

Ricky Ian Gordon

The House Without a Christmas Tree

Piano-vocal score

LIBRETTO BY ROYCE VAVREK

A new opera based on the beloved holiday classic by Gail Rock



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CAST OF CHARACTERS

Adelaide "Addie" Mills, a pre-teen girl from Clear River, Nebraska	Soprano
James "Dad" Addison Mills III, her father, 40s.....	Baritone
Grandma Mills, her paternal grandmother, 60s.....	Mezzo-soprano
Carla Mae, her best friend and classmate.....	Mezzo-soprano
Miss Thompson, her teacher, late 30s	Soprano
Helen Mills, Addie's late mother, late 30s	
Adelaide Mills (Addie all grown up), living in New York City, late 30s	
Juvenile Chorus of Addie's classmates	S.A.T. Chorus
The chorus includes the comprimario roles of:	
Billy Wild, her nemesis (Tenor)	
Gloria Cott, a girl from a poor family (Soprano)	

SETTING

New York City, 1982 and
Clear River, Nebraska, 1962

The performance lasts approximately 1 hour, 20 minutes, with no intermissions.

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SYNOPSIS by Royce Vavrek

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 Cott's front yard. Dad seems to be having second thoughts.

SCENE 9

Addie and her schoolmates get ready for the annual Christmas pageant. Gloria, 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 at her recollections from 20 years ago, and we see her Christmas tree, topped with her mother's star.

LIBRETTIST'S NOTE by Royce Vavrek

EVERY PROJECT I WRITE inevitably contains autobiographic elements, but perhaps none so much as *The House without a Christmas Tree*. When I read Gail Rock's novel, I was immediately struck by how similar the fictional town of Clear River, Nebraska, was to my hometown of Sexsmith in western Alberta, Canada, a small town of around 1,500 people in the '80s and '90s where I attended St. Mary's Catholic School. The book also spoke to me as I, too, lost a parent — in my case my father, who took his own life when I was in my mid-20s. I know all too well how grief creates a lens, a prism through which we see and experience the world, a grief that often cycles around and becomes amplified at this time of year. Christmas has always been a very important holiday in my family, and as a precocious young boy I took it upon myself to volunteer my siblings and cousins to perform in an annual family concert in my paternal grandparents' basement after turkey dinner and presents — one of my earliest opportunities as a producer/writer/performer/ringmaster. Twenty-five or so years later, like Adelaide, I now live in New York City, a long way away from the canola, barley, and wheat fields of my childhood, and I write for a living... and I get to write with geniuses like Ricky Ian Gordon, a man whose music I've loved forever. I wrote the libretto for this opera with my niece and nephews in mind (and in heart)—Gunnar, Lydia, Jacob, and Reid—a quartet of curious and imaginative personalities with whom I am lucky to get to spend Christmas every year. With this opera, I am hoping to instill in them a love of music and theater, something that their late grandfather, Andy Vavrek, valued immensely. My sincerest thanks go out to everyone at Houston Grand Opera, particularly Patrick and Perryn for giving me the wonderful opportunity to tell this story, and to Ricky, who has changed my life in a million ways through our collaboration. I wish everyone the merriest of Christmases as you gather 'round your Christmas trees!

COMPOSER'S NOTE by Ricky Ian Gordon

I WAS HONORED to be asked by Patrick Summers to create one of the holiday operas for Houston Grand Opera's series. While I was looking for an idea, Patrick called one day to tell me of a TV movie he saw when he was little and asked me to watch it and read the book. I liked it right away. I was moved by the way the little girl, Addie, is asked to grow up. In a world that often turns its back on grief, this story stares it squarely in the face and gives it the power to heal and augment everything, to bless. I asked Royce Vavrek to watch and read it and he felt the same way, and went a step further in personalizing it and making it somewhat about his childhood in Alberta, Canada.

I felt a kind of freedom in thinking kids might see this opera with their parents. It made me want to make it very transparent and understandable, full of love, and full of Christmas. Here I am, one more Jewish composer adding to the Christmas canon. But what a joy it was writing it, with Royce's witty, singular, kids'-world libretto. I even got to create a new setting of a Christmas carol!

When *The House Without A Christmas Tree* premiered at Houston Grand Opera on November 30th, 2018, the city had recently suffered great injury from a flood of epic proportions. The opera house at The Wortham Center was unusable with pipes and tubes sticking out of it all over the place. It looked like it was in the Intensive Care Unit. We had to set up shop at the local convention center. It was a "make it work" moment, and I think we all felt like we were lighting a candle for the city's recovery. I suppose that is why, in my heart *The House Without A Christmas Tree* feels like a Christmas present for Houston, a city that has always been so welcoming to me. This is my third opera for this great company and my second opera with Royce Vavrek, both, very good things.

