

WORLD PREMIERE

The House without a Christmas Tree

MUSIC BY
**RICKY IAN
GORDON**
LIBRETTO BY
ROYCE VAVREK

HOUSTON
GRAND OPERA
BRADLEY MOORE

PENTATONE
AMERICAN OPERAS
★★★★★★

Live Recording





HOUSTON GRAND OPERA
The Wortham Theater Center



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Addie's Dad (Daniel Belcher) relives his last Christmas with his wife, Helen (Heidi Stober).



The House without a Christmas Tree

A Chamber Opera in One Act

Based on *The House without a Christmas Tree*, a book by **Gail Rock**

Music by **Ricky Ian Gordon** | Libretto by **Royce Vavrek**

Commissioned by Houston Grand Opera

Premiered by Houston Grand Opera, December 2017

The Houston Grand Opera Orchestra and Juvenile Chorus

Bradley Moore, Conductor

James Robinson, Director

Allen Moyer, Set Designer

James Schuette, Costume Designer

Christopher Akerlind, Lighting Designer

Karen Reeves, Juvenile Chorus Director

Kirill Kuzmin, Music Preparation

Jonathan Gmeinder, Music Preparation

Addie (Lauren Snouffer) sits in bewildered silence as her father, James (Daniel Belcher) demands that she get rid of the Christmas tree she won at school.

The House without a Christmas Tree

A Chamber Opera in One Act

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2	Scene 1	7.38
3	Interlude 1: Snowballs	2.23
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14	Scene 8: A Gift, Not Charity	2.29
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16	Piano Interlude 3	0.30
17	Scene 10: A Surprise for Addie	5.42
	Total playing time:	73.27

Houston Grand Opera

With its first season in 1955–56, Houston Grand Opera (HGO) set the tone for its future, staging two performances each of the still-shocking *Salome* and the repertoire staple *Madame Butterfly*. From that modest beginning, HGO has become one of the largest, most innovative, and most highly acclaimed opera companies in the United States. It is jointly led by Patrick Summers, artistic and music director, and Perryn Leech, managing director.

HGO is perhaps best known as the record-holder among opera companies for commissioning and premiering new works as a means of creating a young, American voice in opera. *The House*

without a Christmas Tree was HGO's 64th world premiere.

Houston Grand Opera's ongoing mission is to advance the operatic art form to serve an ever-evolving audience. The company continues to present standard repertoire in fresh, new ways and also to produce new works that inspire future generations of opera lovers, both in the diverse city of Houston and also globally through technology.

The company is the recipient of a Tony Award, two Grammy Awards, and three Emmy Awards, and is the only opera company in the world to win all three honors.

Cast (in order of vocal appearance)

Adelaide Mills/Miss Thompson/Helen Mills

Heidi Stober

“Addie” Mills

Lauren Snouffer

Grandma Mills

Patricia Schuman

Carla Mae

Megan Mikailovna Samarin

Billy Wild

Maximillian Macias

Gloria Cott

Elisabeth Leone

James Addison Mills III (“Dad”)

Daniel Belcher

Houston Grand Opera **Juvenile Chorus**

Karen Reeves, *Juvenile Chorus Director*

Solomon Alhakeem

Alina Dong

Emily Hansen

Jackie Hickman

Sean Holshouser

Aidan Leake

Elisabeth Leone

Maximillian Macias

Christian Mathews

Antonio Teodoro

Riley Vagis

Mallory Williams

Houston Grand Opera **Orchestra**

Violin	Denise Tarrant, <i>Concertmaster</i> Sarah and Ernest Butler Concertmaster Chair Natalie Gaynor, <i>Principal Second Violin</i> Carrie Kauk, <i>Assistant Principal Second Violin</i>
Viola	Eliseo Rene Salazar, <i>Principal</i>
Cello	Barrett Sills, <i>Principal</i>
Double bass	Dennis Whittaker, <i>Principal</i>
Flute	Christina Medawar, <i>Acting Principal</i>
Oboe	Elizabeth Priestly Siffert, <i>Principal</i>
Clarinet	Sean Krissman, <i>Principal</i> Eric Chi
Bassoon	Amanda Swain, <i>Principal</i>
French horn	Sarah Cranston, <i>Principal</i> Kimberly Penrod Minson
Trumpet	Aaron Schuman, <i>Acting Principal</i>
Trombone	Thomas Hultén, <i>Principal</i>
Percussion	Richard Brown, <i>Principal</i>
Harp	Joan Eidman, <i>Principal</i>
Piano	Jonathan Gmeinder
Music Librarian	Aspen McArthur

Addie (Lauren Snouffer) appears as the Angel in her school Christmas pageant.





Ricky Ian Gordon, composer

American composer Ricky Ian Gordon has composed two previous operas for HGO: *A Coffin in Egypt*, written for Frederica von Stade (2014, with libretto by Leonard Foglia, also performed at The Wallis Annenberg Center for the Performing Arts, Opera Philadelphia, Chicago Opera Theatre, and Lincoln Center), and *The Tibetan Book of the Dead* (1996, with Jean Claude van Itallie). Gordon's catalog also includes *Morning Star* (libretto by William Hoffman) for the Cincinnati Opera, with a new version that premiered in March 2018 for On Site Opera; *27* (libretto by Royce Vavrek) for Opera Theatre of Saint Louis and also performed in a new choral version commissioned by Master Voices at City Center in New York; *Rappahannock County* (libretto by Mark Campbell) for the Harrison Opera House; *Sycamore Trees* (libretto by composer) for The

Signature Theatre; *The Grapes of Wrath* (libretto by Michael Korie), premiered by the Minnesota Opera in 2007 and a new version premiered by Opera Theatre of Saint Louis in 2017; *Green Sneakers: for Baritone, String Quartet, and Empty Chair* (libretto by the composer), a theatrical song cycle premiered by the Miami String Quartet; the song cycle *Orpheus and Euridice* for Lincoln Center; *My Life with Albertine* (with Richard Nelson) for Playwright's Horizons; *Night Flight to San Francisco and Antarctica* (for Renée Fleming), both set to text from Tony Kushner's *Angels in America*; *Dream True* (with Tina Landau) for the Vineyard Theatre; *States of Independence* (also with Landau) for the American Music Theatre Festival; and *Only Heaven* for Encompass Opera.



