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# RAILWAY MODELLER

## A Railway Modeller exclusive - Sir Rod Stewart

*on building his magnificent layout*

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# In my heart, and in my soul

## SIR ROD STEWART on his lifelong love of model railways

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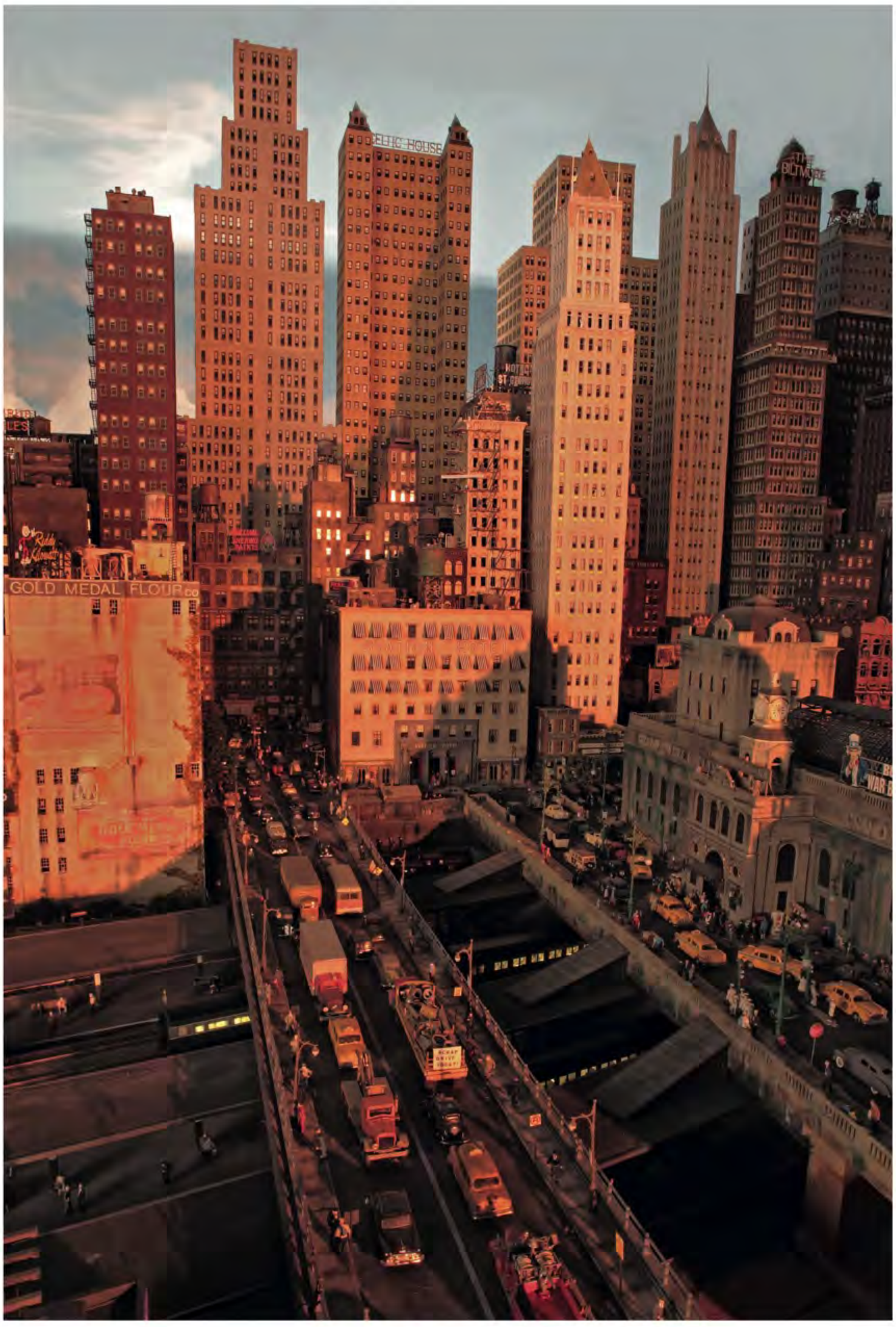



Well, Volume 70 of RAILWAY MODELLER began with a feature about a music legend and his model railway, so why not finish the volume with a renowned rock star as well: welcome, Sir Rod Stewart to the pages of RAILWAY MODELLER.

On this occasion though, not so much with a model railway, as a model *railroad*, for Sir Rod's layout depicts the skylines, tracks and trains of an American city and its industrial hinterland as it might have been one late afternoon on a hot day in the 1940s.

So why an American railroad, when its creator and visionary spent his childhood barely a stone's throw from Britain's steam railways in North London?

His answer was quite emphatic. "I got hooked on American railways because I was living there when the layout was started."

