

PITTSBURGH OPERA

Curlew River

JAN. 24, 27, 30, FEB. 1, 2026 · CALVARY EPISCOPAL CHURCH

Abbot, Monks, and Instrumentalists

Te lucis ante terminum, Rerum Creator,
poscimus, Ut pro tua dementia, Sis praesul et
custodia.

Procul recedant somnia, Et noctium
phantasmata:
Hostemque nostrum comprime,
Ne pollutantur corpora.

Praesta, Pater piissime, Patrique compar
Unice, Cum Spiritu Paraclito,
Regnans per omne saeculum. Amen.

*To thee before the close of day, creator of the
world, we pray that, with thy wonted favor, thou
wouldst be our guard and keeper now.*

*From all ill dreams defend our sight, from tears
and terrors of the night; withhold from us our
ghostly foe, that spot of sin we may not know.*

*O Father, that we ask be done, through Jesus
Christ, thine only Son, who, with the Holy
Ghost and thee, doth live and reign eternally.
Amen.*

Abbot

Good souls, I would have you know
The Brothers have come today
To show you a mystery: How in sad mischance
A sign was given of God's grace.

Monks

A sign of God's grace.

Abbot

Not far away
Where, in our reedy Fens, The Curlew River
runs, Not long ago, Amid souls akin to you,
A sign was given of God's grace.

Monks

A sign of God's grace.

Abbot

As candle-shine In a dismal place,
A freshet spilt In a desert waste,
As innocence Outshineth guilt,
A sign was given Of God's good grace.

Abbot and Monks

O pray for the souls of all that fall
By the wayside, all alone.
O praise our God that lifteth up
The fallen, the lost, the least.

Abbot

Beloved, attend To our mystery.

Ferryman

I am the Ferryman. I row the ferry boat
Over the Curlew,
Our wide and reedy Fenland river.
In every season, every weather,
I row the ferry boat.

Abbot and Chorus

Between two kingdoms the river flows;
On this side, the Land of the West,
On the other, the Eastern fens.

Ferryman

Today is an important day,
Many people need the ferry
To reach the other bank.
There the folk are gathering
To pray before a grave,
As if it were a shrine. A year ago today
There was a burial; The river folk believe
Some special grace is there
To heal the sick in body and soul.
Today is an important day,
Mark this well, all of you!

Traveller

I come from the West-land, on a journey.
Far, far northward I must go;
Weary days of travel lie before me.

Abbot and Chorus

Far, far northward he must go;
Weary days of travel lie before him.

Traveller

Behind me, under clouds and mist,
Heaths and pastures I have crossed;
Woods and moorlands I have passed,
Many a peril I have faced;
May God preserve wayfaring men!
Here is the bank of the Curlew River,
And now I have reached the ferry.
I see the ferry boat about to leave.

Chorus

Between two kingdoms, O River, flow
On this side, the Land of the West,
On the other, Dyke and marsh and mere,
The Land of the Eastern Fens.

Traveller

Ferryman! Have you a place for me,
A place for me in your boat?

Ferryman

Very well, sir. There is room for you.
Pray get in.
But first may I ask you
What is that strange noise
Up the highway there?

Madwoman

You mock me, you ask me Whither I go,
How should I know?
Where the nest of the curlew
Is not filled with snow,
Where the eyes of the lamb
Are untorn by the crow,
The carrion crow-There let me go!

Ferryman

May I ask, did you see
Who it is that is singing?

Traveller

Yes, the people were watching
A woman in the road
Who seems to be crazy.
They say she comes
From the Black Mountains.
The people were amused

When they heard her singing;
They all began laughing.
She is coming this way.

Ferryman

I will delay the ferry boat.

Madwoman

Let me in! Let me out! Tell me the way!
How can you say
Why the point of an arrow Divideth the day?
Why to live is to warm An image of clay
Dark as the day?
Let me in! Let me out! I turn me away!

Ferryman

I will wait for the Madwoman,
I should like to see her.

All (Traveller, Ferryman, Abbot, and Chorus)

She is coming this way!
We will wait for the Madwoman.
We will delay the ferry boat!
We wish to see her.
We wish to hear her singing.
We will laugh at her Crazy singing.

