

SOMMCD 0665



Songs by Eric McElroy (*b.1992*)

James Gilchrist *tenor*, Eric McElroy *piano*

The Fetch:

Five Poems of Gregory Leadbetter [19:41]

- 1. Misterioso 4:39
- 2. Stalking 3:48
- 3. Statuary I 3:56
- 4. Statuary II 2:58
- 5. This 4:23

6. A Short Story of Falling:
A Poem of Alice Oswald 9:21

After the Voices:

Five Poems of W.S. Merwin [16:03]

- 7. On a Distant Shore 3:26
- 8. The Laughing Thrush 2:33
- 9. The Morning 4:13
- 10. The Nomad Flute 2:40
- 11. After the Voices 3:11

Tongues of Fire:

Three Poems of Grevel Lindop [12:09]

- 12. Watching 3:15
- 13. Mirror and Candle 5:50
- 14. Myth 3:04

A Dead Man's Embers:

Six Poems of Robert Graves [17:48]

- 15. Two Fusiliers 3:15
- 16. Here They Lie 2:19
- 17. A Dead Boche 2:54
- 18. Haunted 4:22
- 19. I'd Love to Be a Fairy's Child 1:38
- 20. Strong Beer 3:20

Total duration: 75:07

All First Recordings

TONGUES OF FIRE

SONGS BY ERIC McELROY

James Gilchrist *tenor*, Eric McElroy *piano*

Recorded at: The Menuhin Hall, Stoke d'Abernon on 21 - 23 May, 2022

Recording Producer: Siva Oke

Recording Engineer: Adaq Khan

Front cover: Elements of Red Smoke On Black, composite by NotNeverKnow

Designer: David M. Baker

Booklet Editor: Michael Quinn

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We sing ourselves into being

I have been a composer for as long as I can remember; it is who I am. Every other discipline with which I engage – performance, musicology, teaching – is a distraction from this fundamental pursuit. Simply put, composition is the only activity where, when I do it, I am completely convinced that I should not be doing anything else. A presumptuous way to begin, perhaps, but the point needs to be made: these song-cycles are not merely works, they are parts of me – bottle-stopped thoughts and feelings that stem from my overarching concern with preservation, my wishful side-stepping of time and loss. Still, there is a crucial distinction: these cycles are not autobiography. This music is not about me; it is me. Music is ontology, not historiography; therefore, the act of composition is the working out of self, not in terms of experience but in terms of being. Discerning listeners will, hopefully, mark the difference.

It will come as no surprise to learn that I am interested in the unknown, the enigmatical, the numinous, the half-ness of things. These cycles are the result of my fascination with these and other subjects, each one addressing a specific theme with which I was absorbed when I wrote it. For me, a song-cycle is both an essay and exorcism in music.

Composers envy poets the articulacy of their medium. Poets envy composers their powers of abstraction. The grass is always greener. For me, song-setting is not only a way of half-delineating the indefinite but also simply a consequence of my love of language. It is a manifestation

of the personal relationship I have with text. The best of poetry leaves us at a loss for words, so the conversation continues in musical terms. This process is as much physical as intellectual or emotional: great poetry makes the body sing. It is not coincidental that the two activities through which I compose are physical ones: playing the piano and walking.

There is always a danger when writing programme notes of saying too little, or too much, of saying the wrong thing, or, even worse, of giving the game away, and beneath it all is the hope that one's music will simply speak for itself. At a certain point, the composer has to let go in order to move on, giving listeners the opportunity to find their own interpretations, even if that means giving them the freedom to misunderstand him. That people listen at all is reward enough. I hope that many listeners will find in my music many different meanings.

There is no more auspicious place to meet a poet than Deià, Majorca, and that is where I was introduced to Gregory Leadbetter (*b.*1975), Professor of Poetry at Birmingham City University, in 2018. Our initial conversation brought to light numerous sympathies regarding poetry and music, and Leadbetter subsequently sent me some of his work. By January 2019, I had selected the poems that would comprise **The Fetch**. Like Leadbetter's eponymous collection, the title of this song-cycle refers to "the apparition, double, or wraith of a living person". I had wanted to write about ghosts for some time but had struggled to find texts that did not sacrifice formal precision or coherence in their pursuit of the fantastical.

