
Benjamin Britten (1913–76)

Curlew River: A Parable for Church Performance (1964)

A virtuous wife raped by the vicious son of a Roman tyrant; a Japanese mother, maddened by grief perhaps, in search of her abducted son. How much can *The Rape of Lucretia* and *Curlew River* have in common? For a start there's a span of 18 years between the first performances of each work, during which time Benjamin Britten's interests moved in different directions. Then *The Rape of Lucretia* is described as an opera, while *Curlew River* was subtitled 'A Parable for Church Performance'. It's true that both works tell their tales within a specifically Christian framework, with the man and woman of the chorus in *Lucretia* struggling to relate her rape and eventual suicide to Christian ideas about suffering and redemption, and the history of the Madwoman in *Curlew River* performed by a cast of medieval monks in a work that begins and ends with plainchant.

But look and listen again. *The Rape of Lucretia* was composed hot on the heels of the triumph of *Peter Grimes* in 1945, while *Curlew River* was first performed in 1964, four years after *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. And both would seem to anticipate that late masterpiece *Death in Venice*. What all three works share is a desire to rethink both the form and, perhaps, the function of music drama after the composer had demonstrated (in *Peter Grimes*, *Albert Herring*, *Billy Budd* and *The Turn of the Screw*) his mastery of larger-scale works which sit relatively comfortably within the tradition of European opera.

More significantly, both *The Rape of Lucretia* and *Curlew River* look to cultures that are either at the edge of the Western tradition or outside it: to Rome when it was ruled by kings and to medieval Japan. Yet both set their stories within the dominant Western tradition of Christianity. If Britten intends to revise our notion of what constitutes music drama in both of these works, he is also, perhaps, a child of his time;

an artist who, for all his deep curiosity about other cultures, was grounded in the tradition set in train by the Enlightenment, that West was probably best. However, neither *The Rape of Lucretia* nor *Curlew River* attempts to synthesise the European past and present or East and West; both are simultaneously and separately present in each work and are somehow brought together within the performance itself. Indeed 'performance' may be said to act as a bridge between these two worlds. So the principal action of the church parable has the Madwoman and the Traveller being ferried across the Curlew River, while in the chamber opera Tarquinius must ride from his army camp outside Rome into the heart of the city to ravish Lucretia.

Britten was always alert to creative worlds beyond his native shores. As a young man excited by the music of Mahler he had hoped to study with Alban Berg in Vienna. His journey to America in 1939 may have been largely for personal and political reasons, but he evidently relished the possibility of becoming a part of a different musical culture. Indeed, it was in the USA that he first encountered the music of the gamelan, which would become such a distinct accent in his own music after a holiday to Bali in 1956.

In February of that year Britten, together with his partner Peter Pears, had been invited to perform in Tokyo by the Japanese broadcaster NHK and the British Council. Up to this point the composer's relationship with Japan had not been a happy one. In 1940, at the age of 26, he and five other European composers (including Richard Strauss and Jacques Ibert) had been invited to write a piece celebrating the 2,600th anniversary of the founding of the Japanese empire. Britten's resulting work – *Sinfonia da Requiem* – composed in memory of his parents, was unacceptable to the Japanese. It was, a court official told

him, unsuitably Christian and too 'gloomy' to celebrate the birthday of a dynasty.

Matters were much improved in 1956. Britten and Pears gave a recital that included the Seven *Sonnets of Michelangelo* together with the composer's arrangements of British folk songs. Nine days later Britten conducted the NHK Symphony Orchestra in a performance of *Les illuminations*, with Pears as the soloist, and, for the first time in Japan, the *Sinfonia da Requiem*.

In the meantime the two men were steeping themselves in traditional Japanese culture, with recitals of traditional geisha singing, visits to kabuki and noh theatre and a performance of gagaku, Japanese court music. On 11 February the composer seems to have experienced something of an epiphany at a performance of the noh play *Sumidagawa*. So moved was he by the story of the madwoman who has travelled the land in search of a son who had been abducted a year before that he asked to see the play again on the day that he was to leave Japan.

Two years later Britten reflected on what he had seen that day in a talk for NHK. 'I count [the performance of *Sumidagawa*] among the greatest theatrical experiences of my life. Of course it was strange to start with, the language and especially the curious kind of chanting used. But we were fortunate in having an excellent literal translation of the poem and we soon became accustomed to the haunting sounds. The deep solemnity and selflessness of the acting, the perfect shaping of the drama like a great Greek tragedy coupled with the ... universality of the story is something which every Western artist can learn from.'

