

Waking the Witch Libretto

WAKING THE WITCH

A one-act opera for countertenor and Pierrot ensemble

Ashi Day, composer and librettist

originally written for Min Sang Kim, countertenor

CHARACTERS: WITCHFINDER (countertenor or mezzo-soprano)

INQUISITIN, a person accused of witchcraft (audience; non-speaking role; staging happens around them)

ANIMAL FAMILIARS (musical roles, staging optional)

A BLACK MOUSE (flute)

A GRAY RABBIT (violin)

A WHITE KITTEN (Bb clarinet)

OPTIONAL "SURPRISE" CHORUS, voices from throughout time (SSAA, 4-8 singers. There are several options for incorporating: audience plants, sung by instrumentalists, or a pre-recorded audio cue. An alternate ending can be used in which this part is performed by the countertenor/mezzo stepping out fo character. Only present in the epilogue.)

SETTING: Europe or possibly the American colonies, probably but not definitely England, ca. 1500-1700. A small room in a small house in a small village.

NOTE: Scenes are divided based on dramatic beats and musical structure as a way to organize the piece in preparation. In performance, the piece will present as one extended scene.

I. Prologue: Prayer

WITCHFINDER: *[To himself; a private moment.]*

I call upon thee, the almighty
For strength and power to do thy will

I present myself to thee, the almighty
Thy humble servant of thy law

I call upon thee, the almighty
make me one with thee, and I will serve thee all the days of my life.

Peace to the living,
Rest to the dead,
Death to heretics,
And praise to thee.

[Transition]

II. In the midst of the disasters of the collapsing secular world...

[WITCHFINDER enters the room with the INQUISITOR/the audience (literally, or is otherwise now out of his private moment and present with the interrogated). Speaking more for the audience than to them; almost like giving a lecture or sermon.]

[Reserved; in complete control.] In the midst of the disasters of the collapsing secular world
Which, alas, accelerate as the world declines to its glorious end
the ancient fallen evil in desperation increases his attacks
in the lands of the most godly

And hence we see a rise of a particular devastating heresy
It tempts the weak, the lonely, the jealous poor
And that particular gender over which he is known to have power

A heresy
A heresy of witchcraft
A heresy of witchcraft
Hateful to believers
A heresy of giving one's body and soul
To the adversary himself
A heresy of turning one's back on all that is known to be ordained.
In exchange for the power of maleficia—petty depravities

And so in our good country
The daily fortunes of men
Are under attack.
A frightening time.

And I have come with pious and grieving mind
My work at once old and new
I have come with a pious and grieving heart
To be a terror to evildoers!

[To audience] Rise!

On behalf of the most honorable, much respected, and well-learned gentlemen of the parish
who have summoned me thus

You are accused of various and sundry acts of witchcraft, the greatest of heresies, most
maliciously and feloniously enacted

Having experience finding out witches,
and preparing evidence for the courts
I am come to discover the truth through the proper procedures.

[Spoken] In this godly nation, even witches are interrogated without torture.
But in the almighty's mercy,
I shall only ask you to walk about this small room,
this night and maybe more,
And not to sit or rest until we have the truth.

[Sung] The truth.

And we shall have it.
And we shall know when we have it.

You are now before authority. Tell the truth. Walk!

III. The tavern keeper's son

First there's the matter of the tavern keeper's son.

When the tavern keeper's son was a young boy
Nearly fourteen years ago
He was struck with a sudden weakness
Barely speaking, barely waking
You were summoned on the third night,
For you knew the keeper well—strangely well—
And you brought with you a tincture
That no one else had known
And you saw the boy alone
Saying, "Quiet, quiet,
He will not die from this."
And within a week the boy was bright and healthy
With a strange tale to tell:

That when you did come in
And you thought the boy was sleeping,
He saw you speaking to a
[BLACK MOUSE enters]
small
black
mouse
Like you were old friends!
Even giving it a crumb of bread,

And many were said to be in great wonder,
And some did suspect

That you did not conduct these things in lawful natural ways
But through extraordinary means.

