The Yale School of Music, Robert Blocker, Dean and The Institute of Sacred Music, Margot Fassler, Dean present in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the Master of Music degree:

The Yale Recital Chorus

BENJAMIN BRITTEN Curlew River

A PARABLE FOR CHURCH PERFORMANCE Op. 71

Libretto based on the medieval Japanese No-play Sumidagawa of Juro Motomasa (1395-1431) by WILLIAM PLOMER

Christopher Hossfeld, conductor

5:00 pm 25 January 2004 Christ Church, New Haven No production can go on without the help of many others and this one is no exception. I owe countless thanks and immeasurable gratitude to those who have made today's recital possible:

To my teachers, Maggi Brooks and Simon Carrington, for the guidance in exploring Curlew River and the tools to bring it to the ears of others.

To my manager, Evan, for the legwork that brought everything together.

To Robert Lehman and Christ Church, for allowing us to use this wonderful space.

To my colleagues, Chuck, Holland, Rick, Kim, Joe, David, Michael, Evan, and Richard, for their time, musicality, advice, and expertise to learn this difficult music and make it happen.

To my parents, Linda and Rod, my sister, Emily, my fiancé, Jimmy, and all the family and friends who made the journey to New Haven today, for their constant and enduring love and support.

PERFORMERS

who make up the cast of the Parable:

The Madwoman Charles Kamm, Tenor

The Ferryman Holland Jancaitis, *Baritone*The Traveller Rick Hoffenberg, *Baritone*

The Spirit of the Boy Kimberly Dunn, Soprano

The Abbot Joseph Gregorio, *Bass*

The Chorus of Pilgrims Terrence Fay, David Rentz,

and Adam Ward, *Tenors* Peter Park, Michael Smith, and Evan Wels, *Baritones*

Richard Gard and Evan Crawford, Basses

The Instrumentalists Juliana May, Flute and Piccolo

Katherine Mason, *Horn* Christina Lee, *Viola*

Laura Fleury, Double Bass

Chaerin Kim, Harp

Gwendolyn Burgett, Percussion

Kristin Naragon, Organ

Conductor Christopher Hossfeld

Manager Evan Wels

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THE STORY OF THE PARABLE

We open in a church on the banks of a Fenland river. It is the early medieval times. An order of monks processes in singing an evening chant. The Abbot, leader of the monks, steps forward, calling all those present to listen to the tale they are about to tell. After a brief communal prayer, the parable begins. The immediate action of the parable is limited to the western and eastern banks of the Curlew River.

THE WESTERN BANKS OF THE CURLEW RIVER

It is a busy day for the Ferryman. Many people need the ferry to cross for prayer on the eastern banks: a year ago to the day, a boy was buried on the other side of the river. His grave has been associated with miracles and it even is said that he has become a saint. As he prepares to depart, two wanderers approach: first a Traveller from the Westlands and a Madwoman from the Black Mountains. The Traveller warns that he had seen the Madwoman raving to a crowd of mocking onlookers further up the road. When the Madwoman arrives, she speaks words both confused and confusing, but one thing is clear: she is a widowed noblewoman who wanders the earth seeking her lost son. She begs to be let onto the ferry so that she may cross and continue her searching. But the Ferryman only mocks her, telling her to sing for her crossing. She then sings a song of a journeyman of old, so captivating that all present cannot help but join in. Afterwards, the Traveller leads the whole crowd in begging the Ferryman to let her come aboard. He concedes, and after a warning of the dangers lurking beneath the calm surface currents, he allows all to board and sets sail for the other banks.

CROSSING THE CURLEW RIVER

During the crossing, the Ferryman tells the story of the boy who died but one year earlier. The boy arrived in the captivity of a wild Northman, ill and weary from heavy traveling. Too ill to continue on, he was abandoned by the Northman on the eastern banks. Near death, the boy told the tale of his capture, from a field in his homeland near the Black Mountains, that he was the only son of a nobleman, that he was to be survived only by his mother. Since the boy's death, there have been many miracles reported in association with the grave. Dirt from the grave is said to heal sickness

THE EASTERN BANKS OF THE CURLEW RIVER

The ferry reaches the other side of the river and all exit the boat, save the Madwoman. As the Ferryman encourages her to exit, she begins questioning him about the boy in the story, finally realizing that the dead boy is her lost son. Her grief is overwhelming, that she has come so far only to find her son dead by the side of a river. Her only purpose left in life was to find her son. Her madness intensifies. The Ferryman attempt to console her

by leading her to the grave of her son, but there is nothing to comfort her. Finally, she is convinced to say a prayer for her son at the grave. They all join her in singing. As the song culminates, they hear the voice of the boy's spirit joining in with them. The Madwoman exults, to hear his voice again, and the whole company falls silent in awe. The spirit appears to the Madwoman, curing her of her madness. After the spirit vanishes, he sings a final benediction of peace. Here ends the parable.