In Leadbetter, I discovered a poet whose work is not only technically refined but testifies to a sophisticated, deeply considered worldview. He embodies the Coleridgean ideal of the poet as philosopher, and his work offers a re-enchanting perspective that is severely needed.

The Fetch is a song-cycle about the uncanny. Its core is a confrontation between experience and language. Its first song proclaims the power of music (“the best of speech”) to reawaken atavistic states in which nature is read in a mystical dialogue with our learned, text-based self. Three subsequent songs chronicle encounters with the uncanny in scenes of increasing disorientation. In the second song, a walk in the woods traces an occult path between levels of perception; in the third, a statue becomes an animated thing, weeping blood; in the fourth, another statue, gagged and re-wilded, emits disquieting laughter through the surrounding trees. This three-part unwinding of reality gradually shifts what was already barely discernible into complete indeterminacy, crossing a threshold into the uncanny. In the final song, ‘This’, the limits of language are considered again, only now all sense of affirmation is withheld. The speaker recognizes that any attempt to translate experience into words will (perhaps) inevitably fall short of lived truth. By instead offering ‘an unnamed thing’, he evinces a learned disillusionment toward language’s possibilities as truth is deemed both pre-analytical and post-verbal.

I first flagged *A Short Story of Falling* as a potential song-setting in 2019 upon reading the collection *Falling Awake* by Alice Oswald (b.1966), the University of Oxford’s Professor of Poetry. Other projects intervened and

I did not begin setting the poem to music until receiving a commission from the Oxford Lieder Festival in August 2021. Water is a central element of Oswald’s poetry, and this poem expresses in couplets the enormous range of water’s manifestations and powers. It charts the cyclical journey of water, evoking both the grace and wild force of waterscapes that exist above, below, around, and within ourselves. If we know how to perceive it, our experience of water may be psychosomatic – it may even be an ecstatic thing. This is a poem that is full of joy, and that is the word that I inscribed in my score over the final chord and which for me embodies the spirit of the whole song: joy.

W.S. Merwin (1927-2019), the Poet Laureate of the United States, was one of the most distinguished poets of the late-20th and early-21st centuries, internationally renowned for both his literary achievements and for his social and environmental activism. At the time of his death, Merwin was described by *The New York Times* as possibly the most highly decorated poet in the world. I first chanced upon his work while living in Vienna, but it was not until the summer of 2018 that I read his complete poems while visiting family in the Pacific Northwest. I brought my initial sketches for *After the Voices* with me to Oxford when I moved there in September 2018 and completed the song cycle at Merton College on New Year’s Eve of that same year. The complex geography of this cycle’s origin may be related to its undercurrent of displacement, nostalgia, and identity.

The five poems in **After the Voices** come from Merwin's late collections where he explored one of his recurrent ontological and phenomenological interests: experiences that we can only ever approximate in language. These poems engage subjects for which there is no adequate word or phrase in the English language. Merwin was a master of equivocal states where the self both *is* and *isn't*, where a thing is both *known* and *unknown*, *here* and *not here*. He places degrees of separation between himself and the environments and times his poems occupy, as well as between himself and the versions of himself in those times and places. Some things cannot be translated into anything other than what they are – not even into memory. The approximation of such states and experiences in language is one of poetry's purposes, providing the speaker with an incantation whose enactment allows us to at least intimate lived truth. As Merwin explained, "poetry is about what *cannot* be said".

It is surprisingly difficult to find contemporary poetry that attends to the erotic in terms neither hapless nor lewd. In Grevel Lindop (*b.*1948), I found a poet whose work exemplifies the Erotic Sublime. His extraordinary 2006 collection *Playing With Fire* not only celebrates erotic acts and impulse but does so in poems that, though deeply personal, transcend their specific origins to convey truths about love and desire that are, in the profoundest sense, universal.

I met Lindop in 2018, having first been made aware of his work by Robert Eddy, my English professor and mentor at Washington State University.

The epigraph for *Tongues of Fire* comes from Lindop's poem *The Snowball*, which recounts a memory from many years ago:

"... Who was she, and what did she offer my mouth? Something that has stayed, some oracle, some knowledge of what she knew about me, something that burned perhaps in her throat and had to be uttered".