Royce Vavrek, librettist

Royce Vavrek is a Grande Prairie, Canada-born, Brooklyn-based librettist and lyricist whose opera *Angel's Bone* with composer Du Yun was awarded the 2017 Pulitzer Prize for Music. He made his HGO debut in 2015 with HGOco's world premiere of *O Columbia* (composer Gregory Spears). He is also known for his diverse collaborations with composers Ricky Ian Gordon (*27*); David T. Little (*Dog Days*, *Am I Born*, *JFK*); Missy Mazzoli (*Song from the Uproar*, *Breaking the Waves*, *Proving Up*); Joshua Schmidt (*Midwestern Gothic*); Paola Prestini (*Yoani*, *The Hubble Cantata*); Matt Marks (*A Song for Wade [This is Not That Song]*, *Strip Mall*); Ellen Reid (*Knoxville: Summer of 2015*); Mikael Karlsson (*Diana Vreeland*); and Marisa Michelson

(*Naamah's Ark*). Vavrek is co-artistic director of The Coterie, an opera-theater company founded with Tony-nominated soprano Lauren Worsham. The company is currently developing a series of short films that will operatically adapt Aaron Teel's novella-in-flash *Shampoo Horns* into six installments, each composed by a different composer, a project supported by the Canada Council for the Arts' New Chapter program. He holds a BFA in filmmaking and creative writing from Concordia University, Montreal, and an MFA from the Graduate Musical Theater Writing Program at New York University. He is an alumnus of American Lyric Theater's Composer Librettist Development Program.



Bradley Moore, conductor

Conductor, coach, and pianist Bradley Moore was HGO's associate music director from 2015 to 2018. While at HGO, he conducted performances of *La traviata* (2017); HGOco's world premiere of *Some Light Emerges* (2017); *The Little Prince* (2015); and performances of *The Elixir of Love* (2016), *Tosca* (2015–16), and *The Magic Flute* (2014–15). He also served as pianist for HGO's Eleanor McCollum Competition Concert of Arias. He conducted *The Cunning Little Vixen*, *Dead Man Walking*, and *The Crucible* at the Miami Music Festival; he has conducted *Madame Butterfly* at the Castleton Festival and *The Barber of Seville* at Opera Colorado and has worked on the music staffs of the Metropolitan Opera, the Salzburg

Festival, Paris Opera, Canadian Opera Company, and Los Angeles Opera, among others. Moore has performed with mezzo-soprano Jamie Barton at the Toronto Summer Music Festival, Carnegie Hall, Frankfurt Opera, the Kennedy Center, and other venues; they also joined Angela Meade in recital at the U.S. Supreme Court. Moore has collaborated with Renée Fleming and Susan Graham at Carnegie Hall and on several national tours, and enjoys partnerships with Christine Goerke, Alice Coote, Eric Cutler, Eric Owens, and clarinetist Julian Bliss. TV appearances include performing live on *A Prairie Home Companion* with Renée Fleming and Yo-Yo Ma.

A Note from Gail Rock

Author of the book *The House without a Christmas Tree*

When I wrote about a childhood memory in 1972 for a TV special, I could not have imagined that my story would become an opera 45 years later. Houston Grand Opera Artistic and Music Director Patrick Summers had remembered *The House without a Christmas Tree* from his childhood and set the wheels in motion. I was delighted when HGO commissioned the highly regarded team of composer Ricky Ian Gordon and librettist Royce Vavrek to create the opera.

I traveled from California to join family and friends in Houston for the premiere. What a thrill for an off-key Glee Club alto to hear the brilliant soprano Lauren Snouffer singing the beautiful words and music as “me”!

I’ve been an opera fan for years, and I know how extraordinary the entire *House without a Christmas Tree* cast is. Bravo all!

I also know what a heroic effort HGO Managing Director Perryn Leech and the staff made to create a new performance venue when Hurricane Harvey forced them to relocate on the spur of the moment. They not only conjured up a wonderful opera venue in a giant convention-center box, they filled it with a beautiful holiday gift for me and all music lovers. I hope this recording will find its way into many a Christmas stocking in years to come.

—Gail Rock

Synopsis

PROLOGUE

It is the holiday season. Adelaide Mills, a writer living in New York, happens upon a Christmas-themed department store window that transports her back to her hometown in Nebraska and a special Christmas 20 years before.

SCENE 1

In Adelaide’s memory, her younger self, Addie, tries on an angel costume that Grandma is making for her to wear in a Christmas pageant. After the costume has been fitted, Addie and her best friend, Carla Mae, decorate hard-boiled eggs to represent boys they “hate.” Carla Mae suddenly asks why the Mills’s Christmas tree hasn’t been put up yet. Addie makes up an excuse—she is embarrassed that her father won’t allow a Christmas tree in the house. Sensing an awkward moment, Grandma tells the girls

to put on their snowsuits and play outside, where a snowball fight breaks out between the boys and the girls.

SCENE 2

Addie has decided to ask Dad one more time if they can have a Christmas tree, so at Grandma’s suggestion, she waits until after dinner. Dad replies that Addie doesn’t need a tree, but they make a bet: if Addie can drink a glass “full” of water, he’ll get a tree. When Addie does it, he told her she drank the glass “empty” and thus lost the bet. Addie is enraged and Grandma scolds him for his cruel trick. Grandma points out that it isn’t Addie’s fault he is still grieving the loss of his wife, Addie’s mother.

