

WIGMORE HALL 125

Monday 27 October 2025
1.00pm

Ruby Hughes soprano
Errollyn Wallen piano

Errollyn Wallen (b.1958)

Guru (c.1992)

On the Mountain (2010)

Timeless from *Timeless* (2022)

North (2001)

Benjamin Britten (1913-1976)

From *Vol. 4 Moore's Irish Melodies* (1957)

How sweet the answer • At the mid hour of night

Ca' the yowes from *Vol. 5 British Isles* (1951-9)

I wonder as I wander from *Tom Bowling and Other Song Arrangements* (1959)

Charles Ives (1874-1954)

Songs my mother taught me (c.1899-1901)

Serenity (1919)

Mists (1910)

The Housatonic at Stockbridge (arr. 1921)

Errollyn Wallen (b.1958)

Jesus on a Train (c.1989)

What's up Doc? (c.1986)

Peace on Earth (2006)

Rain (1994)



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The journey to a song

As I wrote in the foreword to my 2006 collection, *The Errollyn Wallen Songbook*:

‘All these songs were written from my heart and in a state of grace. At last they have made the journey from my battered manuscript sketchbook where they were often feverishly scribbled down. I am very pleased to be able to share them in this book.’

Over the last few years I have been astonished at the number of singers and choirs who have sung from *The Errollyn Wallen Songbook*, and so many at Wigmore Hall, apparently making me the most performed living composer at this hallowed venue for chamber music and song recitals.

Ruby Hughes, in particular, has been a great champion of my music, digging into my catalogue – sometimes unearthing songs I’d forgotten about as well as commissioning new works. Last year Ruby gave a staggering performance of her commission *By Gis and by Saint Charity* on my orchestral album, *Orchestral Works*. I am so grateful to her for her friendship and her artistry. All the songs of mine that are being performed in this concert are from *The Errollyn Wallen Songbook*, apart from *On the Mountain* and *Timeless*.

It is strange that in all my years in higher education my composition lessons involved no serious study of the song form nor indeed of how to write for the voice. Like most children I made up my own songs, most notably *It’s a Quarter to Nine* for my sisters and me to sing over and over again as we walked to our primary school together. *Frogs and Toads* was my first large-scale ensemble work for my class to sing and perform. Both works were composed when I was about nine years old. It wasn’t until immediately after graduating from my Masters composition degree that I was asked to play in and eventually write quirky, indefinable songs for the first band I joined, Pulse. Pulse was an innovative group of recent Middlesex Polytechnic graduates who hit the new comedy circuit, playing in pubs, clubs and sometimes on television – combining comedy, systems and avant-garde music alongside such comedians such as Julian Clary, Rory Bremner, Jenny Eclair and Tony Slattery. It was subsequently when I was working as a keyboard player in a variety of pop, jazz and rock bands that I saw at first hand the impact that a three-minute song can have on an audience and the many different ways there are of approaching the form, setting a text and delivering it in performance. I did not at that time consider myself a songwriter and certainly not a singer-songwriter but before long, songs were spilling out of me and continue to do so to this day. One of the first of these, that I composed for me to sing and play, was *What’s up Doc?* composed sometime in the 1980s. It emerged complete in one sitting and I was thoroughly bemused by it. A flurry of others followed, including *Rain* and *Guru*. I am happy that we now live in a time where so many contemporary classical composers are flourishing through their collaborations with singers in both art and popular song, choral writing and opera, setting texts from a wide variety of cultures and centuries.

Learning these songs of Britten and Ives has led me to reflect on the profound ways a performer attunes with a composer through their use of notation to express their ideas not only about the music, but also about their attitude to the drama of the text and about their underlying aesthetic sensibility. In Ives’s scores it is clear that he is hearing other lines, a counterpoint of atmospheres that two hands can only hint at. The stretches in the hands are impossibly wide at times (especially in *The Housatonic at Stockbridge*). Britten’s arrangements of these folk songs make less obvious demands on the pianist though they are as steeped in atmosphere as Ives’s mists, rivers and marching bands.

