

RUWTH

Prelude

Chorus of Village people and harvesters: “While the Earth Endures”

This opening chorus (adapted from Genesis 8:22, God’s promise to Noah to never again destroy life on earth) has just one short verse, but as the words suggest, it should “never cease” – in the sense a Bach cantata seems to last forever and ever; thanks to fugue settings, variations etc. It should be a joyful and rich song, sung by the full chorus, men and women together.

Between two renderings of the main poem, the women sing an “Interlude”. Its motive is Verse 5 of Psalm 126 - most famously set to music in Johannes Brahm’s German Requiem.

Chorus of men and women:

While the earth endures,
Summer and winter,
Cold and heat,
Day and night
Seedtime and harvest,
Will never cease.

“Interlude” Chorus of Women only:

And may those who sow in tears,
Reap with shouts of joy!

Chorus of men and women:

While the earth endures,
Summer and winter,
Cold and heat,
Day and night
Seedtime and harvest,
Will never cease.

SCENE I

Chorus of Village Women: “Did You Hear?”

In the marketplace of Bethlehem the village women are discussing different things of interest. The price of the food. neighborly gossip. This summer’s harvest which promises to be so much better than in the years before. The famine they experienced some years back. Somebody remembers Elim’elech and Na’omi who had fled to Moab, the enemy’s land, during that time rather than to share their meager crop with the starving neighbors of Bethlehem. The women wonder what has become of the family. Somebody seems to have heard that Elim’elech and also his two sons have died. Somebody else tells of the Moabite wives Na’omi’s sons had married....

First woman:

Did you hear?
Sarai has
born a son!

Chorus of women:

Blessed be the Lord,
who has not left her
without next of kin.

Second woman:

Did you hear?
The matchmaker went
to Shachar's house.

Chorus of women:

Blessed be the Lord
who brings her happiness
and children.

Third woman:

Did you hear?
The price of grain
is down today.

Chorus of village women:

Blessed be the Lord
who gives us
our daily bread.

First village woman:

I heard
The harvest will be good this year,
barley and wheat are ample.

Chorus of village women:

Blessed be the Lord
who came to us
after great hardship
to still our hunger
that we may live
and live abundantly.

Fourth village woman:

Speaking of hardship:
Did you hear
that Na'omi, who back then
with Elim'elech fled the famine,
is on her way to Bethlehem?
She is a widow now
and without children.
Her husband and her sons have died
away from home,
in the unclean land of Moab.

Third village woman:

I heard this was God's punishment

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for leaving home and hearth
in times of great distress
instead of sharing
their rich crops with us neighbors.

First village woman:

That was so long ago!
Mahlon and Chilion
were still children
in their swaddling clothes.
Do you think our Lord
chastised even the babies
for their parent's fault?

Second village woman:

God did not doom the little ones,
but the grown men
who took as wives
Orpah and Ruwth,
daughters of our foemen.

Third village woman:

I heard,
the women of Moab
are beautiful,
but dark of skin.

Fourth village woman:

And their ways are queer,
outlandish and unseemly.

Third village woman:

Such foreigners do not belong
in our godly town of Bethlehem.

Na'omi enters, followed by Ruwth. The women cry out: "Is this not Na'omi?"

First village woman:

Hear, hear!
Is this not Na'omi
across the street?
Does she hear us? Na'omi!

Na'omi's Aria: "Do Not Call Me Na'omi"

Na'omi:

Do not call me Na'omi.
Do name me Mara,
bitter of soul.
For the Almighty has dealt
harshly with me.
I went away full
and he returned me empty.

Why call me Na'omi,
the beautiful and pleasant,
when the Lord afflicted me
and brought calamity upon me?
Woe is me!
For I am now
without kin.

Ruwth who is standing behind her mother-in-law turns to Na'omi and tells her she is not alone

Ruwth's Aria: "Wherever You Go"

Ruwth:

Did I, the older
of your affinal daughters,
not stay with you
and walk you to your people?
You are my only mother now
And I your family.

Entreat me not to leave you
or keep from tending you.
For wherever you go,
I will go.
Wherever you stay,
I will stay.
Your people
will be my people.
And your God
will be my God.
Wherever you die
I will die,
and there I will be buried.
Nothing but death
shall separate you from me.
Na'omi and Ruwth embrace.

Recapitulation of Women's Chorus: "Did You Hear"

This is a more thoughtful version of the first chorus. The women have heard what Na'omi and Ruwth had to say. They learned of Ruwth's loyalty and make up their minds to offer them a place to stay among them in Bethlehem.

