

SUNDAY  
7 SEPTEMBER 2025

**BBC**  
Proms

RADIO **3**

# Angélique Kidjo: African Symphony

## ‘Mama Africa’

As ‘African Symphony’ receives its UK premiere, **Jane Cornwell** introduces the orchestral project led by Benin-born legend Angélique Kidjo, who guides us on a musical journey across African and beyond

Angélique Kidjo has always been living an ‘African symphony’. Born in the coastal city of Ouidah in what is now Benin, the child of liberal parents, she grew up singing local melodies and grooving to the music of James Brown, Aretha Franklin and the great South African diva Miriam Makeba. Today she’s a five-time Grammy-winner whose 16 albums fold in everything from jazz, funk and R&B to classical and Latin music into the West African traditions of her youth.

When, onstage, this petite powerhouse throws back her head and sings ‘Chez mama, chez mama Africa’ – an anthem we’ll be hollering along with today – it is, indirectly, herself that she is singing about. Fluent in multiple languages, a campaigner for UNICEF, Oxfam and her own Batonga Foundation, which she established in 2006 with the aim of educating young women, especially in remote parts of the continent, Kidjo is a fiercely committed ambassador for African culture. Which, as it happens, is thriving.

‘African success stories still don’t interest the Western media, which overlooks the boom that’s been taking place in contemporary art, architecture, fashion, technology and music,’ says Kidjo, whose most recent album, *Mother Nature*, deals with climate change, racial inequality and women’s autonomy and features younger African gunslingers including Nigerian Afrobeat star Burna Boy. Music remains her driving force: ‘It’s such a powerful transformative thing. I never let any creative boundary stop me from adding to it, taking it further. Music can heal the world.’

“I want to show the richness and beauty of African culture. I also wanted to speak of the struggles that artists encounter in the pursuit of their music.”

So, then, to *African Symphony*, a new acclaimed orchestral project that – following her BBC Proms debut in 2019 – Kidjo is showcasing as part of Bradford 2025 UK City of Culture. A collection – a song-cycle – of anthems, covers and originals intended to guide us on a melodic journey across the Motherland and beyond, the musical comes deftly arranged by lauded American

multi-instrumentalist, composer and producer Derrick Hodge, whose previous collaborators include Common, Robert Glasper and Jill Scott. ‘We decided to celebrate her 40-year journey not just with her music but also with the people whose lives inspired her, and her influence on so many of the big African artists coming out now,’ Hodge has said. ‘She’s the one that everyone relates to.’

Tonight, conductor Chris Cameron and the BBC Philharmonic Orchestra collaborate on a show that honours everything from symphonic music to Afropop, that takes in love songs, protest songs and songs of freedom; traditional songs, dance songs and songs including ‘Nongqongqo’ – a paean to departing heroes by Miriam Makeba, whose ‘Mama Africa’ moniker has, as we’re about to see, been more than ably passed on.

‘I wanted to tell a story based on my personal experience and my musical background,’ says Kidjo, who as a child was bullied for her musical aspirations (‘Female musicians were not approved of’) and, after her 1981 debut *Pretty* made her a star at home, escaped Benin’s then repressive dictatorship to start a new life in Paris, working odd jobs and as a backing singer to pay for her studies at jazz school. Her concepts over the ensuing decades have been characteristically bold: a trio of albums tracing the roots of slavery; African takes on Ravel’s *Bolero*; the music of Cuban salsera Celia Cruz;

and her own version of Talking Heads’ 1980 album *Remain in Light*. She’s worked with the likes of Philip Glass, the Luxembourg Philharmonic and Yo-Yo Ma. With *African Symphony* she goes one step further. ‘I want to show the richness and beauty of African culture,’ she says. ‘I also wanted to speak of the struggles that artists encounter in the pursuit of their music.’

