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Seeing *the* Star

MUSIC FOR CHRISTMAS
BY BEN PONNIAH

THE CHOIR OF ROYAL HOLLOWAY
RUPERT GOUGH

- 
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 2. **SILENT NIGHT** (Arr. for choir, piano and orchestra by Ben Ponniah) 04.36
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 3. **EMILY'S CAROL** 04.49
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- Total: 1.07.07**

The Choir of Royal Holloway,
Rupert Gough

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The vast majority of the compositions on this album are commissions, written for choirs, conductors and occasions that have all shaped my musical journey in different ways. In 2024 alone, I was commissioned to write ten new carols for ten different choirs. Improvisation at the piano remains the cornerstone of my compositional process – an instinctive space where emotion, intuition, and the joy of discovery all converge. As a result, the music on this recording draws together many strands of my musical language: the Anglican choral tradition, jazz-infused harmony, holy minimalism, melody, and storytelling.

Seeing the Star, the title track, was composed in 2021 as a way of thanking St Mary-le-Tower (now Ipswich Minster) for the profoundly inspiring choral education I received there as a child – an experience that continues to shape me deeply as a composer. I am enormously grateful to Anna Lapwood for later recording the piece on *A Pembroke Christmas*, helping it to reach listeners around the world. For this recording, I chose to add strings to the original unaccompanied version, to enhance its celestial, shimmering atmosphere.

Several works on the album carry deeply personal associations. *Emily's Carol*, written for Timothy Garrard and the Choir of Westminster School, honours the memory of Emily Hoh, a much-loved musician and teacher whose kindness touched so many lives. *Rejoice in the Light* is the only carol I have ever dreamt in its entirety, while *Be Still for the Presence of the Lord* grew from childhood memories of singing the hymn in primary school and hearing it again decades later during communion, inspiring me to create a new choral arrangement.

The final track, *The Sun Shining through the Fog*, was inspired by Claude Monet's *Trouée de soleil dans le brouillard*. I was drawn to the beautiful interplay of sunlight, mist, and water, and to the image of light gently emerging through murk – a theme that, in many ways, runs throughout this entire album.

It has been a tremendous joy to collaborate with Rupert Gough and The Choir of Royal Holloway on this recording. Their warmth, artistry, and extraordinary musicianship have brought these works to life with a sensitivity and brilliance for which I will always be grateful.

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The music of Christmas occupies a special place in the English choral tradition, and it's been part of Ben Ponniah's musical life for as far back as he can remember. His immersion in the Anglican choral heritage began in childhood, and along with his love of musical theatre, minimalism and jazz, it continues to inspire his own blossoming catalogue of choral music. Born in Ipswich to Sri Lankan parents, Ponniah first sang in the choir of St-Mary-Le-Tower – now known as Ipswich Minster – in 1990, at the age of six.

"In year nine [age 13-14] music class we were asked to write a piece of music", he recalls. "Without any lessons in composition I sat at the piano and wrote this four-part harmony stuff - it just came out, really. The music was there, and next I had to set it to words. I was still making up the text as I walked up the stairs to the lesson! My teacher was very impressed that I had this natural gift for writing four-part harmony. But it seemed obvious to me, because I'd sung so much choral music. I thought it was easy!"

Easy might be an understatement, but the naturalness and singability of Ponniah's choral music has brought him a burgeoning popularity with choirs across the English-speaking world – as well as a near-continuous stream of commissions for Christmas music. Ponniah's childhood experience, as well as his eclectic range of musical tastes and influences, gives a special freshness to this most familiar of subjects: this is music that sounds personal, because it is. Ponniah still talks affectionately of the "primary school bangers" that he sang in daily assembly at his Church of England primary school. What, for Ponniah, is the musical essence of Christmas?

"For me, I think it's having a combination of stillness and shininess" he says. "Those would be the two elements that come to me first. Of course, when you think of carols like John Rutter's *Shepherd's Pipe Carol*, they can be quite jaunty. I don't know if there's much jauntiness in my seasonal music – it's a bit more meditative, with sparkling cluster chords. But there are certainly some more upbeat elements, as in *Rejoice in the Light*, and *Sing, O Heav'ns* - which is not really a carol, but still has the spirit of Christmas".

