

A young girl with glasses is sitting in a wheelchair, looking forward with a serious expression. A woman is pushing the wheelchair from behind. They are on a dirt path with trees and a car in the background.

CONVIVIUM
RECORDS

The Girl from
Aleppo

a cantata by
**Cecilia
McDowall**

performed by
**The National
Children's Choir
of Great Britain**

Wherever one looks, innocent children are caught up in conflict. During these last years alone, thousands and thousands of child refugees have trekked from Syria to Turkey and on into Europe in search of asylum.

One of these children was Nujeen Mustafa, a remarkable Kurdish teenager with cerebral palsy who had never gone to school but taught herself fluent English by watching American soap-operas. Driven from their home in Aleppo by war at the age of 16, she travelled 3593 miles across nine countries to Germany in a rickety second-hand wheelchair pushed by her elder sister, Nasrine. Her remarkable journey was followed by the journalist Christina Lamb (co-author of *I am Malala*). Through it all, as they navigated rough seas, people-smugglers, bumpy fields and hostile border guards, Nujeen remained with a smile on her face, chatting about her dream of becoming an astronaut and the things she had learnt on TV.

In this five-movement cantata Nujeen's dramatic story – recounted in her biography *The Girl from Aleppo*, co-authored by Christina Lamb – is retold by Kevin Crossley-Holland. Nujeen's experience unfolds in the musical narrative; chorales, haunting vocal solos, intense violin solos, restless choruses, body percussion, all driving a course from country to country to arrive, thankfully, in

Germany. It is a journey of hope and extraordinary fortitude against all the odds.

The cantata *Everyday Wonders: The Girl from Aleppo* was commissioned by The National Children's Choir of Great Britain on its 20th Anniversary and first performed by the Choirs in Birmingham Town Hall on 10 August, 2018 with Harriet Mackenzie, violin, Claire Dunham, piano, conducted by Dan Ludford-Thomas.

We are most grateful to Christina Lamb for bringing this extraordinary narrative to us in her book, *The Girl from Aleppo*, and to Nujeen Mustafa herself, whose story it is.

The Girl from Aleppo

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|---|---|-------|
| 1 | Orphans of the World | 08:03 |
| 2 | Thousands milling at the border (The Journey) | 02:18 |
| 3 | I'd never seen the sea before | 02:17 |
| 4 | A lost tribe pushed from border to border | 02:38 |
| 5 | Everyday Wonders | 04:02 |

“Working in collaboration with the author Kevin Crossley-Holland on the subject of ‘children in conflict’ has touched something close to my heart. Through the story of one exceptional, wheelchair-bound, young Kurdish refugee from Aleppo, Nujeen Mustafa, I feel I can begin to understand some of the terror, the distress and helplessness experienced by those driven from their homes by the horror of war. As composer I felt it important for the music not to obscure the text in any way, but to allow the words to tell the story, from despair, through hope and ultimately (and surprisingly) joy. The solo violin spins a narrative through the cantata evoking, at times, a quasi-Middle Eastern sound world. The prevailing mood of Nujeen's narrative is embodied by the final line of a chorale that bookends the cantata: ‘singing the song of life itself’.”

Cecilia McDowall

“It's one thing to hear about the plight of the homeless but quite another to meet and talk to refugees. From the moment I met Nujeen at the Emirates Airline Festival of Literature in Dubai three years ago, and then stayed up all night reading Christina Lamb's compelling account of Nujeen's journey from Syria to Germany with her remarkable sister Nasrine, I knew I wanted to work it into a choral text. Nujeen is so spirited, so matter of fact, so brave, and while her astonishing and painful story is utterly personal, it also embodies the experience she has shared with so many hundreds of thousands of women, men and children in so many countries, ‘singing sorrow but singing tomorrow’.”

Kevin Crossley-Holland

The National Children's Choir of Great Britain

The National Children's Choir of Great Britain was founded in 1998 by Lissa Gray. Her vision was that talented young singers from throughout the United Kingdom would have the opportunity to work together and enjoy making music under the guidance of inspired teachers. Young singers audition from ages 9 – 19, and each choir member is encouraged to develop their ability within a supportive environment. A focus on musical excellence is accompanied by a holistic approach to the choir members' well-being that allows them to flourish both musically and personally during courses.

Dan Ludford-Thomas, who was appointed Musical Director in 2018, is committed to taking the choir forward by combining this ethos with his aim to confirm NCCGB as a leader in the delivery of vocal and choral training for children and young people, with innovative programming and the opportunity to work with leading musicians and composers.