Here was a story that stretched out from its roots in a traditional form of Japanese theatre to appeal to an English composer in search of creative bridges between his own cultural patrimony and its 'other'. And it doesn't require much effort to see this fascination between the self and the other as the central motif of Britten's own personal life as well as that of his art: the homosexual in a society where it was a criminal offence for almost all of his adult life and a man overwhelmingly attracted to boys who was thus imprisoned in his own chastity.

Noh is not the most yielding of theatrical forms for a Western audience; indeed, many Japanese have difficulties with this form of drama, which

can trace its roots back to the 14th century. And although music and dance play a central role in noh and its starting-point is a text – albeit in a Japanese that is not easily understood without study – it would be wrong to equate noh with western opera. It makes demands on actors and audiences that are a great deal more challenging than an evening spent in the company of Mozart, Verdi, Wagner or Berg. An actor sitting still and silent on stage for 90 minutes is a challenge for both the performer and those who are watching. Noh is a kind of ritual. As Donald Keene, a historian of Japanese theatre has written, 'the purpose of noh is not to divert on the surface but to move profoundly and ultimately to transcend the particular and touch the very springs of human emotion.' Character and action are scarcely present on the noh stage, which, as another commentator reminds us, is 'a sacred space where the meeting of our world with the other dimension is represented.'

The ritual element in noh undoubtedly would have appealed to Britten. The chanting chorus, the actors wearing their all-important masks and the onstage musicians – just four of them – a flautist and three drummers. He was also lucky in the particular play that he saw performed by the Kanze school of noh. It belongs to a group of plays called *kyōjomon* (drama of madwomen). Generally these stories have a happy ending, with the lost child or the vanished husband or lover eventually restored to the woman, who then recovers her sanity. *Sumidagawa* is different in that the son is already dead. At the end the madwoman can only hear his voice and see his spirit. Britten must have been as much moved by the death of innocence – an abiding theme in his work – as he was by the sorrowing mother in what is sometimes called a drama of madness – *monoguruinoh*.

It seems likely that on his return to Europe Britten shared his excitement about what he had seen with the poet William Plomer, who would write the libretto for what became *Curlew River*. But two years later in 1958 it was still an 'idea' rather than a definite project as a letter from the composer to Plomer makes clear. 'The *Sumidagawa* doesn't come into any immediate plans. I'd rather put it to the back of my mind. But any time that you feel that you'd like to talk about it can be brought forth again. It is something that I am deeply interested in and that I am determined to do sometime. Isn't it a curiously moving and disturbing story?'

Plomer *did* want to talk about it and, more importantly, to start writing. So by the end of the summer of 1958 there was a draft libretto. Daisaku Mukai, who has studied this first draft, points out that the work is a long way from its final form at this stage, being an English-language version of the original play. And it's still very Japanese, with Japanese place names retained and the story beginning with the Ferryman rather than the entry of the monks and their formal robing prior to the beginning of the drama proper. As for the end, the spirit of the dead child actually appears and when the mother and the chorus pray for him they use the words of a Buddhist prayer. At this stage the work was called *Sumida River*.

It seems likely that Britten and Pears, who was to create the tenor role of the Madwoman, were anxious that they might be creating a Western pastiche of a Japanese noh play. So they dropped the Japanese names, and *miyakodori* – the Japanese word for gulls – became curlews, giving the work its final title. It's at this point that the specifically Christian framework is created, with the play becoming a parable to be performed in a medieval church in East Anglia by an abbot and his monks in order to instruct their congregation. So the piece begins with the plainsong hymn *Te lucis ante terminum*, and 'from it the whole piece may be said to have grown', as Britten indicated in the preface to the published score.

As drama *Curlew River* would seem to have distanced itself now from its noh origins. In noh only the protagonist wears a mask but in *Curlew River*, the Ferryman and the Traveller are also masked; in this church parable the characters 'act' their emotions and are rarely static as in noh; and while the chorus still treat us to the kind of monophonic singing that is an essential part of noh drama, they are accompanied by seven musicians rather than four, and who produce a more highly coloured sound than the Japanese hayashi ensemble.