Third village woman:

Na'omi, we all heard
your sorry tale of loss.

Fourth Village woman:

And we women fully know
the many hardships
of a lonely widow's life.

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First village woman:

We heard as well
the pledge and loving words
of your adopted daughter.

Chorus of Village Women:

Blessed be the Lord,
who has not left you
without next of kin.

Second village woman:

There will be no place for you
at the inns of Bethlehem.
The landlords do not easily accept
poor widows...

Third Village Woman:

...nor do they welcome
strangers from Moab!

First Village Woman:

I heard there is an empty stable
right at the edge of town.
It is a humble dwelling,
but dry and big enough for two.

Second village woman:

This shelter we can offer you
in the town of Bethlehem.

Chorus of village women:

Blessed be the Lord
who grants mercy
to his prodigal daughters.

Na'omi and Ruwth exit. The village women stay and discuss what happened.

First Village Woman:

What a cheerless fate Na'omi suffered
in the foreign land of Moab.

Second Village Woman:

And to return without protection
but for a faithful - and foreign! - maid!

Third Village Woman:

How shall the two of them
now make living
among our people?

Interlude I

In their new home, Na'omi and Ruwth make plans for their survival. Na'omi tells her daughter-in-law of her kinsman Boaz. Ruwth offers to go and glean in his fields.

Recitative Na'omi: "What Shall We Do?"

Na'omi:

What shall we do,
both of us widows,
to make a life together
here in Bethlehem?

I used to know,
before I married,
a person of importance
belonging to Elim'elech's kin.
But how can I now, a destitute,
approach this man?

Recitative Ruwth: "Let Me Go Into the Fields"

Ruwth:

Mother, please do not despair
Of our present fate.
Let me go into the fields
and glean among the ears of grain.
The man in whose eyes
I might find favor
will not berate me.

Recitative Na'omi: "Go, My Daughter"

Na'omi:

Go, my daughter.
The Lord be with you.

SCENE II

In the fields, the harvesters sing working songs to make the time pass quicker and the hard work seem lighter. The song "O let the Earth Bless the Lord" is a quote from the first chamber opera of this trilogy "Yona"; it is part of the canticle "Benedicite" that is used in the Roman Catholic "Liturgy of the Hours", and in Anglican and Lutheran worship.

The harvesters also ask each other: "Did you see the maiden gleaning after the reapers?" Somebody heard it was the woman from Moab who came back to Bethlehem with Na'omi her mother in law. "Did you see how beautiful she is", one worker comments. Another says: "She working very hard." They tell each other how Ruwth has left her native country to be with Na'omi and support her. When Boaz comes, they tell him, that Ruwth had asked to glean his fields.

Chorus of Harvesters: “O Let the Earth Bless the Lord”

O you Mountains and Hills, bless the Lord
O all you Green Things upon the earth, bless the Lord
O you Fowls of the Earth, bless the Lord
O all you Beasts and Cattle bless the Lord
O you Children of Men, bless the Lord
Praise Him and magnify Him forever.

O Let Israel bless the Lord
Praise Him and magnify Him forever.

Dialog of Harvesters and Boaz: “Did You See?”

First female harvester:

Did you see the unknown maiden
gleaning in our master’s field?

Second female harvester:

Did you see how young
and beautiful she is?

Second male harvester:

We saw indeed her shapely form
bending for some ears of barley.

Third male harvester:

We followed her
with our eyes
and with our lips we praised
her sublime beauty...

The female harvesters frown at this open admiration of the foreign woman.

First male harvester (Overseer)

...as we praise yours,
my lovely sisters,
as we praise female splendor
in each and every field.
Enter Boaz.

Boaz:

Reapers, did you see
the gleaning maiden in my field?
Who is that woman?

First male harvester (Overseer):

She is a stranger,
a widow, who returned
with widowed Na’omi
from the land of Moab.
She came and asked
to glean and gather

among the sheaves
when we are done.
According to the law
I gave consent.
She has since worked
without a moment's rest.

Enter Ruwth, still focused on her gleaning.

Boaz:

May the Lord be with you, woman.

Ruwth:

And may He bless you, Master, and your crop.

Boaz' Aria: "Do Not Glean in Other Fields"

Boaz:

Listen, my daughter,
do no longer glean
in other fields.
Stay here and
stay close to my maidens.
Let your eyes
be upon the fields
where they are reaping.