SCENE 3

At school, preparations for Christmas are in high gear. Miss Thompson, the

teacher, announces a gift exchange and the children practice singing carols. Later, the children come caroling at the Mills home. Grandma is touched, but Dad doesn't react at all.

SCENE 4

Addie and Carla Mae are doing homework in Addie's room. They fantasize about their future and discuss what they want for Christmas.

SCENE 5

In the school gift exchange, Addie is embarrassed to receive a heart pendant from Billy Wild. Miss Thompson doesn't want to leave the class Christmas tree in the room over the vacation, so she decides to give it to someone whose family has no tree. Addie and another girl, Gloria Cott, are the only ones without a tree, so Miss Thompson devises an impromptu contest to determine a winner. Addie wins, and Carla Mae helps her get the tree home.

SCENE 6

Grandma and Addie decorate the tree. At night, when he thinks he is alone, Dad turns on the Christmas tree lights and remembers his last Christmas with his wife. Addie sneaks out of her room to watch him. When Addie comes down the stairs, Dad explodes and tells her she must get the tree out of his house. Grandma tells him again that his grief is not Addie's fault and that he will drive her away.

SCENE 7

Grandma tries to comfort Addie, who still doesn't understand the true reason for her father's anger. She reaches Addie. When Grandma and Dad have gone to sleep, Addie slips out of the house and lugs the tree to Gloria Cott's house. She rings the doorbell and runs away.

SCENE 8

In the morning, Dad asks Addie where the tree is. Addie replies that she took it to the Cotts' front yard. Dad seems to be having second thoughts.

SCENE 9

Addie and her schoolmates get ready for the annual Christmas pageant. Gloria Cott, dressed as a cow, thanks Addie for the tree. Addie is wearing the heart pendant from Billy Wild, who notices. They wish each other good luck before going onstage for the pageant.

SCENE 10

When Addie, Grandma, and Dad return from the pageant, Addie sees a huge, beautiful, undecorated pine tree in the living room. The house now looks like Christmas. Grandma has brought in the old ornaments, and Dad crowns the tree with a star made by his wife.

EPILOGUE

Back in New York, the grown-up Adelaide smiles as she recalls how that Christmas 20 years ago changed her family forever.

Libretto

PROLOGUE

New York City, Christmas Eve.

Adelaide Mills, a woman in her mid-30s, begins to tell her story.

Adelaide

I'm a writer now,

I live and work in New York City.

A landscape of concrete and noise,

Far, far away from the little town

Where I grew up—

Clear River, Nebraska,

Population: 1,500.

Clear River was surrounded by

cornfields

And cattle and a wide-open sky.

The only house worth noting,

The Anderson's house,

Stood imposing

At just three stories high...

Main Street just a handful of stores, a

bank, a post office, Mr. Brady's shop.

Trains roared through, whistling by,

but could never find an excuse to stop.

Not where I grew up—

Clear River, Nebraska,

Population: 1,500.

I often think of that little town

At this time of year...

Of the snowdrifts and the icicles,

Of the gingerbread and holiday parties.

I can still hear

the carolers singing.

Carolers

Gather 'round the Christmas tree...

Gather 'round the Christmas tree...

Evergreen have its branches been,

It is king of all the woodland scene.

Adelaide

I often think of that little town,

And a Christmas there 20 years ago:

Just my grandma, my father, and me...

SCENE 1

Clear River, Nebraska, 20 years ago.

Addie, a pre-teen girl, stands on an ottoman as her Grandma, a kooky-looking woman trapped in an earlier decade, works with needle and thread at the hem of her angel costume. Addie's best friend Carla Mae sits at the table with books out and a snack in front of her.

Addie

"I bring great news,

And great joy!

In Bethlehem, here!

A baby, wrapped in cloths,

is lying in a manger,

He is your Messiah,

He is your savior!"

I'm not convinced, Grandma!

Has anybody actually seen one?

How can we be sure this is what an

angel looks like?

Grandma

The Bible tells all about them.

2

Addie

Where does it say that angels wear old bed sheets?

Carla Mae

They're just fat gnomes with spiritual delusions...

That's what my Aunt Patty Jo says, And she went to state college!

Addie

I bet they're very colorful.

Or they wear silk...

Or run around bare naked!

Grandma

Addie!

Addie

Grandma, are you trying to stab me with the needle?

Grandma

You're a fidgeter, Addie.



Addie

I fidget when you poke.

Grandma

Yes you do!

And I poke because you fidget.

All done.

Addie

Carla Mae, how's your egghead?

Carla Mae

Showing Addie a design on her hard-boiled egg

I've given mine a large forehead,
Two tiny specks for eyes,
The pudgiest cheeks,
And one little lonely, lopsided dimple,
And that dot is a pimple.

Grandma (Patricia Schuman) works at her sewing machine while Addie (Lauren Snouffer, standing) and her friend Carla Mae (Megan Mikailovna Samarin) paint "faces" on eggs.

Addie and Carla Mae

Delmer Doakes,
Egghead!

Addie

Carla Mae,
Your talent for egg portraits amazes me!

I'm making my egg a freckle-face,
With a red runny nose,
A bum in his chin...
And this is his lazy left eye.

I hate hate hate,
I hate this guy.

Addie and Carla Mae

Billy Wild,
Egghead.

Carla Mae

It's the smirk that gives him away...

Addie

Ready?

Carla Mae

Ready.

Addie and Carla Mae

Smash!

Delmer Doakes, egghead!

Smash!

Billy Wild, egghead!

Tiny eyes,

Pudgy cheeks,

Red runny nose,

Bum chin!

Smash the eggheads!

Delmer Doakes, egghead!

Billy Wild, egghead!

Addie

You chickened out...

The point is to really smack him!

