

Susanna Payne-Passmore

Captain

A chamber opera in 3 acts

Characters

Nemine

A young sailor: fierce, intense, defiant, Nemine will let nothing keep her from the sea.

Contralto

Orison

Her friend, also a sailor: gentle, trusting, and hopeful, he must choose whether to sacrifice the life he thought he wanted for an uncertain future.

Baritone

Mother

Nemine's dutiful, strategic, and adoring mother, who puts everything into creating the best possible life for her daughter.

Soprano

Setting

In a land where wind and flame can be summoned with the voice, an isolated maritime society survives among an archipelago of rocky islands.

Summary

Sailing home from a long spell of fishing and trading, Nemine returns with trepidation for her future. Fellow shipmate Orison tries to reassure her and teach her the men's art of calling the wind and his own prodigious skill of way-faring, navigation without instruments. Nemine is unable to succeed at either. She fears that one day soon, she will be made to marry and leave the sea forever. Once ashore, they visit her mother, who says she has been summoned to the Elders. Orison encourages her, believing that they will finally grant her captainship. They go, and Nemine's mother, alone, reflects on the difficulty of raising a child like Nemine. She admits that she has asked the Elders to help her arrange a marriage for Nemine. Orison returns with the news that Nemine has been betrayed by the Elders: they tried to betroth her to a captain. However, she forcibly refused. In retaliation, the Elders restrained her and left her on outlying isle. Orison and Nemine's mother make plans to visit her.

Later that night Orison brings food and light to Nemine, but she dismisses his help, since she can see he is not intending to help her escape. When he reveals how disturbed he is to see his beloved community and beloved friend pitted against each other, Nemine challenges him to trust her. He leaves and she settles in for the night, but her sleep is interrupted by a strange visitor, a young child, who Nemine identifies as the captain's. They speak of motherhood and the nature of the sea. In the morning, the child is gone. Nemine's mother arrives to tell her that she has renegotiated the betrothal: instead of marrying the captain, Nemine will marry Orison. Nemine is devastated though, because she knows a marriage to her will destroy Orison's dream of having a loving family. Her mother presses her to see that she must submit to a life of caring for their children. Seeing no other choice, she destroys her ability to be a mother in the eyes of her community by cutting off her breasts. Her mother rushes to her side, cauterizing the wound, and brings her home.

As she recovers, Orison meets her walking by the sea. He tells her that, despite her wounds, the Elders have upheld their betrothal. She is unable to respond and seems almost hypnotized by the sea. She approaches it and waves swirl around her and Orison calls out to wake her. She realizes she has the power to call the sea as Orison calls the wind, and with it, the power to escape. They prepare a rowboat for her departure. As Nemine steps into the vessel, her mother catches them in the act of fleeing, and begs her daughter to stay. Nemine refuses. As Orison pushes her off, he asks to come with her. Swearing his allegiance to her as his Captain, they sail off into an uncertain future.

Libretto

ACT I, SCENE 1

Late afternoon, on a ship. It's pointed to the back of the stage with the sea projected behind. As the scene progresses, the island, shaped like an open embrace, approaches in the distance until the ship reaches its shore. Nemine and Orison stand at the back of the ship, towards the front of the stage.

Nemine: The sea is clear and storms lie winds away.
We rise, rise on gently frothing tides today.
Orison, catch that tang which bears the promise
of stranger shores, borne here by distant wind?

Orison: You always loved the sea so, Nemine,
as if it lifted all the weight of life
and swept away your cares. You love it just
as I love home -

Nemine: Birds fly free from wind to wind
while we fly 'cross a deeper, heavier sky.
What lies beyond the sunset and the western stars?

Sailing, we surpass mere wonder and may know!
Our otherwise empty hours saved from stillness.

Orison: But what of amber-brightened hearths? Warm beds?
Good wine! Dear Nemine, would you forego
these comforts for a life wholly at sea?

Nemine: No doubt I'll have a lifetime for all that. [*Resentful*].

Orison: What ails you, my dear friend, that I may sooth?

Nemine: Nothing you can aid.

Orison: Then, can I name it?
You fear an end to your sea-days.

Nemine: As most!
Yet my last sea-day shades my each return.
From the sea, a woman once betrothed...

Orison: ...forever barred.

Nemine: My betrothal looms:
at each return, I fear departure barred.
So yes, yes, when any voyage may my last,
I would forego mere comfort, when each word
from mother and the Elders, like a knot,
is tightened as I pull against it.

Orison: Surely they will make *one* exception for you,
a sailor capable of captaining!

Nemine: Unlikely.

Orison: Then let me help you learn the secret art
of navigation without instrument,
for every ship must have a way-finder.

