

Timeless Whispers with VOX Cape Town

**Saturday 14 October 2023 (11 AM and 8 PM)
St Andrew's Presbyterian Church, De Waterkant**

Pre-concert talk presented by John Woodland

Thank you for joining us today for our Karoo-inspired musical journey, and for supporting this all-South African production! Preparing for this project has been quite a contrast for us compared to our last concert two months ago that some of you attended – an outward-looking programme called [Eternal Echoes](#), with 'big names' (known quantities) in choral music such as Rachmaninoff, Tchaikovsky and John Tavener – and this programme was deliberately planned to be a contrast to that (with respect to the music on offer) and to complement it (by offering another immersive experience – this time homegrown) – and we hope that the resonance between the titles *Eternal Echoes* and *Timeless Whispers*, and our concert posters for these projects, has reinforced this relationship – similar, but different – the fourth and fifth chapters, respectively, of our series of immersive concert experiences we've called [New Soundscapes](#) as we share these fresh choral sounds with Capetonians and build an audience for, and appreciation of, diverse choral music.

Preparing this performance has also stretched us (the musicians) because we have had to shift from singing familiar, intuitive harmonies to new music that has never been heard before – and it is tricky, as a singer, to translate the dots on the page to sounds in one's head for the first time. Much of this music is very rhythmical – a strong contrast to the expansive chordal or chant-like qualities of *Eternal Echoes*. Plus, every composer has their own approach, idiosyncrasies, style – so there has been a lot to get to grips with, but what a privilege for us to engage with living composers, and to give this new music voice for the first time today!

And then of course the Karoo itself is a vast stimulus – earthy, rugged, magical, sacred, unforgiving, beguiling – all of these things – how does one do justice to this remarkable region – its landscapes, languages, sands and skies?

Weggewerp

The starting point for this project was a suggestion from Karen Hahne, one of our singers (and a founding member of VOX), back in 2017. She shared a poem with us that had been scratched into the wall of an abandoned Karoo cottage and photographed by Calitzdorp-based artist [Derek McKenzie](#). It seemed to have been written out of desperation (you can read the poem on your [text sheets](#)) beginning with the words 'Ek is slapeloos' or 'I am sleepless' – and Karen suggested that it could be interesting to set these words to music and identified Hans Huysen as an appropriate composer, given his intersecting interests in the domains of early, contemporary and indigenous South African music. The work was subsequently dedicated to the memory of Karen's late husband, and we are very fortunate to have Karen singing it with us today.

Hans decided to pair that found text with three other landscape-related texts which he admits (in his [programme note](#) on our website that we encourage you to read in full) "is a rather vague, very wide frame of reference and that my choice of related texts is purely subjective, but I will proffer that the language of W. E. G. Louw (born in Sutherland) and C. L. Leipoldt (born in Worcester) shows a particular atmospheric kinship" – and an exciting aspect of today's performance is that we have W. E. G. Louw's granddaughter, Rosa

Mackenzie, joining us – and she will read these four texts as part of the performance of *Weggewerp*.

We were already well in rehearsal for *Slapeloos* earlier this year when our creative force Kyle did the thing that is obvious to Millennials these days and that is simply to Google the text – and we discovered, to our surprise, that the words were not actually original but extracts from an archaic translation of a biblical Psalm (102). There are notable differences in the text; for example, where the original text reads “you lifted me up and cast me away” (*Weggewerp* means ‘cast away’ or banished), the anonymous author chose not to mention the words ‘lifted up’ – and, later verses, in which there is talk of mercy and salvation, are completely missing. Instead, the author offers their own take on eternity with the addition of the words ‘tot dood’ (‘until death’) at the end, which changes completely the meaning of the preceding lines – and thereby, as [Hans writes](#), this re-interpretation of the text actually “reaffirms the Karoo authorship” with “an overwhelmingly existential experience of place overriding canonical scripture”.

That poem, *Slapeloos*, is the highly dramatic lament at the core of the cycle and is framed by the somewhat more restrained language of the other two poets (Louw and Leipoldt). The first poem describes a kind of naïve, child-like wonder, setting the scene for the next poem which is a reflection that life is fleeting and that nothing endures (and an interesting contrast, I think, to the perceived ‘timelessness’ of the Karoo landscape). Then we come to *Slapeloos* (the deliberately uncomfortable, almost delirious setting of the Karoo poem – and I’m sure we can all relate to the helpless feeling of sleeplessness and the kinds of thoughts that might plague our vulnerable minds). The cycle ends with a gentle but earnest prayer reminding us to have courage, and that it is often darkest before dawn.

Hans writes about this cycle forming part of a compositional process in which he attempts to find “a well-fitting musical idiom for the sound of Afrikaans as a sung language” – observing that “its characteristically short words and succinct expressions, open vowels and large variety of nuanced diphthongs mean that it is a particularly suitable singing language”.

