

Curlew River

Music by Benjamin Britten
Libretto by William Plomer

Based on the Japanese Noh play *Sumidagawa River*

Study Guide to the Opera

Logan Wagner, as The Madwoman in *Curlew River*,
in the chancel of Calvary Episcopal Church.
(Photo credit: David Bachman)



A Parable, An Opera, A Blend of Cultures

PARABLE

A simple story that illustrates a moral or spiritual lesson

NOH

Japan's oldest classical musical theater, an art form combining masks, elaborate costumes, dance, and music to tell stories

PLAINSONG

Unaccompanied liturgical chant, traditionally sung by monks in Latin, characterized by a single melodic line and free rhythm

Is *Curlew River* an opera? Is *Curlew River* a church parable? Is *Curlew River* a western translation of a Japanese Noh play? The composer Benjamin Britten described his Opus 71 as “A Parable for Church Performance”, the first of three he composed between 1964–1968. Beginning in 1931, Britten’s stage works included Ballets, Operettas, Operas, and a Miracle Play, but a 1956 trip to Japan awakened his dramatic and musical styles and helped him transition and forge a new, highly individual style that blended Eastern aesthetics and Western operatic traditions.

Curlew River is an English music drama that incorporates elements of Noh theatrical time, spiritual themes, and stylized drama. *Curlew River* is a sung drama (opera) that enhances operatic musical elements with pentatonic scales, instrumental textures, a ceremonial pace, and a group of monks that acts like a Greek chorus. *Curlew River* is a stylized drama that focuses on the interaction between mortal and spiritual realms. *Curlew River* is a Western opera that follows the Noh narrative of *Sumidagawa* and mirrors its characters. When Britten chose to include Medieval plainsong elements, he crafted the role of The Madwoman as a tenor, as all monk singers would have been male.

Unlike traditional church parables—simple stories to teach deep spiritual truths about love and morality—Britten’s *Curlew River* Parable for Church Performance draws on a Japanese tale about life, loss, and suffering. The Buddhist undertones in Noh stories are core ideas that influence the path to a more meaningful existence, without direct religious affiliation.

How to define *Curlew River*? It’s a music drama that focuses on the supernatural, but it’s designed to be performed in a church. It’s a blend of medieval mystery play structures and music, Japanese theatrical traditions, and western operatic elements. It’s a unique cross-cultural work of musical theater that includes powerful emotional expressions.

Curlew River Synopsis

A Parable in One Act, sung in English and Latin

Based on the medieval Noh play *Sumidagawa* by Juro Motomasa

Place: Curlew River (a fictional place in East Anglia)

Premiere June 12, 1964: Suffolk, England. Orford Church

The scene is set in a church by a Fenland river in early medieval times. A group of monks, acolytes, and lay brethren process in with their Abbot, intoning the plain-chant "Te lucis ante terminum." The lay brothers go to their instruments and the Abbot announces the performance of a mystery showing how a sign of God's grace was given.

The monks who are to play the Madwoman, the Traveller, and the Ferryman are ceremonially costumed. The Madwoman and the Traveller leave the acting area. The Ferryman, whose duty it is to ferry pilgrims across the Curlew River, steps forward. Today is the day when they come to visit a grave on the other bank which is revered as a shrine. There was a burial there a year ago, and the folk believe it can heal the sick.

The Traveller approaches. He has been long on the road and he begs for a place on the ferry, which the Ferryman grants. The Madwoman's cries are heard in the distance as she sings about curlews, lambs, and crows. When she appears, her confused singing includes the mention of her child, and the pilgrims listen to her in amazement. She tells how her son was seized by a stranger, and how she has lost her mind in despair. She begs to get into the boat, but the Ferryman refuses, alarmed by her strange story. Eventually the Traveller, the Abbot, and the pilgrims persuade the Ferryman to allow her on board, and a sail is hoisted.

As the ferry crosses to the other bank, the Ferryman tells how a year before a Heathen man came and left behind a boy who had been ill-treated and was very weak. The boy was able to say he had been stolen from his mother before dying with a prayer on his lips. He was buried nearby.

The ferry has reached the bank and the sail is lowered. All go ashore to visit the boy's tomb except the Madwoman. The Ferryman impatiently tells the Madwoman to be on her way, until her questions reveal that she is his mother and this was the boy she lost. She leads the lamentation, in which all join, her prayers mingling with images of birds and flight. A child's voice is heard and the Spirit of the Child appears above the tomb. He blesses his mother with the promise that they will meet in Heaven.

The Madwoman, the Ferryman, and the Traveller resume their monks' habits and all recess chanting the "Te lucis."

—Courtesy of Hugh Macdonald, Mark Morris Dance Group

Characters

The Madwoman *tenor*

A distraught mother who has been driven mad by grief after her son's disappearance and unaware of his tragic fate. She travels to the river looking for him and finds healing through prayer at his grave.

The Ferryman *baritone*

A stoic figure who ferries passengers across the mysterious Curlew River. He tells the story of a boy who died by the river a year ago.

Abbot *bass*

Acts as a narrator, framing the opera's story as a Christian parable. The Abbot helps guide the audience through the monks' mystery play.

The Traveller *baritone*

After a long road trip, he begs the Ferryman for a place on the ferry.

The Pilgrims *3 tenors, 3 baritones, 2 basses*

A chorus of eight monks who represent the community and observe the events that unfold.