"I just looked out of the window and there it all was. With two very accommodating hobby shops selling American model railroad equipment in the vicinity of LA, what else would I buy? Obtaining British models out there was not so easy."

It was back in 1993 when his great project got underway. Sir Rod had built a new house in Los Angeles and had included an attic room specifically for the layout.

Nevertheless, the real seeds of Sir Rod's passion for the hobby were sown many years earlier, and far away from the towering apartment blocks of California.

### Bognor Regis

"We were on holiday with Mum and Dad in Bognor Regis, I was barely eight or nine. I remember seeing a marvellous railway layout in a model railway shop window and thinking if only I could get paid to build a model railway like that."

**A dislike of flat two dimensional backscenes led to Sir Rod filling his deep baseboards with lots of buildings. The skyscrapers seen here are kitbashed by joining several kits together – some are between 4' and 5' tall. Three Rivers City station is crossed by numerous bridges all depicted at rush hour. Forced perspective is not used in creating this immense scene, as Sir Rod says "I'm lucky to have the room".**

## Sir Rod's childhood haunts – Highgate Depot and Wellington Sidings off the Archway Road, London

Many of us will recall the influence that railways had upon us in our formative years. It was no different for a young Rod Stewart in North London. The house he lived in as a youngster, 507 Archway Road – now long demolished for road developments – overlooked the former LNER tracks to Edgware, High Barnet and Alexandra Palace. By his time, most of the routes were part of London Transport, but with freight only workings to various goods yards along the lines, including the coal yard in Wellington Sidings.

**Opposite Archway Road by the entrance to the Depot, and possibly photographed from the signal box. BR N2 Class No.69568 is seen passing with the returning Park Junction – Mill Hill Gas Works goods in 1958. Rod's house was just a few doors up to the right of the photograph.**
***Photograph: Owen Smithers***

**Taken from the footbridge linking Archway Road with the Sports Ground and Highgate Wood in 1962. On the right is the eight road covered shed of London Transport's Highgate Depot with three sets of 1938 stock. The coal yard on the left, known as Wellington Sidings, was still in regular use with an interesting mix of BR 16T minerals and ex-PO wooden bodied wagons.**
***Photograph: Owen Smithers***

**A Waterloo-bound 4-SUB EMU set, No.4299, rolls into Twickenham station on 24 October 1965. The station itself played a pivotal role in Rod Stewart's music career, for it was on a platform bench on a cold night that he was plucked for stardom by Blues singer Long John Baldry. Rod had been playing his harmonica to pass the time whilst waiting for a train home, Baldry had heard him play and offered him a job in the music industry there and then!**
***Photograph: Colour Rail***

**An amazing panorama across Sir Rod's *Grand Street and Three Rivers City* layout. Three Rivers City rises to the right and a power station and locomotive servicing facility can be seen in the distance. In the foreground is one of Sir Rod's kitbashed brick structures. His technique for depicting brickwork is straightforward, beginning with a brick red colour, followed by a wash over with thinned black ink. The mortar colour is painted on next and rubbed off the raised surface before it dries. Sometimes he paints bricks individually if the model is to be viewed close up.**

Quite a perspective on life for a youngster, born in 1945 and living in Archway Road, North London, where, over the road from his home, he could look across to the sprawling London Transport Highgate Depot and the Wellington Sidings coal yard, both of which were situated alongside the former LNER routes to Edgware, High Barnet and Alexandra Palace.

On the other side of the railway lines was Highgate Wood.

"We played football there a lot." he said. "Trains would be rattling by all the time."

## Early layouts

"My first layout was a Tri-ang one." he declared, adding the details of a story he has told many times. "I really wanted a Tri-ang station for my layout, but my Dad bought me a guitar instead."

That was probably a good omen for Rod's career, model railways it seems, were destined to take a lesser role. In fact, the model railway had to go completely, when the family moved from 507 Archway Road into accommodation above a small newsagent's shop that his father had bought for a retirement job.

"I basically had no room for a model railway throughout my teens, but a little later when we moved into a council house in the mid sixties, I got my own bedroom and built a layout all around the perimeter walls. Even across the window."

Rod recited his favourite anecdote. "My good mate and fellow musician Ronnie Wood stayed over in the room sometimes." The beds were beneath the layout. "My Mum came in with a tea tray and Ronnie sat up so quickly that he bashed the train board really hard with his head. He's never let me forget it."

Rod explained that the layout was "...all Tri-ang, crammed with track, but with lots of tunnels." He also lost an entire train when a derailment by the open window sent the stock flying through air.

"It was all smashed to bits on the concrete yard below."

## Central Hall Show

Sir Rod and Ronnie worked together in the music industry and were good mates. One year they visited the annual model railway show at the Central Hall, Westminster, usually held every Easter. Sir Rod thinks it was sometime in the early 1970s.