Upon hearing *Tongues of Fire* for the first time, Lindop sent a note that speaks so much to the purpose of song-setting and to my own delight in working with living poets:

"The whole thing has a strange effect of distancing me from my share in the work and enabling me to come at it from an entirely new angle. No longer mine but something fascinating. The earliest of those poems [*Mirror and Candle*] was written more than forty years ago. Astonishing that they should still have life, indeed have taken a new life in this way. As if the poems had been in a chrysalis, and had now suddenly emerged unrecognisable, with wings".

Robert Graves (1895-1985) was the first poet with whom I became obsessed. I encountered him initially as a translator (*The Twelve Caesars*), then as a novelist (*I, Claudius*), then as a theorist (*The White Goddess*) and lastly as a poet. My reading of Graves's complete poems at the age of 14 was a watershed moment; it is no exaggeration to say that Graves unlocked

an enormous part of my creative imagination which, despite having wandered in non-Gravesian directions since, remains forever indebted to his turning of the key. I toyed with settings of Graves for many years, but it was not until 2017 that I settled on a theme for *A Dead Man's Embers*. Graves's early war poems provided the material for a composition about death, exploring as they do our schizophrenic feelings of terror and awe towards the subject. Even the fifth song, 'I'd Love to Be a Fairy's Child', sits in a morbid shade by the very absence of horror; as Graves's biography attests, a turn to nursery

shade by the very absence of horror; as Graves's biography attests, a turn to nursery rhymes for relief or distraction is an exercise in futility. There is an ecstatic element to the grotesque, analogous to the hysterical, that intensifies as the cycle progresses and reaches its apex in the final song, 'Strong Beer', and it is this that I sought to encapsulate in my settings.

The title of *A Dead Man's Embers* is lifted from the first stanza of a poem that Graves wrote in 1935:

"To bring the dead to life
Is no great magic.
Few are wholly dead:
Blow on a dead man's embers
And a live flame will start".

Possession of the self by the subject, even to the point of reanimation, is the theme of this poem, one of Graves's finest, which was composed

shortly after the publication of his historical novel *Claudius the God*. This question of who speaks, and to what purpose, runs throughout the poems on this recording.

Like poetry, song deals with possession and reanimation, fixing itself on that debatable border where imagination merges with the material. Like poetry, song opens to the self its own possibilities, letting loose what Ralph Waldo Emerson called those "flames and generousities of the heart". As in Emerson's image, the tongues and fires in my own songs are not sensual but daemonic: it is the process of breathing, rather than breath itself, that matters most, marking as it does the point where music emerges from poetry, and vice versa.

We sing ourselves into being. The self is to be found not in the song but in the singing.

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The Fetch : Five Poems of Gregory Leadbetter (*b.1975*)

I. Misterioso

A shell at my ear,
I heard the whisper of my heart's work:
I fell open like a book.
I watched the quiet of the moth's flight,
drawn to silence like the moth to light:
the life within the one we hear.

Now I am the instrument I play
and I am played by the sound
that I make: remade by the touch of the air,
by the rhythm and note of what I say –
as if the world is something I have found
and the world knows that I am there.

And if the best of speech is music – a sense between
the skin and something understood –
returns the tongue
to its own song,
gives the blood
its dream

let its language

bring us close
to the first of us: the cave of eyes
lit by the fire of what they heard –
the drum that gives the ghost
its dance: the voice that swells the earth
like fruit: the cry that carries on the listening skies.

II. Stalking

Between the fingers of the falling dew
I find a path that takes me through
the sleeping eye to where it wakes
on the other side of the dream it makes

I tread the moss that beds the hoof
I follow into absent proof
a moth without a moon
a wanderer with the day's wound

my fingers are lichen and as slow
my mirror the yew that blisters the shadow

the gift I bring for the darkling birth
is stillness suckled from my breath

I spring the roe and the world in hiding

III. Statuary I

You become a miraculous thing
when blood soaks through your stone
eyes, slow as wax from the candle
nearby that marks the melting years.

Scabs of lichen bloom across
the bone-stiff drapery of your clothes
like mould on linen damp too long
in the cold of a room without the sun.

I have seen you move in candle-light –
that trick in the flicker of a breath
through flame that makes the livid
brink of perfect stillness dance.

