

G W Y N E T H W A L K E R

PRAIRIE SONGS

CONTRALTO
and Piano

Contents

1. Prairie	5
2. Going Home	12
3. Prairie	20
4. Prairie Dawn	21
5. Prairie	25
6. Prairie Spring	31
7. Prairie—reprise	36

Total Duration: 14:30 minutes

*Commissioned by Kiya Fife
Premiered in August, 2020 in Lincoln, Nebraska
Kiya Fife, Contralto; Michael Cotton, Piano
Soprano Version commissioned by Nancy Munn*

PROGRAM NOTES

The texts for *Prairie Songs* are taken from the writings of Willa Cather and Carl Sandburg. Three Cather poems (“Going Home,” “Prairie Dawn,” and “Prairie Spring”) are framed by sections of the Sandburg extended poem “Prairie.” Together, these lyrics provide rich and abundant portraits of the prairie land, prairie spirit, and prairie heart.

Of the Cather poems, the first, “Going Home,” speaks of a train crossing the prairie. *How smoothly the trains run beyond the Missouri...like Youth, running away...they run rejoicing...singing and humming.* This is a song of nostalgia. *Even in my sleep I know when I have crossed the river.* Energetic train rhythms fill the piano accompaniment.

A second Cather poem is the brief “Prairie Dawn.” *A crimson fire that vanquishes the stars; a swift, bright lance hurled low across the world.* Here the piano patterns are fluid like the stars, or the purple mists ascending. The voice is gentle and quiet, expressing the magical beauty of a prairie dawn.

“Prairie Spring” is a poem of contrasts, opening with a description of the somber land, *heavy and black, full of strength and harshness...* and then suddenly changing to *Against all of this, Youth, flaming like the wild roses.* Musically the contrast is heard in the change from the dark tonality of F Minor into a bright D Major. *Singing and singing, out of the lips of silence, out of the earthy dusk.*

The Sandburg texts which connect the Cather poems are all excerpted from the poem “Prairie.” This writing is personal (first person), narrative expressive poetry, which contrasts and balances with the Cather style of descriptive imagery. Sandburg writes, *I was born on the prairie. The prairie sings to me. O prairie mother, I am your daughter. I rest easy in the prairie arms.* These words are exquisitely beautiful. They engender the music that opens and closes the *Prairie Songs*.

Certain poetic images suggested by the Cather and Sandburg poetry run through the songs. The listener might hear, and then envision, the expanse of open land, prairie grass blowing in the wind, a train crossing the prairie at night, stars, the mist rising, youth flaming like the wild roses. The astute listener might even hear strains of *The Star Spangled Banner* in the background while at a country picnic. These are the images of mid-America, of the prairie. *The prairie sings to me...*

—Gwyneth Walker

Prairie Songs (on poetry of Carl Sandburg and Willa Cather)
Carl Sandburg selections from "Prairie" in *Cornhuskers*, 1918
Willa Cather selections from *April Twilight*, 1923
[adapted by Gwyneth Walker]

1. Prairie—Carl Sandburg

I WAS born on the prairie and the milk of its wheat, the red of its clover, the eyes of its women, gave me a song and a knowledge...

Here between the sheds of the Rocky Mountains and the Appalachians, here now a morning star fixes a fire sign over the timber claims and cow pastures, the corn belt, the cotton belt, the cattle ranches.

Here I know I will thirst for nothing so much as one more sunrise or a sky moon of fire or a river moon of water.

The prairie sings to me in the forenoon and I know in the night I rest easy in the prairie arms, on the prairie heart.

In the city among the walls the overland passenger train is choked and the pistons hiss and the wheels curse.

On the prairie the overland flits on phantom wheels and the sky and the soil between them muffle the pistons and cheer the wheels.

2. Going Home—Willa Cather

(Burlington Route)

How smoothly the trains run beyond the Missouri;
Even in my sleep I know when I have crossed the river.

The wheels turn as if they were glad to go;
The sharp curves and windings left behind,

The roadway wide open,

(The crooked straight

And the rough places plain.)

They run smoothly, they run softly, too.

There is not noise enough to trouble the lightest sleeper.

Nor jolting to wake the weary-hearted.

I open my window and let the air blow in,

The air of morning,

That smells of grass and earth—

Earth, the grain-giver.

How smoothly the trains run beyond the Missouri;

Even in my sleep I know when I have crossed the river.

The wheels turn as if they were glad to go;

They run like running water,

Like Youth, running away . . .

They spin bright along the bright rails,

Singing and humming,

Singing and humming.

They run remembering,

They run rejoicing,

As if they, too, were going home

3. Prairie–Carl Sandburg

I am here when the cities are gone.
I am here before the cities come.
I nourished the lonely men on horses.
I will keep the laughing men who ride iron.
I am dust of men.