"The experience of the Nine Lessons and Carols certainly went into my music, and that's where I think **Seeing the Star** (2021) came from. It was a very affectionate piece towards my old choir in Ipswich", he says. He describes it as his "way of saying thank you to St Mary-le-Tower for providing such an inspiring choral education." A different side of Ponniah's musical world informs his arrangement of **Silent Night** (2019) – the jazz pianist's flair for improvising on an

existing melody. "I wrote down the chords and it unfolded from there", he says. In a magical touch, this old Austrian carol finds itself in gentle conversation with another famous cradle song, Brahms's *Lullaby*.

Both of these pieces come from very close to home. But in recent years, Ponniah has received commissions from many different choirs, and he knows from experience that no two choral groups are alike. "I speak to each of the conductors before each commission, and ask: what does the choir like singing? What are their strengths? What are their weaknesses? What's the acoustic like, for the premiere at least? For me, choral music is driven by the text - that's the king, or queen - and then I work with the other factors".

So, **Emily's Carol** (2024) uses a text by Ben Jonson to celebrate the memory of Emily Hoh, the much-loved accompanist-in-residence for the choir of Westminster School. But the Westminster Chimes (the peal of bells heard before Big Ben) appear too - a playful nod to the commissioners. **Rejoice in the Light** was a commission from Jonathan Harris and the Newport Pagnell Singers, and Ponniah describes it as "medieval in style". "I woke up one morning with that carol pretty much fully-formed and I just wrote it down!" he recalls.

A Tender Shoot (2024) is about "darkness into light – a warm and lyrical melodic line unfolding over a rich harmonic backdrop", says Ponniah. "I suppose that could be used to describe a lot of my pieces!" he adds, noting that its jazz-infused harmony was particularly enjoyed by the commissioners, the Chapel Choir of Trinity Hall, Cambridge. Another Cambridge choir, Clare Hall, commissioned the **Golden Rose Carol** in 2024. William Canton's poetic evocation of winter was particularly suited to a student choir whose activities are primarily secular, rather than focused on the college chapel.

With Ponniah's 2025 arrangement of the hugely popular hymn **Be Still**, he returns, again, to his musical childhood. "I just remember really loving singing that one at St. Margaret's Primary School in Ipswich" he says, and he hopes that it may bring "a moment of stillness and reflection to those who listen, offering a brief escape from the noise of the world." **The Pigeon Carol** (2024), too, follows a path from stillness to joy, as traced in the words of Margaret Deland's very singular vision of the Nativity. "I was delighted to discover such a wonderful poem" says Ponniah, who notes that carols about pigeons are not exactly common. This one was commissioned by Katherine Dienes-Williams and Guildford Cathedral Choir.

But words aren't always necessary. When Ponniah encountered Monet's painting *Trouée de soleil dans le brouillard*, he remembers that "I looked at the painting and just thought, I've got to try and make this into music". "It's got a beautiful orange sun shining down; then there's the water and the mist and I felt that I had to try and represent all of this in a choral tapestry. Essentially the painting was the text. This weird, wordless piece emerged: **The Sun Shining through the Fog**. But I like it!"

And with **Light of Lights** (2024) we come to a carol written specially for Rupert Gough and the Royal Holloway Choir – one of ten carols, in fact, that Ponniah wrote during his festive *annus mirabilis* of 2024. "They are extremely talented, so there are some chords in there which I would never risk with other choirs" says Ponniah. "It was wonderful to be at the première because they created a sound that was better than was in my head. They just instinctively get my harmonic language". Ponniah's 2013 setting of **O magnum mysterium** is directly indebted to Scriabin's so-called "mystic chord" – as well as the landscape of the Cambridgeshire fens, where Ponniah was staying with the work's dedicatee, his ex-wife Dawn Herbert.

Simon Jackson of Peterhouse College, Cambridge commissioned **The Shepherds Sing** in 2024, and Ponniah initially hesitated over George Herbert's poem (not least because Jackson is an authority on the poet). In the end, the inspiration proved too strong to ignore. "Herbert's text is really a deep metaphor for faith - losing faith, and finding it and wanting to find something that shines even though there's night. I really liked that idea. I would say my shiniest of chords are probably in this piece!" **O Sapientia** is another Cambridge carol, this time for the Charter Choir of Homerton College. For Ponniah its Mixolydian harmonies evoke, once again, the vast skies of the fens around Cambridge.