Diseases may be lawfully cured
only by earnest prayer,
amendment of lives,
and by the sharp pursuit of
every instrument of Satan,
whose punishment to the death will be a salutary sacrifice for the patient.
For the devil's means cannot cast out the devil.

Walk.

Confess, confess, confess.
What do you say to this?

[*Pause*]

Though no one desire it,
If you be guilty let it be discovered.

[*Questions: Semi-improvised*]

What was in the potion? What effects should it have?
How did you come upon this knowledge--who taught it to you?
What said you to the mouse? Why was it tame for you? Was it a true mouse?
Why did the tavern keeper call for you? How were you known to him?
If you would visit him at any hour of night, what else be you willing to do?
Tell the truth--what potion was this? What say you to this?

Confess, confess, confess.

IV. The neighbor's wife

[*allemande & courant*]

Walk.

It isn't over yet.
Next there's the matter of the neighbor and his wife.

[*Allemande*]

Is it not true that some seven years ago your neighbor took a wife
who was known as pleasant, and pious, and humble, and faithful?
And by that time you had sunk into begging
And you did frequently ask her for alms, and work, and bread, and beer, and, and, and...?
Though she would often oblige,
She said you frowned at her sometimes?

Is it not true, that alas,

She grew tired and refused you?
Saying, ah,
You have your own estate, and would get no more help from her?
And you should look for the hand of the almighty in it,
That he would turn his people's hearts from you.

And at that you gave a look
[*sound effect*]
That affrighted the woman for days
That her husband thought she would swoon away.
And you left, walking home in a storm,
and the couple saw a
[*GRAY RABBIT ENTERS*]
small gray rabbit creeping by your door.
And they've seen it several times since,
Unusually tame,
[*RABBIT cadenza*]
And the woman has had no peace since.

[*Courant*]
Just a few days later,
Being in her bed,
Something fell upon her right side
With extraordinary pains and burning.

And for a fortnight
She was taken with strange fits
Which tormented her day and night

And several apparitions,
Like small creatures,
appeared to her in the dark

Little shadows
From a humble bee
To a great bear which ground the teeth and shook the claw.

And all the time
She was in such a bad way
That her husband could not think otherwise
Than it was sorcery!

And for seven years
She has known this town had a witch
And for seven years
She has prayed you be discovered.

And I'm here to write down and register
All and each one of these testimonies carefully,

That what will happen
is what is just.

Confess, confess, confess.
It isn't over yet, confess.

Walk!

[*Questions: Semi-improvised*]

Do you not see how you have afflicted this woman?
Would you deny the truth? Several claim it.
How did you send the evil into this woman?
Was it through the use of the evil eye, which has been known to be done by witches in these parts?
Or was it by sending your familiars, able to conjure themselves into different shapes, what being spirits of the air?
Or was it both? Or some yet unknown maleficia?
How did you come to have this familiar? Who gave it to you?
What evil spirits have you familiarity with?
Tell the truth. With what spirits are you familiar?

[*aside*] See how loathe these witches are to testify without torture
Which only witnesseth their guiltiness.

Confess, confess, confess.

V. The magistrate's estate

[*Lament and psalms*]

It isn't over yet.
There's still the matter of the magistrate's estate.

Man's salvation was lost through his fall
And is restored, in part, only to the elect,
And all the rest, falling away, are given over to the devil.

And once given over, their only delight
Is to cause harm to men and all they possess,
To work small wonders in order to relieve their poverty,
Or to purchase credit and countenance amongst men,
Or just to satisfy their cruel minds.

By three months ago you became so bold
As to attack a great and godly man
Attempting to destroy his family and his good name,
A name built up through decades of hard work
And public service at the highest levels.

You set the power of your sort
Against the almighty's lieutenants themselves
But this man—and all of us like him—
Will not be intimidated
Though you tried, you've given it your all

First a young bull, newly purchased,
Though seeming well overnight,
Was in the morning found stark dead.
And three days later a cow turned ill
And died within three hours
A few days later another fell in the heather
And stayed.
And fourteen days later, another was lost
But the neighbor's animals
Neither fell ill nor died
And the butchers could find no illness.