Nemine: Your prodigious skill precludes me.

Orison: Perhaps you could exceed it!

Nemine: Lacking years to learn the art? I've no time!

Orison: Then let me teach you how to call the wind!
Repeat after me:
Blow wind, blow.

Take this vessel safely ashore
and grant us with the pow'r to lead you.

Nemine: Such pow'r. Shall I try?
Blow wind, blow.
Take this vessel safely ashore
and grant us...

*Orison begins a wind call, low and deep. The wind responds moderately, steadily.
Nemine imitates his call, but the fails to rise.*

Nemine: Would you mock me with my limitations?
I lack the depth of voice to call the wind.
That you suppose mere skill will sway the Elders:
your good faith only serves to irritate!

Orison: Yet how could they forbid you? Though you lack
that skill which many sailors do possess,
you also cannot call the flame that renders
every mother dangerous at sea.

Nemine: It matters not, to them. [*Nemine leaves Orison's side*]

Orison: [*After a time, Orison addresses the approaching island.*]
Oh distant shore, familiar atoll,
embrace us with comfort, we soon sworn to sea.
Encircled, we may visit for a brief
reprieve, 'fore casting off to shores

unknown.
Oh distant shore, familiar atoll,
there I'll grow old in the tender embrace
of home.

Nemine: [*At the same time as Orison's second stanza*]
Farewell wind, farewell wonder! Until again
that unbearable stillness covers all.
Impatiently I await my returning
to you, my sea.

ACT I, SCENE 2

No stage change. The opposite side of the stage is lighted to reveal her mother's home, a modest dwelling silhouetted against the sky. Early evening. With a gesture, Nemine's mother wordlessly calls forth a flame to the hearth.

Nemine: Greetings, Mother.

Mother: Ah, my fairest Nemine!
So reduced from storm and cold.

Nemine: Hardly.

Mother: And Orison, good man,
how were the winds and all the trade?

Orison: As fav'able as ever. Here?

Mother: Women weave and whisper while their children
chase the shadows of more fruitful days
and men return home weary from the sea.
Same as always save one thing.
I have news for Nemine: tonight,
the Elders have convened and they have summoned you.

Nemine: Summoned?
For what purpose would the Elders call me forth?

Orison: Only one!

Mother: Is it true that you have passed each test of mast'ry?

Orison: Why else call a sailor forth?

Nemine: Yes, I have.

Mother: You have passed your mast'ry to become a captain!

Orison: Then go! Reserve your right to future Captainship.

Nemine: [*Looking towards her mother*]. Can it be?

Mother: My child, my wild rose,
you know I only wish you every happiness.
Go, fulfill your destiny.
[*They embrace, briefly, hesitantly, and Nemine leaves with Orison.*]

Mother: To a wild rose, each tender stroke
is met as threat, received with barbs.

So oft have I been pricked attending mine,
pricked with barbs so sharp they draw my tears.

Yet, my wild rose, your pricks are nothing
when compared to what awaits a maiden
unbetrothed at sea, as close you've come to
this most wretched fate. As though a rose were
stripped of fragrant leaves and flowers stolen,
only thorns remain ...

Unruly soul, how can I gentle you?
Possessed by such ambition, grow you savager by year.
No longer can I tend you when
your barbs have drawn not only tears, but blood

So, my wild rose, can you forgive me
that I begged the Elders intervene?
Match her with a man who knows the ways
to keep his wife ashore, a Captain no thorns can intimidate.

Orison returns, running, out of breath.

Orison: It was a trick! They tried betrothing her. No mastery was offered, only marriage to a Captain.

Mother: She refused?

Orison: Of course, and said,
"To whom I am betrothed, I promise death."
And when the Captain tried to have her seized,
she slew his crewmate!

Mother: Ah, my dearest Nemine!
Tenfold too sharp your barbs.

Orison: They've taken her across the narrow bay.

Mother: I know the isle you seek,
just North of sunset.
[Handing him food and a lantern]
Did the Elders grant you leave to see her?

Orison: No, but what else can I do?

Mother: Then go! But make no foolish errand of escape.

[Orison leaves].

Mother: My wild rose, how do you find new ways to torment me?

ACT II, SCENE 1

On stage is a small, ramshackle, wooden lean-to, possibly made from the remains of a shipwreck. It is situated in a small cove, offering shelter from the elements. The moon rises across the sky as the night progresses. Sometimes clouds may pass over the moon. It is serene, lonely, and otherworldly, full of dark blues, faded browns, and silvery strokes of moonlight.

Nemine squats on the ground. She strains to see something in the distance and goes to shore, meeting a boat that carries Orison, who bears food and light. As he comes ashore, she turns her back to him.