But for all three composers, all pianists, the piano is a canvas on which all colours and textures are hewn, while the voice itself is the beacon of the text.

What guides a composer to their chosen text? I personally love the adventure of originating my own words, playing a marvellous game of tag at the piano – magic happens when the words are treated as sounds.

For Benjamin Britten who produced eight books of *Folksong Arrangements* from the British Isles and France, for voice and piano, guitar and harp, it was homesickness while he was in the United States during WWII which drew him to the variety of dialects in folk song. There is a warm austerity and an inventiveness which brings an astonishing freshness to these age-old songs.

For Charles Ives, many of the words he set have a profound personal resonance. *Songs My Mother Taught Me* is dedicated to Molly Parmalee Ives, Charles Ives’s mother. The text is a translation by Natalie Macfarren of the Czech poem by Adolf Heydak. Dvořák had set this in 1880 as part of his *Cigánké melodie (Gypsy melodies)* Op. 55. The text of *Serenity* is taken from John Greenleaf Whittier’s poem *The Brewing of Soma* (1872). Whittier was active in the 30-year struggle to abolish slavery. *Mists* is a heartfelt song, based on a poem by Charles Ives’s wife, Harmony Twitchell, written in 1910 as a response to the unexpected death of her mother earlier in the year.

For myself, as for Britten and Ives, place is a constant fuel for the imagination and, for all three, water is a central and powerful theme. *The Housatonic at Stockbridge* by Charles Ives is an arrangement of the third movement of the orchestral work *Three Places in New England* (1914). The song describes the Housatonic River which is an approximately 149-mile-long river in western Massachusetts and western Connecticut. In a note printed at the end of the song, Ives states that ‘the small notes in the right hand may be omitted, but if played should be scarcely audible. This song was originally written as a movement in a set of pieces for orchestra, in which it was intended that the upper strings, muted, be listened to separately or sub-consciously – as a kind of distant background of mists seen through the trees or over a river valley, their parts bearing little or no relation to the tonality etc of the tune. It is difficult to reproduce this effect with piano.’

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Errollyn Wallen (b.1958)

Guru (c.1992)

Errollyn Wallen

I have the answer
The answer's in a bottle
The bottle's on the mountain
And the mountain's by a river
And the river runs to me

I have the answer
And it's what you want to hear
And I'll tell you what to eat
And I'll tell you what to wear
And the road is not too long
And the way is not too hard
But I, only I, have the answer

For nobody wants to be alone
Nobody wants to be a fool
And you want to live forever

And nobody wants to be alone
Nobody wants to be a fool
And you want to live forever

I'll set you free

And the answer's in a bottle
And the bottle's on the mountain
And the mountain's by a river
And the river is mine

Nobody wants to be alone
Nobody wants to be a fool
And you want to live forever

And no, nobody wants to be alone
Nobody wants to be a fool
And you want to live forever

I'll set you free
Free from yourself

I'll set you free
Free from yourself

I'll set you free

Free from your money...

On the Mountain (2010)

to the memory of Martin Luther King
Errollyn Wallen

He sits on the mountain

He sits on the mountain
That's where you'll find him

All alone

He walks on the mountain of love
And what have I done?

I've led a blameless life
But have I had a dream?
on the mountain?

And I've waited so long
and I've waited so long
and I've waited so long
and I've suffered so long

How we've suffered
and we've waited
and called out your name
and we pray for a sign
but these chains weigh us down

And we can't see your face
and these chains drag us down
and we're

All alone

All alone

He had a dream on the mountain top
Where is that dream on the mountain top?

He had a dream that put hope, like a child's heart

Now he's gone

Now he's gone

Now he's gone

Please do not turn the page until the song and its accompaniment have ended.

Timeless from *Timeless* (2022)

Errollyn Wallen

When I sing in the night
When I glide across oceans and stars
See the Northern Lights
Touch the Milky Way

I am timeless like the water that will carry me home.
Home to the Lake
where the souls of those who love do wait

When I sing in the night
When I glide across oceans and stars
See the Northern Lights
Touch the Milky Way

I am timeless like the water that will carry me home,
Home to the Lake, the Lake.

