

# Songs for Our Times



*Composers:*

Stuart MacRae  
Bernard Hughes

*Lyrics:*

Chinwe D. John

Christopher Glynn - *piano*  
Nick Pritchard - *tenor*  
Isabelle Haile - *soprano*

# Songs for Our Times

## **Kingdoms**

*Stuart MacRae (composer), Chinwe D. John (Lyrics)*

- |    |                     |      |
|----|---------------------|------|
| 1. | I. Kingdoms         | 6:39 |
| 2. | II. Life Unfiltered | 5:35 |
| 3. | III. Tethered Ships | 5:30 |
| 4. | IV. Primordial Cry  | 4:48 |

## **Metropolis**

*Bernard Hughes (composer), Chinwe D. John (Lyrics)*

- |     |                        |      |
|-----|------------------------|------|
| 5.  | I. The Shepherds       | 3:30 |
| 6.  | II. Metropolis         | 4:20 |
| 7.  | III. Call Home         | 2:39 |
| 8.  | IV. When Apart         | 3:33 |
| 9.  | V. A Bedtime Tale      | 4:32 |
| 10. | VI. The River's Course | 3:25 |

Total Playing Time 44:35

# The Music

The global pandemic of 2020 pushed a world that was already struggling to maintain its equilibrium further over the precipice. If we are not already in a new age, we are but moments away. Some historians attribute the emergence of the Renaissance period to the 14th century bubonic plague. What age are we approaching, and what will be our cultural legacy?

Speaking of cultural legacies – Why is the preservation and promotion of classical music of importance to a Nigerian-American? I believe as many others do, that the appreciation of music cuts across boundaries, uniting all in a shared experience. There are art forms and artists, whose contributions to the lexicon are so impactful, that they become the heritage of everyone, regardless of their origin.

In order for classical music to be supported in any meaningful way, and to allow its continued existence as we know it, more people need to be introduced to, and invested in it.

Comprised of two song cycles; **Kingdoms** by Stuart MacRae and **Metropolis** by Bernard Hughes, the music is influenced mainly by classical music traditions, with additional influences from other genres such as folk and African popular music styles.

To give added insight into the lyrics of the songs, there is a note beneath each one, which may allow a deeper exploration of the immediate themes and meaning.

## How the album came to be:

Fortunately for me, there are many who share the views expressed above. I reached out to artists previously unknown to me, from across the Atlantic for this album, and they answered with enthusiasm. It started out as a song cycle EP idea, and the first artist to come on-board, was composer Stuart MacRae. He had been introduced to me by the Welsh baritone Paul Carey Jones, whom I had reached out to for a composer referral, after discovering his novel 'Giving It Away'. Stuart was moved by the 'Kingdoms' song cycle, and this is very much

reflected in his wonderful compositions. I will never forget the magic I felt, the first time I heard the opening chords of the title track Kingdoms. His reputation as a respected composer of opera, is well demonstrated in his 'Kingdoms' song cycle.

The next artist to join us, was tenor Nick Pritchard, introduced by Andrew Griffiths of Stile Antico. Nick embraced the songs, and has remained supportive and fully invested in our album. His heartfelt renditions of the songs, are at once powerful and soothing.

During my initial search for a tenor, I had come across leading piano accompanist Christopher Glynn, who had featured in online recitals for the Ryedale Festival, where he also acts as the festival's Artistic Director. I was blown away by his unique mastery of his craft, and knew I wanted no other pianist for our recording. Christopher responded positively to the songs, and asked if there were more, so we could have an album instead of an EP. I was delighted at the idea of more songs, as the lyrics for what would be 'Metropolis', had begun forming in my mind.

I first learned about composer Bernard Hughes, from the popular interview blog The Cross Eyed Pianist. From the onset, he was enthusiastic about the album's goals. I knew I'd struck good fortune, when he showed he was in possession of a chameleonic ability to compose for whatever style of music the lyrics required. Moving effortlessly between traditional classical music styles, folk, highlife, a hint of klezmer – just listen, it's all there in his brilliant 'Metropolis' song cycle.