Merry Christmas, Happy Chanukah, and all good things, whatever you celebrate. May our country, like Addie Mills, grow and learn from its own mistakes. May peace reign upon the world.

The House without a Christmas Tree

A New Opera Based on the Beloved Holiday Classic by Gail Rock

Libretto by
ROYCE VAVREK

(Revised Version, 2018)

Music by
RICKY IAN GORDON

Prologue

New York City, Christmas Eve Clear River, Nebraska
ADELAIDE MILLS, a woman in her mid- thirties, sits at a small antique
writing desk in her small apartment in New York. She begins to write.

Hesitant ♩ = 48 Più mosso ♩ = 66 rit. Slow again ♩ = 48

Addie

Adelaide Mills

Grandma

Carla Mae

Billy Wild

Hesitant ♩ = 48 Più mosso ♩ = 66 rit. Slow again ♩ = 48

Piano

♩ = 66 rit. Broader ♩ = 52 rit.

Piano

Slow again ♩ = 48 ♩ = 66 accel. Bratty ♩ = 88

Piano

11

Piano

14

Piano

17

Instr.

Piano

20

Instr.

Piano

mf

ff

mp

mf

rit.

a tempo

rit.

More somber ♩ = 76

p

Detailed description of the musical score: The score is for a piece in one sharp (F#) and 4/4 time. It consists of four systems of staves. The first system (measures 11-13) is for Piano, with measures 11 and 12 in 4/4 and measure 13 in 3/4. Dynamics include *mf* and *f*. The second system (measures 14-16) is also for Piano, with measures 14 and 15 in 4/4 and measure 16 in 3/4. Dynamics include *ff*, *mp*, and *mf*. The third system (measures 17-19) includes an Instrumental part (measures 17-19) and a Piano part (measures 17-19). The Instrumental part has a *mf* dynamic and a *rit.* marking. The Piano part has a *f* dynamic. The fourth system (measures 20-22) includes an Instrumental part (measures 20-22) and a Piano part (measures 20-22). The Instrumental part has a *mp* dynamic and a *More somber ♩ = 76* marking. The Piano part has a *p* dynamic. The score includes various musical notations such as notes, rests, slurs, and accents.

Come primo $\text{♩} = 48$ $\text{♩} = 66$ *accel.* **Like daybreak** $\text{♩} = 92$ *8va-1*

Piano

p *mp* *pp sub.*

This system contains the piano accompaniment for the first two sections. The first section, 'Come primo', starts at measure 23 and changes from 2/4 to 4/4 time. The tempo is marked as 48 quarter notes per minute, then 66 quarter notes per minute, with an 'accel.' (accelerando) instruction. The second section, 'Like daybreak', begins at measure 30 with a tempo of 92 quarter notes per minute. The piano part features a triplet of eighth notes in the right hand at measure 30, marked with an 8va-1 instruction. Dynamics include piano (p), mezzo-piano (mp), and pianissimo (pp) with a 'sub.' (sustained) marking.

Adel. *rit.* **Broad** $\text{♩} = 63$ *rit.*

I'm a wri - ter now, — I live and work in New York

Piano

pp *8va-1*

This system contains the vocal and piano accompaniment for the second section. The vocal part (Adel.) starts at measure 27 with the lyrics 'I'm a wri - ter now, — I live and work in New York'. The tempo is marked as 63 quarter notes per minute, with 'rit.' (ritardando) markings at the beginning and end of the phrase. The piano accompaniment features a triplet of eighth notes in the right hand at measure 28, marked with an 8va-1 instruction. The dynamic is pianissimo (pp).

Adel. *rit.* **Meno di "Daybreak"** $\text{♩} = 72$ *a tempo*

Ci - ty. — A land-scape of con-crete and noise,

Piano

p *mp*

This system contains the vocal and piano accompaniment for the third section. The vocal part (Adel.) starts at measure 31 with the lyrics 'Ci - ty. — A land-scape of con-crete and noise,'. The tempo is marked as 72 quarter notes per minute, with 'rit.' (ritardando) at the start and 'a tempo' at the end. The piano accompaniment features a triplet of eighth notes in the right hand at measure 31. Dynamics include piano (p) and mezzo-piano (mp).