Here, then, is ‘Soweto Blues’, the anti-apartheid anthem penned by trumpeter and bandleader Hugh Masekela that was a standard of Makeba’s sets. Here are ‘Lady’, a powerful depiction of African women’s self-determination penned by Nigerian Afrobeat icon Fela Kuti, and Kidjo’s own 1994 hit ‘Agolo’, with its themes of choice and consequence, its magnetic pull to dance. Living legends of African music are also honoured: Salif Keita with ‘Fôlon’, a string-laden tune whose lyrics relate to the return of democracy in Mali. Senegalese superstar Youssou N’Dour has ‘7 Seconds’, his smash hit with Neneh Cherry, interpreted in Kidjo’s inimitable style. Expect a medley of Brazilian tunes, and another of Afrobeats hits by the likes of Burna Boy and Rema.

Are you ready, Bradford? Then hold onto the sides. Angélique Kidjo – and Africa – are in the house.

*Jane Cornwell is a writer on arts and music, and the recipient of the Jazz Media Award at the Parliamentary Jazz Awards 2022.*



Angélique Kidjo, five-time winner of Best Global Music Album at the Grammys

### Angélique Kidjo

Angélique Kidjo was named one of the 100 most influential people in the world by *Time* in 2021. In 2011 *The Guardian* included her in its Top 100 Most Inspiring Women in the World, while *Forbes* has ranked her as the first woman in its list of the Most Powerful Celebrities in Africa. She is the recipient of the 2015 Crystal Award, given by the World Economic Forum, the 2016 Amnesty International Ambassador of Conscience Award, the 2018 German Sustainability Award, the 2023 Vilcek Prize in Music and the 2023 Polar Music Prize. Her voice, stage presence and fluency in multiple cultures and languages have won her respect from peers and expanded her following worldwide. She has cross-pollinated the West African traditions of her childhood in Benin with elements of R&B, funk and jazz, as well as influences from Europe and Latin America. Of her 16 LPs, five have won a Grammy Award for Best Global Music Album: *Djin Djin* (2007), *EVE* (2014), *Angélique Kidjo Sings with the Luxembourg Philharmonic* (2015), *Celia* (2019) and, most recently, *Mother Nature* (2021), which saw her join forces with many artists she has inspired – creators of West African music, Afrobeat, Afropop, dancehall, hip-hop, and alt-R&B. Her memoir, *Spirit Rising: My Life, My Music*, was published in 2014. She is a UNICEF Goodwill and Oxfam Global Ambassador and created a charitable foundation, Batonga, dedicated to supporting the education of young girls in Africa.

### Chris Cameron *conductor*

PROMS DEBUT ARTIST

Chris Cameron has produced and written orchestral arrangements for a variety of professional musicians and performers in Australia, Europe, Japan and the USA. He was Musical Director for a number of George Michael’s concert tours and TV appearances, including the 25 Live Tour, Faith Tour, *MTV Unplugged*, Pavarotti & Friends, Mandela Day Concert and Concert for Hope, a HIV- and AIDS-awareness concert given in the presence of Diana, Princess of Wales. Chris Cameron has also written string, brass, vocal and choral arrangements for Michael, and for artists and groups such as Miguel Bosé, Randy Crawford, Stereophonics, Take That and Tina Turner.

### Corinne Bailey Rae *vocals*

PROMS DEBUT ARTIST

English singer-songwriter and musician Corinne Bailey Rae shot to fame in 2006 with her self-titled debut album, featuring the hits ‘Put Your Records On’ and ‘Like a Star’. She has since released three further albums, the latest of which was 2023’s *Black Rainbows*. This was followed by a worldwide headline tour that included appearances at Glastonbury Festival, Latitude Festival, the National Jazz Museum in Harlem, North Sea Jazz Festival, We Out Here and Yale University’s Schwarzman Center. She has won two Grammy Awards, two MOBOs, two Mercury Prize nominations and a BET

Award for Best International Act. She has sold over 10 million albums worldwide, with ‘Put Your Records On’ garnering over a billion streams and achieving four-times platinum status.

