

THE
PRISONER

An opera for children

by

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Libretto by Sheila Upjohn

The Prisoner

The opera stems from an old French folk song *The Prisoner of Nantes*. This tells of a man in prison whom no one comes to see except the jailor's daughter. When he asks her what is to become of him, she replies that people say he will be hanged. In the opera he becomes, not just a prisoner, but a prisoner of despair.

Outside in the street the children of Nantes are playing a guessing game, asking riddles. The jailor's daughter tells the prisoner that the key to set him free lies in the answer to the riddles. Bound in chains in his cell, the prisoner cannot go to find the answers, and so he sends the children off to search for them. They split into three groups and go off, singing, playing and dancing.

When they return, each group brings a different answer to the first riddle: "What is the sweetest sound in the world?" The prisoner chooses the cry of a newly born child, and his mother singing for joy. Happiness starts to break the bonds of his despair and he recognises the jailor's daughter as Hope.

Once more the prisoner sends the children off, and once more they return with three answers. This time the riddle is "What is the saddest sound in the world?" The prisoner chooses the sound of a mother weeping as her son is crucified. He is able to feel grief as well as joy, and his bonds are lighter.

Now he sends the children off on their last quest "What is the price of the life of a man?" The children bring back, not answers, but more questions: "Is it gold? Is it silver? Or is it love?"

The prisoner chooses love. The walls of his prison dissolve and the children lead him out.

THE PRISONER

The Prisoner

Children

Deep in the prison at Nantes
Lay a prisoner of despair
No one came to see him
But the jailor's daughter fair

When he asked her "Tell me truly
What do people say of me?"
She replied "The folk are saying
You will hang from the tree."

Prisoner

In the dark, in the dark
No light penetrates this gloom
In the dark, in the dark,
No one enters this still room

Only myself, only my breath
Only my heartbeats, counting out death
Only the darkness, choking black
Only the silence at my back

Bound here alone, I drown in fear
Here in the prison of despair

Jailor's daughter

Listen, and you hear your heartbeat
Listen, and you hear your breath
Listen, and you hear me calling to you
Listen, and you lose your fear of death

Then you hear the laughter of the children
The children playing in the street
You will hear the singing of the children
Their chatter and the clatter of their feet

Children Deep in the prison at Nantes
Lay a prisoner of despair
But the sound of children singing
Came into the silence there

Their game was asking riddles
What might the answer be?
But the answer to the riddles
Was the key to set him free

Jailor's daughter Find the answer to the riddles
And the key will set you free

Children What is the saddest sound in the world?
Find the answer if you can

What is the sweetest sound in the world?
Find the answer if you can

The final answer you must find is
'What is the price of the life of a man?'

Prisoner How can I search?
How can I seek?
When chains bind my hands and feet?

Jailor's daughter You are bound
you are bound in this prison
And cannot journey
where you want to go
Let the children be your messengers
and send them
To find the answers
that you need to know

Children

We will be your eyes
We will look, look, look

We will be your feet
We will walk, walk, walk

We will be your ears
We will listen, too

We will walk and look and listen
And come back to you.

Prisoner

Children, you are free
You are free to go
Running through the world
Like the winds that blow

Search through the world
Like the morning wind
Search—and return
And tell me what you find

Children

Wild wind, morning wind
Wind that blows in the tops of the pines
Joyous wind that rushes past
Let us go with the huge wild wind

(The children form three groups and move off singing)

Prisoner

The children, they are free
They are free to go
Running through the world
Like the winds that blow

But I am chained in my prison cell
How can these answers break the spell?
Here in the dark I drown in fear
Deep in the prison of despair

Entr'acte I

"What is the sweetest sound in the world"

(The children and musicians come back)

Children

We have been your eyes
We have looked, looked, looked

We have been your feet
We have walked, walked, walked

We have been your ears
We have listened, too

We have walked and looked and listened
And come back to you.

Prisoner

Where have you looked?
Where have you been?
What have you learnt?
What have you seen?