34 *poco rit.* *a tempo* *poco rit.* *a tempo*

Adel. far, far a - way from the lit - tle town where

Piano *pp* *mp* *pp*

37 *rit.* *a tempo* *rit.*

Adel. I grew up... Clear Ri - ver, Ne - bras - ka,

Piano *p* *mp*

40 *a tempo* *rit.* **Exuberant ♩ = 76**

Adel. Pop - u - la - tion: fif - teen hun - dred... Clear Ri - ver was sur - roun - ded by

Piano *p* *mp*

43 *rit.* *a tempo*

Adel. corn - fields and cat - tle and a wide o - pen sky. The

Instr.

Piano *p* *rit.* *a tempo* *mp*

46

Adel. on - ly house worth no - ting, the An - der-son's house, stood, im -

Piano *p* *mp*

48 *rit.* *Compassionate, but resigned* ♩ = 50

Adel. po - sing, at just three sto - ries high.

Piano *p* *sfz*

The musical score is for a piece titled 'The Anderson's House'. It features a vocal line for Adel and a piano accompaniment. The score is divided into three systems. The first system (measures 43-45) shows Adel singing 'corn - fields and cat - tle and a wide o - pen sky. The'. The piano accompaniment starts with a piano (*p*) dynamic and a ritardando (*rit.*) tempo change, then returns to the original tempo (*a tempo*). The second system (measures 46-47) shows Adel singing 'on - ly house worth no - ting, the An - der-son's house, stood, im -'. The piano accompaniment continues with a piano (*p*) dynamic and a mezzo-forte (*mp*) dynamic. The third system (measures 48-50) shows Adel singing 'po - sing, at just three sto - ries high.'. The piano accompaniment starts with a piano (*p*) dynamic and a ritardando (*rit.*) tempo change, then returns to the original tempo (*a tempo*). The tempo is marked as 'Compassionate, but resigned' with a quarter note equal to 50 beats per minute (♩ = 50). The piano accompaniment includes a fortissimo (*sfz*) dynamic marking. The score is written in G major and 4/4 time.

50 *rit.* *a tempo* *rit.*

Adel. Main Street just a hand - ful of stores, a bank, a post of - fice, and Mis - ter Bra - dy's -

Piano *mp* *pp*

52 **With movement ♩ = 72**

Adel. — shop. Trains roared through, — whi -

Instr. *mp*

Piano *mp* *mf*

54 *rit.*

Adel. - st - ling by, but could ne - ver find ³ an ex - cuse to

Instr. *mp* *rit.*

Piano *mp*

56 *a tempo* *rit.* *a tempo* *poco rit.*

Adel. stop. Not where I grew up... not where

Instr. *mp* *rit.* *p* *poco rit.*

Piano *mf* *a tempo* *rit.* *a tempo* *poco rit.*

58 *a tempo*

Adel. I grew up... Clear Ri - ver, Ne-

Instr. *a tempo* *p* *p*

Piano *a tempo* *p*

60 *rit.* **Slower ♩ = 60** *rit.*

Adel. bras - ka, Po - pu - la - tion: fif - teen hun - dred.

Piano 6

Abrupt ♩ = 76 **Slow again** ♩ = 48 *rit.*

Instr. *mf*

Piano

Adel. **Slow, nostalgic** ♩ = 48

I of - ten think of that lit - tle town at this

Piano *pp* *rit.*

Adel. time of year... of the snow-drifts and the i - ci - cles,

Piano *pp*

Adel. **Colla voce (a tempo)** *rit.*

of the gin-ger-bread and ho - li - day par-ties. I can still hear the ca - ro - lers sing - ing...

Piano *p cresc.*

71 Joyous ♩ = 76

Adel.

Carolers: (faintly offstage, a memory)
mp

Chorus

Ga - ther 'round the Christ - mas Tree! Ga - ther 'round the Christ - mas Tree!

Carolers:
mp

Ga - ther 'round the Christ - mas Tree! Ga - ther 'round the Christ - mas Tree!

Joyous ♩ = 76

Piano

mp

73 *rit.* *a tempo* *rit.*

Chorus

E - ver - green have its bran - ches been, It is king of all the wood-land scene.

E - ver - green have its bran - ches been, It is king of all the wood-land scene.

rit. *a tempo* *rit.*

Piano

75 Slow again ♩ = 48

Adel.

I of - ten think of that lit - tle town, and a Christ-mas there, twen-ty

Piano

pp cresc.

77 *rit.* **Broadly, full of love** ♩ = 36

Adel. years _____ a-go: just my grand-ma, my fa-ther, and

Instr. *p* 7 *mp* **Broadly, full of love** ♩ = 36

Piano *(cresc.)* *sfz* *mp*

79 *molto rit.*

Adel. me...

Instr. *mp* *sfz* 8va *molto rit.*

Piano

Scene One

Clear River, Twenty 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.