Crack him!

Him being Delmer,

Delmer being the egghead!

Carla Mae

I just thought I'd tap him!

Wrinkle him up real good...

Make him look like he's 107!

Addie

That's the spirit, Carla Mae!

Carla Mae

Delmer Doakes, egghead.

Delmer Doakes, old man.

Addie

Why do you love Delmer so much?

Carla Mae

I just...do!

Why do you love Billy Wild?

Addie

Billy Wild is pure evil.

Grandma

That's not nice, Adelaide.

Addie

Sometimes the truth isn't pretty,
Grandma.

Carla Mae

How come you haven't got your
Christmas tree up yet?

Addie

We don't want one.

They're just a waste of money,

And my Uncle Paul has a tree...

That's where we go...

Carla Mae

My dad wouldn't dream of not having
a tree.

You're probably the only person
without a tree.

As your best friend, I totally
understand you,

But that's just weird.

Addie

It's not weird!

Grandma

You girls ought to get some fresh air.

Addie

Not when they're out there.

Grandma

Who's out there?

Addie

Them.

Boys!

It's a war zone.

Snowballs bring out the worst in
people.

Grandma

God created snowsuits for a reason!

Carla Mae

I'm running home to get mine! Bye.

Addie

Grandma,

Why is Dad so parsimonious?

Grandma

That's a pretty fancy word.

Addie

It means stingy.

Grandma

Your dad's not stingy.

Addie

There's no one as stingy as Dad.

Grandma

I don't know how you could say such a thing!

Addie

He always bought Mom a tree, right, Grandma?
Why wasn't he parsimonious with Mom?

Grandma

Addie, they chopped those trees down with their own two hands.
Your dad is far from stingy, he's resourceful!

Addie

I'd go out with him...
Tree hunting.
I'd lug the axe,
I'd drag the saw!
Think I should ask him, Grandma?

Grandma

Oh, I guess there's no harm.
Do it at dinner.

Addie

At dinner...

Grandma

Men are always more agreeable
On a full stomach.

Addie

He'll say yes!

INTERLUDE 1**Snowballs**

Addie stands on the street between two mounds of snow bellowing for Carla Mae down the street.

Addie

Carla Mae!
Billy Wild, I can smell you hiding a mile away.

Billy Wild

Bow down to the king of the mountain,
Princes of the snowmount!

Boys

Aye, aye, King Billy! Aye, aye.

Addie

You are pure arrogance, you egomaniac!

Billy Wild

Time to clobber the four-eyed nincompoop!

3

Boys

Aye, aye, King Billy! Aye, aye.

Addie

Oh, brother!

Billy Wild

Ready, aim, fire!

Gloria Cott

Leave her alone!

Addie

Gloria! I can fend for myself.
Thank you very much.

Boys

Thank you very much!

Billy Wild and Boys

Addie needs the poor girl
To stick up for her!
Not even Addie wants to play with Gloria.

Go cry to your mommy and your daddy, Gloria.

SCENE 2

After Dinner

Addie, Grandma, and Addie's dad sit silently around the dinner table eating their dinner. Dad finishes, tossing his napkin on his plate and retiring to the living room, his evening ritual. He lights a pipe and reads the newspaper.

Grandma

Ask him!

Addie

He's in one of his moods.

Grandma

He's full,
He's comfy,
He's probably half asleep in the easy chair.
Go!

Addie

I don't think he loves me.

Grandma

Oh, for the love of God!

Addie

He never hugs me or kisses me.

Grandma

Addie, he's not the hugging kind.

Addie

He'd love me a lot more if I was a boy.

Grandma

Nonsense!

Addie

He treats me like one...
Why else would he teach me how to box?

Grandma

Stop stalling.

Go, Addie!

Go, be brave.

Dad

You left the paper in a mess again.

Addie

Sorry.

Dad

I don't mind that you read the comics, but I hate a sloppy paper.
Here...
Some foil for your collection.

Addie

Don't know what I'll use this for.

Dad

Make something shiny.

Addie

I can't make tree decorations...
Since we don't have a tree.

Dad

Are we having this conversation again?

Addie

Won't you please buy me a tree?
Or we can chop one down?
It doesn't have to be the biggest one,
Or the greenest one,
It could be the most miniature tree,
A tree you need binoculars to see!
With one or two little branches,
And all its needles fallen off...
That's all I need.
I'll cover it with homemade tinsel
And popcorn garland,
This house could look like Christmas.
This house could feel like Christmas.
A house without a Christmas tree
Is a crime against the holidays,
Is a crime against humanity.
Is a crime against me!
Won't you please buy me a tree?
How many Christmases must I beg?
It doesn't have to be the perfect one,
It doesn't have to be a healthy one.

Any tree is fine!
It just has to be mine...
Ours.
This house could look like Christmas.
This house could feel like Christmas...
Dad, I implore you!
Won't you please buy me a tree,
Daddy?

Dad
You do not need a tree!

Addie
Everybody needs a tree!
I won't ask for another thing for a
whole year.
Will you bet me something?
If I win, you buy me a tree.
If I lose, I'll never ask you again. Deal?

Dad
I'll make you a bet.

Addie
What is it?

Dad
I bet you can't drink a glass full of
water.

Addie
I think you're gonna owe me a tree.

*Addie runs to the kitchen and pours
herself a glass of water. She returns to
the living room and stands in front of
her father, drinking the water in one
long series of gulps. When she finishes
she smiles triumphantly.*

Dad
You drank it empty.
I bet that you couldn't drink it full.

Addie
Why do you hate me?

Grandma and Dad
Adelaide!

*Addie (Lauren Snouffer) pleads her case for a
Christmas tree to Dad (Daniel Belcher).*



Grandma

We do not throw things!

Dad

Unacceptable!

Grandma

Watch where you step, James.

