

# WIGMORE HALL

Wednesday 3 November 2021 7.30pm

**Huw Watkins** piano  
**Ruby Hughes** soprano  
**Jess Dandy** contralto

**James Gilchrist** tenor  
**Henk Neven** baritone  
**Michael McCarthy** stage director

## Britten Sinfonia

**Thomas Gould** violin I  
**Miranda Dale** violin II  
**Clare Finnimore** viola  
**Tim Posner** cello  
**James Douglas** cello  
**Benjamin Russell** double bass  
**Thomas Hancox** flute, piccolo

**Andrew Gourlay** conductor  
**Nicholas Daniel** oboe, cor anglais  
**Joy Farrall** clarinet  
**Michael Elderkin** bassoon  
**Francisco Gomez** horn  
**Bruce Nockles** trumpet  
**Jeremy Cornes** percussion  
**Sally Pryce** harp

**Benjamin Britten** (1913-1976)

Canticle II: Abraham and Isaac Op. 51 (1952)

**Huw Watkins** (b.1976)

Echo for soprano and piano (2017)  
(Texts by Rossetti, Dickinson, Larkin, Yeats and Harsent)  
*Echo • For each ecstatic instant • If grief could burn out •  
When You Are Old • Baby Blue*

Interval

**Huw Watkins**

In the Locked Room (a one-act opera) (2011-2)  
Libretto by David Harsent based on a short story by Thomas Hardy  
By arrangement with Schott Music Ltd

### Welcome back to Wigmore Hall

We are grateful to our Friends and donors for their generosity as we rebuild a full series of concerts in 2021/22 and reinforce our efforts to reach audiences everywhere through our broadcasts. To help us present inspirational concerts and support our community of artists, please make a donation by visiting our website:

[Wigmore-hall.org.uk/donate](https://www.wigmore-hall.org.uk/donate). Every gift is making a difference. Thank you.

*Wigmore Hall is a no smoking venue. No recording or photographic equipment may be taken into the auditorium nor used in any other part of the Hall without the prior written permission of the management.*

*In accordance with the requirements of City of Westminster persons shall not be permitted to stand or sit in any of the gangways intersecting the seating, or to sit in any other gangways. If standing is permitted in the gangways at the sides and rear of the seating, it shall be limited to the number indicated in the notices exhibited in those positions.*

*Disabled Access and Facilities - full details from 020 7935 2141.*

*Wigmore Hall is equipped with a 'Loop' to help hearing aid users receive clear sound without background noise. Patrons can use this facility by switching hearing aids to 'T'.*



*Please ensure that watch alarms, mobile phones and any other electrical devices which can become audible are switched off. Phones on a vibrate setting can still be heard, please switch off.*

The Wigmore Hall Trust Registered Charity No. 1024838  
36 Wigmore Street, London W1U 2BP • [Wigmore-hall.org.uk](https://www.wigmore-hall.org.uk) • John Gilhooly Director

Wigmore Hall Royal Patron HRH The Duke of Kent, KG

Honorary Patrons Aubrey Adams OBE; André and Rosalie Hoffmann; Louise Kaye; Kohn Foundation; Mr and Mrs Paul Morgan



Tonight's performance is centred on *In The Locked Room*, the one-act chamber opera by Wigmore Hall's Composer in Residence Huw Watkins and writer David Harsent. The performance will be directed by Michael McCarthy, whose original production was staged in 2012. Completing the programme are two vocal pieces, with Watkins himself at the piano.

**Benjamin Britten's** five *Canticles*, written periodically across most of his career's span, are short, quasi-dramatic pieces for voice and piano or chamber forces. Each draws from religion in its text and has a cantata-like presentation that separates it from Britten's songs, and each originally featured the tenor voice of his partner Peter Pears.

The second, 'Abraham and Isaac', the longest of the five, is perhaps the most quasi-operatic, but ingeniously scaled-down for his forces. The tenor and alto sing the title roles, of course, but the voice of God is conjured by the sound of both singers singing in rhythmic unison.