The glowing hymnody of the Anglican tradition infuses the opening verses of **The Golden Carol** (a 2024 commission for The Epiphoni Consort). But this being Ponniah, its harmonies soon begin to blossom. And the medieval splendour of Ely Cathedral's Lady Chapel inspired the fusion of polyphony and homophony with which Ponniah sets the Old Testament words of **Sing, O Heav'ns**. The commission (from the Ely Consort) asked for a companion piece to the Tudor composer John Amner's setting of the same text, and Ponniah made full use of the Chapel's expansive acoustic.

"Bach has done a particularly good job of this one already" says Ponniah of **O Little One Sweet**, a 2021 commission from Simon Bell, the Chapel Choir of Dean Close School and Tewkesbury

Abbey Schola Cantorum. "But I wanted to have a go - each verse becomes more animated and more harmonically adventurous".

And if a single thread unites this garland of freshly-picked carols, it's reinvention. The basic elements of the Christmas story are eternal; the art is to make them feel as new, and as universal, as the Nativity itself. Few living composers have succeeded as powerfully as Ponniah, but **The Rose Brought Forth Her Flower** (written for Jesus College, Cambridge, to a text by Evelyn Underhill) is perhaps his most striking piece of re-imagination yet – with very different musical languages for the alternating Latin and English texts. "This piece is very much about the hardness of the journey; the pain and the cold - but with a warmer texture for the more hopeful Latin text", he says.

"I like to think of my music as being at an intersection on the Venn diagram between what I like, and what others like. I've realised that I'm a musical magpie, and it's interesting to think of the blue and golden thread that has linked me to where I am now. When you listen to this album, there are a lot of different sounds - but hopefully I'm recognisable in all of them somewhere".

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1. SEEING THE STAR

Seeing the star, the Wise Men rejoiced with great joy,
and entering the house, they offered the Lord gold,
incense and myrrh. Seeing the star, seeing the Lord.

From the Antiphon for the first Vespers of Epiphany

2. SILENT NIGHT

Silent night, holy night!
All is calm, all is bright.
Round yon Virgin, Mother and Child.
Holy infant so tender and mild,
Sleep in heavenly peace,
Sleep in heavenly peace.

Silent night, holy night!
Shepherds quake at the sight.
Glories stream from heaven afar
Heavenly hosts sing Alleluia,
Christ the Saviour is born!
Christ the Saviour is born

Silent night, holy night!
Son of God love's pure light.
Radiant beams from Thy holy face
With dawn of redeeming grace,
Jesus Lord, at Thy birth
Jesus Lord, at Thy birth

Joseph Mohr (1792-1848)

Tr. John F. Young (1820-1885)

3. EMILY'S CAROL

I sing the birth was born tonight,
The Author both of life and light;
The angels so did sound it,
And like the ravished shepherds said,
Who saw the light, and were afraid,
Yet searched, and true they found it.

The Son of God, the eternal King,
That did us all salvation bring,
And freed the soul from danger;
He whom the whole world could not take,
The Word, which heaven and earth did make,
Was now laid in a manger.

Ben Jonson (1572-1637)

4. REJOICE IN THE LIGHT

There's a song in the air!
There's a star in the sky!
There's a mother's deep prayer
and a baby's low cry!
And the star rains its fire
while the beautiful sing,
for the manger of Bethlehem
cradles a King!

There's a tumult of great joy
o'er the wonderful birth,
for the virgin's sweet boy
is the Lord of all the earth.
Ay! the star rains its fire
while the beautiful sing,
for the manger of Bethlehem
cradles a King!

In the light of that star
lie the ages impearled;
and that song from afar
has swept o'er all the world.
Every hearth is aflame,
and the beautiful sing
in the homes of the nations
that Jesus is King!

We rejoice in the light,
and we echo the song
that comes down through the night
from the heavenly throng.
Ay! we shout to the lovely
evangel they bring,
and we greet in his cradle
our Saviour and King!

