

Ronald Corp (b. 1951)

The Ice Mountain

A new opera for children

First performed in a production by Abigail Morris in March 2010 at St Michael's Church, Hampstead

Libretto by Emma Hill

Cast in order of appearance:

Father / Young Man - Fiona Brindle

Boy - Alex Franklin

Girl - Lara Cosmetatos

Hunter - Shulamit Morris-Evans

Priest - Peter Shafran

Old Woman - Natasha Worsley

Klaus - James Cameron

Sylvoli - Poppy Zadek-Ewing

Shepherd - Eleanor Burke

The Villagers, The Hunters, Spirits of the Mountain - Members of the New London Children's Choir

[1] ACT I: WINTER

From out of darkness

Boy:

Papa! Papa! The glacier is stirring
Groaning and cracking
The goats have taken fright.
They are stumbling all about
Falling and tearing their legs on the rocks.

Boy and Girl:

The wolves are howling
Their cries echoing along the valley.

Father:

Run home as fast as you can
Tell the Priest to sound the church bell
I will follow you – I am right behind you.

Chorus I (The Villagers/Hunters etc)

Stop up the doors
Secure the latches
Fire the beacons along the valley
Gather the children
Speak your prayers
For dark mists move upon the mountain.

Goat herd and hunter
Sense the storm approaching
Descend if luck holds to them
Ahead clouds that roll in
Swift and treacherous
As a brackish wave.

We who dwell in the shadow of the mountain
Heed the warning of the darkness falling
No wayfarer now dares walk roads too remote
At the edge of land and unmeasured space.

Chorus II (Spirits of the Mountain)

High on the peaks
Ice moves, heaves, breaks
Reforms in unseen shapes.

Ice moves
As if in lamentation
For souls lost long ago.

Wind whispers through
Empty catacombs of crystal
Buffets the high ice arches.

Snow shrouds are gathering
And for a moment all is still
Before the avalanche shrieks in.

*Evening. In the village – people emerging out of their houses
and gather together. A light shines at the foot of the
mountain.*

Hunter:

See a light shines in the darkness
Flickers from a single flame
Constant candle – sign of habitation
Lit by a woman
Who waits in vain.

Priest:

Twenty years she has kept vigil
For her husband and beloved son
One bright morning they vanished in the mountain
Never to return.

Both:

Steadfast brightness in the wildness
Guides the weary woodsman home
Lights up a simple mountain dwelling
Where a mother
Lives all alone.

Village Women:

Carry her flax and carry her linen
Honey from the summer's crop
A bobbin for her spindle
Paper and candles
A copper pan.

The Villagers:

Sign of brightness in cold wildness
Calls the wandering spirits down
From out of their lonely frozen kingdom
To shelter in a human home.

The Old Woman's dwelling is lit up, she sits spinning

Old Woman:

When I woke up I had dreamed
That you were still here with me.
Though you are far away
My mind holds you close to me
Reads your imprint in the pillow
Creased, still warm
As if you had only lately left
Jumping up from sleep to start the day.

When morning comes again
I put by me all that might
Remind me of you
Trace your shadow in the images
A trick of the light can sometimes play
And when the ordinary
Threatens to become calamitous
I go to sleep and imagine
That you are here with me.

*The Old Woman lights a candle. She leaves her door ajar
and lies down to sleep*

Spirits of the Mountain:

*Moving down from the mountain, they circle around the Old
Woman's house and enter.*

See a light shines in the darkness
Flickers from a single flame
Constant candle
Sign of habitation
Lit by a woman who waits in vain.

We who have forgotten kindness
From the wastes of our icy tomb
Are drawn to warmth and light and goodness
To where a mother lives alone.

Sign of brightness in cold wildness
Lures the lonely spirits down
From out of frozen desolation
To shelter in a human home.

[2] ACT II: SPRING

All Villagers:

Ice melting, water dripping
Springs coursing, birds calling.

Nature through the land renewing
Bursting bud, rich blossoms drooping.
Cattle lowing, goats bleating
Dogs barking, children laughing.

Dawn song of the capercaillie
Accentor and chough chattering
Knock of woodpecker echoing
Hoarse cry of the sooty crow.

The dark of winter is receding
Warmth into the ground is seeping
Awakening life that lies below.

Young Women:

Spring shakes out her skirts
Dusts the earth with tiny stars
Of soldanella, mountain pink
And shocking blue of gentian.

The boughs of trees are laced
With sprouting leaves and birds
Are busy now with nests new made
Of twig and thistle-down.

Green swelling fronds of crocuses
Advance against retreating snow
And marshland shades are all glow
With primroses smudged with crimson.

Arnica, hepatica
Peek from beneath soft leaves
And deep within the silent wood
The pale anemone blooms.

Young Woman:

A mist like softly fallen cloud spreads and lifts.
New opened flowers turn their faces
To trace in light the course of the day.
The wind breathes in the scent
Of untouched flowers, dew pearled
Exhales sweet freshness along the valley.

All:

Time now to shake off sleep
Awake to light and keep
Dark memories of night away
In daytime tasks of tending
New born calf and bleating sheep.

Spring through the land is spreading
A song of joy and new beginning.
Rejoice at sight of hares skittering
Fox cubs tumbling, cats littering.

A vital sap that now pervades
Hedgerow, field and marshland shade
Renewing pledges, spreading laughter
Banishing sorrow to the dark months after.
Flowers join roots below and leaves above
Every sound in the air is one of love.