Today’s performances will be the world premiere of the work, an early celebration of Hans’s 60th birthday next year and his [60@60 Project](#), in which he is hoping for at least 60 performances of his music in 2024. We are grateful to Hans for creating this artwork for us and for continuing to explore interesting forms of musical expression with his love for European Baroque music and rare traditions of indigenous South African music. As many of you know, Hans wears other hats beside ‘composer’ – he is also a cellist, conductor and music teacher, and has done such valuable work here in Cape Town with the Cape Consort and at St Martini Church.

In fact, we have already ‘sung’ one of the movements of this work (the final *Gebed*) as part of a [virtual project during lockdown in 2020](#) – this concert was originally planned for that year, and we were in the midst of preparing this work, and so we recorded a ‘virtual choir’ version of that movement (as those words resonated with the mutual struggle we all seemed to feel at that time as a global community) – all of our lines captured separately (and safely) from home and then digitally stitched together.

Hans has provided a very detailed score which has given us much to explore and unpack as we refine our interpretation of the music. I have been joking that every time I look at the score I discover something new that I’m sure wasn’t there before! We intend to present this work again next year as it is important for new music to be performed more than just

once – and we hope that this (and the other music in this concert) becomes part of the repertoire.

Usque ad sidera tellus

Not staging this concert in 2020 was, in some ways, a blessing as it allowed us to refine the vision for this concert and more intentionally select music around our Karoo theme. The other new choral piece you will hear today is a commission from Denise Onen, an exciting young composer who calls herself an 'audio alchemist'. Unfortunately for us (but nice for her!) she is in Berlin at the moment for OSCILLATIONS 2023, "a transhemispheric initiative for sound artists and cultural practitioners".

Denise has written that her love for choral music was sparked by the rich choral culture of her hometown Pretoria, in which she sang in choirs for nearly a decade. She has said this influenced her to select Latin as the language for her piece (she wrote her own words), which she also regards as a language that is particularly well suited to singing.

I first heard an art song of Denise's performed at the South African College of Music some years ago, and our paths have since crossed in various ways, and I knew that I wanted to her to write something for this concert. The brief was deliberately broad, giving her the licence to explore the topic of 'Karoo' as she saw fit and, about the resulting piece, which was completed just over a month and a half ago, Denise writes in [her programme note](#):

This piece seeks to capture the emotional journey of awe, wonder and environmental existentialism I experienced the first time I traversed the Karoo. This expansive semi-desert landscape, once submerged, now holds towering mountains and paleontological treasures. This ancient wonder, a humbling reminder of our existence as mere specks, akin to the grains of sand in the Karoo, could never tally the countless stars in the universe.

The persistent dissonance and harmonic colour of the piece contemplate themes of environmental existentialism – the fate of this 'Land of Thirst' in the face of climate change, what 'Mother Earth' has witnessed over time in this terrain and, in time, what will be? Amidst these reflections, there is solace in that at least there will be stars out of humanity's reach, and we are reminded of that in this place where the Earth meets the stars, as encapsulated by the phrase "Usque ad sidera tellus" – the Earth rising up to the stars.

You'll notice that this piece is a soundscape, with great washes of sound, the rhythms often at odds with one another, capturing at times the twinkling of stars – and you'll hear some opportunities for improvisation in the score, a nice contrast to the precision and clear directions asked for in Hans's score.

Karoo Polfyntjies

We're not only celebrating new choral music today but also new instrumental music, and you are going to hear the first performance of the [Karoo Polfyntjies](#) written by friend of VOX, Jan-Hendrik Harley, with whom we have previously worked on several projects. Jan-Hendrik is now based in Gqeberha – he is a composer and arranger of classical and popular music, and also freelances as a performing and recording artist. He is currently enrolled for a PhD in composition at Rhodes University and is the musical director of several groups including Folk Baroque ensemble Here be Dragons.

His *Karoo Polfyntjies*, for flute and two cellos with drumkit, is in three movements and was commissioned by the Holm family here in Cape Town. The brief was to write a piece that would include every family member (three teenagers and two parents): the daughter (a flautist), the older son and father (both cellists), and the younger son (a drummer). It is inspired by C. Louis Leipoldt's poem "Kom gee vir my polfyntjie" – a 'polfyntjie' being an archaic Afrikaans term for a souvenir or a memento – and the mother was included in this ensemble through her love for Afrikaans poetry, Leipoldt being one of her favourites.

*Kom gee vir my polfyntjie,
Dit maak nie saak nie wat,
Die kleinste, nietigste lyntjie
Waardeer ek as 'n skat.*

*Come bring me a trinket small,
It matters not what kind at all,
The tiniest, most humble line,
I'll treasure it as if divine.*

It's almost as if it was 'meant to be' for this concert – the three movements provide such fitting links between the four choral works in today's programme. This is the first (professional) performance of this work and will be delighted to feature young musicians Catherine Stephenson (flute), Ashlin Grobbelaar (cello), Chris Njapha (cello) and Chris Burgess (drumkit).

