

Mercury Songs

Tuesday 7 July 2026 | Wilton's Music Hall

Michael Bardon	Cello, Bodhrán
Matthew Bourne	Piano, Moog, Cello
Emily Levy	Voice, Electronics
Nick Rasle	Voice, Guitar
Aby Vulliamy	Voice, Viola
Kate Hampson	Voice of Julia Varley
Tom Clutterbuck	Lighting and Sound
Jackie Newbould	Senior Producer
Nan Brimble	Producer

Mercury Songs began as an exploration of British folk songs and the search for tales that, instead of casting women in the tragic victim or brazen seducer role, describe brave and empowered women who are the protagonists of their own adventure. We discovered many such songs in British Folk history, thrilling stories of women disguised as men to go to war, challenge their lover, or cross class divides to protect their children.

Matthew and I decided our next challenge was to write something new, about a real figure from recent history. We limited our search to Yorkshire, because our homes straddle two sides of Rombalds Moor, and to our delight we found Julia Varley (1871-1952), a pioneering British trade unionist, suffragette, and social reformer from Bradford.

Julia worked in a mill in Bradford aged 12 and by 15 was campaigning. She strove to understand at first hand the causes she was fighting for, often taking on a new identity to walk the streets, or stay in workhouses. Headhunted by John Cadbury, she moved to Birmingham where she represented the rights of workers at the Cadbury chocolate company, in

the wider Midlands and nationally. Julia devoted her life to improving the working conditions for women and was jailed twice for her protests as a suffragette. Her court summons sits alongside the notification of her OBE amongst her most treasured possessions.

Tonight's musicians have worked together in different combinations over many years and come together for the first time as a 5-piece ensemble for 'Mercury Songs'. Our process has been collaborative, inspired not only by Julia but by our individual musical languages.

The title 'Mercury Women' refers to those who were at the heart of the early newstrade, selling broadsheets, stories and songs on city streets, many in the East end of London, a stone's throw from where we are today. Julia wrote often about the struggle for justice and equality being a 'torch to be passed on'. Mercury Women passed the torch to Julia and her contemporaries, it is ours now to continue: 'To some of us the work is ending, but to others, beginning. There can be no gaps.' [Julia Varley]

- Emily Levy

Emily Levy is a singer and composer with particular interest in voice, sound design and narrative work. Her musical influences range from medieval to classical, folk to jazz and works span solo projects, small and large ensemble, radio soundtrack, theatre and dance.

Recent commissions: Mercury Songs for PRS New Music Biennial & Bradford2025; Composer and MD for A Song for Ella Grey Pilot Theatre (Offie Nomination for Best Composition for Young Audiences); Streetwise Opera & BBC Concert Orchestra Re:Sound; BBC Radio 3 Listen In, BBC Radio 4 Three Acres of Colour, Dante, Amo Amas Amusical, 'The Rain is Coming' for baritone Roderick Williams, and choral works for choirs and vocal ensembles.

Current Projects: REST a large-scale commission for City of London Sinfonia; Mercury Songs on national tour 2026-27 co-commissioned by Spitalfields Music, Ryedale Festival and Royal Birmingham Conservatoire; Composer in Residence for

Matthew Bourne is a recipient of numerous awards and accolades, and possesses an inventive and unique artistic approach for bringing infirm pianos back to life in Harpsichords (2024), collaborating with classical musicians of the London Sinfonietta in Written/Unwritten, the acclaimed solo piano albums, Montauk Variations, Isotach, and reinterpretations of Amon Tobin's work for Ninja Tune. Other projects include Radioland; a live reworking of Kraftwerk's Radio-Activity album (in collaboration with Franck Vigroux & Antoine Schmitt), solo synthesiser album moogmemory; Nightports w/Matthew Bourne; and the double-album Aeolian, with the late Keith Tippett. Bourne's work has appeared on compilations by Bonobo and Hot Chip, and featured in Paolo Sorrentino's 2018 film LORO. Bourne continues to develop his solo piano work (Désinances / Irrealis / This Is Not For You.), and is currently working on a number of new projects - including the recently-released Hand to Mouth, for Fatcat Records with longtime collaborator Keeley Forsyth.
www.matthewbourne.com

Michael Bardon is a Northern Irish bassist/cellist/composer/improviser born in 1986 and based in Leeds, UK. He first came to Leeds in 2007 to study Jazz (BA Hons) at Leeds College of Music graduating in June 2010. Since then he has worked with a variety of musicians from different disciplines and backgrounds including Shatner's Bassoon, Keeley Forsyth, Ancient Infinity Orchestra, Matthew Bourne, Dave Kane, James Mainwaring, Sean Noonan, Jaktar, Konstantinos Glynos, Craig Scott's Lobotomy and Nat Birchall Quintet.
www.michaelbardonbass.co.uk

Nick Rasle is a Bristol-based singer, guitarist, songwriter and teacher whose work draws on jazz, folk, highlife and Afrobeat. His distinctive vocal tone and intricate fingerpicking guitar style can be described as a meeting of Billie Holiday, Nick Drake, Jeff Buckley and Ali Farka Toure. With his band Me and My Friends, Nick has toured extensively across Europe, received airplay on national radio stations around the world and had his compositions featured in major TV series, most recently Netflix's The Lincoln Lawyer.

Aby Vulliamy is a Music Therapist and multi-instrumentalist (she sings and plays viola, piano, accordion, musical saw,

flute and recorders) who features on more than 50 albums recorded over the last 20 years as well as collaborating and performing in a wide range of short and long-term ensembles. In October 2018 Aby released her first solo album, Spin Cycle, a collection of piano-based songs reflecting on her experience of motherhood.
www.abyvulliamy.co.uk

Mercury Songs is co-commissioned by Spitalfields Music and Royal Birmingham Conservatoire, PRS Foundation & Bradford City of Culture, and supported by Arts Council England, The Stanley Thomas Johnson Foundation, and The Mary Kinross Charitable Trust.

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