See, I have ordered
the men in my employment
not to bother you.
When you are thirsty,
don't hesitate.
Go to the water pots
and drink whatever
my servants have drawn.
When it is
time to eat
come over here
And have a meal.
You are most welcome
to eat our bread
and dip your morsel
in our wine.

Ruwth bows deeply before the kindness of the man.

Recitative Ruwth: "Why Have I Found Favor?"

Ruwth:

Why have I found
favor in your eyes?
Why should you take notice
of me, a foreigner?

Aria Boaz: “Do Not Glean in Other Fields” (continued):

Boaz:

I was told of all
that you have done for Na’omi.
How you left your parents
and your land of birth
for your chosen mother.
You came here to a people
you did not know before.
May the God of Israel
in whose presence
you take refuge
bless you, my daughter,
and pay you full reward.

Recitative Ruwth: “You Show Great Kindness”

Ruwth:

You show great kindness,
my lord and master,
in speaking comfort
to the heart of your maidservant -
though I am not even
one of your maidservants.

Recapitulation of Harvester’s Dialog “Did You See”

The harvesters remind each other of Boaz’ instructions not to molest the stranger, to let Ruwth glean with the maidservants, to even leave some extra sheaves for her and to offer her food and drink as long as the harvests of barley and wheat might last.

First female harvester:

Did you see
how Boaz glared at our men
when they paid attention
to the stranger?

Second female harvester:

Did you see
how he cautioned
his young laborers
to leave the woman alone?

First male harvester (Overseer):

Boaz commanded us
To let the woman glean
even among
the full stacks of grain.

Second male harvester:

Nobody shall reproach her.
We are to pull some barley

from the bundles
as means for her to glean.

Third male harvester:

She's safe with Boaz
and our maidens
until all wheat and barley
will be cleared.

Recapitulation Chorus of harvesters: "O Let the Earth Bless the Lord"

O you Heavens, bless the Lord
O you waters above the firmament, bless the Lord
O you Sun and Moon, bless the Lord
O you Stars of heaven, bless the Lord
O you Showers and Dew, bless the Lord
O you Winds of God, bless the Lord

O let the Earth bless the Lord
For his mercy endureth forever.

Interlude II

In their home Na'omi and Ruwth assess the situation, now that the harvests have come to an end. Na'omi tells Ruwth that she needs a home/husband (that would also secure the future of the mother-in-law). She thinks Ruwth should appeal very directly to Boaz the kinsman for protection, a man who already showed his loving-kindness towards Ruwth.

Na'omi's Recitative (Aria?): "Should I Not Seek a Home for You?"

Na'omi:

Should I not seek
a home for you?
Too soon the harvest seasons
will come to an end.
You can no longer glean
in Boaz' fields.
Daughter, I must find
a place for you to settle,
a home,
which will be good for you.

Why not woo
The one whose maidens
were with you
for all these weeks?
Boaz is after all our kinsman.
I know, this very night
He will be winnowing
his barley at the threshing floor.

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He spends the night there
to guard his grain.

Apace! Go wash yourself,
put on perfume,
don your best dress.
Then go down
to the threshing floor.
But wait until the man
has finished eating
and drained his cup
before you let him know
that you are there.

When he lies down,
note the place.
As soon as he is resting,
go over to him.
Uncover his feet
and lie down.
Have no fear,
my daughter.
He will tell you
What to do.

Ruwth's Answer (short recitative): All That You Say I Will Do"

Ruwth:

Have trust in me,
my friend and mother,
all that you say
I will do.

SCENE 3

Chorus of feasting harvesters: "Blessed Be the Lord"

The singing and dancing men praise the rich harvest of this season. They praise god and toast their generous master Boaz who joins them in their song. A short while after, Boaz leaves the thanksgiving feast and goes to the threshing floor, where he has put up his bed for the night. He lies down and falls asleep. Ruwth comes in very softly and lies down at his feet. (The words of this harvest song are taken from Psalm 65)

Chorus of Harvesters

Blessed be the Lord
who visits the earth
gives it water
and makes it rich.
Your river, o God,
is full of water
and you provide us
with a generous yield.

You drench our furrows
With great abundance
and soften the ridges
with gentle rain.
You bless all growth,
O Lord of the seasons,
And crown the year
with your bounty.

Wild grassland
turns to pasture
and hillsides
blossom with joy
meadows are clothed
with flocks of sheep,
valleys are carpeted
with barley grain.

Let us shout and sing in exultation:
Blessed be the Lord!

First harvester (Overseer):

Let us drink and salute
our generous master!

Chorus of male harvesters:

To Boaz, the barley king!

