

## Wigmore Hall 125th Anniversary Festival

The Anniversary Festival is supported by the 1901 Patrons' Circle and Cockayne Grants for the Arts, a Donor Advised Fund, held at The Prism Charitable Trust

### Songs, Airs & the Blues

Elaine Mitchener vocalist  
Elizabeth Kenny lute

#### Traditional

The Black's Lamentation (c.1730-1740) *arranged by Angeline Morrison*

Joni Mitchell (b.1943)  
Robert Johnson (c.1583-1633)  
Robert Johnson (1911-1938)

Don't Interrupt the Sorrow (pub. 1975)  
As I walked forth (pub. 1652)  
Love In Vain (Take 1) (1937)

Joan Anita Barbara Armatrading (b.1950)  
Henry Purcell (1659-1695)  
Duke Ellington (1899-1974)  
Mark E Smith (1957-2018)

Love and Affection (pub. 1976)  
O solitude, my sweetest choice Z406 (1684-5)  
(In My) Solitude (1934)  
Joker Hysterical Face (pub. 1982)

John Dankworth (1927-2010)  
John Dowland (1563-1626)

Shall I compare thee to a summer's day? (1964)  
In darkness let me dwell (1610)

Bob Dylan (b.1941)

It's Alright, Ma (I'm Only Bleeding) (pub. 1965)

Bob Marley (1945-1981)

Redemption Song (pub. 1980)



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Please note the programme order has changed since these programme notes were written.

A voice and a string instrument: a simple musical pairing, capable of bearing some of the most complex expressions of interior life. Whether in the courts of Elizabethan England or in the juke joints of the US, love, loss, loneliness, anger and redemption have been expressed through this essential arrangement.

For this programme, Elaine Mitchener casts the net wide across the history of song, drawing together such diverse material as John Dowland and The Fall to explore varied collisions of subjectivity and music. Songs endure because they can be carried by all kinds of voices – trained and untrained, codified and free-form, authoritative, timid, damaged, limpid; just as there is no one way to interpret any given song, there is no one voice to carry it. Nonetheless, songs' embeddedness in culture means that listeners will bring a set of expectations to bear on their listening. Elizabeth Kenny's lute accompaniment both subverts and sympathises with these expectations, staying true to the instrument's centuries-old function: to recontextualise the familiar and bring it to life in new ways.

**Robert Johnson** (c.1583-1633) was a composer and lute player of the late Tudor and early Jacobean periods. *As I walked forth* (pub. 1652) places a singer's encounter with a maiden dying of heartbreak in an uncannily benign, pastoral setting. Johnson is not to be confused with Delta blues master **Robert Johnson** (1911-38), whose *Love In Vain* was made in a series of landmark recordings in 1937 which have gone on to become hugely influential to the development of popular music. Mystery surrounds Johnson's life, with speculation and mythology – such as the legend that he sold his soul to the devil at a crossroads – filling the gaps in his all-too-brief biography.

**John Dankworth** was a seminal figure in 20th-century British jazz, known amongst many things for putting classical and jazz on the same stage. His arrangement of Shakespeare's Sonnet 18 *Shall I compare thee to a summer's day* sets the poet's ardour, and the difficulty of finding words for it, to a jazz setting. The version heard today was recorded by his wife and long-time professional partner, the singer Cleo Laine. British singer-songwriter **Joan Armatrading**'s view of love in *Love And Affection* is more ambivalent than Shakespeare's: the singer declares in those relatable opening lines: 'I'm not in love / but I'm open to persuasion'. Armatrading rarely centres her own life in her songs, instead observing the experiences of the people around her, which gives the characters in her songs a curiously timeless quality. *Love and Affection*, one of her most well known, compares romantic love with the wider beauty and necessity of friendship.

*The Black's Lamentation* is an anonymous broadside ballad that was popular in the mid-18th Century; the arrangement heard today is by Angeline Morrison, who has set the text to the tune usually used for the traditional song *The Blacksmith*. A member of the Black British Folk Collective, Morrison has recorded the song for her forthcoming *Songs Of Black Albion* – this will be the first ever recorded version of the song.

Songs can be vehicles for personal expression; they can also carry political sentiment. **Bob Dylan**'s *It's Alright, Ma* (1965) rails at the excesses and falseness of American consumer culture ('Advertising signs they con you into thinking you're the one'). Meanwhile, in The Fall's *Joker Hysterical Face* (1982), **Mark E Smith** uses the image of the manically laughing joker to represent emotional dishonesty against a backdrop of a decaying relationship and economic recession. **Bob Marley**'s *Redemption Song* (1980) harnesses lyrics from a speech given by Pan-Africanist leader Marcus Garvey to a simple arrangement of voice and guitar that represented, for the Jamaican singer, a return to an earlier, pre-Wailers style. Shortly before he wrote it Marley had been diagnosed with cancer, from which he would not recover; *Redemption Song* now feels like a parting gift in which he implores his listeners to carry his songs on after his death: 'Won't you help to sing / These songs of freedom?'

Two contrasting meditations on solitude – **Henry Purcell**'s *O solitude* and **Duke Ellington**'s (*In My Solitude* (1934) – outline something truthful about the condition of being on one's own: that sometimes it seems freeing, at other times like a prison. In the former's text (translated by Katherine Philips from the French poem by Antoine Girard de Saint-Amant), the singer delights in being 'remote from tumult and from noise / How ye my restless thoughts delight!'; while in the latter (with lyrics by Eddie DeLange and Irving Mills) the singer is 'filled with despair / No one can be so sad'.

**John Dowland** was a major composer of the English Renaissance. The song included here – *In darkness let me dwell* – reads like a response to misery. It despairs: 'Thus, wedded to my woes, and bedded in my tomb, O let me living die'. Like Dylan, Smith and Marley, Dowland confronted forces of oppression – in his case the Elizabethan court, which rejected him as its composer, supposedly on account of his religion – through the then-fashionable affect of melancholy.

**Joni Mitchell**'s *Don't Interrupt the Sorrow* eye-rolls at the space given to men's feelings at the expense of women's. As the singer's antagonist chides: 'We walked on the moon / You be polite'. The track comes from Mitchell's seventh album *The Hissing Of Summer Lawns* (1975), which saw the Canadian artist push her sound in more experimental directions.

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