80 Sprightly ♩ = 63

Piano

Instr.

Piano

Addie

Instr.

Piano

(quoting from her script) *rit.*

"I bring great news _____ and

86 *a tempo* *rit.*

Addie

great joy! In Beth - le - hem, here!_ A_ ba - by_

Piano

88 *a tempo* *rit.* **Poco meno ♩ = 56** *poco rit.*

Addie

wrapped in cloths, is ly - ing in a man - ger,

Piano

90 *a tempo* *poco rit.* **Slower ♩ = 44**

Addie

he is your Mes - si - ah, He is your_ sa - vior!"_

Piano

(beat, breaking character,
to her GRANDMA)
rit.

Sprightly again ♩ = 63

92

Addie

rit.

I'm not con- vinced, Grand- ma! Has a - ny-bo-dy

Piano

Sprightly again ♩ = 63

p

94

Addie

rit. *a tempo*

ac- tu - al - ly seen one? — How can we be sure this is what an an - gel looks like?

Gran.

rit. *a tempo*

Piano

96 *rit.*

Addie

Where does it say that an-gels wear old bed sheets?

Gran.

The bi - ble tells all a-bout them.

C. Mae

They're

Piano

6

6

rit.

98 **Slightly slower** ♩ = 56 *rit.* ♩ = 63

Addie

C. Mae

just fat gnomes with spi - ri - tual de - lu - sions... that's what my Aunt Pat - ty - Jo says, and she went to

Piano

sfz 3

100 *poco rit.* *a tempo* *rit.*

Addie I bet they're ve-ry co-lor-ful. Or they wear silk, or run a-round bare

C. Mae state col-lege!

Piano

102 *a tempo* *Slower, freely ♩ = 44* *rit.*

Addie (beat, she winces) na-ked! Grand-ma, are you try-ing to stab me with the nee-dle?

Gran. Ad-die!

Piano

104 *Tempo ♩ = 63* *rit.*

Addie I fi-dget when you poke.

Gran. You're a fi-dge-ter, Ad-die. Yes you do. And

Piano

(GRANDMA pulls the costume over ADDIE's head and drapes it over her sewing machine. ADDIE runs to join CARLA MAE at the table.)

106 *a tempo*

Gran.

I poke be-cause you fi-dget! All done...

Piano

108 **"Eggheads"**
More deliberate ♩ = 63

Addie

Car-la Mae, how's your egg-head?!

Piano

p

110 (showing ADDIE a design on her hard-boiled egg)

C. Mae

I've gi-ven mine a large fore-head, two ti-ny specks for eyes, the

Piano

112 *poco rit.*

C. Mae
pud - gi - est cheeks, and one lit - tle lone - ly lop - side dim - ple, and

Piano
8ba - -1

114 *a tempo* *poco rit.*

Addie
Del - mer Doakes, Egg - head!

C. Mae
(they squeal)
that dot is a pim - ple. Del - mer Doakes, Egg - head!

Instr.
mp *poco rit.*

Piano
a tempo *poco rit.*
8va - -1
sffz 6 *p*

116 *a tempo* *rit.*

Addie
Car - la Mae, your ta - lent for egg por - traits a - ma - zes me!

Piano

118 *a tempo*

Addie

I'm ma-king mine_ a freck- le face, with a run - ny nose,_ a bum in his chin, and_

C. Mae

Instr.

p

Piano

a tempo

120

Addie

this is his la - zy left eye, I hate, hate, hate, I hate this guy.

C. Mae

Instr.

rit.

Piano

rit.

122 *a tempo* *rit.* *a tempo* *rit.*

Addie
Bil - ly Wild, Egg - head! It's the smirk that gives him a- way...

C. Mae
Bil - ly Wild, Egg - head!

Instr.

Piano
a tempo *8va* *mp* *rit.* *a tempo* *rit.*
sffz *p*

(beat, placing her egg in a holder, raising her spoon)

124 *a tempo*

Addie
Rea - dy? Smash! Del-mer Doakes, egg - head!

C. Mae
Rea - dy. Smash! Del-mer Doakes, egg - head!

Piano
a tempo

126 *poco rit.* *a tempo*

Addie
Smash! Bil-ly Wild, egg - head! Ti - ny eyes, Pud - gy cheeks,

C. Mae
Smash! Bil-ly Wild, egg - head! Ti - ny eyes, Pud - gy cheeks,

Piano
poco rit. *a tempo*
mf

128

Addie
Red run - ny nose, Bum chin! Smash the egg-heads! Smash the egg-heads!

C. Mae
Red run - ny nose, Bum chin! Smash the egg-heads! Smash the egg-heads!

Piano