### BBC Philharmonic Orchestra

Founded in 1922 as the ZZY Orchestra, the BBC Philharmonic Orchestra is one of the most celebrated broadcast ensembles in the world. Away from the Philharmonic Studio, its broadcast home in Salford, the orchestra presents a series at Manchester’s Bridgewater Hall as well as live concerts recorded in venues across the country, at the BBC Proms and on overseas tours. The orchestra’s Chief Conductor is John Storgårds. Anja Bihlmaier is Principal Guest Conductor and Julia Wolfe is Composer in Residence for 2025/26. Last year it gave the world premiere of Huang Ruo’s *City of Floating Sounds*, an immersive symphonic experience, at the Aviva Studios. In March it followed this up with Philharmonic Sessions: The Augmented Orchestra, featuring the UK premiere of Anna Clyne’s *PALETTE*. Forthcoming premieres include music by Laura Bowler, Edmund Finnis, Gabriella Smith and Julia Wolfe, and the UK premiere of Du Yun’s Pulitzer Prize-winning opera *Angel’s Bone*. At the end of 2023 the Philharmonic released *Musical Storyland*, a 10-part TV series for young people which brings famous stories from around the world to life using the power of music.





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# Angélique Kidjo: African Symphony

## Angélique Kidjo

African Symphony *UK premiere 80'*

*Tracks to include:*

**Fela Kuti** Lady

**Miriam Makeba**

Nongqongqo (To Those We Love)

**Hugh Masekela** Soweto Blues

**Manu Dibango** Soul Makossa

**Youssou N'dour/Nenah Cherry/  
Cameron McVey/Jonathan Sharp**

7 seconds

**Pedro Rodrigues** Carnaval de São Vicente

**Salif Keita** Fôlon

**Khaogelo Moagi/Nomcebo Nkwanyana**

Jerusalema

**Angélique Kidjo/Jean Hebrail**

Agolo

Afirika

**Miriam Makeba/Jerry Ragovoy** Pata Pata

*All tracks arranged by Derrick Hodge*

**Angélique Kidjo**

**Corinne Bailey Rae** *guest vocals*

**Amen Viana** *guitar*

**David Donatien** *percussion*

**BBC Philharmonic Orchestra**

**Chris Cameron** *conductor*

**Linton Stephens** *presenter*

*There will be no interval*

*The appearance of Angélique Kidjo has been made possible with the support of Bradford 2025 UK City of Culture.*

**RADIO 3 SOUNDS**

This concert is broadcast live on BBC Radio 3. Listen on BBC Sounds.

## PROMS Q&A

# Angélique Kidjo

### **What does it mean to give the UK premiere of *African Symphony* here in Bradford?**

I am very fond of this programme, which I performed previously at Carnegie Hall in New York and at the Philharmonie de Paris. I have performed a lot with classical orchestras here in the UK, from my own songs to the symphonies that Philip Glass has written for me. I am so happy to sing *African Symphony* with the BBC Philharmonic Orchestra for my second BBC Prom, following my Celia Cruz tribute concert at the Royal Albert Hall back in 2019. It's a real privilege to bring this piece to Bradford in the year that it celebrates its status as UK City of Culture.

### **In what way do these songs tell the story of your own personal experience and musical background?**

These songs tell the story of both my artistic and my personal life, because the artists who sang them have inspired me deeply – from my mentor, Miriam Makeba, to such luminaries as Cesária Évora, Youssou N'Dour and Salif Keita. Also I've had the honour to personally meet most of them, and they gave me a lot of support in the beginning of my career.

### **How did you choose which songs to include in *African Symphony*. How did you want the overall shape of the song-cycle to feel?**

I wanted to showcase the whole range and beauty of the African song tradition. That's why you have songs from all over the continent, from 'Malaika' from Tanzania to 'Fôlon' from Mali. It's a celebration of the incredible work of so many brilliant composers.

### **Is there a song that you are particularly looking forward to performing tonight?**

My motivation was to choose songs that are fun to sing, so all of those songs are favourites of mine!

### **What would you say African musical culture has to offer audiences that no other tradition can?**

African culture is at the root of so much music. Who knew that J. S. Bach, when he was composing his sarabandes, was building upon a tradition whose roots can be traced back to a dance originating from enslaved people in North Africa? I feel that these days there is a trend to acknowledge more and more the importance of African culture, and I want to bring my small contribution to that trend!