Dad

I hardly recognize her anymore.
That attitude.

Grandma

That was cruel.

Dad

It was hardly cruel.

Grandma

You don't want nothin' to remind you.
But there she is with those familiar eyes,
with that familiar smile,
Growing up in fits and starts.
Every day she blossoms

Just a little bit more
Into the image of her mother.
The ache in your heart
Is not her fault.

Dad

Mother!

Grandma

Let her have a tree this year.
Have you forgotten what it's like to be
a child?
You've let your whole life turn sour,
James.
And you're doing a good job of souring
her, too.

Dad

Is that so?

Grandma

You don't want nothin' to remind you.
But there she is with her familiar plea,
A holiday wish for an evergreen.
Growing up in fits and starts.
Every day she blossoms

Just a little bit more
Into the image of her mother.
The ache in your heart
Is not her fault.

Dad

I hardly recognize her anymore.
She's not the daughter I raised, Mother.

Grandma

If I had it in me,
I'd go out and find her a tree myself.

Dad

You wouldn't dare, Mother.

Grandma

Wanna bet, watch me...
The grief that we feel,
The sadness that circles back around,
Is a heavy cloud,
That always seems to hover
Around Christmastime.
Christmastime...
But it's not her fault, James.

Dad

It's all my fault.
Having the baby is what killed her.
Helen was weakened.
It's the baby that stole her.

Grandma

But it's not your fault, James.

Dad

It's all my fault. All mine...

*Upstairs in Addie's room we see her
looking at an old photo book.*

Addie

Proof my dad was happy:
A box of pictures of him and my mom,
A smile that took over his entire face,
A picture of my mom in her wedding
dress,
Handmade with so much lace,
Pictures from years ago,
many years ago,
Before me,

Before Addie.
Before all the joy inside him
Shriveled up
Like a prune.

Grandma

I, too, have loved and lost.
I tell you, Son,
That love,
That joy,
That life
We must hold onto at any cost.

SCENE 3

Caroling

At the local school, all of the kids arrive. It is one of the last days before the Christmas break. The teacher is Miss Thompson, a conservative 30-something who wears her long hair up in a bun, and a holiday-patterned floor-length dress. Billy Wild sits adjacent to Addie.

Miss Thompson

We don't want anyone left out of the gift exchange!
And remember the rules,
Do not overspend!

Billy Wild

What if we don't spend at all?

Miss Thompson

That wouldn't be fair, Billy.

Billy Wild

My dad says life ain't fair.

Addie

You're so parsimonious.

Billy Wild

What's that, pet?
Petpetpet
Teacher's pet?
Addie the pet.
Miss Thompson's pet.
Woof, woof, woof, woof, woof!

Miss Thompson

Enough, Billy.

Billy Wild

How-ooooooooo...

Miss Thompson

Everyone in caroling formation!

Addie

Miss Thompson,
I have a request!
My grandma loves the carol
"Gather 'round the Christmas Tree"...
Can we add it to our repertoire?

Billy Wild

I vote no.
I don't want it in our repertoire.
Not just to please her nutjob grandma.

Addie

She's not a nutjob!
Who are you calling a nutjob, egghead?
She's not a nutjob!
She's got—character!

Miss Thompson

Hey!

Addie

He started it.

Miss Thompson

Billy, to the other side, please.
Let's sing "Gather 'round the Christmas Tree."
I think that's a lovely carol, Addie.

Billy Wild

Disagree!

Carolers

Gather 'round the Christmas tree!
Gather 'round the Christmas tree!
Evergreen have its branches been,
It is king of all the woodland scene.

The location shifts from the school to the living room of Addie's house.

Carolers

Gather 'round the Christmas tree!
 Gather 'round the Christmas tree!
 Once the pride of the mountain side,
 Now cut down to grace our Christmas-tide.

If your branches hold
 Snow or candlelight,
 Birds or a star so bright,
 Forever may your sight
 Evoke the truest meanings,
 And season's greetings.

Gather 'round the Christmas tree!
 Gather 'round the Christmas tree!
 Ev'ry bough has a burden now,
 They are gifts of love for us, we trow.
 Gather 'round the Christmas tree!

Grandma

How beautiful!
 Aren't they, James?
 Beautiful...

Carolers

Silent night, holy night,

All is calm,
 All is bright.

Grandma

James!

SCENE 4**Best Friends**

Addie and Carla Mae do homework in Addie's bedroom.

Carla Mae

I will live in the woods with Delmer Doakes.
 He'll plant the barley, I'll plant the carrots.
 He'll mend the fence, I'll mend his trousers.
 And I'll kiss his chubby little face
 At breakfast, lunch, and dinner!
 Delmer...

Addie

I will live in Paris,

6

In an apartment with three Persian cats,
 And drink Peruvian coffee,
 And I will write the greatest romances,
 And wear a pink beret and blue galoshes.

Carla Mae

You'll never forget me, will you?

Addie

Carla Mae, you are the most unforgettable person I have ever met.

Carla Mae

Really?

Addie

Yes.

Carla Mae

What's on your Christmas list?

Addie

I'm praying for cowboy boots.

Carla Mae

Cowboy boots like Billy Wild?
 I knew it, you do like him!

Addie

Absolutely not!
 I saw this pair in the Sears catalog,
 With silver on the toes,
 And this design up the side.
 Billy's are just boring brown boy boots.

Carla Mae

Yeah, right.
 We should go on double dates.
 That's what my Aunt Patty Jo does,
 And she went to state college!

Addie

You're gonna make me sick.

SCENE 5**School Christmas**

Miss Thompson, dressed in her Christmas finest, has gathered the

7

class around the tree. Addie wears a red plaid circle skirt and red sweater.

Miss Thompson

This is a present from Carla Mae to Delmer...

Miss Thompson

And here's one from Addie Mills to Tanya Smithers...

