

[Daily](#) Telegraph 12 May 2022

Debbie Wiseman interview: I've written a theme tune for the Queen

The musical director of this week's Platinum Jubilee Celebration discusses her royal commission, which premieres tonight

By [Lucy Davies](#) 12 May 2022 • 5:00am



Royal ascent: Debbie Wiseman Credit: CAMERA PRESS/Gemma Day

Debbie Wiseman's piano – a shiny black grand – has pride of place in her London home, allotted the kind of prominence that you or I might grant a fancy sofa. Flanked by enough tech to rival Nasa mission control, it's where the British composer has spent the better part of a year writing the score for this week's [Platinum Jubilee Celebration](#), of which she is musical director. On the cloudless May morning we meet, she is poised, baton packed, to shoot down the M4 for rehearsals at [Windsor Castle](#).

The event will be performed live to 5,000 spectators for four nights from tonight, and broadcast live on ITV on Sunday evening, with the Queen in attendance.

“It's a very, very intricately planned show, and there's nothing in it that hasn't been tailored to the Queen,” says Wiseman. Her rehearsal this afternoon is for the finale, which she is conducting, and has “a big medley with a hundred massed pipes and drums. It brings the four nations of the United Kingdom together.”

Wiseman, who is 59, has been composing for film and television for more than 30 years. It's a safe bet that you will have heard her music, because she has worked on acclaimed TV dramas such as [Wolf Hall](#). It's also a safe bet that you'll recognise it – her speciality is the kind of emotionally resonant melody that, while not an earworm exactly, attaches effortlessly to your memory.

“I think it's lovely if somebody can hum one; if they take it away with them,” she says. “We all know the music from Coronation Street or Inspector Morse, and films such as Lawrence of Arabia, or Jaws, or Dr Zhivago – the music has a life beyond them and a connection that takes you straight back. It must feel seamless, so that you can never imagine the film or series without that music.”



Claire Foy and Damian Lewis in Wolf Hall Credit: BBC

Wiseman's home is bright and warren-like, one airy room opening onto another. Beyond the open glass doors in her studio, the garden is lovely, if unruly, and thick with birdsong. “Most men composers I know sit in a shed or a basement bunker,” she says. “And they're quite happy there. But I like the daylight.”

Behind her, the walls creak with accomplishment: the OBE received in 2018 for services to music, her various fellowships (to the Royal College of Music and her alma mater, Guildhall School of Music and Drama), posters for films she has written for, including *Arsène Lupin* (2004) and *Wilde* (1997) and her number one albums, *The Music of Kings & Queens* (2021), narrated by Helen Mirren and Damian Lewis, and *The Glorious Garden* (2018) with Alan Titchmarsh.

The Platinum Jubilee Celebration is a reunion of sorts, because Mirren, Lewis and Titchmarsh are all taking part. The 90-minute performance, which also features Tom Cruise, Omid Djalili and 500 horses, is conceived as a “gallop through history”. Mirren is playing

Queen Elizabeth I, and Djalili will be The Herald who introduces her Players. “It’s like little snapshots of a time, done in a very humorous, lighthearted way,” says Wiseman.

Born in London in 1963, Wiseman spent several years post-Guildhall in a band that played at functions before a demo tape hit its mark. Her first credit was a choral piece for a documentary about the miners’ strike, and it was a “slow build” from there: the 1980s game show *That’s Showbusiness*, for instance, and the 1990s sitcom *The Upper Hand* (Wiseman still remembers the glorious moment she heard the girl washing her hair at the hairdresser’s humming the theme). Then she struck gold with the film *Tom & Viv* (1994), about ^[1]_[SEP]T S Eliot and the US poet Vivienne Haigh-Wood.

Wiseman was a shoo-in for the Platinum Jubilee Celebration. In 2018, she composed the Overture and Finale for the Queen’s 90th birthday, and in 2012, was one of the composers to write *New Water Music* for the Diamond Jubilee river pageant. She and Simon Brooks-Ward – the mastermind behind the Platinum event – go way back, and he wrote the spoken parts for *Kings & Queens*.

Some of that album, which celebrated the Queen’s 95th birthday, has been expanded for the forthcoming Celebration. “I have an Elizabeth II melody, which I now think of as her theme tune,” explains Wiseman. It conveys, she says, “not only the majesty and ceremony, but her dignity and steadfastness – the feeling that we’ve lived with her all our lives.” Wiseman does the same for every character in every show or film she works on. So Oscar Wilde has one, *Father Brown* too, as well as the *Lesbian Vampire Killers*.



The Diamond Jubilee river pageant in 2012 Credit: EPA/Andy Rain

The music for the Celebration will also include the new anthem “Beacon of Brightest Light”, which Wiseman composed using lyrics written by the Queen’s Commonwealth Trust. It features “lots of the traditional, *Last Night of the Proms* stuff [such as Elgar] that you’d

expect, and short segments from places like India and Azerbaijan,” she says. All of it has been woven into a score that Wiseman has written specially.

Creating the whole has been “tricky”. Wiseman might have a tri-service military orchestra at her disposal, and handpicked members of the National Symphony Orchestra besides, “but this is a live show, and it changes every single time you do it,” she says. “I’ve had to write in a lot of belt-and-braces stuff so that whatever happens, there is music in place to cover it.” The horses have also been acclimatised to her music, “so they don’t get spooked. The number of times they’ve heard it now, they ought to be able to sing along.”

Today, like every day, Wiseman has been at her piano since 6am. She still writes something new every day – a habit she learned from her teacher at Guildhall, the composer Buxton Orr. I wonder if her husband, Tony, ever complains about the noise but, apparently, he barely notices. The pair met at Guildhall, where he was studying acting, though soon after they graduated he became her “co-pilot” and now manages “the technical side”, such as turning sound files into orchestral scores.

Their relationship must be strong, because opposite the studio is a table tennis table, on which, during lockdown, they devised and played a multi-round tournament. Wiseman was seven-four up when Freedom Day came around. She’s also pretty good at snooker, the precision of which she compares to music. Both can help calm her nerves.

Not that she is nervous about the next few days. “It’s exciting,” she says. “The musicians we have in this country are the best in the world. When you’re conducting, there in the middle of it and everybody’s playing your music back to you, even having done it for so many years, it’s still the best part; still spine-tingling. It’s what you do it for.”

The ‘Queen’s Platinum Jubilee Celebration’ is on ITV on Sunday, May 15 at 8pm