So the magistrate called for his trusted men
To consider what could be the cause
And finding no great fault upon himself
They did remember two strange things:

At the time the trouble began
A lone white kitten was seen in the barn,
[*WHITE KITTEN enters*]
Just once, and never more.
It came just after

You, a person of ill fame,
Said to be a witch,
Brought yourself to this great house,
And claimed that you were owed
[*Spoken*] A pound of cheese for some wood for kindling
[*Sung*] And swiftly he corrected you
That no such promise had been made.
And yet, in Christian charity,
A half pound you were free to take.

Then you raised your left hand
And made a sign, saying,
[*Spoken*] "You'll regret that."
[*Sung*] And other mutterings that were not perfectly understood.

So the magistrate,
fearing reasonably for his life,
Called
for
me.

And I will get to the bottom of this.

The magistrate and I
Are of a class of men
Who take upon themselves the burden
of the holy sword and shield of law.
And by our godly work on earth
To exterminate his foes,
We are protected from the tricks, the lies, delusions, temptations, bewitchments, and false
claims
Of the devil and his kind.

The almighty would never permit
The desecration of the body of a man
Who would do such good work
So you could only succeed against his poor creatures.
I do not fear you!
Though I fear for our country and the rise of your class.

Confess, confess. Confess.

[*Questions: Semi-improvised*]

What did you say when you walked away muttering?
What sign did you make? Where did you learn it? Who taught you?
Is this white kitling not one of your familiars?
How did you send the kitten to do your bidding? What did it require of you?
What other harms had you planned before your apprehension?
Have you removed your curses from the magistrate's estate? How are they to be
removed?
How came you to have such power?
What say you to this?

By attacking this man
You attack our courts, and our nation itself.

We have a duty to investigate
after a time of so many irregularities.
For not to fight when the almighty bids fight,
Would be a treason akin to witchcraft itself.

VI. The Charges

[*Spoken*] If you would have the mercy of the almighty,
then you must look for it in the almighty's way and confess.

Though we face a world full of lies and conspiracies,
My heart knows a truth that cannot be swayed.

And I shall not cease or rest until we can share in that truth, together.

[*Sung*] The truth.
And we shall have it.
For we already know what has happened.

What do we know?

Like so many poor
Your poverty lends you
To greed and laziness,
Discontent with your station,
And instead of the way
Of hard work
And strong faith
You have yourself over,
Body and soul,
To the wicked one.

And in exchange,
He gave you the use
of three familiars
[*FAMILIARS respond*]
And you sent these beasts forth
To enact your revenges
To frighten the town
With strange powers
Of healings,
And curses,
And slaughter.

Confess, confess!
Confess! confess.

Come now, come now, you will do well to confess.
You are now before the almighty.
You may yet find mercy if you hasten to the truth.
Think on your soul.
Think on your soul.
Make your choice.

VII. Think on your soul [*Instrumental*]

[*Trio, with improvisation, for the FAMILIARS.*]

[*Interrupting, spoken*] Rise!
You must sit up and walk about!
You cannot be suffered so to couch down, lest you call your familiars to the room to scareth the
watchers, and hearteneth the witch!

VIII. Proof

[*Sung*] You have been brought before authority
To give account
Of the type of witchcrafts you are conversant in.

You have had time to consider
your life, and your immortal soul.
Will you stand by the great deceiver?
Then give an upright answer:

[*Spoken or improvised recit.*]
Have you any familiarity with evil spirits?
Have you made no contract with the devil?
What do you say to all this which is apparent?

[*Spoken, as if in response to any answers given or not given by the audience*] Hmm.

[*Setting up the argument*]
They say that accusations,
Require specific allegations
And allegations require proof.
Have we not proof?

The truth is clear to any who researches himself
By taking pains to read diverse authentic histories
And the facts are also proved by daily experience
as by the manifold confessions—freely given—from the witches themselves.

But let us prove through various arguments:

[*Proof #1*]
[*Spoken*] First, the natural tendency
[*Sung*] The philosophers and theologians clearly show
That no human can enact strange unnatural things,
But that the devil gives them power through contract for the soul.

