



FAIR LANE FESTIVAL



Curlew River

A Parable for Church Performance

by BENJAMIN BRITTEN

Libretto based on the Mediæval Japanese Nō-Play

Sumidagawa of Juro Montomasa by

WILLIAM PLOMER

WEDNESDAY EVENING, JULY 5, 1967, AT 8:30

FAIR LANE, DEARBORN CAMPUS, THE UNIVERSITY OF MICHIGAN

The Monks and Acolytes

Madwoman	ANDREA VELIS
Ferryman	EDWARD PIERSON
Abbot	ARA BERBERIAN
Traveller	WILLIAM METCALF
Voice of the Spirit	STEVEN CHALL

The Pilgrims

William Caniff
 Richard Christopher
 Richard Eikenberry
 David Forssen
 Seth McCoy
 Richard Shadley
 Richard Vogt
 Neil Raber

The Players

Arthur Granick *viola*
 James Brennand *bass*
 John Wion *flute*
 William Brown *horn*
 Raymond Desroches *percussion*
 Francesca Corsi *harp*
 Julius Rudel *organ*

The Acolytes

Douglas Hughes Patrick Malone Charles Nutile
 Musical Preparation — Julius Rudel

This performance is made possible with the support of the New York State Council on the Arts.

FIFTH PROGRAM

1967 FAIR LANE FESTIVAL

COMPLETE SERIES 3570

89th Season of the University Musical Society Presentations

Twenty-fifth program in the Sesquicentennial Year of The University of Michigan

CURLEW RIVER—The Background

by DONALD MITCHELL

The origins of Britten's *Curlew River* date back to 1956, when the composer visited Tokyo in the company of his friend the Prince of Hesse and the Rhine. In his contribution to the Britten 50th Birthday Symposium (Faber, 1963), Prince Ludwig writes about an encounter with a medieval Japanese Nō-play. He tells us how, at first, it was difficult to overcome the strangeness of the language—"deadly serious gibberish"—and the style of production—"no scenery, except a stylised painting of a pine tree." More immediately comprehensible and appealing were the "magnificent costumes" and the "wonderful masks which can change their expression by a tilt of the head."

But with the help of a translation, the barriers were gradually broken down, and one play in particular made a profound impression—the "play about the Sumida river." What Prince Ludwig goes on to write is, in essence, the story of *Curlew River*.

The ferryman is waiting in his boat, a traveler turns up and tells him about a woman who will soon be coming to the river. The woman is mad, and she is looking for her lost child. Then she appears, and the ferryman does not wish to take a mad person, but in the end he takes her in his boat. On the way across the river the two passengers sit behind each other on the floor as if in a narrow boat, while the ferryman stands behind them, symbolically punting with a light stick. The ferryman tells the story of a little boy who came this way a year ago this very day. The child was very tired, for he had escaped from robbers who had held him. He crossed the river in this boat, but he died from exhaustion on the other side. The woman starts crying. It was her son. The ferryman is sorry for her and takes her to the child's grave.

Over the years the memory of this play had remained with the composer, a fertile seed that has now flowered into a "Parable for Church Performance" (the work was composed in Venice, early in 1964). To supplement Prince Ludwig's testimony, we have Mr. Britten's own words:

"The whole occasion made a tremendous impression on me, the simple touching story, the economy of style, the intense slowness of the actions, the marvelous skill and control of the performers, the beautiful costumes, the mixture of chanting, speech, and singing, which, with the three instruments, made up the strange music—it all offered a totally new "operatic" experience."

For the composer, of course, haunted though he was by the conception of the original play, there was no question of "a pastiche from the ancient Japanese"; this would have been an artistic impossibility. The link was provided by the thought of English medieval religious drama, which, in many ways, seemed to offer a parallel: an all-male cast . . . simple, austere setting . . . a very limited instrumental accompaniment, a moral story . . ." It was this idea that bridged the gap between Tokyo and Aldeburgh, and it was on the transplantation of Sumidagawa to Curlew River and a Church in the Fens that Britten and his collaborator, William Plomer, have built their parable . . .

Thus, *Curlew River* is a realization, in Christian terms, of *Sumidagawa*, a novel exploit, certainly, but perhaps not so surprising as it seems at first sight. One recalls, at once, the composer's treatment of *The Rape of Lucretia*, in which he surrounded a pre-Christian drama with a Christian frame. *Curlew River* and *Lucretia* may be world's apart, but there is something of the same principle at work in both. The emphatic Christian symbolism of *Billy Budd* is another precedent to bear in mind . . .

As may be imagined, the re-siting of the story in the English Fens required the most delicate and skillful handling on the part of Mr. Plomer. I had read the complete text just before attempting to sketch out this background to the Parable, and am greatly impressed by the authenticity of his work. It is faithful to the outline of the original play, as recorded by Prince Ludwig, and yet establishes its own independent validity of place and time—"A church by a Fenland river in early medieval times."