Josiah Gilbert Holland (1819-1881)

5. A TENDER SHOOT

A tender shoot hath started
Up from a root of grace,
As ancient seers imparted,
From Jesse's holy race,
It blooms without a blight,
Blooms in the cold bleak winter,
Turning our darkness into light.

This shoot Isaiah taught us
From Jesse's root should spring;

The Virgin Mary brought us
The branch of which we sing;
Our God of endless might
Gave her this child to save us,
Thus turning darkness into light.

German 15th Century

Versified by Otto Goldschmidt (1829-1907)

Translated by William Bartholomew (1793-1867)

6. The Golden Rose Carol

When the herds were watching
In the midnight chill,
Came a spotless lambkin
From the heavenly hill.

Snow was on the mountains
And the wind was cold,
When from God's own garden
Dropped a rose of gold.

When 'twas bitter winter,
Homeless and forlorn
In a star-lit stable
Christ the Babe was born.

Welcome, heavenly lambkin;
Welcome, golden rose;
Alleluia, baby
In the swaddling clothes!

William Canton (1845-1926)

7. Be Still for the Presence of the Lord (arrangement)

Be still, for the presence of the Lord,
the holy One, is here;
come bow before him now
with reverence and fear
in him no sin is found
we stand on holy ground.
Be still, for the presence of the Lord,
the holy One, is here.

Be still, for the glory of the Lord
is shining all around;
he burns with holy fire,
with splendour he is crowned:
how awesome is the sight
our radiant king of light!
Be still, for the glory of the Lord
is shining all around.

Be still, for the power of the Lord
is moving in this place:
he comes to cleanse and heal,
to minister his grace –
no work too hard for him.
In faith receive from him.
Be still, for the power of the Lord
is moving in this place.

David J. Evans (b 1957)

8. The Pigeon Carol

Hushed are the pigeons cooing low
On dusty rafters of the loft;
And mild-eyed oxen, breathing soft,
Sleep on the fragrant hay below.

Dim shadows in the corner hide;
The glimmering lantern's rays are shed
Where one young lamb just lifts his head,
Then huddles 'gainst his mother's side.

Strange silence tingles in the air;
Through the half-open door a bar
Of light from one low-hanging star
Touches a baby's radiant hair.

No sound: the mother, kneeling, lays
Her cheek against the little face.
Oh human love! Oh heavenly grace!
'Tis yet in silence that she prays!

Ages of silence end to-night;
Then to the long-expectant earth
Glad angels come to greet His birth
In burst of music, love, and light!

Margaret Deland (1857-1945)

9. The Sun Shining through the Fog Vocalise

10. Light of lights!

Light of lights! All gloom dispelling,
Thou didst come to make thy dwelling
Here within our world of sight.
Lord, in pity and in power,
Thou didst in our darkest hour
Rend the clouds and show thy light.

Thomas Aquinas (1225-1274)

11. O magnum mysterium

O magnum mysterium,
et admirabile sacramentum,
ut animalia viderent Dominum natum,
jacentem in praesepe.
Beata Virgo, cujus viscera meruerunt
portare Dominum Jesum Christum.
Alleluia!

O great mystery,
and wonderful sacrament,
that animals should see the Lord born,
lying in a manger.
Blessed is the virgin, whose womb was worthy
to bear the Lord, Jesus Christ.
Alleluia!

Words from Matins for Christmas Day

12. The shepherds sing

The shepherds sing; and shall I silent be?
My God, no hymn for Thee?
My soul's a shepherd too; a flock it feeds
Of thoughts, and words, and deeds.
The pasture is Thy word: the streams, Thy grace
Enriching all the place.
Shepherd and flock shall sing, and all my powers
Outsing the daylight hours.
Then we will chide the sun for letting night
Take up his place and right:
We sing one common Lord; wherefore he should
Himself the candle hold.
I will go searching, till I find a sun
Shall stay, till we have done;
A willing shiner, that shall shine as gladly,
As frost-nipped suns look sadly.
Then we will sing, and shine all our own day,
And one another pay:
His beams shall cheer my breast, and both so twine,
Till ev'n His beams sing, and my music shine.