No one accepts the devil but he has prepared for them a path
As a spirit, he spies our affections:
Greed, vengeance, control,
And so conforms himself thereto—to deceive us to our destruction.

And the great wickedness of people causes them that fall to be so widespread
And as the consummation of the world draws near
Satan labors all the harder through his instruments.

The devil hath been raised amongst us, and his rage is terrible!

So knowing how great temptations are among your kind—
The weak, lazy, easily taken by lies—
And so our first point is made:
For people like you witchcraft is a rife and common sin.

You are the devil's easy target.

[*Proof #2*]

[*Spoken*] Second: the witnesses

[*Sung*] Several sober godly persons
testify to claims that they
suppose doth not arise from any
natural cause
or neglect in themselves,
But that they were bewitched
by some ill-disposed person.
What do you say to this?
What do you say?

Here are more than two that accuse you of witchcraft.
Three or four more confirm it.
Would you tell wicked lies against these witnesses?
Do you believe they do not say true?
Do you believe
that I could believe
that these upright people do not say true?

[*Proof #3*]

[*Spoken*] And last, and most damning, the mark.

[*Sung*] As none convene for worshipping the almighty
but they are marked by his seal:
the sacrament of baptism

So none serve Satan, but their contract is sealed
with a mark on some secret part of the body.

[*aside, possibly to a specific audience member*] (You know.)

A mark which looks unnatural and further is forevermore
impervious to pain

[*aside, possibly directed to a specific person*] (As can be tested with needles, if needed.)

The often variations and mutations of these marks
into several forms only confirms the matter
And thus they bear the proof of the betrayal
apparent to any who seek the truth.

Now I can call the searchers—
Good women, who have knowledge
Of the types of marks that honest men have not—

They can tell what they have found
and explain why it can't be natural,
But you would do well to confess, confess, confess!

[*Conclusion and damnation*]

[*Spoken*] Though people may lie, or deceive themselves,
the body does not.
And we know from learned doctors,
that if one does not consent to the mark,
the body has ways of rejection.
And so, alas, you do know if you be guilty.

You have been searched.
Your mark has been found.
Any denial now, and you are caught in a flat lie.
We have undeniable proof
that you have made
A contract with the Devil!

[*Instrumental*]

[*Cacophonous. A wild rant. Spoken/shouted, overcome with zealous fervor.*]
Here is a great deceit, and a great illusion.
Here is massive fraud.
here the Devil leaders the ignorant people into foul errors,
By which he draws them headlong into many grievous sins.
But each lie, each attack, shall only strengthen us.
We shall stop this madness. Our innocents shall not be groomed into deviants.
We shall take this land back from this Satan-worshipping cabal!
We shall—

[*Microsleep*]

IX. Contract

[*Audience emerges from micro sleep with WITCHFINDER in the middle of a new train of thought. An undetermined amount of time has elapsed. This happens each time there is a microsleep.*]

—ness, confess, confess!
Walk! It isn't over yet.
We still have all the time we need.
And next there's the matter of the going price for souls.

[*Spoken*] Tell the truth. What familiarity have you with the devil?

[*Sung*] How did he first come to you?

Did he take the shape of a man or some beast?
Where did you meet with him?
Was it in day? Or at night?
Did you go alone?
and that was a choice that you made, right?

Do you think to find mercy by aggravating your sins?
So give glory on high and confess then.

What did he say to you?
What did he promise?
Did he claim there were ways and means for you to live better than you did?
Did he gain your trust through small little favors?
Tell me. What temptations have you had?
What? Have you done it without temptation?

Take it seriously to heart what you say.
For the almighty knows.

When he bid you join him, what did you answer him?
Did you not give your consent?
Did you not resist? Scream? Try to get away?
Perhaps you ere not necessarily willing,
But neither did you put up a fight.

Do you dare lie? Do you deny your part?
Are you not sorry?

How was it done? What did you promise?
What were the words of your unholy covenant?
Hoo was your pact sealed? Did you sign his book?
Or, How far did you go?
For it is common practice—
though to your little pleasure, due to his cold nature—
Hath the devil had use of your body?
And is that how you gained your power?