4. Prairie Dawn–Willa Cather

A crimson fire that vanquishes the stars;
A pungent odor from the dusty sage;
A sudden stirring of the huddled herds;
A breaking of the distant table-lands
Through purple mists ascending, and the flare
Of water ditches silver in the light;
A swift, bright lance hurled low across the world;
A sudden sickness for the hills of home.

5. Prairie–Carl Sandburg

I am the prairie, mother of men, waiting.
They are mine, the threshing crews eating beefsteak, the
farmboys driving steers to the railroad cattle pens.
They are mine, the crowds of people at a Fourth of July
basket picnic, listening to a lawyer read the Declaration
of Independence, watching the pinwheels and Roman
candles at night, the young men and women two by two
hunting the bypaths and kissing bridges.
They are mine, the horses looking over a fence in the
frost of late October saying good-morning to the horses
hauling wagons of rutabaga to market.
They are mine.

7. Prairie–Carl Sandburg

O prairie mother, I am your daughter.
I have loved the prairie as a woman with a heart shot full of pain over love.
Here I know I will thirst for nothing so much as one more sunrise or a sky moon offire or a river moon of water.
The prairie sings to me in the forenoon and I know in the night I rest easy in the prairie arms, on the prairie heart.

6. Prairie Spring–Willa Cather

Evening and the flat land,
Rich and sombre and always silent;
The miles of fresh-plowed soil,
Heavy and black, full of strength and harshness;
The growing wheat, the growing weeds,
The toiling horses, the tired men;
The long empty roads,
Sullen fires of sunset, fading,
The eternal, unresponsive sky.
Against all this, Youth,
Flaming like the wild roses,
Singing like the larks over the plowed fields,
Flashing like a star out of the twilight;
Youth with its unsupportable sweetness,
Its fierce necessity,
Its sharp desire,
Singing and singing,
Out of the lips of silence,
Out of the earthy dusk.

Prairie Songs

for Contralto and Piano

Carl Sandburg

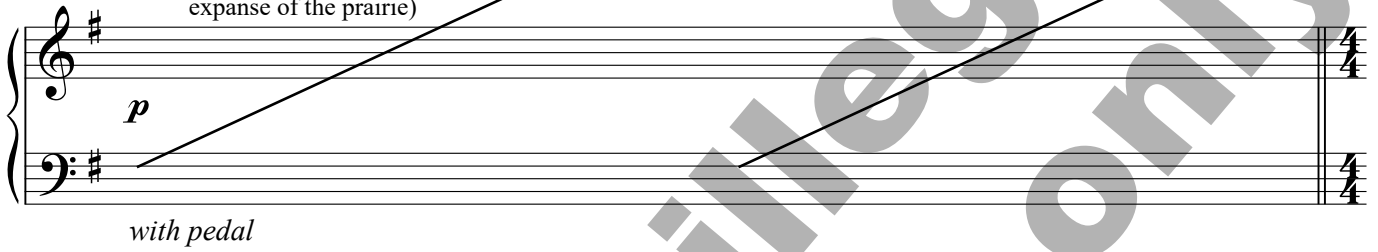
Gwyneth Walker

1. Prairie

Singer moves hand across stage as piano plays.

slow glissando
(to represent the broad
expanse of the prairie)

Piano



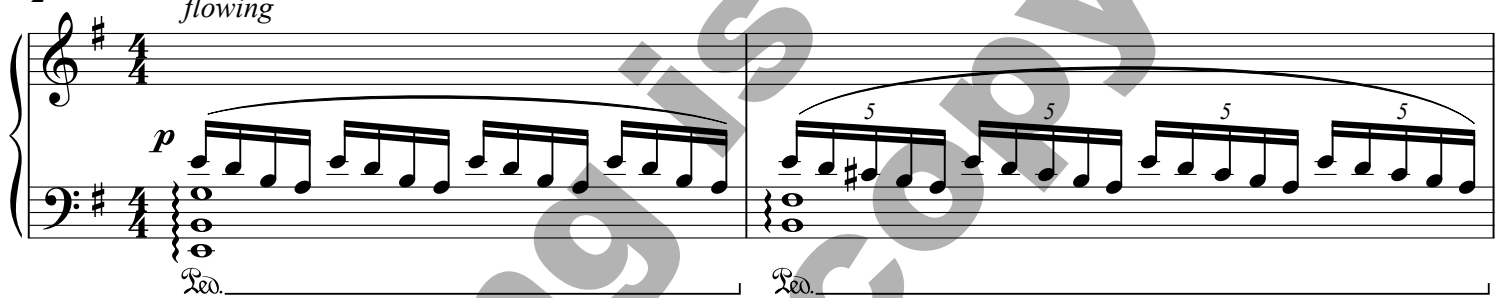
p

with pedal

The piano introduction consists of two staves in 4/4 time. The right hand has a treble clef and a key signature of one sharp (F#). The left hand has a bass clef and the same key signature. A long, sweeping glissando line starts in the right hand and moves across both staves, ending with a fermata. The dynamic is marked *p* (piano). The instruction 'with pedal' is written below the left hand.