However, when you listen to *Curlew River*, you hear unmistakable echoes of the music that Britten heard in Japan in 1956, though always wonderfully bent to his own creative purposes. The very particular use of the chamber organ and the gradually accelerating *tremolando* of the drums seem to come from gagaku, the Japanese court music which he had heard in Tokyo. And it was in the Japanese capital that Britten acquired his own sho, a kind of mouth organ used in gagaku. The sho has 17 bamboo pipes and in court music it plays complex chords. Britten seems to have adapted what he heard on the sho to be played on the chamber organ in *Curlew River*.

As Daisaku Mukai has suggested, 'heterophony characterises the musical language of *Curlew River* [and] is also common to Japanese traditional music – we hear this in the entrance of the Abbot after the prelude. In this entry music the opening plainchant theme is played in unison by all the instruments but each line is slightly delayed to create a kind of echo-like effect suitable for the visionary nature of the piece.'

Whereas other composers might have written these things into their score as so many exotic calling cards, they are intrinsic to Britten's work and its meanings. Through the heart of this Parable for Church Performance runs a river that must be crossed, *Curlew River*, a frontier between 'two kingdoms', as the Ferryman tells us. 'On this side the Land of the West, on the other, the Eastern Fens'. East Anglia certainly, but also it's the Japanese other, life and death too, darkness and light, despair and hope ... all these things are written into the monks drama. And when we are almost at the end, as the chorus chant *Custodes hominum psallimus Angelos*, the hymn for Vespers for the feast of the guardian angels, the stately progressing chords sound strikingly Japanese, while the solo flute, representing the soaring curlew, belongs to the English Fens. East and West, other and self, are held in balance in the moment of performance.

Synopsis

The parable is told by a quartet of characters who in the tradition of noh theatre are all men: the Abbot, who is the narrator, the Ferryman, the Traveller and the Madwoman. Eight pilgrims form the chorus. The action takes place in a church by a river in the Fenlands in the early medieval period.

Curlew River opens with the Abbot and his monks processing into the centre of the church singing the hymn *Te lucis ante terminum*. The abbot, his monks and the musicians take their places and at a cue from the organ the abbot tells his congregation of a time not long ago when 'a sign was given of God's grace ... in our reedy Fens ... [where] the *Curlew River* runs.' The monks who are to play the Ferryman, the Traveller and the Madwoman are ceremonially dressed in their robes, the pilgrims take their places and the story begins.

The Traveller and the Madwoman have come to cross the river that 'flows between two realms, on this side the land of the West, on the other the Eastern Fens.' The Madwoman, who is clearly nobly born, has journeyed from the Black Mountains in search of her child, who was abducted 12 months previously. The Ferryman seems unwilling to take her across the water and they argue. However, the Traveller and the pilgrims persuade him to give her passage.

As they begin their crossing, the Ferryman stops poling his boat. 'Today', he tells his passengers 'is an important day, the people are assembling in memory of a sad event.' He continues poling. One year ago, a young boy arrived in the area with a vicious master who had kidnapped him from his home near the Black Mountains. The

boy was badly beaten by this master and then abandoned by the river. Local people cared for the sick child, who, clearly dying, made a last request. '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.' For the people who live along the river the boy's grave is sacred, '... some special grace is there, to heal the sick in body and in soul'.

All now understand the boy who died is the son for whom the Madwoman is searching. 'O Curlew River, cruel Curlew, where all my hope is swept away.' During the crossing, the Ferryman tries to console her. 'Your sad search is ended.' And he and the Pilgrims lead the grief-stricken mother to her son's tomb.

As all pray the voice of the dead boy suddenly echoes their chant, *Custodes hominum psallimus Angelos*. Alone now, the mother suddenly sees the spirit of her son. 'Go your way in peace, mother. The dead shall rise again and in that blessed day we shall meet in heaven.' Freed from her grief and with her wits restored, the Mother kneels in a prayer that ends with a joyous emblematic 'Amen', the final note of which resolves into a long-delayed unison with the full cast – a signal of her return and acceptance.

The actors in the drama are disrobed and as monks now hail 'a sign of God's grace.' 'In hope, in peace, ends our mystery', intones the Abbot. And the company process away from the centre of the church once again singing the hymn *Te lucis ante terminum*.

Programme note and Synopsis © Christopher Cook