

Option 2: An analysis and overview of Sheku Kanneh-Mason's rendition of "No Woman, No Cry"

by

Yusef Bushara, 3035831458

Mr. Chan Hing Yan

MUS 1025

Saturday, May 27th, 2023

In the world of reggae, there's been no name uttered with as much force as Bob Marley. His name is synonymous with the once-obscure genre. It's now not uncommon to walk into establishments in the smallest towns of the world and see, hanging there behind a counter like some sort of shrine, a tapestry of Marley. He enriched global soundscapes with his interpretations of life that amalgamated into reggae music, adding a new dimension of aural subtlety to the music scene. Even in death, his magnitude bears on individuals outside of the genre. Cellist Sheku Kanneh-Mason is one of them. Having risen to celebrity after an unprecedented personal invitation to perform at Prince Harry and Meghan Markle's wedding in 2018, Kanneh-Mason's cello talents are rightfully lauded as virtuosic across classical music. His arrangement of "No Woman, No Cry" is deeply embedded in the tradition and spirit of both classical and reggae music. What makes this performance especially extraordinary is the pioneering it does. Being a black classical musician is extremely precarious; notwithstanding, Kanneh-Mason takes the risk of falling from grace by arranging a non-classical piece. He bridges a gaping partition between two genres. When listening to his rendition of "No Woman, No Cry," the joint force of reggae and classical music is undeniable, and it leaves the audience incapable of considering anything else but "sound" in their reflections of the piece. He makes reggae and classical music seem an always natural pairing.

His performance of Marley's original is the opening song in a small concert of four pieces. The other two pieces are arranged for the cello but not by himself; they are Edmund Finnis' "Preludes I-III" and Joseph Parry's "Myfanwy," which was arranged specifically for Kanneh-Mason. All four pieces comprise a "Tiny Desk Performance," a youtube series started in the late 2010s with the intention of collapsing the space between the public and performer by putting them in proximity to each other. The performances are deliberately intimate and stripped back so that all parties can experience the rawness of unobstructed sound, from the ears to the soul. The "tiny desk" components are real, Kanneh-Mason is sat surrounded by an assortment of unrelated books, stationery of no particular significance, some other objects with inexplicable use, and a small audience blocked from view but reflected easily in Kanneh-Mason's congenial reactions to his genius. Besides his cello, which is of the Matteo Goffriller variety, the only quasi-musical elements are the two mics saddling his position on stage. The duration of the entire performance lasts only a brief moment, a concise 14 minutes, as is the nature of Tiny Desk performances. His arrangement of "No Woman, No Cry" is painfully brief, an impossibly quick two minutes and 35 seconds, and minute shorter than the original, leaves the listener salivating for more.

The audience was likely given explicit instructions not to sing along, the song otherwise is irresistible. The opening, deep and resonant, plummets the listener into the song's chorus. "No woman, no cry. No woman, no cry." The melody then sweeps in and transports listeners back in time, at least back to a time when reggae wasn't played on the cello. That realization pulls listeners forward again. To non-classically trained ears, the piece sounds like a conversation. The first voice, so to

speak, is bass-filled, opening the song, with darker overtones. The other has brighter sounds and higher notes. Each of these two parts converse, sometimes separately, but in many instances they overlap to create smooth harmonies. Metaphor is the most intuitive way to describe music without a sophisticated disciplinary vocabulary. At no point do the two threads unravel, each linger and weave into each other. The musical dialogue that Kanneh-Mason creates is characteristic of chamber music, as is the setting he is performing in, meant to emphasize intricacy. And although this piece is composed for a soloist, there's an interplay happening throughout, between the cello's lower and higher register. Such a dialogue in such a setting allows him to modestly show his command on the cello, his virtuosity. Kanneh-Mason likely chose his own arrangement to be played first for how it accentuates his talent and range, successfully setting a baseline of general astonishment and familiarity for an untrained audience. Beginning with "No Woman, No Cry" releases nostalgia and puts the listener in a deeper state of contemplation for the pieces to come, by no coincidence either. Kanneh-Mason plays to a modern audience, and in knowing their tastes, is able to create an emotional resonance that gives the rest of the performance more gravity.

His decision to set this piece as the inaugural one strengthens the overall performance, it's an intelligent and thoughtful choice. While the way he plays may not be so much a choice as a compulsion, it, too, strengthens the performance: his face matches the passion heard in the notes, contorting on waves of continual passion. The blended sounds he makes exist in perfect and seamless harmony; the diminished ones act as pause, and the forte ones rile the listener up with the emotional resources of raging fire. Overall, there is little in this performance that detracts from its greatness. Even the last phrase, where he decides to pluck, is so completely complementary that it seems an extension of the previous bow stroke. While most audiences would be content with experiencing the piece as its trajectory lays out, he subverts expectations. The first verse, which comes after the chorus in the song structure, is undulating and rapid. The audience goes from hearing the voices converse slowly, peaceably, to cacophonously, each voice fighting to come out on top. It's an adventurous and exciting part, coming at around the 1 '50 mark. It's the kind of excerpt that permanently alters one's perception of an original song, a true feat of originality and talent.

But such is the nature of Kanneh-Mason. He uses every stroke to paint impressions for the listener that will leave them wanting to conjure up more emotion than they have, so that he can use it to make them feel things they've never felt. Which is why he takes a reggae classic and imbues it with the genius of his classical techniques. When has an audience ever felt what that pairing makes one feel? He's a pioneer on the cello in this century and his daring breaks many of the antiquated allowances afforded to classical music. May artists with his courage continue to challenge the canon and prove that classical music evolves. Until then, may the fusion of reggae and classical music be the hidden gem of the lucky soon to find the brilliant Sheku Kanneh-Mason.

Works Consulted

Kanneh-Mason, Sheku. "Sheku Kanneh-Mason: Official Website." Sheku Kanneh-Mason, <https://www.shekukannehmason.com/>.

Hewett, Ivan. "Sheku Kanneh-Mason Plays Bloch at the Royal Festival Hall Review: Harry & Meghan's Favourite Cellist Takes Centre Stage." Evening Standard, 9 Oct. 2021, <https://www.standard.co.uk/culture/music/sheku-kanneh-mason-plays-bloch-at-the-royal-festival-hall-review-harry-megan-b1063249.html>.

Goldman, Andrew. "Black Musicians Who Changed the World of Classical Music." Classic FM, <https://www.classicfm.com/discover-music/black-musicians-pioneering-in-classical-music/>.

NPR Music. "Sheku Kanneh-Mason: Tiny Desk Concert." Youtube, 15 Nov. 2022, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8Yu6CQcnQ_A

"Question of the Month: December 2021." Jim Crow Museum of Racist Memorabilia, Ferris State University, Dec. 2021, <https://www.ferris.edu/HTMLS/news/jimcrow/question/2021/december.htm>.