All

She wanders raving, and all alone.

Madwoman

Clear as a sky without a cloud
May be a mother's mind,
But darker than a starless night
With not one gleam, not one,
No gleam to show the way.
All is clear but unclear too,
Love for my child confuses me:
Where is my darling now?
Shall I ask these Travellers?

Abbot and Chorus

Or will they also laugh at her
As she wanders raving, and all alone?

Madwoman

Does he know his mother's grief?

Abbot and Chorus

Dew on the grass Sparkles like hope
And then is gone.

Madwoman

Dew on the grass Sparkles like hope;
Dew on the...It's here, it's gone!

Abbot

Is she to pass her days
Complaining of their bitter taste?

Chorus

Dew on the grass It's here, it's gone!

Madwoman

Near the Black Mountains There I dwelt,
Far in the West, There I was living
With my only child.
One day alas he vanished:
With silence every room was full,
Full of his absence, Roaring like the sea!
My only child was lost, Seized as a slave
By a stranger, a foreigner.
They told me he was taken Eastward,
eastward, Along the drovers' track
East, east, east.
Clear and unclear in mind
Eastward I wander on,
In longing for my son.

All

A thousand leagues may sunder
A mother and her son,
But that would not diminish
Her yearning for her child.

Traveller

Will her search be at an end
Here, at the Curlew River,
Now she has reached the Curlew River?

Abbot and Chorus

The river flowing between two realms-
On this side, the Land of the West,
On the other, the Eastern fens.

Madwoman

Ferryman, Ferryman,
Let me get into your boat!

Ferryman

How can I take you in my ferry boat,
Unless you tell me
Where you have come from,

And where you are going?

Madwoman

I come from the Black Mountains!
Searching for, searching for Someone...

Ferryman

So you come from the Black Mountains!
I tell you, Black Mountain woman,
Any fool can see
Your feet are wandering,
Your thoughts are wandering too.

Madwoman

Let me get into your boat!

Ferryman

I will not take you across the Curlew
Unless you entertain us with your singing!

Ferryman and Tenors

Unless you entertain us with your singing!

Traveller and Baritones

We want to hear you singing, crazily singing!

Abbot and Basses

Make us laugh with your singing, Madwoman!

All

Show us what you can do! Madwoman, sing!

Madwoman

Ignorant man!
You refuse a passage
To me, a noblewoman! It ill becomes you
Curlew Ferryman, Such incivility.

Ferryman

The Black Mountain woman
Uses a high-flown way of talking!

Madwoman

Let me remind you
Of the famous traveller
Who once made a riddle In this very place:
"Birds of the Fenland, though you float or fly,
Wild birds, I cannot understand your cry,
Tell me, does the one I love
In this world still live?"
Ferryman, there the wild birds float!
I see the wild birds fly!

What are those birds?

Ferryman

Those? They're only common gulls.

Madwoman

Gulls you may call them!
Here, by the Curlew River,
Call them, I beg of you,
Curlews of the Fenland.

Ferryman

I beg your pardon.
Living in this famous place
I should have known
To call them Curlews of the Fenland.

Madwoman

Instead of gulls.

Traveller

A traveller at this very place cried:

Madwoman

"Tell me, does the one I love
In this world still live?"

Traveller

Thinking of his lady love-

Ferryman

She too is seeking someone lost.
Searching for a son.

Traveller

Yearning for a woman.

Traveller and Ferryman

Both derive from longing, Both from love.
"Birds of the Fenland," she will ask,
But answer they will not.
"Birds of the Fenland, though you float or fly,
Wild birds, I cannot understand your cry."

Chorus

Birds of the Fenland, she will ask you too,
"Is the child I love Still living?"
She will ask, and she will ask,
But answer they will not.
"Tell me, does the one I love
In this world still live?"

Abbot and Chorus

Birds of the Fenland, she has heard you crying
There in the West, in the mountains, in her
home. How far, how very far, Birds of the
Fenland, comes this wandering soul.

Traveller, Abbot, and Chorus

Ferryman, she begs of you
To let her come aboard.
She sees the boat is crowded,
But let her come aboard,
Let her come aboard!

