayo’ Bankole** (1935-1976) was born and grew up in Nigeria. In 1957 he moved to England to study at the Guildhall School on a Nigerian Government scholarship and later took his BA at Clare College, Cambridge. A Rockefeller Foundation Fellowship then allowed him to study ethnomusicology at UCLA in California. Returning to Nigeria in 1966, he worked first at the Nigerian Broadcasting Corporation and then, from 1969, as a lecturer in music at the University of Lagos.

For the rest of his short life, Bankole was a music educator, composer, choral conductor, performer and musicologist. He also wrote Christian liturgical music in the Yoruba language and all his compositions show elements of both traditional Nigerian and Western classical music.

Bankole’s *Egun Variations* are based on an ethnic Egun song, Tona Nowe, and meld Nigerian musical language with a G major tonal structure. The *Variations for Little Ayo* were composed for ‘little Ayo’, the composer’s son, with the purpose of teaching him the art of variations using a Yoruba theme.

Christian Onyeji was born in 1967 in Imo State, Nigeria, and he continues to uphold the musical legacy of his paternal grandfather, an Igbo master Oja (wooden flute) performer at traditional Igbo ceremonies. He received a Diploma in Music Education in 1988, a Bachelor of Arts Degree in Music in 1990, and a Master of Arts Degree in composition in 1995, all from the University of Nigeria, Nsukka, and in 2002 gained a Doctorate in Music from the University of Pretoria in South Africa.

Onyeji’s first significant work was “Ufie,” an Igbo dance, realised for piano in three movements, traditionally played on the wooden slit Ufie drum and performed only by men who have achieved ‘respectable’ status in the Anambra part of Igbo land in southeastern Nigeria.

Nabil Benabdeljalil (b1972) is widely thought to be the most significant concert composer Morocco has produced. A graduate of the music colleges of Kyiv and Moscow, he’s been based since 2011 in Casablanca, where he also teaches musicology at the University of Hassan II.

Benabdeljalil’s solo piano *Nocturnes*, are showcases for his art. The fourth (2015) is, in the composer’s words “characterised by an uninterrupted melodic line from beginning to end, with expressive implications of sweetness, tenderness and nostalgia” while the sixth (2020) was composed after a trip to the Middle Atlas in Morocco after the first Covid lockdowns and “represents the rediscovery of freedom within nature.”

Fred Onowwerosuoke (b1960) was born in Ghana to Nigerian Igbo parents but in 1990 started studying music theory and compositional techniques at Principia College, Elsay, Illinois. He subsequently moved to St Louis and later to New Orleans. It was during the clear-up in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina in the latter city in 2005 that many of his manuscripts came to public attention and were subsequently published. His works as a composer display influences from Africa, the Caribbean and the American Deep South, all fully reflected in his *24 Studies in African Rhythms* (1986-2007).

Five Kaleidoscopes for Piano (2013) was commissioned by Rebeca and, in the composer’s words, “no.3 is a romance of the pure joy of being back in a lover’s arms – Africa: beholding the landscapes, beauty and repose.”

Girma Yifrashewa was born in Addis Ababa in 1967. At 16 he started to learn the piano at the Yared School of Music in Addis and in 1986 began studying at the Bulgarian State Conservatory. Losing his scholarship in 1989 when the Bulgarian Communist Party lost power, he spent two years in Italy and then returned

to the Conservatory in 1991 to finish his studies. He’s currently Director of the Ashenafi Kebede Performing Arts Centre at Addis Ababa University and in 2020 was responsible for acquiring Ethiopia’s very first grand piano.

Yifrashewa has now performed in over 50 countries worldwide and is well-recognised for masterfully blending classical music with the rich musical traditions of Ethiopia. *Elilta* (Cry of Joy), composed in 2006, has been described as “a celebration of happiness” by the Swiss musicologist Louis Bernard.

Born in Algeria in 1967, the composer and conductor **Salim Dada** says that his work “reflects a deep connection to heritage and innovation, merging traditional influences with contemporary expressions. My symphonic compositions, chamber music, and soloist works have brought stories to life, performed and recorded in over 40 countries worldwide. Born in the Sahara, my life’s path – from the coast to Europe and back – has been a continuous exploration of new horizons. Life, for me, is a canvas for experimentation, where every experience fuels reflection, creation, and the desire to enrich the world through art and culture.”

Since 2018 Dada has been Chairman of Algeria’s National Council for Arts and Literature. His five *Miniatures Algériennes* (2009-2010), first composed for strings, create a characteristically North African sound world with vibrant and exciting rhythmic impetus.

Born in Soweto, South Africa, in 1963, **Mokale Koapeng** currently chairs the music department at Rusangu University in Zambia. Over the years he’s engaged in a number of international collaborations and says his favourite was with the British vocal group *I Fagiolini* – “It was magic working with a group who specialised in Western music and embraced our indigenous music.” The urgent polyrhythms of his *Prelude in D flat* “infuse the dance elements I grew up listening to and witnessing in various townships.”