George Herbert (1593-1633)

13. O Sapientia

O Sapientia, quae ex ore Altissimi prodisti,
attingens a fine usque ad finem, fortiter
suaviterque disponens omnia: veni ad
docendum nos viam prudentiae.

O Wisdom, Who didst come out of the mouth
of the Most High, reaching from end to end and
ordering all things mightily and sweetly: come and
teach us the way of prudence.

O Antiphon for December 17

14. The Golden Carol

We saw the light shine out afar,
On Christmas in the morning,
And straight we knew Christ's star it was,
Bright beaming in the morning.
Then did we fall on bended knee,
On Christmas in the morning,
And praised the Lord, who'd let us see
His glory at its dawning.

Oh! every thought be of His name,
On Christmas in the morning,
Who bore for us both grief and shame,
Affliction's sharpest scorning.
And may we die, when death shall come,
On Christmas in the morning,
And see in heav'n, our glorious home,
That Star of Christmas morning.

Old English Carol

15. Sing O Heav'ns

Sing, O heav'ns; and be joyful, O earth; and break
forth into singing, O mountains: for God hath
comforted his people, and will have mercy upon his
afflicted. Let them also give glory unto the Lord:
and declare his praise for ever. Amen.

Isaiah 49:13; 42:12

16. O little one sweet

O little one sweet, O little one mild,
Thy Father's purpose thou hast fulfilled;
Thou camest from heaven to mortal ken,
Equal to be with us poor men,
O little one sweet, O little one mild.

O little one sweet, O little one mild,
With joy thou hast the whole world filled;
Thou camest here from heaven's domain,
To bring men comfort in their pain,
O little one sweet, O little one mild.

O little one sweet, O little one mild,
In thee Love's beauties are all distilled;
Then light in us thy love's bright flame,
That we may give thee back the same,
O little one sweet, O little one mild.

Samuel Scheidt (1587-1654)

Tr. Percy Dearmer (1867-1936)

17. The Rose Brought Forth Her Flower

Flores apparuerunt in terra nostra.

Very still was all the land,
Very secret was the hour;
Darkness as a guard did stand
When the Rose brought forth her flower:

Rosa sine spina.

Long the road and hard the pain,
Chill and lowly was the shed:
See, upon the straw she's lain:
Straw, to make her childingbed!

Virgo et regina.

Cold the welcome, sharp the smart;
Godhead treads the bitter way.
Only in the lowly heart
Is her Babe brought forth today:

Genetrix divina.

Evelyn Underhill (1875-1941)



BEN PONNIAH is a British composer of Sri Lankan heritage whose music blends emotional immediacy with choral richness, melody, jazz harmony, and influences from musical theatre. A lifelong improviser, he began creating music at the piano at the age of two, and this instinctive relationship with sound continues to underpin his compositional voice today.

His music has been performed and recorded by leading artists and ensembles including the BBC Singers, Recordare, Anna

Lapwood, the Choir of Canterbury Cathedral, and the Choir of Royal Holloway. His carol *Seeing the star* has become a contemporary seasonal favourite, attracting hundreds of thousands of streams, while his catalogue spans sacred choral music, concert works, film scores, and musical theatre, including his new stage work *Jabberwocky*.

Improvisation remains central to Ben's creative process – a place where emotion, intuition, and storytelling converge. Although he initially studied Economics at the University of Nottingham, his musical path was shaped through singing in choirs, exploring jazz piano, and rediscovering composition in his twenties. Early works such as *O sacrum convivium* quickly gained recognition and are now published by Boosey & Hawkes.

Ben completed a PhD in Composition at the University of Aberdeen under Professor Phillip Cooke and Dr Jonathan Hicks, further refining a musical language rooted in expressive harmony, lyricism, and choral colour. Alongside sacred and secular choral works, he continues to write for concert hall and stage, always driven by the same impulse that first drew him to the piano as a child: transforming emotion into sound.



The **CHOIR OF ROYAL HOLLOWAY** is considered to be one of the finest mixed-voice collegiate choirs in Great Britain, with their recordings attracting top reviews from all major music publications. Created at the time of the foundation of Royal Holloway in 1886, the choir was originally only for women's voices. The mixed choir now comprises 24 Choral Scholars who undertake a busy schedule of weekly services, as well as concerts, international tours, recordings, and TV and radio broadcasts. They are the only choir to give a weekly concert performance and during an average year give around 40-50 concerts with a particular specialism in contemporary music.