Chorus of harvesters:

To Boaz! To Boaz!

Recapitulation Chorus of Harvesters: “Blessed Be the Lord”

Chorus of Harvesters:

Blessed be the Lord
who visits the earth
gives it water
and makes it rich.
Your river, o God,
is full of water
and you provide us
with a generous yield.

Let us shout and sing in exultation:
Blessed be the Lord!

Boaz exits the feasting scene and goes to the threshing floor. He lies down and is falling asleep. Ruth enters and uncovers his feet. She lies down. At about midnight Boaz stirs and turns and finds the woman in his bed.

Duet Boaz and Ruwth: "Lie Down Until the Morning"

Following the bible text Ruwth and Boaz narrate their encounter at night in direct dialogue. Boaz explains the details of the situation (closer kinsman) to Ruwth. The duet is ending with the words: "Lie down until the morning".

Boaz:

Who are you, woman?

Ruth:

It is I, Ruwth,
your maidservant.
Spread your skirt over me
and wed me
for you are next of kin,
and our redeemer.

Boaz:

Young woman,
This act of kindness
exceeds all others.
You have not turned
to young men,
rich or poor, for pleasure,
but sought
redemption
for yourself
and your kinswoman.

Be not afraid,
Whatever you say,
I will do for you.
Everyone knows
You are
a marvelous woman.

Short musical interlude, while Boaz thinks about the legal details of the situation.

Now it is true.
that I'm a kinsman.
Yet there is a relative
nearer than I.

Ruwth:

You do send me away then
from your harvest lodging?

Boaz:

No, no. Remain this night,
Young woman,
And in the morning
if the one closest

to the clan of Elim'elech
will claim his right,
let him do it.
If he's not willing,
I will act as next of kin
and release you
from your childless plight.

Lie down until the morning,
Ruwth. Please lie down.

Ruwth:

Boaz, I will lie down
Until the morning.
Spread your skirt over me
For you are my redeemer.

Recapitulation of the chorus of feasting harvesters: "Blessed Be the Lord"

Faintly in the background the by now tired harvesters still sing and praise their rich return.

Chorus of Harvesters:

You drench our furrows
With great abundance
and soften the ridges
with gentle rain.
You bless all growth,
O Lord of the seasons,
And crown the year
with your bounty.

Blessed be the Lord!

The harvesters sing another verse or so, this time just humming, while the following short dialog takes place:

Boaz:

The day is breaking, Ruwth,
You have to go.
No one shall know
a woman came
down to my threshing floor.
Take your shawl
and hold it out
so I can fill it.
For you must not go empty-handed
back to your mother Na'omi.

Interlude III

In their home Na'omi waits for Ruwth's return. She asks her how things went. Ruwth tells her of Boaz' generosity. Na'omi is hopeful regarding the future.

Recitative-Dialog between Na'omi and Ruwth

Na'omi:

How are you, my daughter?
How did you fare?

Ruwth:

I did remain the night
for Boaz spread his skirt o'er me.
He promised me
to act as our redeemer.
He said I must not return
empty-handed.

Na'omi:

Then all is well.
Stay here, my daughter,
and await what comes to pass.
For this man will not rest
until the matter is resolved
and he made you as his spouse.

Na'omi looks out window and sees Boaz.

I see that Boaz gathered the elders
already at the city gate.

SCENE IV

Chorus of Village men: "Did You Know?"

At the city gate Boaz has gathered the next of kin of whom he had spoken. And also ten of the elders to fill the quorum for witnessing Boaz' transaction with the next of kin. The elders discuss the business at hand. And they attest that you can only claim the land if you also give protection to the widow and perpetuate the name of the family. They agree that only Boaz is ready to fulfill the law in its entirety. Instead of by a chorus this scene will be introduced by an instrumental prelude that sets the scene.

First Village Elder:

Did you know
the barley harvest
was plentiful this year.

Second Village Elder:

And the wheat was copious too.
Blessed be the Lord!

Third Village Elder:

Did you know
that our Boaz
let a woman from Moab
glean in all his fields?

First Village Elder:

That goes against tradition!
Our gleaning laws should
benefit our own people!

Second Village Elder:

But widowed Na'omi
is one of us.
And her daughter Ruwth
has gleaned for her.

Third Village Elder:

...and has worked hard
all through the harvest season.
I heard that Boaz has acted toward her
with exceeding kindness.

First Village Elder:

Do you think
He will redeem her
and make her
his wife?

Second Village Elder:

I think there is another man
closer still to Elim'elech
and his family.
He might lay claim
to his rights
and acquire land and woman.