Grant McLachlan (b1956) is a South African composer based in Cape Town. He holds music degrees from Oxford, King’s College, London, and Bournemouth University. Grant spent nearly 20 years in England, during which time he wrote extensively for chamber ensembles and choirs. Since returning to South Africa in 1994, he’s specialised in composing for natural history films, scoring music for more than 120 wildlife and feature film productions, many for broadcasters such as the *BBC*, *National Geographic* and *Smithsonian*.

Serenzi Na? (“What have we done?”) is the third movement from his *Sonatina for Double Bass and Piano* (2016). McLachlan describes it as “a recreation for piano of an anti-apartheid protest song often sung at funerals and demonstrations...inextricably linked to the struggle for freedom and democracy.” The piece is slow and gentle, but with a quiet rage. Its stately reflection hints at deeper emotion.

Born in Little Rock, Arkansas, and educated at the New England Conservatory of Music in Boston, **Florence Price** (1887-1953) was the first Afro-American to be recognised as a serious composer of symphonic music.

What first brought her to public prominence was her *Fantasie Nègre no1 in E minor* (1929). *The Associated Negro Press* recorded the premiere thus: “The surprise of the evening was a most effective composition by Mrs FB Price, entitled ‘A Negro Phantasy’, played by the talented Chicago pianiste, Margaret Bonds [Florence’s friend and fellow pianist-composer]. The entire association could well afford to recommend this number to all advanced pianists.” High praise indeed, given the date.

Weaving intricate spells around the spiritual ‘Sinner, Don’t Let This Harvest Pass’, the work was Price’s powerful assertion that such traditional negro hymns can be the basis for serious ‘classical’ compositions in the manner of Chopin and Brahms.

Majoie Hajary (1921-2017) was convinced that her music would only become better known when she was dead – and that is indeed proving to be the case. Born in Suriname, South America, to Indian and Creole/Chinese parents, she was sent to Europe in 1937 where she studied piano under Nelly Wagenaar in Amsterdam and, after the war, composition with Nadia Boulanger in Paris.

In 1951 she married Roland Garros, Director of Air France, and thereafter lived a thoroughly cosmopolitan life: the sounds of Africa, Asia and Suriname merge with those of classical music and jazz in her own works. In the words of her biographer, Ellen de Vries, what makes Hajary’s music so special are the cultural and musical influences that are reflected in her compositions. “She mixed classical music with music from Asia – she spent some time in Japan – and from the African countries where she lived, as well as blending in jazz elements. Her body of work isn’t all that large, but she constantly came up with new arrangements for different instruments, giving her works a new spin time and again.”

Notes by Dick Ware
(Continued on insert) >>

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The 2026 Little Missenden Festival will run from Friday 2nd to Sunday 12th October.

Festival Website little-missenden.org

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Programme Notes

REBECA OMORDIA

African Pianism



8pm, Tuesday October 7th, 2025
Little Missenden Church

65th Little Missenden Festival

The artist

Rebeca Omordia *piano*

Hailed as an “African classical music pioneer” (*BBC World Service*) and “a classical music game changer” (*Classical Music*), London-based award-winning pianist **Rebeca Omordia** is an exciting virtuoso with a wide-ranging career as soloist, chamber musician, recording artist and artistic director.

Her many recordings include the BBC Music Magazine Award-winning *Piano Concerto* by Errollyn Wallen, composed especially for her, with the *BBC Concert Orchestra* under John Andrews.

Rebeca was born in Romania to a Romanian mother and a Nigerian father. After graduating from the National Music University in Bucharest in 2006, where she studied with acclaimed Romanian pianist and professor Dana Borsan, she continued her studies in the UK at the Royal Birmingham Conservatoire and Trinity College of Music in London with professor Mikhail Kazakevich. She holds a Doctorate in Music from the National University of Music in Bucharest.

Rebeca has spent the last decade pioneering repertoire by African classical composers, unearthing and recording compositions by some of the continent’s influential past and present composers. Her piano solo programme ‘African Pianism’ has toured world wide, being described as “wild and shimmering piano gems” (*The Guardian*) and “appealing and pioneering in equal measure” (*Gramophone*).

In 2019 she launched the world’s first ever African Concert Series in London with the aim of creating a platform for African classical music to be performed regularly and featuring monthly concerts of music by African composers. The series was self-funded until 2021 when Rebeca was awarded a grant from Arts Council England and in 2022 the series was given recognition by joining Wigmore Hall’s Family of Partners, becoming resident there in 2023.

Performing and recording British Music has been another major project for Rebeca. The ‘Deliuss Prize’ she won in 2009 opened the door to a three year- partnership with the cellist Julian Lloyd Webber. They toured the UK as duo partners performing chamber repertoire by British composers in different venues and also live on *BBC Radio 3*.

In 2019 Rebeca and South African double bass virtuoso Leon Bosch became duo partners, the partnership resulting in a recording project featuring ‘The South African Double Bass’ and ‘The 21st Century British Double Bass’.

“Rebeca’s technique knows no bounds but, more importantly, she plays with a depth of insight and understanding which is all too rare today.” *Julian Lloyd Webber, London Magazine*