The Girl from Aleppo project has been an inspiration to everyone involved: musically, choir members have benefitted from the experience of working with Cecilia McDowall

and the outstanding team of musicians; and personally, we were all able to learn from Nu-jeen's courage, determination and optimism in the face of adversity.

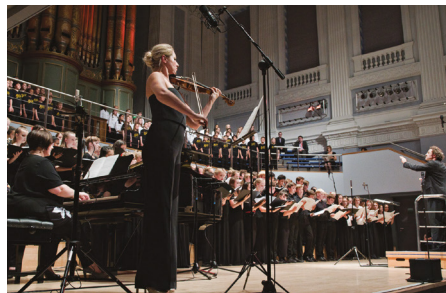
www.nccgb.com

Dan Ludford-Thomas

Dan is the Musical Director of the National Children's Choir of Great Britain. He maintains a busy schedule conducting professional choirs, choral societies and chamber choirs in London. He is the Director of Music of Lewisham Choral Society, Musical Director of the Hackney Singers and Conductor of Concordia Chamber Choir. In 2015, with Lewisham and Greenwich NHS Choir, he enjoyed success as the co-producer and Musical Director for the Choir's 2015 Christmas Number One *Bridge Over You*. Dan is Head of Vocal Studies at Dulwich College and enjoys a long association as a singing teacher on the Rodolfus Choral Courses.

Images of the rehearsal and concert in August 2018 and the recording in July 2019.

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The premiere performance at Birmingham Town Hall, 10th August 2018

THE
NATIONAL
CHILDREN'S CHOIR
of GREAT BRITAIN



Harriet Mackenzie

“Searing Intensity... A performance full of panache... captivating” - The Strad.

Harriet Mackenzie is an internationally renowned concerto soloist and has performed across five continents. Recordings include concertos with the Royal Philharmonic Orchestra, Orchestra Nova and the English Symphony Orchestra and these have received international acclaim, includ-

ing ‘Five Star’ review in The Times (Richard Morrison), ‘Editor’s Choice’ in Gramophone Magazine (Richard Whitehouse) and a nomination for ‘Recording of The Year’ in Music Web International: *“There is a completeness, a confidence, an honesty and a consistent lyrical beauty that has moved me again and again. These qualities all emerge in Harriet Mackenzie’s utterly magisterial performance...”* - Richard Hanlon.

www.harrietmackenzie.com

Claire Dunham

Claire Dunham is an accompanist, chamber musician, piano teacher and adjudicator.

She accompanies for Manchester High and Grammar Schools, Junior RNCM, the University of Manchester, RNCM and NCCGB; plays regularly at the Bridgewater Hall, and was engaged by the BBC to accompany bass-baritone Simon Bailey in a Radio 3 recital at St George’s Hall, Liverpool.

Recordings include contributions to *Bright Jewels* - an album of works by Malcolm Arnold, the NCCGB Christmas album *Wolcum!* and several CDs with flute / oboe / piano trio Intriplicate, with whom she has performed across the UK, from Perthshire to St Martin-in-the-Fields, over the last 20 years.

Cecilia McDowall

Cecilia McDowall has won many awards, including the 2014 British Composer Award. Regularly broadcast on BBC Radio, her works are available on CD and performed worldwide. Recent commissions include works for the BBC Singers, St. John’s and King’s Colleges, Cambridge. *Three Latin Motets* were recorded by the American choir, Phoenix Chorale, conductor Charles Bruffy; the disc won a Grammy award.

Wimbledon Choral Society commissioned the Da Vinci Requiem to coincide with the 500th anniversary of Leonardo’s death in May 2019, recording the work in May 2020 with the Philharmonia Orchestra for the Signum label. McDowall is a recipient of two Honorary Doctorates and an Honorary Fellowship award from the Royal School of Church Music.

www.ceciliamcdowall.co.uk

Kevin Crossley-Holland

Kevin Crossley-Holland is a poet, medievalist and novelist for children, and has translated *Beowulf* from Anglo-Saxon. Author of *The Penguin Book of Norse Myths*, the prizewinning *Arthur Trilogy* (translated into twenty-five languages) and *Between Worlds*, a definitive collection of English and Irish folktales. He has also worked with many leading composers and collaborated with the artists Charles Keeping, John Lawrence and Norman Ackroyd. President of the School Library Association (2012-17), he is a Fellow of the Royal Society of Literature and an Honorary Fellow of St. Edmund Hall, Oxford, and has been awarded honorary doctorates by Anglia Ruskin and the University of Worcester. He lives in north Norfolk.

www.kevincrossley-holland.com

Libretto

1 Orphans of the World

Chorale

This wreath of words is what we have,
And flowers of song all we can give.
Singing sorrow but singing tomorrow.
Singing the song of life itself.