Then, on days like this, you cry.
I daren't dab those tears away.
I watch, instead – remember when
your soft hand took hold of mine.

IV. Statuary II

Your laughter is overgrown
and silent too – there are no
birds in this damned wood,

and no path – only you.
I should not have come.

More rotten stump than stone
but for the grey brow
at knee-height – a satyr's head.
Moss has stuffed your mouth,
gifted you a sphagnum tongue.

Without your own,
the wood's your laughter now.
I am the latest joke.
I see a sudden jackdaw land
before it laughs out loud.

V. This

As if this were unreal, your touch
is more than skin on skin today.

Your voice is more than what you say
although you've never said so much.

There is, I know, a word for this,
or something like it, but it falls short

of knowing what your eyes have taught.
Compare the word 'love' to a kiss.

Accept this gift, an unnamed thing
that does what nothing else can do.

This, the reckless truth we're in
together, of which we are the only clue:

where time is done and we begin,
where you and I are the way through.

A Short Story of Falling A Poem of Alice Oswald (b.1966)

It is the story of the falling rain
to turn into a leaf and fall again

it is the secret of a summer shower
to steal the light and hide it in a flower

and every flower a tiny tributary
that from the ground flows green and momentary

is one of water's wishes and this tale
hangs in a seed-head smaller than my thumbnail

if only I a passerby could pass
as clear as water through a plume of grass

to find the sunlight hidden at the tip
turning to seed a kind of lifting rain drip

then I might know like water how to balance
the weight of hope against the light of patience

water which is so raw so earthy-strong
and lurks in cast-iron tanks and leaks along

drawn under gravity towards my tongue
to cool and fill the pipe-work of this song

which is the story of the falling rain
that rises to the light and falls again

After the Voices Six Poems of W.S. Merwin (1927-2019)

I. On a Distant Shore

The night before sailing
from the world I had known
that now seems the ancient
world to me
it was a hot summer night

in the humming city
the small hours the tiny
two-room apartment of a friend
the windows wide open
above the avenue
and behind me three young women
crammed in asleep
as I stood at the window
and then I turned to the room
and in the light from the street
beheld one beautiful
bare breast of a friend's friend
gently rising and falling
as though I were not there
already not there

II. The Laughing Thrush

O nameless joy of the morning

tumbling upward note by note out of the night
and the hush of the dark valley
and out of whatever has not been there

song unquestioning and unbounded
yes this is the place and the one time

in the whole of before and after
with all of memory waking into it

and the lost visages that hover
around the edge of sleep
constant and clear
and the words that lately have fallen silent
to surface among the phrases of some future
if there is a future

here is where they all sing the first daylight
whether or not there is anyone listening

III. The Morning

Would I love it this way if it could last
would I love it this way if it
were the whole sky the one heaven
or if I could believe that it belonged to me
a possession that was mine alone
or if I imagined that it noticed me
recognized me and may have come to see me
out of all the mornings that I never knew
and all those that I have forgotten
would I love it this way if I were somewhere else
or if I were younger for the first time
or if these very birds were not singing

or I could not hear them or see their trees
would I love it this way if I were in pain
red torment of body or gray void of grief
would I love it this way if I knew
that I would remember anything that is
here now anything anything

IV. The Nomad Flute

You that sang to me once sing to me now
let me hear your long lifted note
survive with me
the star is fading
I can think farther than that but I forget
do you hear me

do you still hear me
does your air
remember you
o breath of morning
night song morning song
I have with me
all that I do not know
I have lost none of it

but I know better now
than to ask you

where you learned that music
where any of it came from
once there were lions in China

I will listen until the flute stops
and the light is old again

V. After the Voices

Youth is gone from the place where I was young
even the language that I heard here once
its cadences that went on echoing
a youth forgotten and the great singing
of the beginning have fallen silent
with the voices that were the spirit of them
and their absences were no more noticed
than were those of the unreturning birds
each spring until there were no words at all
for what was gone but it was always so
I have no way of telling what I miss
I am only the one who misses it

Tongues of Fire Three Poems of Grevel Lindop (b.1948)

I. Watching

Watching as she took off all her clothes,
he unwrapped his own heart's desire

only to find another desire inside it,
another and another.