I recall at one point during the preparation the album's recording, wondering what would happen if one of the artists suddenly became unavailable due to an unforeseen event. I'm not sure what I concluded my backup would be, but I was soon to find out. Three weeks to the recording dates for our album, I received an apologetic message, informing me that the soprano commissioned to perform 'Metropolis', had taken ill, and would not be able to make it for the recording. For the first time throughout this project, I felt defeated. Who could learn the score well enough to give it the performance it deserved, within such a short time frame? I pleaded with the wonderful artist agent Franziska Hunke, to help me find such a soprano, and she began an in-depth search. Salvation came in the form of soprano Isabelle

Haile. She threw herself into rehearsals, and even during those early sessions, it was clear that the recording had been saved. Isabelle's phenomenal range, great technique and clear phrasing, make 'Metropolis' come to life in brilliant colours.

A world of thanks and appreciation to all the artists on this album: composer Stuart MacRae, composer Bernard Hughes, pianist Christopher Glynn, tenor Nick Pritchard and soprano Isabelle Haile. Your sacrifice, dedication and artistic mastery, have made this album soar. Special thanks to Stephen Sutton, James Cardell-Oliver and the Divine Art Recordings Group team. Many thanks to Franziska Hunte of Artista International, baritone Paul Carey Jones and tenor Andrew Griffiths of Stile Antico for making those all-important artist introductions.

*Thank you to my mum and dad, Dr. & Mrs. T.M John, for introducing me to literature and classical music respectively. This album is dedicated to my son Isaac I. John, for being a source of happiness and hope.*

### **Chinwe D. John, Poet/Lyricist**

Art song has a particular way of speaking to the world – intimate, reflective and many-layered. It offers us a chance to rediscover nuance, depth and collaboration in a time of polarisation, shallowness and fragmentation. And it always begins with words.

So I was thrilled when, at the height of the Covid pandemic, the writer Chinwe D. John got in touch to propose a project - *Songs for our Times* - based on our shared passion for bringing new audiences to classical music.

Like all the best lyric poets, Chinwe uses words to clear a space into which music can flow. She knows how a small form can contain big ideas and is deeply engaged with the world as it is today. But at the same time, her work is full of biblical and classical allusions and seems to revive the ancient idea of song as a way to convey wisdom.

For her collaborators, she looked across the Atlantic to the UK and inspired all of us with her vision and generosity. As performers, we had fascinating discussions with Bernard Hughes and Stuart MacRae about how they had responded to Chinwe's words, blending old and new to find the right musical language for each song.

The ripples now continue as we share the project with a wider audience. We hope you enjoy listening to these songs as much we have enjoyed performing them.

**Christopher Glynn, Pianist.**



*Metropolis recording day - Bernard Hughes, Chinwe D. John, Isabelle Haile and Christopher Glynn*

# Lyrics

*with notes by lyricist Chinwe D. John*

## Kingdoms

### Verse 1

These are the days of turbulent living  
Followed by nights of rebellion brewing.  
These are the days where the sacred is profaned  
Followed by nights of cities set aflame.  
Where are the holy ones, the seers and the wise  
To help us navigate the rapids and the fire?

### Verse 2

One man to rule them all  
One hand to wield the sword.  
Soon he discards his earthly robes,  
And seeks eternity for a throne.  
Where is the voice to whisper, calmly, soft and subtle  
Remember human that you're only mortal? Only mortal...

### Chorus

Alexandria, Where is the Book of Wisdom?  
Did we lose it in the ashes, or is it buried safely underground?  
Alexandria,  
Our ship is in the harbour, don't let it leave before we've found the prize.  
Goodbye Alexandria, goodbye.

### Verse 3

The streets of history are lined with the pages  
Telling of kingdoms that thought they'd last the ages  
But they fall. Now we cast our eyes, up into the sky  
Seeking galaxies to conquer, riches from the stars  
But stars do fall. They fall...

### Chorus

*'Kingdoms' was written in April of 2021, and for me captures the global turbulence of the past few years.*

*Now more than ever, Wisdom appears lacking in the courts where she is most needed, and power rages forward without caution. Our destiny as a people is not fixed in stone. The song has an element of hope to it; perhaps Wisdom may yet be invited in.*

## Life Unfiltered

### Verse 1

In Castel San Giovanni, by a hospital wall,  
A man played for his sweetheart, confined to its floors.  
In that precious hour, theirs was a tale that inspires,  
Transcending time and desire.

### Chorus

The heart craves the wonder  
Of being loved by another. To exist in their eyes,  
Without filter or guise.  
To be free of all armour  
And yet find oneself stronger;  
Is a state of existence,  
Without boundary or limits.