Nemine: I see escape is not what you intend.
[*Gesturing to his meager provisions.*]

Orison: You know how dangerous that way would be!

Nemine: Then you just came for conversation?

Orison: I come with food, if you'd allow it.

Nemine: I would if from a friend,
but are you friend to me after what you did,
or rather did not do?
Stood by while those men seized me like a prize!

Orison: Nemine! What would you have me do?
Oppose the Elders and retaliate
by force, as you did?
That man's children weep tonight.

Nemine: And who weeps for what I lost,
For what was stripped from me?
My days, my work, the ocean?
I will never sail again. I will never sail again, again!
[*In her anger, Nemine knocks over the lantern and it goes out.*]
And every night, the captain
will come to me to do as he please with me.
So who, who weeps for what I've lost?
[*The moon comes out, and all is suffused in a silvery glow.*]

Orison: Always have I lived a gentle life,
faithful in devotion to my kin
and obedient to the Elder's law.

Always have I waited for a wife,
yearning for a child to could call my own,

trusting in a place that feels like home.

But to have my faithful trust rewarded so...
so useless was the grief that paralyzed my every limb.
Beloved Elders scheme against beloved friend.
Watching them restrain you, I was lost at sea.

Nemine: Then, let me be as wind to lift your sails.
Though I can't call the wind, or find the way,
I can be as a force 'gainst rougher tides.

Orison: Always have I trusted in my friends,
Never able to imagine that you, dear friend,
you'd take up arms against them.
Where is this land, the home I yearned to one day never leave?
You think it doesn't trouble me, what you've lost?
And at the hands of those I trusted...I am lost at sea.

Nemine: Then no wind can lift your sail tonight.
But perhaps a distant tide may bear you
To a shore unknown where I await you.

As Orison shows how troubled he truly is, Nemine allows him to draw close, and they comfort each other. After a moment, Orison returns to the boat and departs. Nemine finds a something to lean against and, as she goes to sleep, contemplates the stars at sea for what may be the last time.

ACT II, SCENE 2

The moon rises high in the sky. A strange child, pale as moonlight, approaches and Nemine awakens.

Nemine: Who goes there?

Moonchild: Just a child.

Nemine: From the captain,
sent to woo me as a mother.
Who brought you?

Moonchild: I came alone.

Nemine: Impressive. Already a sailor, truly the child of a captain.

Moonchild: I am a captain's child.

Nemine: Come,

Moonchild: 'Tis late to go.

Nemine: Stay here, and return after first light.

[The child warms to her and scoots closer.]

Here, the murmuring tide seems a gentle lullaby.

Yet

Both: our sea-cradles are rocked and robbed by the same hands.

Nemine: She is a pitiless capsizer.

Moonchild: She is a pitiless one.

Both: The sea is no one's mother,

Nemine: nor am I.

Both: Silver shoals and shores make a plentiful rapport

Nemine: Yet

Both: our bellies are filled and parched by the same swells.

Nemine: She is a volatile provider.

Both: The sea aids all, yet no *one*

Nemine: more, like I.

Both: Once birthed onto shore, we return forevermore.

Nemine: Yet

Both: the sea cares not how long we stay nor how we go.

She's an inscrutable embracer.

The sea is wilder, stranger, than any know.

Moonchild: Tis true then, you will not wed?

Nemine: Not him, nor any man who keeps me ashore.

My heart is already with the sea.

My child, you will find a mother someday

but not in me.

The child falls asleep, head on Nemine's shoulder, but has disappeared by morning.

ACT II, SCENE 3

At morning, Nemine's mother arrives by ship. Nemine sees her and approaches her directly.

Nemine: Tell me, what's the difference

between the fate you sought to spare me from

and the fate you have resigned me to?

Mother: Save your questions, Nemine.

Nemine: I know what an unwed woman
risks when she's at sea
But you have assured me that same fate daily!

Mother: What do you know of that fate?

Nemine: Enough: that the Captain
will come nightly
to do to me what one might *someday* do at sea.
And I know the Elders acted by your hand.

Mother: Yes child, by my hand,
which now spares you!
Since you have proved to follow through
on your threats, the Elders accepted a compromise.
You will wed the only man you will not kill.

Nemine: Orison?

Mother: Orison.

Nemine: He would never agree to that.

Mother: But the choice is not his to make.
He will follow the Elder's law.

Nemine: You know he could never keep me on the shore.

Mother: Would you spoil his dream of family?
Loving and comforting?

Nemine: I would give him children, and then return to sea!

Mother: And who will nurse the child?
Protect him, teach him, love him?
Your duty is done at your youngest child's betrothal.
Heed your husband's command!
Or would you have him endure
the shame not only of meager family
but of your disobedience?
Be glad for this compromise.
Orison is a kind man, far kinder
than the Captain, a gentler husband.