Horizons and the San Gloria

The last two choral works, bookending the programme, are by Péter Louis van Dijk. *Horizons* was commissioned for the King's Singers in 1995 and attempts to evoke the rhythmic world of the early inhabitants of the Karoo. It was inspired by a cave painting of a ship resplendent with flags and sails, testament to their remarkable powers of observation. It contains aspects of their mythology such as the eland, which was believed to be an intermediary of God and their ancestors, and the rain, and tells an imagined story of how the San could have perceived these visitors and the end they might have suffered at their hands.

The performance ends with the *San Gloria* that blends the rhythms of these ancient people with an abridged version of the ancient Latin hymn 'Gloria in excelsis Deo' – and, like Vivaldi did with his famous setting, with lots of contrast and word painting in its sections. In fact it was written for my alma mater (Bishops) in 1992 and it has always been on my 'to sing' list. Earlier this year we were invited by the composer's wife, Junita, to sing this work at the [70th birthday celebration for Péter Louis in the Endler Hall in March](#), at which the whole family was present – a very special experience for us.

A nice touch to this music, not unlike what Benjamin Britten would do for his pieces written for schools, is that there are opportunities for audience or congregational participation. We won't put you on the spot today but unlike some of our other performances in which we encourage you to keep your applause to the end (which you are also welcome to do if you prefer), please express your appreciation at any time! Speaking of clapping, you will notice the similarities between the *San Gloria* and *Horizons* and the body percussion (the snapping/clicking) that adds a vibrancy to the choral colour. It is also worth noting that there isn't a formal chamber version of this piece so kudos to Mikyle Adams who has put in a lot of work constructing a suitable organ accompaniment!

The Time Trackers

So that's it about the music. The last big thing I want to mention is that we are also celebrating words this morning – the first book for children about archaeology in the Tankwa Karoo was published in August. Called [The Time Trackers](#), it is written by award-winning children's author and dear friend Lesley Beake, with expert input by archaeologist

Emily Hallinan, and brought alive with illustrations by Michael Pattison. Proceeds from book sales will support the work of South African non-profit organisation [Children's Book Network](#) (CBN). CBN inspires reading in pre-teens from under-resourced areas by providing them the opportunity to engage with creative and imaginative stories. Join me for chat with Lesley about half an hour after the performance. Books are on sale for R200 and there will be an opportunity to get yours signed and to chat with Lesley. Hopefully this will be the first of many adventures together with Lesley and CBN, with whom we have been wanting to work for a long time!

After the performance, we encourage you to join us outside for moerkoffie and rusks, baked by one of our singers, Jean Westwood (and if you decide to join us again this evening, we'll be serving muscadell/port from Boplaas!). If you enjoy this performance, please share your experience on social media. There is more information about the music and the performers on our website, so please visit www.voxcapetown.com or scan the QR code on your [programme postcard](#). Derek McKenzie's photograph of the *Slapeloos* text is also available at the back, and we have included some of his photographs in the slide show today.

VOX is all about creating immersive experiences, so (as always) 'imagineer' Kyle (a portmanteau of 'manager' and 'imagineer') has augmented the space with the windpomp, Karoo vegetation, projections and so on. You will also notice that the musicians have an unusual dress code in keeping with the theme. We went on a trip to the Karoo last month in preparation for this performance to create as authentic an experience as possible, and so some of the parched vegetation was collected with permission from the Karoo!

In case you are wondering, the title *Timeless Whispers* refers to the idea of the silence across the vastness of the landscape – and although man-made structures and vegetation may show signs of aging, the landscape changes only over a much longer time. Similarly, cultures come and go but leave traces, or whispers, of their existence that you may pick up on your travels. We are presenting some of these whispers today, inspired by and celebrating the landscape and varied cultures of the Karoo, past and present.

Lastly, thank YOU for supporting new music and VOX in this celebration today. One of the reasons we love putting together our musical projects is the opportunities they create – for our musicians to sing and play, for our composers to have their pieces heard, and for our audiences to savour new music written right here at the southern tip of Africa. Thank you also to St Andrew's for hosting us today and for allowing us to transform this space into a semi-desert!

Finally, I must thank the singers and musicians who have all been game for this new music – it hasn't always been easy, especially after all the intuitive music of *Eternal Echoes*. We haven't had existing recordings to work from, and we've closely worked with the composers to find a balance between their musical vision and our interpretation of the pieces. But it is an important part of our (VOX's) creative vision to have concerts like this one, and this unusual confluence of different influences, styles, languages as we celebrate something close to us – and perhaps, like the landscape of the Karoo, which can be harsh and challenging to tend and cultivate, can be so rewarding when it blooms – providing sounds and sentiments that we hope will stay with you long after you leave us today.

<https://voxcapetown.com/performances-timeless-whispers/>