Miss Thompson

And now it's Addie's turn to open her gift from Billy Wild.

Class

Ooooh!

Addie pulls out a chain with a heart pendant on it, her excitement quickly turning to embarrassment. The lights switch and we are suddenly alone in Addie's inner monologue.

Addie

You don't give a heart on a chain
To a girl you hate.

You don't.

A heart means romance.

Romance means love.

Love means...Love...

Billy Wild, egghead.

Smash the egghead.

Billy Wild

You don't...

You're dead!

My face is on fire,

My face is red.

Billy Wild, egghead.

Romance means love.

Billy Wild loves me.

Billy Wild loves me.

Billy Wild...

Miss Thompson

Show us what you received, Addie!

Class

Show us, Addie!

Addie

This is the most embarrassing day
Of my entire life.

Class

Oooooooooohhhh...

Billy Wild is in love with Addie Mills!

Tanya Smithers

Go in the utility closet if you're going
to kiss!

Billy Wild

I'd rather kiss my Aunt Carmen,
And she's got a mustache.

Addie

You are insufferable, Billy!

Miss Thompson

Is this for me?

To Miss Thompson...love, her students.

She opens the box and pulls out a blue mirror-glass jewelry box. She opens the lid and music begins to play.

This must be the most beautiful,
beautiful gift I've ever received. Really.

Addie

I found it—we found it—at Mr. Brady's
shop!

He thought you'd like perfume,

But I knew it—we knew it!—we knew
that this was the gift for you.

Miss Thompson

I thank you all from the bottom of my
heart.

Kameron Sherk

It's just a box, Miss Thompson.

Brian Johanson

No need to cry over a little blue box.

Miss Thompson

It's beautiful.

Now, before the final bell!

We must get to the matter of the
Christmas tree!

Kristopher Blaine and Amy Rowney

What about it?

Addie

Patience, people!

Miss Thompson

Raise your hand if your family doesn't have a tree.

Addie and Gloria Cott, a poor girl, both raise their hands.

Misty Andrews

My family has two trees!

Someone

Braggart!

Miss Thompson

As you know, we usually leave the tree up over the Christmas vacation, and then have our annual New Year's bonfire

out on the track field...

Due to some issues of liability...

Derek John

Lia-Billy Wild!?

Miss Thompson

We've decided to send the tree to a home without!

Since we have two such families,

We'll have a contest.

Terri-Jan Quinn

Poorest one wins!

Cody Beck

Make 'em thumb wrestle!

Miss Thompson

Pick a number between one and ten...

The closest will win the tree!

Classmates

Most.

Boring.

Contest.

Ever.

Miss Thompson

Gloria...

Gloria Cott

Eight.

Miss Thompson

Addie?

Addie

Seven.

Miss Thompson

I chose the number five,

Meaning Addie has won the tree.

Classmates

Teacher's pet!

Addie

Shaking Gloria's hand

Nice try!

Classmates

Rigged! It's a rigged contest!

INTERLUDE 2

8

Journey of the Christmas Tree, Part 1

Addie and Carla Mae drag the tree to Addie's house through the street.

Carla Mae

You were lucky, Addie!

Addie

It wasn't luck.

I played the odds.

My dad taught me.

You're drooping!

Take a break.

Carla Mae

I've lost my grip!

Carla Mae (Megan Mikailovna Samarin) helps Addie (Lauren Snouffer) bring home the class Christmas tree.



I need some hot chocolate to warm my insides.

Suddenly Billy Wild appears on the top of a snowbank, throwing a snowball and hitting Addie.

Addie

Not you again.
Leave me alone, Billy.

Billy Wild

Need help luggin' that thing?

Addie

Not from you!
You don't think girls are as strong as boys?
You are ridiculous.
Now, heave-ho, Carla Mae!

Billy Wild

I just thought it looked like a job for three people,
That's all.

Addie

It's a job for two girls!

PIANO INTERLUDE 1

9

SCENE 6

The House with a Christmas Tree

Addie stands in front of the tree, set up in the living room. Grandma comes into the house carrying shopping bags.

Grandma

Oh, boy.

Addie

I won it at school.
We guessed numbers.

Grandma

It's a beauty.
Must be a seven- or eight-footer!
Your dad's gonna have a heart attack.

Addie

But it didn't cost anything...

Grandma

That's not the point, Adelaide.

Addie

Would you place the star up top?

Grandma

You think I could get up there?
Ha!
With my rheumatism?
Ha!

Addie

Let's go get it!

Grandma

Oh, jeez!

The house transitions into night, everyone seemingly asleep. Suddenly, the Christmas tree lights come on

and we realize that Dad has plugged them in. He stands in his coat and work clothes like a deer caught in the headlights. He falls back into his chair, staring at the tree. We notice Addie sneaking out of her room and sitting at the top of the stairs where she watches her father. Out of the shadows, Addie's mom, Helen, appears, visibly pregnant in a beautiful Christmas dress. She carries a large catalog and glasses of milk and cookies on a tray.

Helen

When I open the Sears Wish Book today,
I still get as excited as I did when I was four years old.
We'd sit, me and my sisters,
Each with a glass of milk
And a tower of store-bought cookies,
And the catalog,
Every page we'd circle something,

Every page something worth wishing
for.

What are you lookin' at?

Dad

My wife,
Glowing brighter than the tree.
My wife,
Beautiful with our child.

Helen

Did you forget to shovel the driveway?
You tend to compliment
when avoiding an apology.

Dad

The driveway is immaculate.

Helen

Dance with me, James...

Dad

You know I have two left feet.
Promise me...
That we'll dance

around the Christmas tree.

Every year,
Promise me.
Promise me,
While the fire
roars its wintery melody,
We will be,
Promise me.
Waltzing here
While the ornaments shimmer.
Snow will fall,
As the mulled cider simmers.
You and me,
Endlessly,
Promise me.