Nemine: A gentler husband?
You've ensured the mutual ruin of our ambitions.

Mother: Be at peace, my wild rose.
Motherhood will suit you better than you fear.

Nemine: [*Rising*] I am no rose, nor any other flower.
Nor any being that sits idly
upon the earth, accepting of its fate!
You would shape me as a prize
and strip me of myself.
I am no woman. I am wild though, yes,
and I will make my own fate, my own tides,
and ride them to the shores of my own choosing.
I will shape myself according to my will
and cast out to sea that fate has given me.
[*With a cry of agony, she slices into her chest and falls to the ground.*]

Mother: [*She rushes to Nemine's side and calls a flame to stop the bleeding.*]
My child, my foolish daughter,
what senseless suffering have you inflicted
on yourself and your future husband, Orison?
Speak not, we're leaving, Elders be damned.
[*She helps Nemine to the boat.*]

ACT III, SCENE 1

Nemine walks along the shore of her home. She is hunched over with one arm grasping the other shoulder. The music of the interlude makes it clear that she is utterly alone. Orison approaches.

Nemine: Leave me be.

Orison: Not yet.

Nemine: If Elders see you -

Orison: They do not care.

Nemine: If the Elders see you -
They've resolved that our betrothal stands.
[*Waits for her outrage.*]

Nemine: Leave me be.

Orison: Do you have nothing to say?

Nemine: What else is there to do?

I sought to save your dreams since mine were lost.
And still I failed in that.

Orison: Forget our dreams!

What of the Elders' decision?

Nemine: No more rage.

Whatever burned within me has died.

[Slowly, she approaches the sea and quietly addresses it.]

No more fear as I listen to your gentle lullaby.

Orison: That's what they want!

Our betrothal is punishment.

Nemine: No more fear.

My rage, embraced by inscrutable tides, subsides.

[She enters the water and the sea begins to swell up around, her undulating with her voice.]

No more rage, no more fear
if I return forever more
to your murm'ring swells.

Orison: What is this?

What kind of wave rises like a fog
and waits, unwavering?

What is the sea when it stands still as stone?

Nemine: As it moves, it seems more beast than sea.

I know not what it is,

I know not what it is, but it is mine!

Mine to make my own fate, and my own tides!

Mine to ride to shores of my own choosing.

Orison: No man can call the sea.

Nemine: I am no man.

Orison: Nor any woman.

Nemine: Than what am I? Impossible?

Orison: *[Delighted by her newfound ability]* Impossible!

Both: With the impossible, I/you can leave this place forever!

ACT III, SCENE 2

On the ship where they started. The projection is as seen in Act I Scene 1, but in the darkness of night. Nemine and Orison sneak across deck to lower a rowboat into the sea.

Orison: Listen! Voices approach.

Nemine: Lantern light too. We've no time.

[They find a rowboat. Nemine steps in and Orison makes to lower it.]

Mother: *[Offstage]* Nemine! *[She enters]* Nemine!

My child, my daughter, stay with me!

I beg you, come ashore.

Nemine: And I beg you hush!

There's no place for me here.

You've made that so.

Mother: In that tiny vessel, the sea offers only death!

Nemine: The sea has offered so much more to me.

As you call a flame, I call the sea.

Orison: It's true!

Mother: Impossible! You are fev'rish from your wound.

Mother: Help! Help! They are here! I've found them!

Orison: Get in, quick! I'll lower you. *[Nemine climbs in.]*

Nemine: The sea is clear.

Nemine and Orison: Storms lie winds away.

Orison: May you rise on gently frothing tides.

Nemine: Orison, may your winds be ever swift.

Orison Let me go with you!

Nemine: Go with me? You can still have fam'ly here,
and a home.

Orison: Where is this place I once called home?

I yearned to one day never leave its shores.

Now it is gone as though a dream at dawn,
and seeming just as real a thing to me.
More homesick now than e're before,
I'm lost at sea, one no way-finding
can bring me home from – *that* is gone.
So how can I remain to raise a child here,
lest she share your ambition?

Nemine: You may join me, on one condition:
swear to me as your captain.

Orison: That I swear.

Nemine: Then we are sworn at sea. Come my friend,
together we will seek another world.

Nemine pushes off in the sail-less, oar-less vessel, propelling them forward with her newfound ability. Steered by Orison's way-finding, they make their way into an uncertain future.

Mother:

May you sail on fairer winds than bore you here.
May your voyages be fruitful and your tides be strong.
May your children sail on fairer winds
then bear you away from me.
That all our children may be borne on gentler tides.
Whether they call wind or flame or sea.