Ferryman

This Madwoman seems,
Though her mind may be wandering,
To know what she seeks.
Lady, be quick and come aboard!
And you too, Traveller.
To navigate the ferry boat Is not easy.
The river is glassy, But the Devil himself
With strong-flowing currents
Can drag the boat aside,
And carry away All who are in her.
Be careful and sit still.
God have mercy upon us!

Traveller, Abbot, and Chorus

God have mercy upon us!

Ferryman

Hoist the sail!

Traveller, Abbot, and Chorus

Curlew River, smoothly flowing
Between the Lands of East and West,
Dividing person from person!
Ah, Ferryman,
Row your ferry boat, Bring nearer, nearer,
Person to person,
By chance or misfortune,
Time, death or misfortune, Divided asunder!

Traveller

What are all those people
Crowded on the other bank
Near that yew tree?

Ferryman

Today is an important day,
The people are assembling
In memory of a sad event.

I will tell you the story.

It happened on this very day a year ago. There was a stranger in my boat, a Northman, a foreigner, a big man armed with a sword and a cudgel. He was on his way to take ship to the North-land. And not alone. There was a boy with him, a gentle boy, twelve years old, maybe, and a Christian. The Heathen said he'd bought him as a slave. The boy said nothing. I could see he was ill. Unused to travelling rough. Poor child. When we had crossed the river, he said he was too weak to walk, and down he lay on the grass near the chapel. The Heathen threatened him, swore at him, struck him. He was a man without a heart, and we feared he would kill the boy, but he left the boy where he was, and went on his way.

Abandoned by his master, the boy lay alone. The river people pitied him, took care of him. But he grew weaker and weaker. We asked him who he was, where he was born. "I was born," he said, "in the Western Marches; from my pillow, when I first opened my eyes, I could see the Black Mountains. I am the only child of a nobleman. My father is dead, I have lived alone with my mother. Then, walking alone in our own fields, I was seized by that stranger. He threatened to kill me... But there was no need: I know I am dying... Please bury me here, by the path to this chapel. Then if travellers from my dear country pass this way, their shadows will fall on my grave, and plant a yew tree in memory of me." He spoke these words calmly, like a man. Then he said a prayer: "Kyrie eleison! Kyrie eleison!" And then he died.

Traveller, Abbot, and Chorus
Kyrie eleison! Kyrie eleison!

Ferryman
The river folk believe The boy was a saint.
They take earth from his grave
To heal their sickness.
They report many cures.
The river folk believe His spirit has been seen.

Traveller, Abbot, and Chorus
Kyrie eleison! Kyrie eleison!

Ferryman

There may be some people from the West in this boat. Let them offer prayers that the soul of that boy may rest in peace.

Traveller, Abbot and Chorus
Kyrie eleison! Kyrie eleison!

Ferryman

Look! While you were listening to my story, we have reached the bank. Lower the sail!

Ferryman

Make haste there, all of you!
Come, get ashore!

Traveller, Abbot, and Chorus

Curlew River, smoothly flowing
Between the Lands of East and West,
Dividing person from person.
Ah, Ferryman, row your ferry boat!
Bring nearer, nearer, Person to person,
By chance or misfortune,
Time, death or misfortune, Divided asunder!

Traveller

I'll remain here today.
I cannot journey on today. Though I never
knew the boy I'll offer up a prayer for him.

Abbot and Chorus

Though he never knew the boy
He'll offer up a prayer for him.

Ferryman

Come along there, you crazy soul!
It's time to land, So get out of the boat.
Come along there, Get out of the boat!
You must be soft-hearted To weep at my story,
To weep so bitterly.
Make haste there, step ashore!

Madwoman

Ferryman, tell me, When did it happen,
This story you have told us?

Ferryman

Last year, at this time,
On this very day, a year ago.

Madwoman

Ferryman, how old was the boy?

Ferryman

I told you, he was twelve.

Madwoman

What was his name?

Ferryman

But I told you all about him!
I told you what he was,
And how he came here.

Madwoman

Ferryman, pray tell me,
Tell me what his name was.