Inside each desire a new pleasure,
a new pleasure with a new sorrow in it,
a new inside with a new outside around it,
a new she, unwrapping a new him.

II. Mirror and Candle

The mirror and the candle throw
their incantations through the room
and on the wall our shadows loom
monstrous in their reverberate glow.

Their occult transformations make
our bed a range of hills, the floor
a flickering plain edged with the shore
that borders on a glassy lake.

We act our legends in that space.
The mirror takes, the candle gives,
and light from both the eye receives
to conjure out that double place

where through the sky our shadows pass
drowned in the depths that wait below.

I rest my cheek on the pillow
and in the fathoms of the glass

you reach across the dark to me.
The light flows back the way it came.
High on its tower of wax the flame
sings songs of mutability.

III. Myth

So many things to make a galaxy:
the flutter of my tongue between your lips –
butterfly shivering a salted rockpool,
breaking the sea's meniscus into tumult;
your hands, moulding me up like growing clay;
your mouth, tasting and ripening what you'd made;
you, turning over, pulling me on top;
the elements combining, heaven's opening,
primeval floods.

Then how you sighed and stretched,
shook a night sky of hair back from your face
and, with the lazy splendour of a goddess,
strolled to the bathroom; leaving in your wake
that trail of white stars on the bedroom floor.

A Dead Man's Embers Six Poems of Robert Graves (1895-1985)

I. Two Fusiliers

And have we done with War at last?
Well, we've been lucky devils both,
And there's no need of pledge or oath
To bind our lovely friendship fast,
By firmer stuff
Close bound enough.

By wire and wood and stake we're bound,
By Fricourt and by Festubert,
By whipping rain, by the sun's glare,
By all the misery and loud sound,
By a Spring day,
By Picard clay.

Show me the two so closely bound
As we, by the wet bond of blood,
By friendship blossoming from mud,
By Death: we faced him, and we found
Beauty in Death,
In dead men, breath.

II. Here They Lie

Here they lie who once learned here

All that is taught of hurt or fear;
Dead, but by free will they died:
They were true men, they had pride.

III. A Dead Boche

To you who'd read my songs of War
And only hear of blood and fame,
I'll say (you've heard it said before)
'War's Hell!' and if you doubt the same,
To-day I found in Mametz Wood
A certain cure for lust of blood:

Where, propped against a shattered trunk,
In a great mess of things unclean,
Sat a dead Boche; he scowled and stunk
With clothes and face a sodden green,
Big-bellied, spectacled, crop-haired,
Dribbling black blood from nose and beard.

IV. Haunted

Gulp down your wine, old friends of mine,
Roar through the darkness, stamp and sing
And lay ghost hands on everything,
But leave the noonday's warm sunshine
To living lads for mirth and wine.

I meet you suddenly down the street,
Strangers assume your phantom faces,
You grin at me from daylight places,
Dead, long dead, I'm ashamed to greet
Dead men down the morning street.

V. I'd Love to Be a Fairy's Child

Children born of fairy stock
Never need for shirt or frock,
Never want for food or fire,
Always get their heart's desire:
Jingle pockets full of gold,
Marry when they're seven years old.
Every fairy child may keep
Two strong ponies and ten sheep;
All have houses, each his own,
Built of brick or granite stone;
They live on cherries, they run wild –
I'd love to be a fairy's child.

VI. Strong Beer

'What do you think
The bravest drink
Under the sky?'
'Strong beer,' said I.

'There's a place for everything,
Everything, anything,
There's a place for everything
Where it ought to be:
For a chicken, the hen's wing;
For poison, the bee's sting;
For almond-blossom, Spring;
A beerhouse for me.'

'There's a prize for everyone
Everyone, anyone,
There's a prize for everyone,
Whoever he may be:
Craggs for the mountaineer,
Flags for the Fusilier,
For English poets, beer!
Strong beer for me!'

'Tell us, now, how and when
We may find the bravest men?'
'A sure test, an easy test:
Those that drink beer are the best,
Brown beer strongly brewed,
English drink and English food.'

Oh, never choose as Gideon chose
By the cold well, but rather those
Who look on beer when it is brown,
Smack their lips and gulp it down.
Leave the lads who tamely drink
With Gideon by the water brink,
But search the benches of the Plough,
The Tun, the Sun, the Spotted Cow,
For jolly rascal lads who pray,
Pewter in hand, at close of day,
'Teach me to live that I may fear
The grave as little as my beer.'