North (2001)

Errollyn Wallen

When the wind is in the north,
When the mountains sigh.
That is when I'll take my boat
And sail without a cause.

I'll sail by night and think by day,
I'll sail by night and I'll think by day,
I'll sail by night and I'll think all day of
North.

When the stars are beating fast,
When the dark is light,
That is when I'll steal my way
And I'll gird these spirits tight.

I'll sail by night and think by day,
I'll sail by night and I'll think by day,
I'll sail by night and I'll drink all day of
North.

...of North,

When I lighted to this place,
When I smelled the sea,
I knew I'd be here again,
It's where I want to be.

I need to feel cold,
Feel the sea,
I wanna be a part of ice and storm.
I want to hold you,
Your cold, cold heart,
My arms outstretched to greet the dawn.

I'm gonna sail by night and think all day,
I'll sail by night and I'll think all day,
I'll sail by night and I'll drink all day of
North.

North.

Benjamin Britten (1913-1976)

From *Vol. 4 Moore's Irish Melodies* (1957)

Thomas Moore

How sweet the answer

How sweet the answer Echo makes
To Music at night,
When, rous'd by lute or horn, she wakes,
And far away, o'er lawns and lakes,
Goes answering light.

Yet love hath echoes truer far,
And far more sweet,
Than e'er beneath the moonlight's star,
Of horn, or lute, or soft guitar,
The songs repeat.

'Tis when the sigh, in youth sincere,
And only then -
The sigh, that's breath'd for one to hear,
Is by that one, that only dear,
Breath'd back again.

At the mid hour of night

At the mid hour of night, when stars are weeping, I fly
To the lone vale we loved, when life shone warm in thine
eye;
And I think oft, if spirits can steal from the regions of air
To revisit past scenes of delight, thou wilt come to me
there,
And tell me our love is remember'd even in the sky.

Then I sing the wild song it once was rapture to hear,
When our voices commingling breathed like one on the
ear;
And as Echo far off through the vale my sad orison rolls,
I think, O my love! 'tis thy voice from the Kingdom of
Souls
Faintly answering still the notes that once were so dear.

Ca' the yowes from Vol. 5 *British Isles* (1951-9)

Traditional

Ca' the yowes to the knowes,
Ca' them where the heather growes,
Ca' them where the burnie rowes,
My bonnie dearie.

Hark the mavis evening sang,
Sounden Clouden's woods amang;
Then a-folding let us gang,
My bonnie dearie.

We'll gang down by Clouden side,
Through the hazels spreading wide,
O'er the waves that sweetly glide
To the moon sae clearly.

Fair and lovely as thou art,
Thou hast stol'n my very heart;
I can die but canna part,
My bonnie dearie.

I wonder as I wander from *Tom Bowling and Other Song Arrangements* (1959)

Traditional

I wonder as I wander out under the sky,
How Jesus our Saviour did come for to die,
For poor or'n'ry people like you and like I,
I wonder as I wander out under the sky.

When Mary birthed Jesus 'twas in a cow stall,
With wise men and shepherds and farmers and all.
On high from God's heaven the star's light did fall,
And the promise of ages it then did recall.

If Jesus had wanted for any wee thing,
A star in the sky, or a bird on the wing;
Or all of God's angels in heav'n for to sing,
He surely could've had it for he was the King!

Charles Ives (1874-1954)

Songs my mother taught me (c.1899-1901)

Adolf Heyduk, trans. Natalie Macfarren

Songs my mother taught me in the days long vanished,
Seldom from her eyelids were the tear drops banished.
Now I teach my children each melodious measure;
Often tears are flowing from my memory's treasure.

Serenity (1919)

John Greenleaf Whittier

O Sabbath rest of Galilee!
O calm of hills above,
Where Jesus knelt to share with thee
The silence of eternity,
Interpreted by love.

Drop thy still dewes of quietness,
Till all our strivings cease:
Take from our souls the strain and stress,
And let our ordered lives confess
The beauty of thy peace.