Ferryman

Oh how should I know?
His father was a nobleman
From the Black Mountains.

Madwoman

And since then have neither
Of his parents been here?

Ferryman

No one of his family.

Madwoman

Not even his mother?

Ferryman

Not even his mother!

Madwoman

No wonder no one
Came here to look for him!
He was the child
Sought by this Madwoman.

Traveller

The boy was her child,
The child she was seeking! He who died here
Was this poor woman's child.

Ferryman

Who could have dreamed it?
The boy who died here!
Her sad search is ended.
Is ended after months of weary searching.

Abbot

The Madwoman was his mother!
Him she was seeking
Was not to be found.

Madwoman

Am I dreaming? Is this a dream?

Chorus

He was her child!
She has found his grave here by the river.
She was his mother!
She has only found sorrow!
Is this a dream?
Or is it true she was his mother?

Madwoman

O Curlew river, cruel Curlew,
Where all my hope is swept away!
Torn from the nest, my bird,
Crying in empty air.
Now the nest of the curlew is silent with snow,
And the lamb is devoured by the carrion crow...
The innocent lamb... The heathen crow!
Good people, where shall I turn?
Tell me now! Take me back...
Chain on my soul, let me go!
O River Curlew, O curlew, cruel bird!

Abbot and Chorus

Here, where the Curlew Separates for ever
On that side, the Land of the West,
And here, the Eastern Fens.
Here where the River
Forever divides them Her sad search is ended.

Ferryman

Who would have guessed that
The boy was her child?

Traveller

This Madwoman was his mother.

Ferryman

Lady, I pity you!

Traveller

I pity you!

Both

We pity you!

Madwoman

Let me in! Let me out! Let me in!

Ferryman

Your sad search is ended!

Ferryman

Now let me show you
Where the boy is buried. I beg you,
Please step this way.
Lady, come with me.
This is the grave of your young child.
That his young soul may rest in peace,
We all can pray.
May Heaven receive it!
For his young soul's repose, lady,
Your prayer is best.

Ferryman, Abbot and Chorus

Lady, let him guide you to the tomb,
The place where your wandering steps have
brought you.
This is the grave of your young child.
That his soul may rest in peace,
We all can pray.
May Heaven receive it!

Madwoman

Hoping, I wandered on,
Hoping to find my son. I have come alone
To the reedy land of Fens,
Where all is strange to me,
Only to learn In all this earth, no road
Leads to my living son. Hoping, I wandered on-
I have come to a grave! Did I give birth to him
To have him stolen And carried far away,
Here to the Eastern Fens
To end as dust by the road?
O, good people, open up the tomb
That I may see again The shape of my child,
His face, his well-beloved face!

Abbot and Chorus

He whose life was full of promise
Promised, and is gone.
She who feels her life is passing,
She is left alone.
Left alone, and weeping:
May her weeping cease!

Ferryman

What is the use of tears?

Whom can your weeping help?
No, rather say a prayer
That in the other world
The soul of your child May rest in peace.

Madwoman

Cruel! Grief is too great, I cannot pray,
I am struck down. Here, on the ground,
All I can do is weep.

Traveller

This is not right. Lady, remember,
All of us here
May pray for your child: But your prayer is best
To rejoice his young soul.

Madwoman

What you say is true:
I'll say a prayer
For the soul of my lost child.
Deafened by his silence,
Roaring like the sea.

Abbot and Chorus

The moon has risen,
The river breeze is blowing,
The Curlew River
Is flowing to the sea.
Now it is night
And time to pray.

Madwoman

I pray with the others
Under the white light
Of the cloudless moon.

Ferryman

And her prayers go straight to Heaven.

Traveller

Her prayers go to Heaven.

Ferryman and Traveller

And, O, to the numberless
Holy and glorious Saints and martyrs,
All the company Holy and glorious
There in the blessed Abode of eternal
Peacefulness, happiness.
All angels, all martyrs,
All saints, pray for us.
Christ have mercy upon us.

Abbot and Chorus

Custodes hominum psallimus Angelos,
 Naturae fragili quos Pater addidit Caelestis
 comites, insidiantibus
 Ne succumberet hostibus.

