

ChamberFest Cleveland welcomes composer/performer Errollyn Wallen

by Mike Telin



In her memoir *Becoming a Composer*, Errollyn Wallen recalls being nine years old and walking to Ridley Road Market with her uncle to buy fruit and vegetables. “I told Uncle Arthur that I could hear ‘all these sounds in my head’ but I didn’t know what to do with them. Uncle Arthur suggested that perhaps I was a composer.”

Little did that young girl — who was born in Belize and brought up in Tottenham, England — know that she would go on to become one of the world’s top twenty most performed living classical composers.

In 2024, Wallen was appointed Master of the King’s Music by His Majesty The King, and in 2025 she was named *BBC Classical Music Magazine*’s Personality of the Year. This month Wallen is also ChamberFest Cleveland’s composer-in-residence.

Opening the Zoom link from her home in Orkney, I began our conversation by asking how the ChamberFest invitation came about.

Errollyn Wallen: I think it came about through my violin concerto, because its world premiere was with the Calgary Philharmonic in 2024 and Diana Cohen was concertmaster. She introduced me to her husband Roman, and I was very taken with both of them.

I invited Roman and Diana to come to my house in Orkney — they were on their way to the Lammermuir Festival — and they stayed a few days. And in front of an invited audience, Roman played the Goldberg Variations. It was the most magical evening.

Mike Telin: The first piece of yours, Making Hay, will be performed on Saturday, June 14 at 7:30 at Heights Theater.

EW: Yes, I was just writing it when Diana and Roman were visiting. It's for String Trio, and it was commissioned by the Black Oak Ensemble. In fact, they've just released it on Cedille Records. It's a fairly short work, only eight minutes long, but it's quite an intense piece that takes a Bach fugue and responds to it in a very contemporary way.

MT: Dervish for Cello and Piano, is part of the Saturday, June 21 program at Federated Church — what should people know about that piece?

EW: It was composed around 2001 and was commissioned by a dear friend and collaborator, Matthew Sharp, and was written for him and Dominic Harlan to premiere at Wigmore Hall. They also recorded it on my album, *the girl in my alphabet*. It's another intense piece with a heightened atmosphere that draws from the idea of devotion that's at the heart of the Sufi religion.

MT: On Wednesday, June 18 at 7:30 pm at Mixon Hall you will be singing selections from your Errollyn Wallen Songbook.

EW: We'll do about 30 to 40 minutes' worth. I'll sing a few songs solo, but some of the works have a string quartet accompaniment. That's really a joy because the quartet brings an added dimension to the songs.

MT: You describe the Songbook as an ever-evolving project. What was the impetus for it and why do you continue to add to it?

EW: I started writing when I was in a comedy group, and wrote a few songs for them. Then a member of the group said to me, 'You know, you're a really good songwriter.' Songs just seem to come spontaneously for me. It's a bit like writing a diary.

It's the one area where I have no rules for myself other than I'm in love with the song form and what you can do in capturing an atmosphere in just a very few minutes. It's the thing that makes me extremely happy to perform — I feel very liberated.

And these songs that I really wrote for myself are now being discovered by other singers, and that's an unexpected surprise for me.

MT: Changing topics, congratulations on becoming the Master of the King's Music. What an honor as the first black woman to hold the position. What does that mean to you?



EW: Actually, I am the first black person. There's never been a person of color that's had that title and I don't know why it's put out that I'm the first black woman. But I was generally shocked to be asked, and I accepted it with great excitement because I see myself as an advocate for all sorts of music, music making, and access to music for children. So I feel a bit like an ambassador. The title has been in existence since 1626 and formerly it was a lifetime appointment, but now it's for ten years.

MT: What are your duties?

EW: There's a wide range of duties. I sometimes recommend things or I can follow my own initiatives. I will also be called upon to write some music for state and royal occasions. It's quite a loose appointment — there's no fixed job description. But we have an extremely musical monarch and that's really good.

MT: Stylistically, your music can't really be pigeonholed: was that a conscious decision or is it just you?

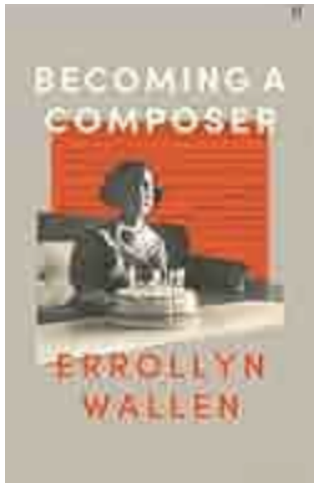
EW: It's just me. I think it's in my nature to draw from as wide a palette as possible. So much music from when I was growing up has influenced me or has been part of the backdrop of my life that it seems natural to call on these materials. And it's fun putting things together that may not on the face of it seem to fit.

I worked for many years as a keyboard player with bands and that opened up a whole new way of being a musician. I really admire so many musicians from pop and jazz and I draw on that too.

When I'm composing, I try to be as free as possible and not second guess myself by positioning myself in a particular trend. That probably caused some difficulties when I was starting out because nobody knew quite what to do with me.

MT: Your writing is beautiful. It's as musical as you are. Was writing something you always enjoyed doing?

EW: I had a love of words from an early age through being introduced to poetry — I used to write a lot of poetry. I've contributed articles here and there, but I never considered myself to be a writer.



Writing the book had its challenges. It took a while for me to think about the tone and what I wanted to achieve with it. But I remember thinking, 'If I can just write this the way I write music.' In other words, pay attention to the sound of the words, the rhythm, and the shape of sentences.

I do feel that writing aspires to be music. I spent a lot of time on the choice of words and trying to write clearly so that even though at times the writing is poetic, I wanted to give a sense of the underlying practical nature of being a composer.

MT: I think the story about walking to the market with your Uncle Arthur is just beautiful. You say that you were glad that you gave yourself permission to become a composer — why did you need to give yourself permission?

EW: If nobody were to write another note of music, the fact is we have such great music already to listen to, to enjoy, and to study. And when I think of my heroes, I sort of judge myself against these colossus figures.

Even when I was studying for my masters, we were all told that we probably wouldn't be composers because it was such an impossible field. So the idea was put in my head that I might have aspirations, but reality would be very different.

But then I did see that all through my life I have always been composing. It was just like a natural part of me. But it took me a long time to say 'I am a composer.'

Being a composer comes with a huge responsibility, both to yourself and to the people you're writing music for. So I don't take it lightly. And when I'm teaching my students, I see the number one thing they need is encouragement. For me to say 'yes, you're okay, you're on the path.'

MT: Well stated. Is there anything else you'd like to tell me?

EW: Just how delighted I am to have been invited. It will be so wonderful to be around my friends Diana and Roman. But also to meet other wonderful musicians. That's what we live for.

MT: Sorry one more question — being from Tottenham, are you a Hotspurs fan?

EW: Yes! Yes I am — you have to be.

ChamberFest Cleveland runs from June 11- 28. Tickets are available [online](#).

Published on ClevelandClassical.com June 10, 2025

[Click here for a printable copy of this article](#)

[Return to the Front Page.](#)