If you be guilty do you think that you can hide it?
Then you will speak the truth.

Is this not when you were gin your familiars? [*FAMILIARS respond*]
Have you no consort with such spirits? [*FAMILIARS respond*]
Do you never see something appear in some shape more than what is common in nature?

What did he say you must do more?
What wretched service did you promise him?
Did he teach you the vile and unlawful ways by which you have hurt so many?
How came you to such knowledge?
To such power?

To such hatred?

Confess, confess confess.

X. I Rise

I rise for the integrity of our institutions,
for accountability to our time-proven systems,
to protect our freedom,
For good can never come of doing evil.

[Microsleep]

...all magicians, diviners, enchanterers, sorcerers, witches,
and whatsoever of that kind consults with the devil,

According to the law of the almighty, the civil, imperial, and municipal law of all Christian
nations,
They ought to be put to death.

[Microsleep]

What we do here today is very important,
For there are those who have concerns, and their concerns deserve to be heard.
This is the appropriate place. This is the forum the law provides.
And our laws must always be followed
Especially in a time of crisis, of jarring irregularities.

I rise for our nation, for order and law,
For us to become stronger after this difficult day;
And, together,
To once again be free, safe, and fair.

[Microsleep]

XI. The Sabbath

[Fugue and vamp]

Walk! It isn't over yet.
We still have days, months, years, if we need.
And next there's the matter of your great conspiracy!

It is known that a false and pernicious ideology
Is being pushed from the fringes
Infiltrating the core of our honored institutions,
Suppressing free thought.

It is known that those teachings are meant to divide us,
To prevent unity,
An attack on our fundamental rights and values,
Through subversion, perversion.

It is known from the free confessions of witches,
That there be thousands of your sort,
Nearly one or two in every village,
Fanning the flames of hate,

And it is known that he calls you to gather on the mountain,
Or at the very church itself,
To give comps of your evil deeds to further his agenda
Of division, coercion.

But where is he now in your hour of need?
Instead, you shall give comps of your co-conspirators.
We shall not rest till we have sufficient names.
Confess. Confess. Confess.

[Spoken over a long vamp. Optionally sing on reciting tones or simple phrases, similar to question sections.]

When you signed the devils book, was it a great or little book?
How many marks were there? Could you read them?
What names were there?

Tell the truth. We know this conspiracy is widespread. We know you must go to the witches' sabbath.

You will walk until we have the names we need.

[A threat] Does not witchcraft run in families, and among friends?

How many times did you go to the sabbath?
How did you get there? Did you go through the trees or over them?
What were your deeds there? What perversions?
Did you kiss the devil's hinder parts as he stood in the pulpit? It has been known to be done.

How many travelled with you, and what were the names of the same?
How many more were there?

How many have you seduced through sorcery and indoctrinations?
To whom did you teach witchcraft? What are their names?
How many, on your order, did damage to people and animals?
Would you not have hurt others, if you could?

Give an answer, an answer I can believe.
What are their names?
What are their names?

[Sung] It is a lamentable case

to see how the devil hat bewitched thousands,
Thousands at this day
To run after him.
But those who follow the almighty,
The true authority,
The legitimate power,
We will never cede our place,
We will never cede our place,
We will never cede our place.
Walk!

[Instrumental—FAMILIARS in celebration]

XII. In the midst of the disasters

It isn't over yet.
We still have centuries.

In the midst of the disasters of the ever revolving world
You must endure panels of men who will never believe you—
Or will, but won't care.
Walk!

And if you frighten us, threaten us, dare to offend us,
Give us a chance for control, for righteousness,
If you disgust us, attract us,
And if you dare
We'll cry:
WITCH! WITCH! WITCH!

And if you dare to hold us responsible, hold us accountable,
Hold us to God, hold us to the gods we claim,
And if you dare
We'll cry:
WITCH HUNT! WITCH HUNT! WITCH HUNT!

WALK!

XIII. Epilogue

SURPRISE CHORUS:
[alternately, WITCHFINDER, out of costume as a regular person, or themselves, no longer in character]

It isn't over yet.
We still have centuries.
Can you walk?