Helen

Promise me...
That we'll dance
around the Christmas tree.
Every year,
Promise me.
We'll be here,
Like the echoes
of a wonderful memory

We will be,
Promise me.
Waltzing here
While the children play near us.
Whispering
So they see but don't hear us.

Helen and Dad

I tell you
You tell me
I love you
You love me
Every year
I'll be here.
Promise me!

*Addie comes down the stairs quietly
and stands facing her dad. He opens
his eyes and realizes that he has an
audience.*

Dad

Where the hell did that come from?

Addie

I won it.
I played the odds like you taught me.
I beat Gloria Cott.

Dad

Gloria Cott?
Gloria Cott!
You think we're like the Cott's?
Think we're poor like them?
Do you
Think we need charity?
Addie, do you think we need charity?
I don't accept charity, Addie.
I work, Addie,
Hard work,
On that crane 60, 70 hours a week.
Every penny earned.
Every last penny earned.
Work, Addie.

Addie

But it was free!

Dad

If I wanted a tree,
I'd buy—
I'd chop down a damned tree!
Addie...

Addie

Dad!

Dad

You can't have everything you want.
Not in this life.
You've got to learn, Addie.
A tree is something you can't have.
Not in this house.
Not in my house.
That's my decision.
We can't
Have a tree:
Not by charity,
Not chopped,
Not bought.
I don't want a damned tree!
You know what I want?
I want a vacation from you.

A vacation from this.. this... this...
This attitude you've developed...
Not in this house,
Not in my house, Adelaide.

Addie

You really hate me, don't you?

Dad

I want that tree gone.
I want that tree gone!
Get it gone. Gone!

Grandma

Actually, James,
This is my house.
I say the tree stays where it is.

Dad

If you don't want me here,
I'm happy to ship out tonight.
We'll be gone by the morning.

Grandma

Don't be stupid, James!

Dad

I mean it, Mother.
I'm not having you interfere
In the way I raise my daughter.

Grandma

She's got feelings, James,
Even if you don't.
The last person you felt anything for
was Helen.

Dad

Leave her out of this.

Grandma

You're brokenhearted,
But you're not the only man
Who's lost his wife.
That kind of grief is selfish, James.
Addie deserves your love.

Dad

Don't you tell me
I don't love my daughter.

Grandma

Before you know it,
She'll be full grown...
And you'll live in this house like a
hermit.
Addie will leave you,
I'll be long gone,
And you'll have nothing.
Then you can really live in the darkness
you crave, James.

PIANO INTERLUDE 2

11

SCENE 7

12

Gentle Wisdom

*Grandma slips into bed with Addie,
who is crying.*

Grandma (Patricia Schuman) tries to help Addie (Lauren Snouffer) understand her father's reaction to the tree; Dad (Daniel Belcher) seeks comfort in memories of his wife (Heidi Stober).



Addie

He's mean.

Grandma

He's proud.

Addie

He's mean.

Grandma

He'll get over it,
Maybe not in time for this Christmas.

Addie

It's a tree.
It's just a tree
That I won fair and square.
How can it be that we are so different?
How can something make me so
happy
And him so furious?

Grandma

Put yourself in his shoes:
The last tree he decorated

Was with your mom.
The last tree had a pile of presents
wrapped
For your mom.
The last tree was the first tree for him
And your mom...
With you in her belly.
When she died so soon after you were
born
That tree became the last tree he
could manage.
Its star became her light
Too quickly extinguished.
A tree is not a tree against Addie.
A tree is a broken promise.

Addie

Grandma...

Grandma

A tree is a promise...

Addie

Grandma...

Grandma

...of Christmas being a family time.

Addie

But this is no family...

Grandma

He may seem like a very strong man...

Addie

...might as well be a phantom to me,
Grandma...

Grandma

...but the truth is that
in his heart is a hole where your
mother once was.
A hole that feels a whole lot bigger
During the holidays.

*Grandma kisses Addie's forehead,
tucking her in, then exits her room.
As the lights in the house go down,
everybody falls asleep...except for
Addie. She climbs out of bed and out*

*into the hall, listening for evidence of
her sleeping Grandma and Dad. When
she hears snoring from both Dad and
Grandma, she tiptoes downstairs,
getting into her snowsuit. With great
effort, she drags the tree out of her
house.*

INTERLUDE 3

13

**Journey of the Christmas Tree,
Part 2**

*Addie, slowly and with much grunting
and groaning, drags the tree in the
other direction.*

Addie

This.
Is.
Impossible.

*Suddenly Billy Wild appears on the top
of the snowbank. He comes down and
picks up the trunk-end of the tree.*

Billy Wild

Heave-ho!

They arrive at the Cott's house. They prop the tree up on the front lawn.

Billy Wild

This tree has seen better days.

Addie

I'm not in the mood for you, Billy.
Why did you give me that heart pendant?

Billy Wild

It was on sale.

Addie

Ughhhh!
You could have bought chocolates...
or shampoo!

Billy Wild kisses Addie on the cheek and runs away.

Addie

Billy! Wait!

Billy Wild turns around and Addie throws a giant snowball at him. He laughs and runs away.

Addie

Merry Christmas, Gloria.

She rings the doorbell, then runs away and hides. Gloria Cott opens the door.

Gloria Cott

Mom! It's a...
It's a tree... from "Santa Claus"!
You said Santa couldn't visit this year,
We weren't on his list.
But I was good, Mama,
At least Santa thought so...
Must be a miracle, Mama!

SCENE 8**A Gift, Not Charity**

Grandma and Dad wake up, still in their pajamas, and stumble into the kitchen for coffee. Dad notices that the tree is gone.

Dad

What happened to the tree?

Grandma

It's gone?

Dad

A trail of pine needles out the door.