Mists (1910)

Harmony Twichell Ives

Low lie the mists;
They hide each hill and dell ...

Due to copyright reasons we are unable to print the full text of this song

The Housatonic at Stockbridge (arr. 1921)

Robert Underwood Johnson

Contented river in thy dreamy realm
The cloudy willow and the plummy elm:
Thou beautiful! from ev'ry dreamy hill
What eye but wanders with thee at thy will.

Contented river! And yet overshy
To mask thy beauty from the eager eye;
Hast thou a thought to hide from field and town?
In some deep current of the sunlit brown.

Ah! there's a restive ripple.
And the swift red leaves
September's firslings faster drift;
Wouldst thou away, dear strem?

Come, whisper near!
I also of much resting have a fear;
Let me tomorrow thy companion be,
By fall and shallow to the adventures sea!

Please do not turn the page until the song and its accompaniment have ended.

Errollyn Wallen (b.1958)

Jesus on a Train (c.1989)

Errollyn Wallen

Rolling hills go past this place I'm in,
Rolling land reminds me that I can
Fall from grace.

Half this world will eat their sandwiches —
So confident that life was and shall remain
So sure,
So sure.

The middle of the night finds him crying
And the stone is covered with blood,
Children huddle from bullets raining down
And so hungry.
And while you talk I see pain buried deep in your lips
And on your hand gold tells me
Nothing about love.

Still we're sure,
So sure.

Rolling hills go past this place I'm in,
Rolling land reminds me that I can
Fall from grace.

Rolling hills, rolling hills,
Rolling hills,

Yet we're still so sure.

Rolling hills.

What's up Doc? (c.1986)

Errollyn Wallen

Sometimes I get so lonely that
I eat the television
Sometimes I get so lazy that
I eat the television

What's up Doc?
What's up Doc?
Is it the words you say
Or the way you say it?

Sometimes I get so cold that I,
I hug the television
Sometimes I get so crazy that
I hug the television

What's up Doc?
What's up Doc?
Is it the words you say
Or the way you say it?

The tears fall in my soup
And dance around the room
To the tune that's in the news
Everyone sings
Everyone is smiling
The colours on the screen
Confound my misery

Sometimes I get so weary that
I drink the television
Sometimes I get so churlish that
I drink the television

What's up Doc?
What's up Doc?
Now is it the words you say
Or the way you say it?

The tears fall in my soup
And dance around the room
To the tune that's in the news
Everyone sings
And everyone is smiling
The colours on the screen
Confound my misery

What's up Doc?
What's up Doc?
Mmm...is it the words you say
Or the way you say it?

What's up Doc?
What's up Doc?
Now is it the words you say
Or the way you say it?

Sometimes I get so lonely that
I eat the television
Sometimes I get so crazy that
I eat the television

What's up Doc?
What's up Doc?
Is it the words you say
Or the Way you say it?

What's up Doc?
What's up Doc?
Is it the words you say
Or the
Way you say it?

Sometimes I get so lonely that
I I eat the television
Sometimes I get so lazy that I I eat the television

What's up Doc?
What's up Doc?
Is it the words you say
Or the way you say it?

What's up Doc?
What's up Doc?
Now is it the words you say
Or the
Way you say it?

Peace on Earth (2006)

Errollyn Wallen

And snow falls down on me.
Peace on earth.
The night is dark and soft.
Peace on earth.
The lights that sparkle in the square,
The smoke that lingers in the air.
Peace on earth.

And grace falls down on me.
Peace on earth.
The dark will turn aside.
Peace on earth.
The fires that burn in every hearth
Do sing our praise of Christmas past.
Peace on earth.

Hear them singing.

Peace on earth.

Rain (1994)

Errollyn Wallen

And another day
As I rise up
To greet the rain.

And another year
Since we first heard
There would be
No sun at all.

But how wonderful is the rain.

You should find yourself
Something that's big and bright
And orange.

Maybe I should
Paint myself a large square
Of
Blue.

But how wonderful is the rain.