Nujeen. Nujeen.

New life. That's me!

But I can't walk, can't balance.

My two legs have lives of their own.

Plaster, braces, operations.

I'm stuck forever on tiptoes.

I often dream about being an astronaut.

Floating in space, your legs don't matter.

The scent of rosewater, hookah pipes,

Pistachios. That's how Aleppo used to be.

Dust, rubble. Every window broken.

Aleppo, Aleppo... like a ghost town.

We Kurds: orphans of the world.

My mother, father, my siblings.

All ten of us in three rooms.

TV was my school, TV was my friend. I learned

Soap-opera English by watching TV.

Shelling, looting, hammering, bombing.

We knew we had to leave.

Just me, my sister Nasrine, and my wheelchair.

Sometimes sisters can be as sweet as birds.

Chorale

Remember me? Remember.

I'm not a baby, not a girl, not a boy.

I'm just a number, an obstacle.

I'm on the wrong side.

Remember. Remember me?

2 Thousands milling at the border (The Journey)

Thousands milling at the border. Suitcases.

Bundles. Refugees — nothing!

We sold heirlooms. Family homes.

One man said he sold his kidney.

We raised money to buy life jackets,

A place on a dinghy, freedom.

3 I'd never seen the sea before

I'd never seen the sea before,

The mist, the spray. How beautiful it is!

Our phones we tied inside party balloons

To keep them dry on the crossing.

Of course I can't swim. I've never been in water.

None of us could swim. I became Poseidon.

That dove pebble a little Afghan boy

Gave me: I held it for luck

Between my awkward fingers.

4 A lost tribe pushed from border to border

A lost tribe pushed from border to border.

Stampeding for a bus, swarming across fields.

In the camps children drew pictures

With coloured pencils: a flower bright as blood.

The guards lobbed food at us —

Lawyers, doctors, Professors, businessmen.

We aren't animals.

The jerking, the jolting, the pain, the pain.

And Nasrine always pushing, pushing.

Greece, Macedonia, Serbia, Hungary,

Croatia, Slovenia, Austria...

'Please, Germany? Where is Germany?'

The policeman smiled.

'Willkommen! Welcome to Germany!'

5 Everyday Wonders

My head, my heart. Skipping and singing.

What delights me are everyday wonders:

People talking to me because I'm smiling.

My head, my heart. Skipping and singing.

Happy frogs croaking, summer rain falling,

Even the ducks seemed to welcome me.

A chance to brush my teeth in the morning.

Everything on time, all the strict rules,

Waking early, my first ever morning at school,

My pink-and-blue rucksack, red subject folders.

Sometimes in my dreams I make friends...

The animals at the zoo, some are as weird

As I am. A smiling refugee. Am I an alien?

Laugh as long as you breathe.

Love as long as you live.

These are my favourite sayings.

My head, my heart. Skipping and singing.

Nujeen. Nujeen. New life. That's me.

Chorale

This wreath of words is our choice.

These flowers of song, they are our voice.

Singing sorrow, singing tomorrow,

singing tomorrow.

Singing the song of life itself.

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to Christina Lamb & Nujeen Mustafa).

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The Girl from **Aleppo**

The Girl from Aleppo is the story of **Nujeen Mustafa**, written by **Christina Lamb**, upon which **Kevin Crossley-Holland** based his libretto that has been set to music by **Cecilia McDowall**.

*The cantata was commissioned and premiered by **The National Children's Choir of Great Britain** on **10th August 2018** and recorded at **Shrewsbury School** on **31st July 2019** with violinist **Harriet Mackenzie**, pianist **Claire Dunham** and directed by **Dan Ludford-Thomas**.*

*The recording was engineered and produced by **Jon Cohen** with assistant engineer **Al Unsworth**, additional mixing by **Adaq Khan**.
Photography is by **Karina Lyburn**, artwork by **Mike Cooter** and **Adrian Green** is the executive producer.*

With thanks and gratitude for the contribution of everybody at The National Children's Choir of Great Britain for their involvement in the premiere concert and recording of this cantata.



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