**Huw Watkins's** *Echo* contains texts by (in order of its five movements) Christina Rossetti, Emily Dickinson, Philip Larkin, WB Yeats and Watkins's operatic collaborator David Harsent. It is one of a number of Watkins's vocal works that exhibit his shapely, calligraphic approach to vocal writing, and an acute sensitivity towards varied texts.

There is a range of musical modes here – a delicate, quicksilver fragility in the first song, a slow flowering of musical shapes in the third, and a fifth and final song where an initial muscularity seems to subside into a closing tenderness. Despite the differences, however, each song has a compelling harmonic consistency and an unmistakable sense of its own identity.

In the opening minutes of David Lynch's 1986 film *Blue Velvet*, a scene of apparently idyllic suburban bliss (picket fences, smiling lollipop ladies) is quickly undercut as the camera dips just below the pristine lawn into a writhing nest of insects and beetles, showing the hidden darkness beyond the gleaming surface. In a similar manner, the short instrumental prelude to Huw Watkins's *In The Locked Room* sets up a clear, open pulse before suddenly undercutting it with darker, scurrying undercurrents in the violins. Whatever notions of safety, solidity and reality will be conjured in the coming 45 minutes cannot be trusted.

*In the Locked Room* is based on a short story by Thomas Hardy (*An Imaginative Woman*), adapted by David Harsent. The opera follows Ella, who has rented a room in a holiday home on the Sussex coast with her city trader husband Stephen, his attention firmly on the closing of a financial deal. It is here that she is informed by the landlady Susan that the mysterious locked room of the house is occupied by Ben Pascoe, a poet whose work, in a 'book with no title', is a source of intrigue and fascination for Ella.

Ella's immersion in Pascoe's poetry conjures him up as a character for the audience – we view him almost exclusively

through her imagination. The Pascoe conjured by Ella is the anthesis of her boorish husband, who is unfeeling in matters of art, and incurious towards Ella's imaginative world. In the ensuing drama of this taut and economical opera, Harsent and Watkins explore notions of what is real and what is illusory. Whose eyes are trustworthy custodians of reality – Ella's? Susan's? Can even our own reading of reality as the opera's audience be relied upon?

There is something about the forms of the one-act opera and the chamber opera that encourage a sense of claustrophobia: reduced forces, a constricted mode of storytelling. A number of models that Huw Watkins has cited as influences exhibit claustrophobic properties: Peter Maxwell Davies's *The Lighthouse*, Béla Bartók's *Bluebeard's Castle* and Benjamin Britten's *The Turn of the Screw*. In all of these examples, the opera's location itself becomes a character in its own right, becoming oppressive, closing in on the characters. Watkins's and Harsent's setting proudly joins this tradition, as we begin to feel the pull of the locked room itself, and as we start to wonder about the true role of our host, the landlady Susan.

There is claustrophobia, too, in Ella's marriage, and her desire for escapism into the world of Pascoe's poetry. Triangles of love and obsession in opera are often marked by absence – certain characters may only converse because the third is absent, the exit of one character allows for the arrival of another. Here, with Pascoe a product of Ella's imagination, Watkins and Harsent are free to create intriguing trios where all three sing together – Ella and Pascoe's sympathetic duets of poetic exploration are pock-marked by Stephen brashly shouting financial jargon down his mobile phone, or answering her questions of Pascoe with his own answers from the financial world. As with any failing marriage, Stephen and Ella obey the grammar of conversation, but they seem to be speaking a different language.

The 14-piece ensemble is small enough to allow for a leanness and precision in the sound, but large enough that Watkins has a great many colours at his disposal, often used to skilfully shape characters' intentions and roles. Ella herself is first introduced hoping for space to read, walk and contemplate – Watkins surrounds her with spacious flute and harp, a contrast from the bustling, driving rhythms of Stephen's typical music, conjuring the 'fast trains to London' that he values about the holiday location. The other-worldly figure of Pascoe is frequently signified by tolling on crotales – the most strange and exotic instrument in the ensemble, shimmering in the air far above the fray. The slightly enlarged string section means Watkins can create a lyrical bed that binds the sound together in a quasi-orchestral sound throughout – a sonic richness to match that of the narrative.