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Eric McElroy

Described as “one of the leading composer-pianists of his generation” (*Musical Opinion*), **Eric McElroy** has concertized throughout North America and Europe and been praised for both his “stunning virtuosity” and “rapturous aplomb” (*Seen and Heard International*). A prolific composer, Eric has written for solo piano, voice, choir, orchestra, and various chamber ensembles, with works receiving performances in Germany, Austria, Spain, the United Kingdom, and the United States. Eric has become especially known for his song-settings of contemporary poets, including collaborations with Gregory Leadbetter, Grevel Lindop, and Ruth Fainlight, as well as song-settings of Alice Oswald, Dunstan Ward, and W.S. Merwin. He is currently working on a commission for the English Symphony Orchestra.



Photograph: xxxxx xxxxx

The brother of the American flutist Colleen McElroy, Eric began piano studies with his mother at the age of three. From the age of 10, he studied with Maria Sier of Snohomish County. Eric received his Bachelor’s Degree

in piano with Gerald Berthiaume at Washington State University, with additional studies with Jeffrey Gilliam at Western Washington University. In 2014, Eric moved to Vienna where he obtained his Master’s Degree in piano under Klaus Sticken at Musik und Kunst Privatuniversität der Stadt Wien. He was the only pianist of his graduating class to pass with full honours (*mit Auszeichnung bestanden*).

In 2015, Eric won the Music Teachers National Association (MTNA) Young Artist Competition, and he remains the only person ever to have won the Washington State Music Association Competition, the highest award for collegiate musicians in the state of Washington, in both piano and composition. In 2017, Eric completed a postgraduate diploma at the Royal Birmingham Conservatoire under Mark Bebbington and Margaret Fingerhut. He teaches piano at Oxford’s Dragon School, is the editor of the Arthur Bliss Society Journal, and is a doctoral candidate in musicology under the supervision of Daniel Grimley at the University of Oxford (Merton College).

eric-mcelroy.com

 [ericmcelroymusic](https://www.youtube.com/ericmcelroymusic)

James Gilchrist

Tenor James Gilchrist began his working life as a doctor, turning to a full-time music career in 1996. His musical interest was fired at a young age, singing first as a chorister in the choir of New College, Oxford and later as a choral scholar at King's College, Cambridge.

His extensive concert repertoire has seen him perform in major concert halls throughout the world with renowned conductors including Sir John Eliot Gardiner, Sir Roger Norrington, Harry Bicket, Harry Christophers and the late Richard Hickox. He is considered a master of English music, and equally at home in Baroque repertoire – the *St John* and *St Matthew Passions* feature prominently in his schedule.

Highlights have included singing the role of Rev. Adams in Britten's *Peter Grimes* for Deborah Warner's acclaimed production, in company debuts at the Teatro Real, Madrid and the Royal Opera House, Covent Garden, as well as with Bergen Philharmonic and Edward Gardner with



Photograph: xxxxx xxxxx

performances at the Edinburgh International Festival, Royal Festival Hall, Grieghallen and Den Norske Opera; Haydn's *Creation* for a staged production with Garsington Opera and Ballet Rambert; a European tour of Bach's *St John Passion* with Bach Collegium Japan and Masaaki Suzuki, and a return to King's College, Cambridge to perform *St Matthew Passion* as part of Stephen Cleobury's final Easter Week as Director of Music.

James' impressive discography includes recordings of *Albert Herring* (title role), Vaughan Williams' *Songs of Travel*, and a solo disc *Solitude* with pianist and long-time collaborator Anna Tilbrook, including a new work by Jonathan Dove, all for Chandos Records; *St John Passion* with the AAM, Vaughan Williams' *On Wenlock Edge*, and Britten's *Winter Words* for Linn Records; and the critically-acclaimed recordings of Schubert's song cycles for Orchid Classics. For SOMM he has recorded songs by Stephen Dodgson, Penelope Thwaites and Hubert Parry, as well as the three-volume *One Hundred Years of British Song* with pianist Nathan Williamson.

jamesgilchrist.co.uk

 @JamesTenorGilch