



LIFE AT THE TOP

Sheku Kanneh-Mason's career is in the ascendant after the cellist won BBC Young Musician earlier this year. He talked to David Kettle

Life has changed dramatically for 17-year-old cellist Sheku Kanneh-Mason. One of seven musical siblings in his Nottingham family, he already comes from a remarkable – and highly unusual – background. But it was winning the BBC Young Musician title in May, with a searing Shostakovich first

cello concerto, that really turned things upside down.

Since then he's shot to fame, with extensive media coverage – not least because he's the first black winner of the title. In fact, Sheku and his family are the subjects of a BBC documentary profiling their remarkable achievements,

provisionally titled *Young, Gifted and Classical*, to be screened in November. And, of course, he now finds himself in demand for performances across the country.

Starting out

But it wasn't even the cello that he started off playing. 'I grew up listening to my brother and sister playing violin and piano in the house, so it just seemed like a natural thing to want to do that as well. I started on the violin for about a month, but to be honest I really didn't enjoy it at all. Then I saw an orchestral concert, and I was really drawn to the cello section – I realised that was the instrument for me.'

He feels that his home life has undoubtedly helped his own development. 'It's been a very helpful environment to grow up in. I've had my older siblings to look up to, and they've given me lots of advice – and likewise, I give my younger siblings advice too.' How do things work in the family home, with seven young musicians keen to practise? 'We do have rooms in the house where we each go – I normally just practise in my bedroom. But it feels very normal for us to hear each other practising, and I'm used to one of my siblings coming in and asking: "Are you sure about the tuning of that bit?" It's been very helpful having a good pair of ears in the next room!'

Teachers

His first experience of the cello came from Southwell-based teacher Sarah Huson-Whyte, who took him from his first steps on the instrument right through to Grade 8 at the age of nine. 'She really established my technique, which was very important – to have that foundation established so early on, so that now I can focus more on the music itself. We did quite a lot of standard things, like getting the bow straight, playing in tune – of course, things that now seem quite basic. But looking back, it was so important to establish those things as early as possible.'

Since the age of ten, Kanneh-Mason has studied at the Junior Royal Academy »

in London with Ben Davies. 'I've been travelling from Nottingham to London every Saturday morning since then – it's been quite an early start every week! We've done a lot of work on my bow arm. Students often spend a lot of time on the left hand, but I think the most important thing in terms of producing the sound is the bow arm.' And they've also broadened their focus: 'Ben has been very involved in bigger things, like performance skills and career choices. He tries to come to as many of my concerts as possible, and he'll be sitting at the back with a notepad and pen, making notes on the performance – I get to hear them at my next lesson.'

School and music

Working alongside Kanneh-Mason's instrumental tutors have been, of course, his school teachers. He's currently entering his final year at Nottingham's Trinity School, taking A-levels in music, maths and physics next summer. 'At school, they've been very understanding if I have to miss lessons to give concerts, for example. They've always been very supportive of my musical activities. I have two teachers for A-level music – Mrs Cardwell and Mrs Squires – and to be honest I think they're pretty excited to have a Young Musician of the Year in the class! Mrs Squires actually came to the Barbican to watch the BBC Young Musician final.' How has he found combining school work with his burgeoning performing career? 'It's



The Kanneh-Masons at the Britain's Got Talent semifinal in 2015

been a case of learning not to waste time, making sure I use the time I have productively, and of course ensuring that the school work gets done when it needs to get done.'

He also points to two other cellists who have influenced his musicianship. 'I first met Guy Johnston when I was about eight or nine, and we've kept in touch since then. It's been great to have someone who also won the BBC Young Musician of the Year, and has been through a similar kind of process to the one I'm going through. He's given me some great advice.' He's also received support and encouragement from Julian Lloyd Webber, whose advice was not to do

too much too soon. 'I've had some great conversations with him, which have been really useful because of his great career.'

Career direction

Following his competition win, being signed to an agent, and making his London debut as a soloist with the Chineke Orchestra – which he also plays in, as well as being principal cello of its junior orchestra – where does Kanneh-Mason feel he's heading now? 'I think it's important for me to go to a conservatoire, to study more as a performer.' But for the moment, he's keeping his options open. 'I'm going

Sheku Kanneh-Mason in the BBC Young Musician final



Sheku Kanneh-Mason with fellow BBC Young Musician finalists Jess Gillam and Ben Goldscheider



to try out the Royal College, the Royal Academy and the Guildhall. I've not yet decided between them, because it will be dependent on which teacher I feel I should study with. I know there are great teachers at all three conservatoires, and I'll need to decide who I think it would be right for me to study with.' And what kind of figure is he looking for? 'Ideally someone who challenges me, and who's going to push me to play at a higher level, but someone who also shares similar ideas on music to me.'

He's also keen to include teaching in his future activities – and it's something he's already done. 'My brother Braimah and I spent a week coaching on one of Sistema England's courses, and I'm also working as a mentor with London Music Masters.' What does he particularly enjoy about teaching? 'I've often found that I'm learning myself from what I'm teaching – if I ask someone to do something, I question myself about what I'd do in that situation, and whether it's the right

A REMARKABLE MUSICAL FAMILY

The seven musical Kanneh-Mason siblings, and their teachers

Isata Kanneh-Mason (20) received the Elton John Scholarship to study at London's Royal Academy of Music. She studies piano with Hamish Milne, and also plays viola

Braimah Kanneh-Mason (18) has been awarded a scholarship to study violin at the Royal Academy of Music with Mateja Marinkovic. He previously studied violin with Nicole Wilson and piano with Druvi de Saram, both at the Junior Royal Academy

Sheku Kanneh-Mason (17) received the the ABRSM scholarship to study cello with Ben

Davies at the Junior Royal Academy. He also studied piano there with Druvi de Saram


Konya Kanneh-Mason (16) studies piano with Sarah Pickering at the Junior Royal Academy, and violin with Debbie Diamond

Jeneba Kanneh-Mason (14) studies piano with Patsy Toh and cello with Ben Davies, both at the Junior Royal Academy

Aminata Kanneh-Mason (10) is working towards Grade 8 violin with teacher Joanne Percival in Matlock, and studying piano Grade 5 with Vicky Manderson

Mariatu Kanneh-Mason (7) is working towards Grade 3 piano with Vicky Manderson, and has just started studying cello with Sarah Huson-Whyte in Southwell

thing to do. And when I'm teaching, I find I'm always drawing on what I've learnt from my two cello teachers in particular, and the ways I've been taught that are the most effective.' With his accomplished technique, charismatic

musicality and perceptive insights into teaching and learning, it seems certain that we will be hearing an awful lot more from Sheku Kanneh-Mason in the near future. Exactly what, where, and who with, will be up to him. 

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