© Tom Coult 2021

*Reproduction and distribution is strictly prohibited.*

## Benjamin Britten (1913-1976)

### Canticle II: Abraham and Isaac Op. 51 (1952)

*Anonymous*

*God speaks*

Abraham, my servant, Abraham,  
Take Isaac, thy son by name,  
That thou lovest the best of all,  
And in sacrifice offer him to me  
Upon that hill there besides thee.  
Abraham, I will that so it be,  
For ought that may befall.

*Abraham*

My Lord, to Thee is mine intent  
Ever to be obedient.  
That son that Thou to me hast sent,  
Offer I will to Thee,  
Thy bidding done shall be.

*Here Abraham, turning him to his son Isaac, saith:*

*Abraham*

Make thee ready, my dear darling,  
For we must do a little thing.  
This woode do on thy back it bring,  
We may no longer abide.  
A sword and fire that I will take,  
For sacrifice me behoves to make;  
God's bidding will I not forsake,  
But ever obedient be.

*Here Isaac speaketh to his father, and taketh a bundle of sticks and beareth after his father, and saith:*

*Isaac*

Father, I am all ready  
To do your bidding most meekely,  
And to bear this wood full bayn am I,  
As you commanded me.

*Here they both go to the place to do sacrifice:*

*Abraham*

Now, Isaac son, go we our way  
To yonder mount, if that we may.

*Isaac*

My dear father, I will essay  
To follow you full fain.

*Abraham, being minded to slay his son Isaac, lifts up his hands, and saith the following:*

*Abraham*

Oh! My heart will break in three,  
To hear thy words I have pitye;  
As Thou wilt, Lord, so must it be,  
To thee I will be bayn.  
Lay down thy faggot, my own son dear.

*Isaac*

All ready father, lo, it is here.  
But why make you such heavy cheer?  
Are you anything adread?

*Abraham*

Ah! Dear God! That me is woe!

*Isaac*

Father, if it be your will,  
Where is the beast that we shall kill?

*Abraham*

Thereof, son, is none upon this hill.

*Isaac*

Father, I am full sore affeared  
To see you bear that drawnē sword.

*Abraham*

Isaac, son, peace, I pray thee,  
Thou breakest my heart even in three.

*Isaac*

I pray you, father, layn nothing from me,  
But tell me what you think.

*Abraham*

Ah! Isaac, Isaac, I must thee kill!

*Isaac*

Alas! Father, is that your will,  
Your ownē child for to spill  
Upon this hillēs brink?  
If I have trespassed in any degree,  
With a yard you may beat me;  
Put up your sword, if your will be,  
For I am but a child.  
Would God my mother were here with me!  
She would kneel down upon her knee,  
Praying you, father, if it may be,  
For to save my life.

*Abraham*

O! Isaac, son, to thee I say,  
God hath commanded me today  
Sacrifice, this is no nay,  
To make of thy body.

*Isaac*

Is it God's will I shall be slain?

*Abraham*

Yea, son, it is not for to layn.

*Here Isaac asketh his father's blessing on his knees, and saith:*

*Isaac*

Father, seeing you muste needs do so,  
Let it pass lightly, and over go;  
Kneeling on my kneeyës two,  
Your blessing on me spread.

*Abraham*

My blessing, dear son, give I thee  
And thy mother's with heart free;  
The blessing of the Trinity  
My dear son, on thee light.

*Here Isaac riseth and cometh to his father, and he taketh him, and bindeth and layeth him upon the alter to sacrifice him, and saith:*

*Abraham*

Come hither, my child, thou art so sweet,  
Thou must be bound both hand and feet.