Tell me the sweetest sound in the world
Answer the riddle that will set me free

1st group

We listened and we heard the wind in springtime
Blowing through a field beside the sea
This sound made us laugh
This sound made us rejoice
And so we bring this music back to thee

2nd group

We listened and a bird hailed the sunrise
As she sat on the branch of a tree
This sound made us laugh
This sound made us rejoice
And so we bring this music back to thee

3rd group

We passed a little cottage
And as we stood at the door
We heard the cry of a new born child
And its mother singing for joy

All children

These are the sounds that made us glad
The music we bring to thee
Choose the sweetest sound in the turning world
And the knowledge will set you free

Prisoner

My heart leaps up
I hear the bird
I hear the wind
I hear the birth

Happiness flows in this prison cell
Happiness starts to break the spell
I choose the child, and his mother too
There is joy in my heart I never knew

Fly children, fly on your willing feet
Bring me the answers I still seek
Jailor's daughter, you spoke true
Hope is your name. I welcome you

Jailor's daughter

Hope is my name, and I can pass
Through prison walls and gates of brass
Hope is my name, I light the gloom
That stifles you in this small room

Turn to the children of the street
Send them again on their willing feet
Send them again like the morning wind
Send them to seek what you need to find

Prisoner Search through the world
Like the morning wind
Search—and return
And tell me what you find

Children We will be your eyes
We will look, look, look

We will be your feet
We will walk, walk, walk

We will be your ears
We will listen, too

We will walk and look and listen
And come back to you

(They go off in three groups as they sing)

Entr'acte II

“What is the saddest sound in the world”

(The children re-enter singing as they return)

Prisoner Where have you looked?
Where have you been?
What have you learnt?
What have you seen?

Tell me the saddest sound in the world
Answer the riddle that will set me free

1st group We listened and we heard the wind in winter
Sighing as it searched the icy sea
This sound brought us sorrow and sadness
And so we bring this music back to thee

2nd group We listened and we heard a blackbird mourning
Her mate who had wandered from the tree
This sound brought us sorrow and sadness
And so we bring this music back to thee

3rd group The earth was filled with sighing
And darkness covered the sea
We heard a mother weep for her son
Whom men had nailed to the tree

All children These are the sounds that made us weep
The music we bring to thee
Choose the saddest sound in the turning world
And the knowledge will set you free

Prisoner My heart is rent
I hear the wind
I hear the bird
I weep with her

The tears flow in my prison cell
Love mixed with grief will break the spell
I choose the knowledge that loves holds pain
That he who died will rise again

Run, children, run on your hurrying feet
Bring me the answer that I still seek
Jailor's daughter, you spoke true
The children have made me hope anew

Jailor's daughter The blindness of your eyes
The coldness of your heart
The deafness of your ears
Begin to lose their art

Look at the world with the eyes of a child
Hear the world through the ears of a child
Love the world with the heart of a child
And the knowledge will set you free

Children

We will be your eyes
We will look, look, look

We will be your feet
We will walk, walk, walk

We will be your ears
We will listen, too

We will walk and look and listen
And come back to you.

Wild wind, morning wind
Wind that blows in the tops of the pines
Joyous wind that rushes past
Let us go with the huge wild wind

(The children move off)

Entr'acte II

"What is the price of the life of a man"

(The children re-enter singing as they return)

Children

We have been your eyes
We have looked, looked, looked

We have been your feet
We have walked, walked, walked

We have been your ears
We have listened, too

We have walked and looked and listened
And come back to you.

Prisoner Where have you looked?
Where have you been?
What have you learnt?
What have you seen?

What is the price of the life of a man?
Answer the riddle that will set me free

1st group We saw a slave being bought for gold
In a market by the sea
Is this the price of the life of a man?
We bring this question to thee

2nd group We heard thirty pieces of silver chink
As a man was sold for a fee
Is this the price of the life of a man?
We bring this question to thee

3rd group For love a child was born on earth
For love he died on a tree
For love he lived on earth like us
For love he sets us free

All children Is gold the price of the life of a man?
Is silver the precious fee?
Or is it love that unlocks the door
And sets the prisoner free?

Prisoner The darkness lifts
My chains are gone
The walls dissolve
And I walk free.
Children of Nantes
You have woken me

I wake from the nightmare of despair
I see the sun, I breathe fresh air
Now I am free as the winds that blow
To run through the world as the children do

Jailor's daughter See life through the eyes of a child
Hear life through the ears of a child
Love life with the heart of a child
And love will set you free

(The children help the prisoner from his lonely place)

Children We have been your eyes
We have looked, looked, looked

We have been your feet
We have walked, walked, walked

We have been your ears
We have listened, too

And love will be our guide
All our whole life through.

All Deep in the prison at Nantes
Lay a prisoner of despair
No one came to see him
But the jailor's daughter fair

Then he asked her "Tell me truly
What do people say of me?
She replied "They cry aloud
You are saved by the tree."