The Abbot comes forward again, giving us some parting words. The monks say a closing prayer and recess out, repeating the opening chant.

BENJAMIN BRITTEN (1913-1976)

Benjamin Britten, one of the preeminent British composers of the twentieth century, composed many works for the dramatic and symphonic stages, as well as numerous chamber pieces, choral works, and church anthems. Many of his vocal works were written for his partner in music and life, the tenor Peter Pears. They were close collaborators on many of Britten's musical projects. Although Britten was constantly testing new methods of structuring his music and experimenting with different international colors, his music never lost its tonal flavor, as sound that has become his hallmark. Britten died in 1976 of complications from an unsuccessful operation to correct a defect in his heart.

ABOUT CURLEW RIVER

THE HISTORY OF CURLEW RIVER

Curlew River is the first in a series of Church Parables that Britten composed in collaboration with librettist William Plomer. They are all short chamber operas, about an hour long, with religious themes. They are meant for church performance, with minimal sets, costumes and staging.

The story of *Curlew River's* creation begins in Japan in 1956. Britten was in the middle of a whirlwind world concert tour, with the double purpose of generating wider interest in his music, as well as allowing him to study a varied sample of the world's music and art, so that he might improve his compositional skills. Upon the insistence of his friend, the writer William Plomer, while in Japan Britten attended a performance of the fifteenth century No play *Sumidagawa*. The starkness of the play captured Britten's imagination. The action of the play is incredibly slow: it stretches a short plot over a long time, leaving room for a deep exploration of the emotional intricacies held within it.

Very soon after his return from the world tour, Britten contacted Plomer about collaborating on an adaptation of *Sumidagawa*. In translating the work from play to opera, from the Japanese medieval stage to the modern English church, from east to west, Britten and Plomer searched for a western equivalent to act as a bridge between the two: the medieval liturgical drama in England. All of the roles in the parable are sung by men, following both the Japanese and English medieval performing traditions. Because of Britten's busy composition schedule, the project was allowed to percolate for a few years before being brought to completion in 1964..¹

A BRIEF ANALYSIS OF THE MUSIC

The music of *Curlew River* defies traditional classification. It has no time signatures: the length of the bars changes freely with seemingly no organization or pattern. Quite often, different performers even have different tempo indications, allowing various harmonic, melodic, and rhythmic ideas to occur simultaneously. Instead of a steady, controlled progression of ideas that grow into each other, in *Curlew River* contrasting ideas are constantly juxtaposed or even layered on top of each other. The traditional idea of an over-arching harmonic structure that controls the dramatic progression of a work has no place in *Curlew River*. Instead, the drama is driven by the overlaying of much more static layers and their interactions between each other.

What are these layers and how are they static? Each of the characters in *Curlew River* is strongly associated with a specific harmonic world that can be summarized as a single pitch or set of pitches. As the characters interact, their pitches interact to create new harmonies and musical ideas. Related characters have similar pitches, while conflicting characters have dissimilar pitches. The sum total of the characters' pitches becomes the canvas onto which the music of the parable is painted (Ex. 1.):



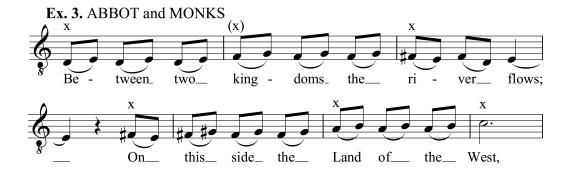
There are four principle characters: the Abbot (and chorus), the Ferryman, the Madwoman, and the Traveller. A fifth character, the spirit of the boy, appears at the end of the parable. In addition to specific pitches, the principle characters are also associated with specific instruments.

¹ 229-231, Alexander, Peter F., "A Study of the origins of Britten's 'Curlew River'," *Music & Letters*, Volume 69, No. 2, April 1988, 229-243.