*Isaac*

Father, do with me as you will,  
I must obey, and that is skill,  
Godës commandment to fulfil,  
For needs so must it be.

*Abraham*

Isaac, Isaac, blessèd must thou be.

*Isaac*

Father, greet well my brethren ying,  
And pray my mother of her blessing,  
I come no more under her wing,  
Farewell for ever and aye.

*Here Abraham doth kiss his son Isaac, and binds a kerchief about his head.*

*Abraham*

Farewell, my sweete son of grace!

*Isaac*

I pray you, father, turn down my face,  
For I am sore adread.

*Abraham*

Lord, full loth were I him to kill!

*Isaac*

Ah, mercy, father, why tarry you so?

*Abraham*

Jesu! On me have pity,  
That I have most in mind.

*Isaac*

Now, father, I see that I shall die:  
Almighty God in majesty!  
My soul I offer unto Thee!

*Abraham*

To do this deed I am sorry.

*Here let Abraham make a sign as tho' he would cut off his son Isaac's head with his sword; then God speaks:*

Abraham, my servant dear Abraham,  
Lay not thy sword in no manere  
On Isaac, thy dear darling.  
For thou dreatest me, well wot I,  
That of thy son has no mercy,  
To fulfil my bidding.

*Abraham*

Ah! Lord of heaven and King of bliss,  
Thy bidding shall be done, i-wis!  
A horned wether here I see,  
Among the briars tied is he,  
To Thee offered shall he be  
Anon right in this place.

*Then let Abraham take the lamb and kill him.*

*Abraham*

Sacrifice here sent me is,  
And all, Lord, through Thy grace.

ENVOI:

Such obedience grant us, O Lord!  
Ever to Thy most holy word,  
That in the same we may accord  
As this Abraham was bayn;  
And then altogether shall we  
That worthy King in heaven see,  
And dwell with Him in great glorye  
For ever and ever, amen.

## Huw Watkins (b.1976)

**Echo** for soprano and piano (2017)

### Echo

*Christina Rossetti*

Come to me in the silence of the night;  
Come in the speaking silence of a dream;  
Come with soft rounded cheeks and eyes as bright  
As sunlight on a stream;  
Come back in tears,  
O memory, hope, love of finished years.

O dream how sweet, too sweet, too bitter sweet,  
Whose wakening should have been in Paradise,  
Where souls brimfull of love abide and meet;  
Where thirsting longing eyes  
Watch the slow door  
That opening, letting in, lets out no more.

Yet come to me in dreams, that I may live  
My very life again though cold in death:  
Come back to me in dreams, that I may give  
Pulse for pulse, breath for breath:  
Speak low, lean low,  
As long ago, my love how long ago.

### For each ecstatic instant

*Emily Dickinson*

For each ecstatic instant  
We must an anguish pay  
In keen and quivering ratio  
To the ecstasy.

For each beloved hour  
Sharp pittances of years,  
Bitter contested farthings  
And coffers heaped with tears.

### If grief could burn out

*Philip Larkin*

If grief could burn out  
Like a sunken coal ...

*Unfortunately we are unable to provide the text for the above song on this occasion*

## When You Are Old

*WB Yeats*

When you are old and grey and full of sleep,  
And nodding by the fire, take down this book,  
And slowly read, and dream of the soft look  
Your eyes had once, and of their shadows deep;

How many loved your moments of glad grace,  
And loved your beauty with love false or true,  
But one man loved the pilgrim soul in you,  
And loved the sorrows of your changing face;

And bending down beside the glowing bars,  
Murmur, a little sadly, how Love fled  
And paced upon the mountains overhead  
And hid his face amid a crowd of stars.

## Baby Blue

*David Harsent*

She might be singing 'My buttie, my lolly, my blue-eyed boy'  
As she stoops to take him up in joy,

Then stops on a broken note, her own eyes full  
As she catches a glimpse of the sky through the skull.

*Echo: 'Baby Blue' Text © 2005 David Harsent. Reproduced by permission. All rights reserved.*