Nam quod corruerit proditor Angelus,
 Concessis merito pulsus honoribus, Ardens
 invidia, pellere nititur
 Ouos caelo Deus advocat.

*The guardians of our race,
 our Angel Guides we hail; our Father sendeth
 forth to aid our nature frail
 these heavenly friends, lest we should suffer
 overthrow through cunning of our subtle foe.*

*For he, who justly lost the honor once his own,
 the traitor angel, rues his lost and vacant
 throne, with burning envy strives to make them
 fall away whom God doth call to heavenly day.*

Madwoman

From the river I hear voices,
 Like souls abandoned Curlews are calling.
 "Birds of the Fenland, though you float or fly,
 Wild birds, I cannot understand your cry.
 Tell me, does the one I love
 In this world still live?"

Ferryman, Traveller, Abbot, and Chorus

Haec custos igitur pervigil advola, Avertens
 patria de tibi credita
 Tam morbos animi, quam requiescere
 Ouidquid non sinit incolas.

*Then, watchful Guardian,
 spread thy wings and cleave the air,
 haste hither to our home committed to thy care;
 drive thence each noxious ill that might the
 soul infest, nor suffer danger here to rest.*

Spirit and the Rest

Sanctae sit Triadi laus pia jugiter...

*Now to the holy Three your praise devoutly
 pour...*

Madwoman

I thought I heard
 The voice of my child.

Spirit and the Rest

Cujus perpetuo numine machina...

*His glorious Godhead guides and governs
 evermore...*

Madwoman

I thought I heard him. Praying in his grave.

Spirit and the Rest

Triplex haec regitur...

This triple fame...

Ferryman

We also heard it,

Traveller

The voice of the child

Spirit and the Rest

...cujus in omnia...

...to him ascribe we all our praise...

Ferryman

We shall keep silent.

Traveller

Say your prayer alone, lady.

Ferryman

Say it alone.

Abbot, Chorus and Spirit

Regnat gloria saecula.

Who reigns through everlasting days.

Madwoman

O but if only
 I might hear it,
 Hear his voice once again,
 The voice of my son,
 Hear the voice of my son!

Spirit

Amen.

All (except the Madwoman and Spirit)

Hear his voice!

See, there is his shape!

Madwoman

Is it you, my child?

Spirit

Go your way in peace, mother.
The dead shall rise again
And in that blessed day
We shall meet in Heaven.

Abbot and Chorus

Amen.

Spirit

God be with you all.

Ferryman and Traveller

Amen.

Spirit

God be with you, mother.

Mother

Amen.

Spirit

Amen.

Abbot

Good souls, we have shown you here
How in sad mischance
A sign was given of God's grace.

Monks

A sign of God's grace.

Abbot

A vision was seen,
A miracle and a mystery,
At our Curlew River here.
A woman was healed by prayer and grace,
A woman with grief distraught.

Monks

With grief distraught.

Abbot and Monks

O praise our God that lifteth up
The fallen, the lost, the least;
The hope He gives, and His grace that heals.

Abbot

In hope, in peace, ends our mystery.

All

Te lucis ante terminum, Rerum Creator,
poscimus, Ut pro tua clementia,
Sis praesul et custodia.

Procul recedant somnia, Et noctium
phantasmata:

Hostemque nostrum comprime, Ne polluantur
corpora.

Praesta, Pater piissime, Patrique compar
Unice, Cum Spiritu Paraclito,
Regnans per omne saeculum. Amen.

*To thee before the close of day, creator of the
world, we pray that, with thy wonted favor, thou
wouldst be our guard and keeper now.*

*From all ill dreams defend our sight, from fears
and terrors of the night; withhold from us our
ghostly foe, that spot of sin we may not know.*

*O Father, that we ask be done, through Jesus
Christ, thine only Son, who, with the Holy
Ghost and thee, doth live and reign eternally.*

Amen.

Libretto by William Plomer
After Jūrū Motomasa

Latin translations by John Mason Neele

© 1966 by Faber Music Ltd., London
Reproduced by permission of the publishers.
All rights reserved.