The choir has one of the busiest recording schedules of any collegiate choir with an extensive discography with Hyperion, Decca, Signum, and Naxos amongst others. The choir is renowned for its performances of Nordic and Baltic music and has recorded works by Vytautas Miškinis, Rihards Dubra, Bo Hansson, Tõnu Kõrvits, and Ola Gjeilo to great acclaim. The 2018 release *Winter Songs* with Gjeilo was No. 1 in the UK and US classical charts and they have now recorded a follow-up album with the Royal Philharmonic Orchestra released in September 2023. The choir's

recording of Matthew Coleridge's *Requiem* is already in the top 50 of Classic FM's Hall of Fame'. Following the death of Queen Elizabeth II, the choir recorded several tracks for a commemorative album released by Decca Classics which was no. 1 in the Christmas Classical Charts.

Other recent projects include two recordings of the music of Dan Locklair, a collaboration with the jazz-trio Acoustic Triangle and recordings for TV and film including the Apple TV series "Prime Target".

The choir regularly collaborates with and performs alongside many famous ensembles. These have included the King's Singers, the BBC Singers, The Royal Philharmonic Orchestra, Britten Sinfonia, London Mozart Players, Onyx Brass, Fretwork and the jazz-trio Acoustic Triangle. The group also celebrates the work of living composers and has commissioned works from Sir James MacMillan, Gabriel Jackson, Richard Rodney Bennett, Cecilia McDowall, and Paul Mealor. International performances are also an integral part of the choir's work. They have toured most European countries, and have been broadcast on national television and radio all over the world. A tour of all three Baltic states saw the choir performing in the Latvian Song Festival with the Tallinn Chamber Orchestra, in a concert (sung in Estonian) broadcast nationally on the Estonian Day of Independence. Further afield, the group has visited Beijing and numerous tours to the US and Canada.

SOPRANO

Amelia Blackburn
Flora Henderson
Emily Oxtoby
Natalie Phillips
Jessica Quigley
Dimitra Sotiropoulou
Sophia Vines

ALTO

Grace Hindle
Manuela Musanga
Kate Pinnell
Kristin Polman
Chloe Spires
Irina Temerel

TENOR

Daniel Ayers
Edward Dawson
Luke Gore
Robert Murray John

BASS

Thomas Allen
Jacob Dike
Peter Evans
Charlie Maggs
Brooke Storey
Jack Templar-Johns
Noah Toogood
Logan Williamson



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RUPERT GOUGH has been director of Choral Music and College Organist at Royal Holloway, University of London since 2005. He is also Organist and Director of Music at London's oldest surviving church, Saint Bartholomew the Great, which maintains a professional choir. At Royal Holloway Rupert has developed the choral programme to include weekly choral recitals, choral conducting courses and transformed the Chapel Choir into an elite group of 24 choral scholars. The Choir particularly came to prominence through

their series of recordings for Hyperion Records and for their role in popularising contemporary composers from the Baltic States, USA and UK. Their recording Winter Songs of the music of Ola Gjeilo is one of Decca Classics' most successful albums and was top of the US and UK classical charts. The choir is now greatly in demand for recording work from a variety of record labels, composers and orchestras and travels widely for concert performances.

Rupert was a chorister at the Chapels Royal, St. James's Palace, and won a scholarship to the Purcell School. He received (with distinction) a Masters degree in English Church Music from the University of East Anglia whilst Organ Scholar at Norwich Cathedral. For 11 years he was Assistant Organist at Wells Cathedral during which time he made around 30 album recordings as accompanist and director. Rupert has worked with a wide variety of professional ensembles including the BBC Singers, King's Singers, Royal Philharmonic Orchestra, Britten Sinfonia, London Mozart Players and Tallinn Chamber Orchestra. He is an established reviewer of organ recordings and has a number of compositions, editions and arrangements published by OUP, UMP, Edition Peters and Carus Verlag.

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Recorded 9th-10th January 2026 at **St. John the Evangelist**,
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Recording Engineer, mixed and mastered - **Adaq Khan**

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