Grandma

It's gotta be Addie.
You overreacted.

Dad

I didn't overreact.

Grandma

It's gotta be Addie!

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Dad

Addie!
Get out here!

Grandma

It's gotta be Addie!

Addie comes out of her room.

Dad

Where's the tree?

Addie

You wanted it gone.
So last night,
when I heard you snoring,
I took it to Gloria's house,
Left a note saying "From Santa Claus"
So they'd know it's a gift.
So they'd know it's not charity.

Adelaide

Promise me...

Grandma

Oh, boy.
Your girl is full of surprises.

Addie

You wanted it gone, Dad.

Addie turns around and goes back into her room.

Grandma

You've raised a generous daughter,
James.
She's got the spirit of her mother, she
does.
And she's just as stubborn as you.

Dad

...it's just...

Grandma

I know, James.
That's your Addie.

SCENE 9

15

Nativity

Addie and her classmates get ready for the annual Christmas pageant. Addie is dressed in her angel costume, Carla Mae is dressed up as a lamb, and Gloria Cott is dressed up as a cow. There is a stable-full of animal costumes behind them as well as shepherds, a Mary and Joseph, Wise Men, etc. Gloria Cott sidles up to Addie.

Gloria Cott

Moo.
Thank you.

Addie

Gloria, is that you?

Gloria Cott

It's moo.
Thank you, Addie.

Addie

For what?

Gloria Cott

I know you're Santa Claus.

Addie

News to me.

Gloria Cott

Thank you, Addie.
You shoulda seen my brothers' eyes
light up
When we plugged the tree in!

Addie

Everyone should have a Christmas tree.

Miss Thompson

I need my cow...
My horse, my lamb, my donkey!
Angel, you're on deck!
Line up, shepherds, kings...
Mary and Joseph, you're on!

Billy Wild

You're wearing my necklace.

Addie

My necklace.

Billy Wild

It looks nice.

Miss Thompson

Places in the stable!

Addie

Good luck out there.

Billy Wild

You, too.

Miss Thompson

Places in the stable!

Addie

"I bring great news,
And great joy!
In Bethlehem, here,
A baby, wrapped in cloths,
is lying in a manger,

He is your Messiah,
He is your savior!”

Full Company

Gather 'round the Christmas tree!
Gather 'round the Christmas tree!
Evergreen have its branches been,
It is king of all the woodland scene.
Gather 'round the Christmas tree!
Gather 'round the Christmas tree!
Once the pride of the mountainside,
Now cut down to grace our Christmas-
tide.
If your branches hold
Snow or candlelight,
Birds or a star so bright,
Forever may your sight
Evoke the truest meanings,
And season's greetings.
Gather 'round the Christmas tree!
Gather 'round the Christmas tree!
Ev'ry bough has a burden now,
They are gifts of love for us, we trow.
Gather 'round the Christmas tree!

PIANO INTERLUDE 3

16

SCENE 10

17

A Surprise for Addie

Grandma, Dad, and Addie return home from the pageant. When Dad turns on the light, Addie notices the biggest, most beautiful undecorated pine tree she has ever seen.

Dad

What do you think?
Well, if you don't like it—

Addie

I love it.
It's beautiful.
It's ours.
I'll cover it with homemade tinsel
And popcorn garland...
This house now looks like Christmas.
This house now feels like Christmas.

Grandma and Addie (Patricia Schuman and Lauren Snouffer) are overjoyed when Dad (Daniel Belcher) brings out the star made by Addie's mom.



Grandma

I found all the ornaments,
From when your dad was a boy.

Addie

Do we have a star
For the top of the tree?
The one I made of foils that you gave
me
Is sitting on the top of Gloria's tree.

Dad

It's gotta be in here somewhere.
Aha!
Look here, Addie...
This is a star your mom made.
Pretty, ain't she?
Your mom loved stars,
Just like you.

Addie

Put it on the tree.
Do you think I look like her?
Like my mom?

Dad

Let's take a look at you...
Yes, I dare say...
...when you smile.
Dance with me...

Full Company

Promise me...
That we'll dance
around the Christmas tree.
Every year,
Promise me,
Promise me,
While the fire
roars its wintery melody
We will be,
Promise me.
Waltzing here
In a dream of December,
Waltzing here,
by the fire's last ember
I tell you
You tell me
I love you

You love me
Every year
I'll be here.
Promise me!

EPILOGUE**New York City**

*Basking in the warm glow of her
memories, Adelaide begins to reflect.*

Adelaide

That's where I grew up—
Clear River, Nebraska,
Population: 1,500.
I won't pretend that the tree solved
everything,
At that Christmas 20 years ago.
But I still return to a tree waiting,
Ready for our decorating.
My father unwraps the star.
And I place it on the top.
The tree is lit.
We stand back and admire it.
Just my grandma, my father, and me...

Adelaide, Grandma, and Dad

We three.

Acknowledgments

Executive Producer

Daniel James (Houston Grand Opera)

Producer

Blanton Alspaugh (Soundmirror, Inc.)

Recording Engineers

Mark Donahue

Brandon Johnson

Mixing and Mastering

Mark Donahue

Audio Recording & Post-production

Soundmirror, Inc.

Photography

Production photography by

Lynn Lane

The Wortham Theater Center by

Gary Barchfeld

Packaging Designer

Rachel Block

Album Cover

Addie (Lauren Snouffer) and her father (Daniel Belcher) share a warm moment next to the Christmas tree.

CD Sleeve

Addie (Lauren Snouffer, third from left) reacts to teasing from Billy Wild (Maximillian Macias).

Product Manager

Kasper van Kooten

Houston Grand Opera thanks the supporters that made this production possible: The Wortham Foundation, Inc.; The Robert and Janice McNair Foundation; Janice Barrow; The Cullen Foundation; and The Cullen Trust for the Performing Arts.



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