### Verse 2

In this age of alteration,  
few will come as they are.  
Thoughts are often borrowed, trends dictating their mark.  
With the flick of a finger, passion is summoned,  
But love's not so easily beckoned.

### Verse 3

When life takes a bend, in times of distress,  
There are those who will offer a shoulder to rest.  
In those fragile hours, theirs is a service unhindered,  
Transcending creed and divisions.

## Chorus

In Castel San Giovanni, by a hospital wall,  
A man played for his sweetheart, confined to its floors.

*A rare positive news story caught my attention at the end of 2020. An elderly man in Castel San Giovanni, Italy, was captured in a video, sitting underneath the hospital window of his ailing wife, playing an accordion. His wife supported by members of the hospital staff, who were clearly moved, looked on.*

## Tethered ships

### Verse 1

In the moments that allow reflection,  
I pose myself the eternal questions.  
Being neither oracle nor sage,  
The mysteries of existence remain unchanged.

### Chorus

No one sleeps, no one sleeps tonight,  
Not without a nagging sense of doubt.  
The world that we inhabit bears no semblance to  
The one that we imagined we'd be passing through.

### Verse 2

So we have a purpose, there is a goal.  
How to set about it, when the world has come undone?  
Captain of a ship tethered to the shore.  
Thirsting to find boundaries that exist no more.

### Chorus

### Verse 3

Time is on a mission, hurtling us through space. We,  
celestial travellers, try to find our place.  
Amidst the toil and struggle, wary hearts forge on, Hopeful  
in the promise emerging with the dawn.

### Final chorus

All who lie, all who lie tonight,  
Beneath a veil of prayer offered high.

Draw from night your valour, let your sails unfurl.  
When daylight is upon us, we'll be on our way.

All who search for solace, all who dream tonight, Beneath  
a veil of prayer rising to the skies.

The world that will await us when we lift our eyes,  
Surpasses every aspect of the one we've left behind.

*This is a song open to multiple interpretations. It encourages the listener to forge on through life's adversities, seeking the light at the end of the tunnel. There is also however, the suggestion that the light at the end of the tunnel, is on the other side of life. Both offer hope, but in different realms.*

## Primordial Cry

The grass was cool which was a wonder,  
For such a day, in such a summer.  
I'd moved away from where they were,  
Found solace in the sage filled air.

Through the rippling haze of heat,  
Neither awake, neither asleep.  
I thought a vision came to sight,  
But wasn't raised to altered heights.

### Chorus

No epiphany was found,  
To free my stifled sound.  
I want to cry out.  
I want to cry out.

### Verse 2

I put aside my apparition,  
Curled up before the television.  
I'd moved away from where we were,  
But hoped our touch would bring us near.

Through a wall of words unsaid,  
My unnamed hunger can't be fed.  
I hold to task the common lore,  
For saddling Love with such a chore.



### Chorus

#### Verse 3

Night, the silent confessor,  
Draws me underneath her shelter.  
Within the silence of her wings,  
Heart and mind will interweave.

Through the channels of my thought,  
Past the conscious and its hold.  
Emerging by its own accord,  
Without the heavy weight of words.

#### Final chorus

Ancient cry, that transports,  
To where my soul has sought.  
Here I cry out.  
Here I cry out.

*'Primordial Cry' speaks about being mentally isolated from others, and the inability to find relief in the usual places. Finally, on entering into a deeper understanding of ourselves, we may reach a place of sanctuary, where solace is found.*

## The Shepherds

#### Verse 1

Who can we trust to narrate the tale?  
The heroes and villains seem one and the same.  
Is the raging fire that seeks to make pure,  
So different from that which seeks to destroy?  
Maybe I missed the gift which allows one to hear,  
The wisdom in the words that resound through the air.

#### Chorus

Excuse me if I seem wary and worn.  
This cycle's already played out before.  
And after all the words have been said, We'll bury the dead.  
Bury the dead.

#### Verse 2

They call you a shepherd, they've crowned you a king,  
But your sheep are lined up at the edge of a hill.  
If you gave the command, I'm certain they'd leap.  
If you give the command, there's still time to retreat.  
These aren't the words of the valiant and brave.  
They're just words to keep the young from the grave.

#### Chorus

*'The Shepherds' expresses the grief, fatigue and disappointment many must feel about the endless cycle of global wars, and their inevitable consequences.*

## Metropolis

#### Verse 1

These are the unforgiven zones.  
Where lives imprisoned freely roam.  
The urban planner's failed design,  
Kept hidden from discerning eyes.