It is clear from the text that we are to experience the Parable as if it were played by a party of Monks, who walk to the acting area, chanting *Te lucis ante terminum*. After the Abbot's opening address, in which the heart of the Parable is revealed:

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.

—the Monks are ceremonially prepared for the performance, and the Parable begins. “A sign of God’s grace” is the crucial phrase, and the Sign is made explicit at the end of the Parable when the demented mother, led to her small son’s tomb by the Ferryman, hears the voice of the Spirit of the dead boy and, finally, the Spirit emerges from the tomb and stands before it, in full view:

Go your way in peace, mother,
The dead shall rise again
And in that blessed day
We shall meet in Heaven.
God be with you all.
God be with you, mother.
Amen.

The Abbot concludes, “In hope, in peace, ends our mystery,” and to the plainsong hymn with which the Parable began, the Monks move off in procession.

Benjamin Britten writes:

It was in Tokyo in January 1956 that I saw a Nō-drama for the first time; and I was lucky enough during my brief stay there to see two different performances of the same play—*Sumidagawa*. The whole occasion made a tremendous impression upon me: the simple touching story, the economy of style, the intense slowness of the action, the marvellous skill and control of the performers, the beautiful costumes, the mixture of chanting, speech, singing which, with the three instruments, made up the strange music—it all offered a totally new “operatic” experience.

There was no conductor—the instrumentalists sat on the stage, as did the chorus, and the chief characters made their entrance down a long ramp. The lighting was strictly non-theatrical. The cast was all male, the one female character wearing an exquisite mask which made no attempt to hide the male jowl beneath it.

The memory of this play has seldom left my mind in the years since. Was there not something—many things—to be learnt from it? The solemn dedication and skill of the performers were a lesson to any singer or actor of any country and any language. Was it not possible to use just such a story—the simple one of a demented mother seeking her lost child—with an English background (for there was no question in any case of a pastiche from the ancient Japanese)? Surely the Medieval Religious Drama in English would have had a comparable setting—an all-male cast of ecclesiastics—a simple austere staging in a church—a very limited instrumental accompaniment—a moral story? And so we came from *Sumidagawa* to *Curlew River* and a Church in the Fens, but with the same story and similar characters; and whereas in Tokyo the music was the ancient Japanese music jealously preserved by successive generations, here I have started the work with that wonderful plainsong hymn *Te lucis ante terminum*, and from it the whole piece may be said to have grown. There is nothing specifically Japanese left in the Parable that William Plomer and I have written, but if stage and audience can achieve half the intensity and concentration of that original drama I shall be well satisfied.

Curlew River was given its first American performance at the Caramoor Festival in Katonah, New York, in June of 1966. It was repeated there this summer on Sunday afternoons June 18 and July 2. The staff was:

Stage Director	BLISS HEBERT
Costume Designer	LLOYD EVANS
Technical Director	DONALD SWINNEY
Choral Director	RICHARD VOGT
Organ	courtesy, Trinity Church, Katonah, N.Y.

Costumes executed by Laura Matz
Music by arrangement with G. Schirmer, Inc.
Michael Sweeley — Executive Director

The musical instruments and other materials relative to the Japanese Nō Theater are through the courtesy of Dr. William P. Malm of The University of Michigan.

The exhibition of paintings on display here at Fair Lane on July 5 and 6 are from The Forsythe Gallery of Ann Arbor:

Chung Che	<i>Hunter</i>	ink
Richard Wilt	<i>Apache Trail #2</i>	acrylic
King Calkins	<i>Poppies</i>	acrylic
William Lewis	<i>Big Red</i>	oil
Carol Summers	<i>Dark Rainbow</i>	wood cut
Alecos Condopoulos	<i>Image I</i>	oil
Milton Kemnitz	<i>Detroit Towers</i>	acrylic
Chet LaMore	<i>Canyon Country at Dusk</i>	oil
Richard Wilt	<i>Antigua</i>	watercolor
Rafael Coronel	<i>Suenos Antiguos VII</i>	oil
Winifred Klaren	<i>Gold Coast</i>	colage
Lee Weiss	<i>Rock Garden</i>	watercolor
Louise J. Nobili	<i>On the Veranda</i>	oil

FAIR LANE FESTIVAL

Dearborn Campus, The University of Michigan

First announcement of an additional Special Concert

YEHUDI MENUHIN and THE BATH FESTIVAL ORCHESTRA

SATURDAY, JULY 15, 8:30

CORELLI—Concerto Grosso No. 2, F major, Op. 6

MOZART—Concerto for Piano, K. 271

BACH—Concerto for Violin, E major

BRITTEN—Variations on a Theme of Frank Bridge