Third Village Elder:

I know for sure
that Boaz wants
to settle the question
this very day.

He asked us all
to come and
offer counsel
in this matter.

First Village Elder:

What do you know!
Here Boaz and the kinsman
both come to the gate.

Boaz and the relative come and sit down with the elders. Boaz begins to speak.

Duet of Boaz and relative

Boaz:

Widow Na'omi has returned from Moab

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and is about to sell her husband's land.
You, kinsman, have first right
and I come after you.
In the presence
of the elders of my people
I ask you:
Will you redeem it?

Relative:

Without a doubt:
I will redeem.

Boaz:

The day you buy the field
from the hand of Na'omi
You also accept Ruwth,
woman of Moab,
widow of Na'omi's late son.
This is in order to restore the name
of the dead upon his inheritance.

Relative:

Count me out then!
I want the land, but not the woman.
I have a wife already
and might destroy
my own inheritance
by raising children of another clan.
I am not willing to redeem.
The right is yours.

The relative leaves in great haste. Boaz addresses the Village Elders.

Boaz:

I will redeem land and family.
Here is my sandal to confirm.

Boaz' Aria: "Ruwth is to Be My Wife"

The somewhat prosaic words of Boaz in front of the elders are also in a way his love song and his official proposal to Ruwth.

Boaz:

Ruwth is to be my wife!
Blessed be the Lord.

Elders, you bear witness
that I have bought from Na'omi
all that belonged to Elim'elech
and to his sons.

I take title too
to the spouse of Mahlon
so his name will not be cut
from the place he came from.

You are witnesses this day
that I gained Ruwth,
woman from Moab,
and spread my skirt over her.

Ruwth is to be my wife!
Blessed be the Lord.

Chorus of Village men: “We Witnessed Your Vow”

Chorus of Village Elders:

We witnessed your vow.
May God make the woman
who enters your house,
fruitful as Sarai, Rachel and Leah
who built the house of Israel.
May you do well
and gain fame in Bethlehem.
And may you prosper
through the children
God will give you
by that young woman.

Boaz exits.

Chorus of Village Elders:

We witnessed his vow.
May God make the woman
who enters his house,
fruitful as Sarai, Rachel and Leah
who built the house of Israel.
May he do well
and gain fame in Bethlehem.
And may he prosper
through his children.

Interlude IV

In their home Na’omi and Ruwth discuss the newest development. Ruwth assures Na’omi of their ongoing commitment to each other.

Na’omi’s Recitative “We Are Redeemed”

Na’omi:

Call me Na’omi again,
for I am redeemed.
The name of Elim’elech will live on.

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And you, my daughter,
will at last have a home,
a husband and soon children.

Ruwth's Aria "Wherever I go"

Ruwth:

You are still my mother though,
and I your family.

My marriage makes me not leave you
or keep from tending you.
For wherever I go,
You shall go.
Wherever I stay,
You shall stay.
Your people
are now my people.
And your God
has become my God.
Whenever I give birth
You will give birth,
And my children will be yours.
Nothing in life
shall separate you from me.

Ruwth and Na'omi:

For wherever I go,
You shall go.
Wherever I stay,
You shall stay.
Nothing in life
shall separate you from me.

SCENE V

Chorus of Village women: "A Son Has Been Born"

The village women celebrate the birth of Ruwth's son as a restoration also of Na'omi's life. They praise Ruwth' loving-kindness, and call her the one "who is more to you (Na'omi) than seven sons". And they name the boy Obed: the one who serves.

First Village Woman:

A son has been born
to you, Na'omi,
the beautiful and pleasant.
He will give you new life
and take care of you
in your old age.

Chorus of Village Women:

Blessed be the Lord
who has not left you
without next of kin.
May his name
be celebrated
in all of Israel!

Second Village Woman:

Your daughter Ruwth,
who loves you,
is more to you
than seven sons.
She has born
you a child.

Chorus of Village Women:

We give him
the name of Oved.
Since he is the one
who serves
and fulfills
the blessings of the Lord.

The village men join the women in a recapitulation of the prelude-song, which has two elements: the everlasting promise (never ceases) and the promise of hope (may those who sow in tears).

Chorus of Village Men and Women: “While the Earth Endures”

Chorus of village men and women, with Ruwth, Na’omi and Boaz:

May those who sow in tears,
Reap with shouts of joy!

Chorus of village men and women:

While the earth endures
seedtime and harvest,
day and night,
cold and heat,
summer and winter,
will never cease.