The music of the Abbot centers around the D below middle C (see the first arrow from the left in Ex. 1a.); this pitch becomes the base (or bass) of the canvas that will stretch above it. Secondary pitches for the Abbot are the A above it and the thirds around these pitches, F or F-sharp, and C. In his prayers before the parable itself begins, the Abbot actually lays out most of the primary and secondary pitches of this canvas (see Ex. 2.; an x marks the important pitches: compare these with the pitches in Ex. 1a.).



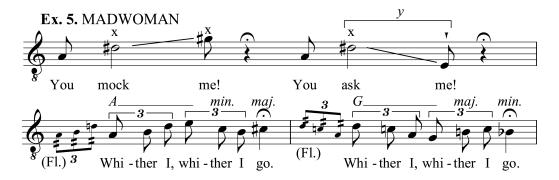
It seems appropriate that the pitches of the Abbot who is telling the story become the pitches on which the story is based. Throughout the parable, the music of the Abbot and chorus is centered around this D: nearly all melodic lines begin or end on it. Their secondary pitches, F/F-sharp, A, and C, also play an important role in shaping these melodic lines. The following melody (Ex. 3.) is a perfect example of the influence of these pitches (marked with an x). It occurs four times in the parable, always at the same pitch level, emphasizing the Abbot's primary and secondary pitches. Appropriately enough, the instrument associated with the Abbot and chorus is the chamber organ, accompanying nearly all of their music.



The Ferryman's music is centered around the pitch A (see Ex. 1a., the second arrow from the left), a fifth above the Abbot's D. His instrument is the horn (Ex. 4.). Nearly all of his entries are heralded by a strong and resounding horn A, followed by his characteristic sextuplet sixteenth notes. The Ferryman does have many modulations into keys distant from the A, but his music always returns to it, representative of his daily obligations to continuously row his ferry across the river, never moving very far from the Curlew River itself. The Ferryman's modulations do enrich his character and its presentation, but, because he always returns to the same pitch, they do not contribute to the dramatic flow of the parable as a whole.



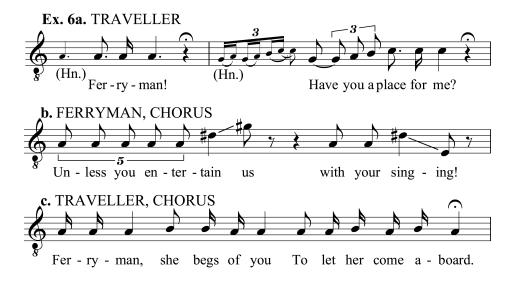
The Madwoman's character is defined by her madness; her musical material reflects this madness in both variety and pitches (Ex. 5.). Her primary pitch, the D-sharp (or E-flat) is set in opposition to the other pitches we have heard so far: it is a half-step from the Abbot's D, and a tritone above the Ferryman's A. Her secondary pitch, the G-sharp (or A-flat), is a half tone from the Ferryman's A, and a tritone from the Abbot's D—not very harmonious intervals indeed! The Madwoman's pitches are placed on top of the canvas that has been given so far (Ex. 1), and create the dissonances that drive the harmonic and dramatic conflict in the parable. Her music is constantly modulating, and never remain in one harmonic place for very long, always gravitating toward the D-sharp. This is most clearly represented by fast major-minor shifts, as can be seen in on the setting of "whither I go". The flute is the Madwoman's instrument, representing the curlew birds that continuously cloud her thoughts.



The first six pitches in Ex. 5. become important motivic material for the Madwoman, and a symbol of her continuing search for her son. They remain constant through her madness, just as her drive to find her son will never change. The last two of these pitches, the major seventh D-sharp to E (marked with a y in Ex. 5.), become very important when the Madwoman discovers that her son is dead and buried next to the river. This interval will be discussed later.

The one principle character not discussed yet, the Traveller, is unique in that he does not have any specific pitches associated with him. Unlike the Abbot and Ferryman, he has no place that he can call home, and, unlike the Madwoman, he has no specific purpose that drives his traveling. He is a wanderer, a nomad, a person without strong purpose. His music is constantly modulating, with no goal or tonal center. When his music is grounded, it is because he has borrowed the pitches of another character.

The Traveller is not the only character to borrow pitches from others. This borrowing is symbolic of the interactions of all the characters. A particularly clear instance of this is when one character is addressing another. In this situation, both the pitches and even the instruments of the character being addressed are borrowed by the character doing the addressing.