Klaus:

The girl I love is a lovely girl
Delicate and fine in every feature
Fairer than gold or strings of pearl
A sweet and delightful creature.

Sylvoli:

The boy I love is strong and good
His hair the colour of hay
Straight as the fir tree in the wood
Clear eyed and bright as the day.

Together:

How beautiful fair is the one I love
How kind and true is she/he
I will whisper to the brook
My love for her/him.

While I am / he is gone the summer long
Tending to the cattle at pasture
At night I will look to the far off stars
Remembering her / his eyes in their lustre.

Klaus:

The girl I love is my one true love
I long for the day when we can be
Together as are the gentle turtle doves
In the dovecote of the tall pine tree.

Sylvoli:

She flying – wings trembling
He in grace to her
The air after still humming
Flown now into night's deepening.

[3] ACT III: SUMMER

*A shepherd is bringing flax to the Old Woman to spin. The shepherd is the woman's brother. They greet each other warmly and sit down outside her house**

Shepherd/Shepherdess:

Sister
You have lived too long alone
I have come to bring you home
To warmth – to laughter
To bless the marriage of my daughter
To join us in celebration of the future
To leave the past behind.

Old Woman:

Sister/Brother
Though I am alone I am not lonely
The birds and beasts come to cheer me
From here I can see clearly
The awakening of the sun
The heavenly light transforms the ice
Into a sight of golden radiance
And in the dark of the night the stars
Shine brighter here than anywhere below.

I cherish no illusions.
My place is here
Close to those who are lost.
I do not wait in vain –
Yet proximity to the glacier
Assuages my pain.

Shepherd/Shepherdess:

Sister I plead with you –
Can I not entreat you?

Old Woman:

Sister/Brother
I know it is out of love that you ask me
And I thank you kindly
But you must leave me as you find me.

In the Village – Wedding Music and Dancing – Dusk

Old Woman, spinning:

You would be a young man now
Ready to take your own wedding vows
Strong and tall as the straight pine tree
Eyes the colour of the noon-day sky.

Like this
I keep you alive in myself
I hold you within me
Deep inside
Like a dream I draw you into
The night, in my sleep.

*She repeats this to herself and falls asleep at her spindle.
The Stage goes dark*

Spirits of the Mountain:

*Out of the darkness – agitated and ominous
Where is the light that drives out the darkness?*

Hear us, hear us
Piteously crying

Darkness mirrors all that is within us
Only the light can bring us home

Groping blindly in the shadows
We are abandoned
We are alone.

* The parts of A Shepherd/Shepherdess are interchangeable

[4] ACT IV: AUTUMN

The Villagers:

A thin wind sounds
A soft percussion in the trees.

Red and yellowed leaves curl
And on bare branches hang
Trembling in the autumn breeze
Where in summer sweet birds sang.

Chill gusts catch up the wing-ed seeds
And float them to their wintry beds
Where cold and still they sleep
Till Spring's breath stirs the earth again.

Each fragile leaf born in the wind
Speaks to us of nature's flux
These fading trees and falling leaves
Will teach and caution us to live.

In twilight of the darkening sky
In sigh and creak of empty boughs
We trace the pattern of our days
Which into black night – by and by –
Will draw away.

The Hunter enters the village

Hunter:

Sorrow follows my weary footsteps
Sadness weights my heavy pack
For I have found those lost in the mountain
Released where a crevice of ice has cracked.
Tracing a path I seldom take
On a route so ravaged few have passed
I came upon a tomb broke open
Cold walls split to give them back.
They rest as if in sleep entwined
Little changed in these long years
Father and son who died together
Returned in the last light of a fading year.

The Villagers:

Gently – gently
We will bear them
We will bear them gently home
To the woman who has waited
Half a life-time all alone.

Sorrow and joy
Go round and around
For those that were lost
Are those who are found.

The villagers gather into a procession to go to the Old Woman's house

As they approach the Old Woman's house

The Villagers:

See a light shines in her window
As the shadowed dusk draws in
Falters in the evening's stillness
Trembles in the whispering wind.

The Shepherd goes into the Old Woman's house and finds her dead

Shepherd/Shepherdess:

Oh my sister
You who with such patience kept
In lonely years your vigil long
Taught us kindness and compassion
Kept faith they would one day return
Rest peacefully in Death's long sleep
United now with those who are gone.

The Villagers:

In the silence of this lonely clearing
We light a flame remembering
That our lives will pass
Like the traces of a cloud
And be scattered like mist
In the soft rain.

They light candles

Spirits of the Mountain:

See a light shines out the darkness
Draws our weary spirits down
To a woman whose great goodness
Kept us from being all alone.

We will bear her gently
To her Father's heavenly home.

The Spirits move down from the mountain and assemble around the Old Woman

Priest:

Before the ending of the day
Creator of the world we pray
That with thy wonted favour, thou
Wouldst be our Guard and Keeper now.

The Villagers:

From all ill dreams defend our eyes,
From nightly fears and fantasies:
Tread under foot our ghostly foe,
That no pollution we may know.

All:

We pray at the close of day
The pain of life fades away
A gentle calm quiet falls
In peace that lasts eternally

When in despair I turn to you
The Ever Faithful Ever true
My rock and guide throughout all strife
Eternal strength that gives us life.

Amen.