#### Verse 2

Poisoned waters know no course,  
Soon returning to their source.  
The reaper moves across divides,  
Uniting all beyond the lines.

#### Chorus

From the door of a derelict building,  
A voice calls.  
It's echoed back, grief unyielding,  
From behind walls.

#### Verse 3

Mind the glass, step inside.  
This just came in, it's a new design.  
Though our walls are made of glass,  
They can't see in, we're a different class.

#### Verse 4

This just came in from the other side.

We've never been to the other side.  
We're floating high above the lines.  
Don't look down we're beyond the lines...

### *Chorus*

*'Metropolis' uses as a direct example, the opioid overdose pandemic sweeping through communities seemingly worlds apart, but yet united in common grief. In the bigger picture, it cautions against taking false comfort behind zones and financially constructed divides. A neglected societal ill in one zone, will as time has shown, soon manifest as a larger societal problem.*

### **Call Home**

#### *Verse 1*

Where the mangrove lines the banks,  
And the palm trees grow.  
Where the leaping gazelle dance, And the Harmattan blows,  
I call home.

#### *Verse 2*

I remember dazzling festive lights,  
Raucous laughter all about.  
Outfits elegant and bright,  
Endless beats that left no doubt.  
I call home.

#### *Verse 3*

A double shift then home at last.  
The streets are empty though its bright.  
Astride the present and the past  
To live the dream comes with a price.  
I call home...

#### *Verse 4*

Things have changed, they often say,  
You'll be happier there, than here.  
Some days it doesn't feel that way.  
There's comfort in the words I hear,  
So, I call home.

Where the leaping gazelle dance.  
Outfits elegant and bright.  
Astride the present and the past, I call home.

*'Call Home' expresses a common sentiment amongst immigrants the world over, as they try to make their way in a new country.*

### **When Apart**

#### *Verse 1*

Did I wake you? Sorry. Are you sure?  
It's just I feel so restless, you know...  
How did all the meetings go?  
That's great, can't wait to have you home.

#### *Verse 2*

The phone signal isn't very strong,  
Okay, I'll just listen to your voice.  
Sounds like you have the TV on.  
Danae? I've seen that one.

#### *Verse 3*

I wish that you like Zeus would come,  
In through our window with the dawn.  
Washing over me in golden rain,  
Till I invoke the power of your name.

#### *Verse 4*

There is a place within my thoughts, When we're apart.  
Where there exists no quantum laws, When we're apart.  
And in the moments when I cease to be,  
We're closer still, we are as one,  
Never to part.

*'When Apart' is an ode to romantic love and longing. It also allowed me to touch on a phenomenon I find fascinating – quantum entanglement.*

## A Bedtime Tale

### Verse 1

The moon sits low, the dust rides high.  
The sound of horns and a distant cry.  
By the wall of the city gates,  
A blind seer sits and waits.  
They know the hour is nigh...

### Verse 2

Light of foot, sleight of hand.  
Slipping through the palace grounds.  
A figure masked with purpose sure,  
Seeks a closely guarded door.  
Forged steel will slice its iron bands.

### Verse 3

There within the captive stood.  
She pulls down her velvet hood.  
Siblings cruelly once parted  
Helped by fate, are now united.  
Just as she had sworn they would.

### Verse 4

Soon they make a quick escape.  
As they ride out through the gates,  
A horde of riders thunders past,  
The kingdom will see peace at last.  
A new dawn is about to break.

*'A Bedtime Tale' was a chance to write a short fantasy tale, featuring a female heroine, sibling love and the hope for a brighter tomorrow.*

## The River's Course

### Verse 1

Tell us mighty Niger  
The things you've seen.  
Help us to remember  
What once had been,  
Before the ocean took away  
Our kings and queens.

### Verse 2

Help us sing of lands  
Bathed bright with gold.  
Of ochre coloured sands  
Of warriors strong and bold.  
Ask the ocean to restore  
Our dreams and hopes.

### Chorus

The river answered in response,  
This tale has a winding course.  
Though tides cannot reverse,  
The histories of the past,  
Springs break out from rock,  
And waters do change path.

### Verse 3

New boats upon the waters  
What tales will they weave?  
Young hands write the chapters,  
But old hands never leave.  
The oarsmen battle the waves of the past.  
Help them mighty river, forge a way at last.