"We had to do something extraordinary. So we went dressed up as Monsieur Hulot, a French film character portrayed by film maker and mime artist Jacques Tati."

Monsieur Hulot in 1950s and 1960s movies was distinctive in appearance with a floppy Fedora hat, long smokers pipe and raincoat.

The two rock stars dressed this way, and tapping their pipes on the soles of their shoes, as Tati did, must have raised a few curious eyebrows as they wandered amongst the exhibits and serious modellers.

## Kings Cross Models

This Aladdin's den of a model shop, which used to be adjacent to Kings Cross station on York Way, was one of Sir Rod's regular haunts for layout equipment. "I picked up many of my Great Western Railway models from that marvellous shop."

He kept the models for many years but eventually passed them onto Jools Holland.

## The move to America

His musical success eventually took him across the Pond to live and work in the United States. The model railway bug however, never left him.

It was in the States that he embarked on his biggest and most ambitious project in the aforementioned new house.

Although Sir Rod opted for an American railroad theme he said he didn't think it was

**Down by the docks. Across from the city skyscrapers is the bay area. In the foreground, ship *John W Brown* was built by maritime modeller Fred Hutchins. Just behind the ship is some of Sir Rod's scratchbuiling work – the Pier 7 Atlantic Avenue warehouse. The external roof trusses were adapted from a Walthers heavy duty crane kit.**

**Weathering, grime and attention to the finest of details is very important to Sir Rod. He uses chalks and dry brushing techniques and keeps adding fine layers at a time. This wide angle view of the approaches to the station shows just how crowded the model is – and all the way back to the sky backdrop. The late afternoon sunshine is portrayed effectively with long shadows and a warm orange glow.**

**The Great Caledonian Steel and Iron Co. is a reference to Sir Rod's love of football, as an avid fan of Celtic FC. Hence the Peco gift painted up in the colours of Celtic (below). The huge steelworks seen here is more of Rod's work, again created from several American outline kits.**

**We come bearing gifts... A Celtic FC liveried bogie open coal wagon representing an American gondola. It was built from a Parkside LNER bogie sulphate wagon by Pecorama Exhibition Manager Andrew Beard and presented to Sir Rod during our visit.**

any more or less appealing than modelling the British railway scene.

"They're bigger, the locos are bigger, but not any better," he suggested, "everything is just bigger."

The ethos behind the new layout was clear. He'd obtained a book on the work of George Sellios, an American railroad modeller of repute. "It was amazing his work, the weathering and attention to detail was fabulous. We've got to do this I said."

Other factors influenced Sir Rod's approach, in particular his dislike for flat backscenes. "I don't like to see flat backdops, they spoil the illusion, so I went for more buildings and streets than tracks. Just to give it a great depth."

He said he only wanted four separate loops, two up and two down, with a few sidings, loops and factory spurs.

## Creative approach

On layout planning he revealed there hadn't been a master plan. "None of it was really planned, there was no vision, I just winged it." he proclaimed.

"We had a basic schematic plan, and my old mate Malcolm, who was in the road crew, made a little model."

Another friend Mike, took on the laying of the track. "These were all banked, just as on the real thing. The ballasting took forever but it was so important for trouble free running to get all this correct."

Sir Rod's particular forté is scenery and structure modelling. He happily admits he's not into locomotives, rolling stock, or the railway foundations; trackwork, benchwork or electrics. "I can't tell a Niagara from a Hudson," he said.

"It's the landscape I like. Attention to detail, extreme detail, is paramount. There shouldn't be any unsightly gaps, or pavements that are too clean."

Whereas lots of established modellers take great pains in developing their layout designs, Sir Rod doesn't follow the norm.

"I don't build mock ups, or do sketches to try things out, I think I've just got a good eye for this sort of thing. You know if a model isn't going to work out within the first week of its construction."

He does use photographs for reference however, and often when he's out with his wife Penny, they'll stop the car and snap away merrily.

"I find beauty in what everyone else sees as ugly – rugged skyscrapers, beaten-up warehouses, things that are very run down."

And he really likes to see the layout lit in the colours of late afternoon sunshine. "The guy who lit my railroad is a genius."

## Modelling time

It's common knowledge that whilst on his concert tours, he would book an extra room in the hotels for his model making workshop.

"We would tell them in advance and they were really accommodating, taking out the beds and providing fans to improve air circulation and ventilation."

Many of his amazing skyscraper buildings were built 'on location' in this way. He reckoned it was his only means by which he could get the project finished. In fact he spent 23 years building the layout – *Grand Street and Three Rivers City* – which demonstrates a truly amazing dedication for any modeller working on a single project.