A few examples of these can be seen in Ex. 6. In 6a., the Traveller is asking the Ferryman if he can take the ferry on this busy day. He uses the pitches (especially the A), motives, and the instrumentation of the Ferryman when addressing him. When the Ferryman and chorus are mocking the Madwoman (Ex. 6b.), they use the same six pitches she sang in Ex. 5, A, D-sharp, G-sharp, A, D-sharp, E. After the mockery, she answers them on her principle pitch, the D-sharp. Finally, in Ex. 6c., when the Madwoman has won over the crowd with her singing, they beg the Ferryman to let her board. What pitch do they base their please upon? None other than the Ferryman's primary pitch, the A.

The canvas of pitches from the Abbot, Ferryman, and Madwoman is set up in the first scene of the parable. It grows as each character is introduced, and is well in place by the time the company leaves the western banks for their journey across the Curlew. The story the Ferryman tells on this journey, and the Madwoman's realization of the death of her son, introduce new dramatic conflict and new musical material.

The shift in the music occurs as the ferry reaches the eastern banks of the river. The Ferryman has finished his story, and the Madwoman is realizing that her son is buried nearby. The change in location and in the Madwoman's mood is manifested in a new scale played in the orchestra (Ex. 7.).



This scale is an expansion of the Madwoman's major seventh, marked *y* in Exx. 5. and 7, beginning on a D-sharp, and moving down to a sort-of resolution an octave lower. The qualities of this scale are very dark, incorporating the major-minor qualities of the Madwoman's music: there are the enharmonic equivalents of C minor and C major triads as well as implied E minor and E major harmonies. Also noteworthy is the absence of the Abbot's D and the Ferryman's A from this scale. It is completely of the Madwoman's musical world, and it is here it becomes clear that the parable of the Curlew River is the story of the Madwoman and her search for her son. The question in the parable has become: How will the Madwoman overcome her grief? How will her D-sharp truly be resolved?

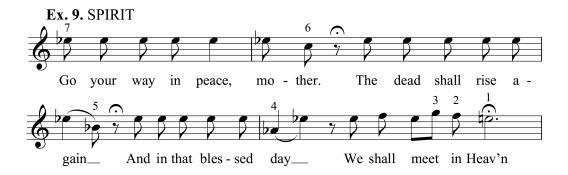


The arrival of the boy's spirit begins to provide an answer (Ex. 8a.). As the spirit sings for the first time, he soars up to a high E—the resolution of the Madwoman's D-sharp in an upper octave. With the D-sharp resolved, the canvas of pitches (Ex. 1b.) becomes much more stable, a set of stacked perfect fifths, with diatonic thirds on F and C (Ex. 8b.). The tritone is gone and the conflict is resolved. Yet the reality is not so perfect. The boy is still dead, and the Madwoman's grief and madness cannot be erased overnight. But there is still a glimpse of the resolution and beginning to the healing process.

In order to reach the Madwoman, so that she can hear what he is saying, the spirit must address her in a tonality familiar to her. And there is no pitch more familiar to the Madwoman than the D-sharp she has been obsessing over. And so the final benediction the spirit gives to his mother (Ex. 9.) not only contains the Madwoman's primary pitch, but also all of the pitches in her scale (Ex. 7), sung in order. But the re-arrangement of these pitches is significant. The E-flat is held as a high pedal throughout the passage. and the last three pitches are transposed up an octave. Thus the E-flat can resolve to an E-natural in the same octave for the first time.

Is this E-natural the resolution of the Madwoman's madness? Sadly, no—for the organ holds an E-flat pedal throughout the passage, turning the E-natural into a dissonance. But there is a resolution of sorts, and to find it, a little bit of backtracking is required. Up until this moment in the piece, the pitch in question is almost always spelled as D-sharp. But

once the spirit appears and the benediction is given, the pitch is re-spelled as E-flat. And so, in some odd sense. the healing of the Madwoman is not represented by the resolution of the D-sharp to an E-natural, but rather, by the resolution of the D-sharp to an E-flat!



After the spirit delivers his message the parable proper ends and the Abbot steps out to give his closing statements, quoting a shortened version of his music from the introduction. The music is the same, save for the closing prayer given by the monks (Ex. 10.). Here they sing almost exact inversion of the first prayer (Ex. 2). Furthermore, the pitches sung here are all taken (save for the last) from the Madwoman's scale (Ex. 7.). Even the monks telling the story do not walk away from it unchanged. The canvas of pitches so carefully constructed at the beginning of the parable has been dismantled and replaced by a new set of pitches. The appearance of the spirit, fictitious or not, has changed all those involved and left its mark upon them.