2

Moderate tempo ♩ = 108
flowing

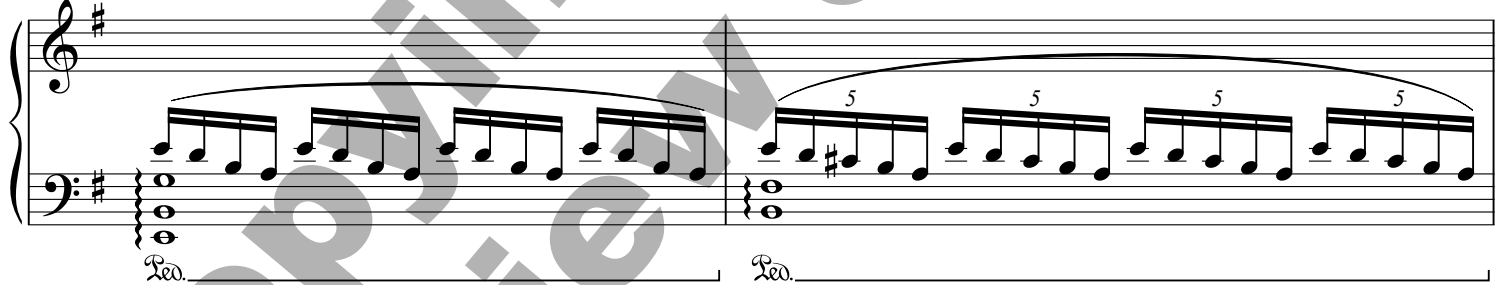


p

Red.

The piano accompaniment for measures 2 and 3 is in 4/4 time. The right hand has a treble clef and a key signature of one sharp. The left hand has a bass clef and the same key signature. The music features a steady eighth-note accompaniment in the right hand and a bass line in the left hand. A fermata is placed over the right hand in measure 3. The dynamic is marked *p*. Pedal markings 'Red.' are present at the end of each measure.

4



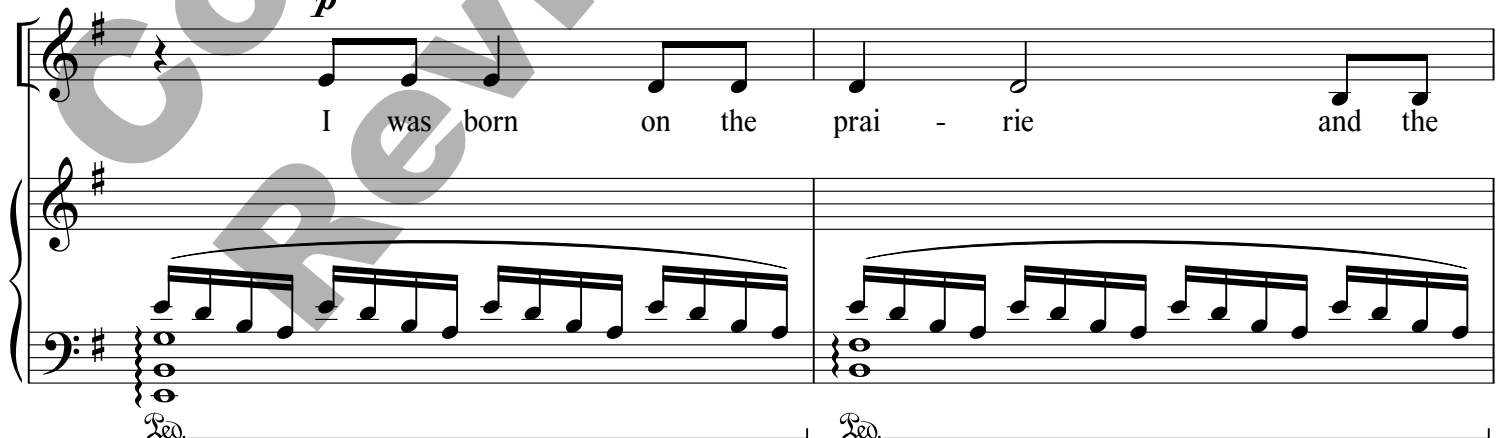
Red.