A lot of hobbyists would find the workload and the schedule too much, giving up, or changing tack, but not Sir Rod, his drive and determination was exceptional.

"When I take on something creative like

▲ **American railroads had big locomotive depots, usually with a huge roundhouse off a central turntable. *Grand Street and Three Rivers City* is no exception, set in the 1940s in American railroads' 'transition era' with facilities for both steam and diesel traction.**

this, I have to give it 110 percent. For me it's addictive. I started, so I just had to finish. I'm lucky I had the room. If I'd have realised at the start it would have taken so long, I'd have probably said No! No! Nah!"

## A high profile railway modeller

Sir Rod acknowledged that it was quite some time before he publicly admitted he was a model railway enthusiast.

"The mainstream media like to take the mickey over these things, but then the press is rude to everybody." he said.

He did agree that attitudes seemed to be changing towards model making but divulged that he was wary about answering questions on TV and radio.

"It's hard to talk about something so all encompassing in a short of time, especially if I'm there to talk about my music."

## It's finished

Although the old modelling adage states that a model railway is never finished, Sir Rod considers that his layout is, indeed, finished.

"There are perhaps aspects of the layout built in the early days which could be upgraded or improved, such as some of the earlier buildings, but at the moment it is time to enjoy some operating sessions."

He also completely scotched rumours that he was building a new layout at his home in Essex, where we met for the interview.

"Definitely not." he said but revealed that he has been considering bringing the *Grand Street and Three Rivers City* over to the UK.

"It would need its own room of course, and I wonder how well it might travel."

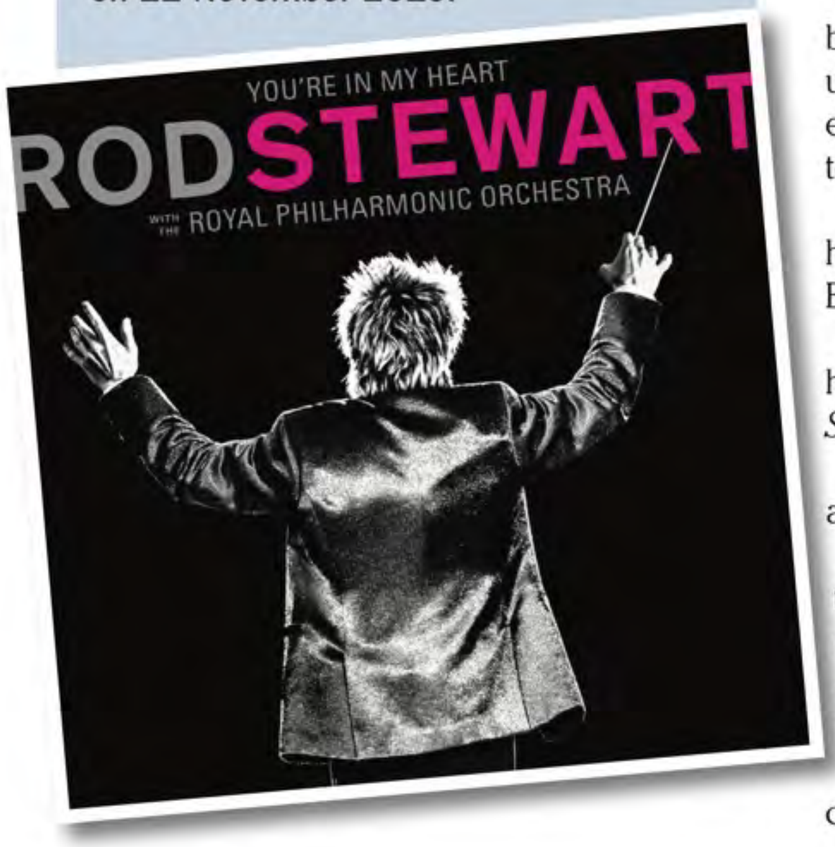
He's not entirely committed to the notion though. "I'm going to need a lot of convincing that it would work. I reckon that all the track would need relaying after its journey, even now some of the original Shinohara switches [points] have been causing a few problems."

Whether Sir Rod can be persuaded, remains to be seen. He says he still enjoys running the layout in LA and whenever he shows it to guests and visitors for the first time, they are stunned by what they see.

He divulged that he is not currently doing any actual model making, allocating his time to other priorities, but he repeated the advice his father gave him many years ago: that every man needs a hobby.

"Mine's model railways," he said proudly, "Right now though, I've got a brand new album to promote!"

▲ **Job done, and you know what Sir Rod would say – "Every picture tells a story..."**

### His latest album

Sir Rod Stewart's new album release, ***You're In My Heart with the Royal Philharmonic Orchestra*** goes on sale on 22 November 2019.