

Two Kingsongs (2013)

For Baritone and Piano

Duration: 7'45"

Commissioned by The Cheah-Chan Duo

World Premiere: Phillip Cheah, baritone, Trudy Chan, piano; Ten-Ri Cultural Institute, NYC, June 29, 2013

The poems I set in *Two Kingsongs* are anything but hagiographies. Sylvia Townsend Warner's King Duffus describes the Scottish monarch who, having been revived from a months-long witches' curse, longs for the pastoral comforts of his half-death. Shelley's famous Ozymandias tells of the crumbled statue of a pompous ruler, forlorn and neglected in the vast desert. "Duffus" is driven by a motoric riff which evolves from the flames of the witches' burning to the gentler nostalgic tones of the roused king's musings. "Ozymandias" is a slow Saharan blues, featuring evocations of the swirling sands. The singer uses falsetto for the voice of the ancient king, finishing the song at the bottom of the baritone range.

I. King Duffus

When all the witches were haled to the stake and burned,
When their least ashes were swept up and drowned,
King Duffus opened his eyes and looked round.

For half a year they had trussed him in their spell:
Parching, scorching, roaring, he was blackened as a coal.
Now he wept like a freshet in April.

Tears ran like quicksilver through his rocky beard.
Why have you wakened me, he said, with a clattering sword?
Why have you snatched me back from the green yard?

There I sat feasting under the cool linden shade;
The beer in the silver cup was ever renewed,
I was at peace there, I was well-bestowed:

My crown lay lightly on my brow as a clot of foam,
My wide mantle was yellow as the flower of the broom,
Hale and holy I was in mind and in limb.

I sat among poets and among philosophers,
Carving fat bacon for the mother of Christ;
Sometimes we sang, sometimes we conversed.

Why did you summon me back from the midst of that meal
To a vexed kingdom and a smoky hall?
Could I not stay at least until dewfall?

--*Sylvia Townsend Warner*

II. Ozymandias

I met a traveller from an antique land
Who said: Two vast and trunkless legs of stone
Stand in the desert. Near them, on the sand,
Half sunk, a shattered visage lies, whose frown,
And wrinkled lip, and sneer of cold command,
Tell that its sculptor well those passions read
Which yet survive, stamped on these lifeless things,
The hand that mocked them and the heart that fed:
And on the pedestal these words appear:
"My name is Ozymandias, king of kings:
Look on my works, ye Mighty, and despair!"
Nothing beside remains. Round the decay
Of that colossal wreck, boundless and bare
The lone and level sands stretch far away.
--Percy Bysshe Shelley