### Chorus

*The River's Course was the last song written and reflects upon aspects of the historic legacy, and the future hopes for our mother continent Africa. No destiny is fixed, there is always the chance for a new course.*

## Composers

**Stuart MacRae** (*Kingdoms*) is a renowned composer of contemporary opera, orchestral, chamber and vocal music. His awards include the South Bank Sky Arts Award for Opera. He is based in his home country of Scotland, where he is a professor of composition at the Royal Conservatoire of Scotland. Some of his most recent works include opera *Anthropocene* which was hailed by **The Times** as ‘Gripping music theatre’; album *Chamber Music* performed by the Hebrides Ensemble; and album *Earth, thy cold is keen* in collaboration with mezzo-soprano Lotte Betts-Dean.

**Bernard Hughes** (*Metropolis*) is cited as being one of the leading composers of choral music in Britain. He regularly composes work for the BBC Singers amongst other ensembles. His awards include the William Mathias Prize, the Polyphonos International Prize and the Simon Carrington Chamber Singers Composition Prize. Most recent works include album of choral music *Precious Things* performed by The Epiphoni Consort, and praised by Gramophone which stated ‘This sparkling recording brings together an a cappella feast of short choral pieces...’ His latest album release of this year (2023) *Bagatelles*, is also released under the Divine Art record label.



Stuart MacRae (credit Loudon MacRae)



Bernard Hughes (credit S.J. Field)

## Lyricist

Chinwe D. John is a Nigerian-American award winning physician and poet/lyricist, whose previous work includes a book of narrative poetry *Tales of Fantasy and Reality*, and a contemporary classical music EP *Within a Certain Time and Place*, released under the Voces8 label. In 2020, in response to the particular challenges facing UK classical musicians, and the need for the genre to expand its audience base, she was inspired to take the steps that would lead to this album project.



Chinwe D. John (credit Sara Roney)

## Musicians



Christopher Glynn (credit Benjamin Ealovega)

**Pianist: Christopher Glynn** (on a Steinway D) is a Grammy award winning classical pianist, and much sought after accompanist, working with most of the world's renowned classical music artists, on an international scale. Reviewers have cited his 'breathtaking sensitivity' Gramophone, 'irrepressible energy, wit and finesse' The Guardian and 'revelatory performances' BBC Music Magazine. He is the Artistic Director of the Ryedale Festival in North Yorkshire, having taking up the mantle in 2010. Under his leadership, the festival features up to sixty programmes a year. Some of his most recent album recordings include *Beethoven: Sonatas for violin and piano...* with Rachel Podger and *Schubert: The Fair Maid of the Mill* with tenor Nicky Spence.

**Tenor:** Nick Pritchard is an award winning versatile tenor, who features frequently with noted ensembles such as the Orchestra of the Age of Enlightenment, the Monteverdi Choir and Orchestra, and L'Orchestre de Chambre de Paris. His recording of Bach's St John Passion under Sir John Eliot Gardiner, was nominated in the 2023 Grammy awards for Best Choral performance. A recent review in **The Guardian** stated, 'Singing from memory, Nick Pritchard's *Evangelist*, in the finest account of the role I've heard live, drew us through the narrative with extraordinary vividness...' Another review in **The Telegraph** from his role in opera *Alcina*, states "Tenor Nick Pritchard (...) stops hearts and time with a ravishing Un momento di contento.'



Nick Pritchard (credit Nick James)



Isabelle Haile (credit Patrick Allen)

**Soprano:** Isabelle Haile is an award-winning Ethiopian-Romanian soprano, who has received her vocal training in Moldova, Italy, and the United Kingdom. She has sung in both operatic and solo recital roles internationally. She was awarded the Provincia di Roma Special Prize for her rendition of Monteverdi's '*Jubilet tota civitas*' in the Final of the International Sacred Music Competition 2014 in Rome. In 2020, she completed a Masters with Distinction, in Vocal Performance, from the Royal Academy of Music. Recent opera performances include roles in George Benjamin's *Lessons in Love and Violence*, and Purcell's *Dido and Aeneas*.

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Produced by Chinwe D. John

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*Clockwise from top:  
Nick Pritchard (tenor), Isabelle Haile (soprano),  
Christopher Glynn (piano)*

*Photo Credit Patrick Allen*