The piano accompaniment for measures 4 and 5 continues the eighth-note accompaniment. A fermata is placed over the right hand in measure 5. Pedal markings 'Red.' are present at the end of each measure.

6

p

I was born on the prai - rie and the



Red.

The vocal line and piano accompaniment for measures 6 and 7. The vocal line is in the treble clef with a key signature of one sharp. The piano accompaniment is in the bass clef with the same key signature. The lyrics are 'I was born on the prai - rie and the'. The dynamic is marked *p*. Pedal markings 'Red.' are present at the end of each measure.

8 *sustained*

milk of its wheat, the red of its clo - ver, and the

10

eyes of the wom - en, gave me a

LH

12 *poco rit.*

song and a know - ledge.

poco rit. LH

2. Going Home

Willa Cather

Same tempo $\text{♩} = 88$

with the energy of a train in motion

f
slight pedal

mf warmly,
as recounting a fond memory

How smooth - ly the

*piano provides a quiet murmur of the train,
as a background while the passenger sleeps.*

pp
Ped.

13

trains run be - yond the Mis-sou - ri; _____ E - ven in my

(Ped.) Ped. Ped.

17

sleep I know when I have crossed the riv - er. The wheels_ turn as

(Ped.) Ped. Ped.

21

if they were glad to go; The sharp curves and

(Ped.) Ped. Ped.

25

wind - ings left be - hind, The road - way wide

(Ped.) Ped.

28

o - pen, (The crook - ed straight and the

Ped. Ped. Ped.

3. Prairie

Carl Sandburg

Singer speaks lines of poetry with piano chords in the background.
(Speaking and chords should be approximately coordinated.)

Moderate tempo ♩ = 112
[background chords and rhythm]

p

much *And.* *simile*

5 I nourished the lonely men on horses. I will keep the laughing men who ride iron.

9 I am the dust of men.

rit.

And.

connect to next song

4. Prairie Dawn

Willa Cather

1 **With slight motion** ♩ = 88

With slight motion ♩ = 88
gently, as stars (mentioned in poem)

p

8va *loco*

4 *p* *expressing the magical beauty of a prairie dawn*

A crim-son fire that van-quist-es the stars; A

8va *loco*

7 *mp*

pun - gent o - dor from the dust - y sage; A

loco *8va*

9

sud - den stir - ring of the hud - dled herds; A

mp *loco* *pp*

11

break - ing of the dis - tant ta - ble - lands Through

mp *pp*

13

cresc. poco a poco

pur - ple mists as - cend - ing and the flare of wa - ter dit - ches sil - ver in the

cresc. poco a poco

16

(cresc.) f poco rit.

light; A swift bright lance hurled low a - cross the world;

(cresc.) f poco rit. p

Red.

5. Prairie

Carl Sandburg

Flowing ♩ = 108
as prairie grass blowing in the wind

[a theme for the timeless
mf espr. expanse of the prairie]

p

mf espr.

(p)

simile

4

7

10 *mf espr.*

I am the prai - rie, — moth - er of men,

13

wait - ing. _____ I am the prai - rie, —

16

moth - er of men, wait - ing. _____ They are

19

mine, the thresh - ing crews eat - ing beef - steak, the farm - boys driv - ing

gentle background tremoli, with hints of excitement

(mf) *p*

Red. *Red.*

23

steers to the rail - road cat - tle pens. _____ They are mine, the crowds of peo - ple at a

mf

(Red.) *Red.*

6. Prairie Spring

Willa Cather

Moderate tempo ♩ = 100

Moderate tempo ♩ = 100

*murmuring,
a quiet background*

with much pedal

5 *p free rhythm
recited on pitch, with depth of tone*

Evening and the flat land,

Rich and sombre and always silent;

9
The miles of fresh-plowed soil,

Heavy and black,
full of strength and harshness;

13 *(p)* *cresc.*

The grow - ing wheat, the grow - ing weeds, — the toil - ing hors - es, the

Red.

16 *(cresc.)* *mf*

tired — men; the long emp - ty roads,

Red.

19

quiet background, as before

Red.

22 *p*

Sul - len fires of sun - set, fa - ding, —

Red.

7. Prairie – reprise

Willa Cather

very gently (8va RH only)

5 *p* tenderly
O prairie moth - er,

9
I am your daugh - ter. I have loved the prairie as a wom-an with a

13

cresc., with increased intensity

heart shot full of pain o - ver love. Here I know I will

8va

loco

cresc.

Leg.

simile

16

(cresc.)

mf

thirst for _____ noth - ing so much as one more sun-rise or a

(cresc.)

mf

19

sky moon of fire or a riv - er moon of wa - ter. _____

22

f grandly

The prai - rie

f grandly