The Spirit of the Boy *treble*

Appears as a vision at his grave, allowing the Madwoman to find peace.

Instrumentation

The instrumentalists are dressed as lay brothers:

Flute (doubling piccolo)

Horn

Viola

Double Bass

Harp

Percussion (5 small untuned drums, 5 small bells, 1 large tuned gong)

Chamber Organ

Meet the Composer

Born in Suffolk, England, Benjamin Britten was a central figure of 20th-century British classical music. His father was a dentist with little interest in music, but his mother, Edith, loved music and actively steered her son toward her ambitious dream of his becoming “the fourth B” (after Bach, Beethoven, and Brahms). The young Britten did demonstrate precocity in music and honed his composition skills with Frank Bridge and John Ireland.

Britten composed vast choral works, sonatas, as well as intimate settings of folk songs, but devoted the major part of his output to opera, composing a total of 16. His operas were considered the finest English operas since those of Henry Purcell in the 17th century. Britten has become one of modern opera's most prominent names, often compared with Vaughan Williams, Elgar, and Holst. Britten's extensive list of works (95 opus numbers) includes choral music (church parables, operas), solo and chamber instrumental works (piano, organ, viola, cello, oboe, timpani, guitar, harp) as well as larger instrumental ensembles (string quartet, concertante, orchestral, film and drama music). Britten was also an outstanding conductor and pianist. Nominated for 12 Grammy Awards, Britten won three.

Best known for his opera *Peter Grimes*, Britten explored recurring plot themes throughout his operas—an outsider versus a hostile society and the corruption of innocence. Typical of Britten's music, leitmotifs occur throughout, and his music mixes tonality and dissonance. With his prolific output and extensive performances, Britten follows in the footsteps of Bach, Beethoven, and Brahms.



Lord Benjamin Britten (1913–1976)
Image from a 2013 British stamp
in the Great Britons series

Britten notable works:

Billy Budd
Curlew River
Owen Wingrave
Peter Grimes
The Rape of Lucretia
Spring Symphony
The Young Person's
Guide to the Orchestra
War Requiem



Benjamin Britten and his life-long
companion, the tenor Peter Pears
(pronounced “peers”).
Image © National Portrait Gallery, London

Meet the Librettist

William Charles Franklyn Plomer was a South African and British novelist, poet, librettist, and literary editor. He wrote some of his poetry under the pseudonym Robert Pagan. Plomer served in the English Naval intelligence during World War II and was made Commander of the Order of the British Empire in 1968.

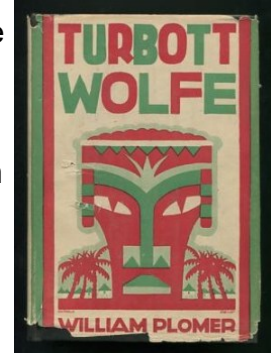
Born in Transvaal, South Africa, he was educated in England but returned with his family to South Africa after World War I. At the age of 17, he apprenticed on a remote farm in the eastern Cape; that experience alerted him to the literary possibilities of the South African landscape and societal issues. His early works caused scandal and outrage because they touched upon miscegenation and cast some white characters in the role of villains. His first novel, *Turbott Wolfe* (1925), and a collection of stories, *I Speak of Africa* (1927), exacerbated his reputation of criticizing South African racist society.

After leaving South Africa, Plomer travelled in Japan and Europe before returning to England, where he became a British man of letters. He wrote dramatic novels about London: *The Case Is Altered* (1932) and *The Invaders* (1934). His memoirs include the semifictional *Museum Pieces* (1952), and volumes of family memoirs, *Double Lives* (1943), *At Home* (1958), and *Autobiography of William Plomer* (1975). A major achievement was *Collected Poems* (1960). Plomer also edited diaries of the Victorian clergyman Francis Kilvert.

Plomer collaborated with Benjamin Britten on the opera *Gloriana* (1953) and also wrote librettos for the parables *Curlew River* (1964), *The Burning Fiery Furnace* (1966), and *Prodigal Son* (1968).



William Plomer
(1903–1973)
<http://www.britannica.com>



Curlew River Lineage



Sumida-gawa, National Noh Theatre



The Sumida River flowing through Adachi, Tokyo, Japan



Noh Sumidagawa
Photograph by Ishida Yutaka
<https://matcha-jp.com/en/6850>



Curlew (*Numenius arquata*)



The Fenlands of eastern England



Benjamin Britten visited Japan in 1956 and saw the Japanese Noh play *Sumidagawa* (*Sumida River*) by Kanze Jūrō (1395–1431). The composer's encounter with classical Japanese dance-drama profoundly influenced *Curlew River* (1964) and later, *The Prodigal Son* (1968).

Performed since the 14th century, Noh (能, Nō) is Japan's oldest major theater art. Noh combines dance, drama, music, and poetry. Works are highly stylized and symbolic, with actors wearing elaborate masks and costumes, and using slow, precise movements to convey emotion and story.

Sumidagawa, named for the Sumida River (隅田川), is a famous play about a mother whose child has been kidnapped and who is distraught trying to find her lost son. Many Noh plays include a woman who becomes a madwoman.

Britten would have been familiar with the birds and fens of eastern England, so when he and Plomer translated *Sumidagawa* into a Christian parable, they created the fictional Curlew River as a setting. Based during Medieval times, *Curlew River* begins with plainsong sung in Latin.

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

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.

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