**FOUR RIVERS (Keith Orrell)**

**TEXTS & COMMENTARY**

The rivers Ribble, Eden, Severn and Mersey are particularly associated with different points of my life (Ribble – youth; Eden – early twenties; Severn – twenties into forties; Mersey – since my mid-forties). By way of an introduction, I was drawn to words of the American writer Norman McLean who refers to the timeless messages and histories which rivers secretly utter. Some of the other texts for this piece are mine. I recall exhilarating bike rides in my teenage years, one a particular route not far from my childhood home in the higher hills on the outskirts of Blackburn: an exhilarating two-mile freewheel down into the heart of the Ribble valley near Whalley. I spent three very happy years as a schoolteacher in Kirkby Stephen in the upper Eden valley, involving myself fully in the musical life of this vibrant small town, conducting the choral society (hence the watery quote from Mendelssohn’s *Elijah*, which was my first main concert with them), playing organ sometimes at the parish church, and conducting the brass band. My last fond farewell to the town was a concert with them in the town square, which concluded rather movingly with the hymn ‘The day thou gavest, Lord, is ended’. You will hear this music in the background to the words of Tennyson’s ‘Farewell’. I associated the Severn, when I lived near Shrewsbury (where I gave concerts and played organ at the Abbey and the Cathedral), as a very impressive river, and I recall moments during the year when the river was frequently liable to flood. While steps have since been taken to minimise the flooding in certain sections of this river, the fear and reality of present-day flooding in the wider world inspired me to set Tricia Robinson’s terrifying poem to music. The grandeur of the Mersey as it flows through Liverpool and crowns this great city is the subject of the final movement, and I am grateful to Rhiannon Liddell for composing an uplifting original text for this.

**PROLOGUE** The river was cut by the world’s great flood

and runs over rocks from the basement of time.

On some of the rocks are timeless raindrops.

Under the rocks are the words, and some of the words are theirs.

[ Norman McLean: *A River Runs through It* ]

**I RIBBLE** Exhilaration!

Downward I ride with effortless speed.

Miles and miles of heavenly bliss.

Wind in my face. Exploration awaits!

Pendle to my right and Longridge to my left.

The breath of the valley is my fill.

“Reduce speed now” and into the space

where Calder and Hodder meet Ribble,

and beauty unfolds.

Stories are told of witches’ tales and Tolkien trails,

of Cromwell’s Bridge and Hacking Ferry,

to Roman forts and Civil War battles

which fight the tidal bore.

The river of my youth: I embrace you!

[ Keith Orrell ]

**II EDEN** Peat-rich water from limestone fells remote

gargles, splashes, bubbles

and grinds unworldly sculptures in brockram and sandstone.

*“The waters gather, they rush along.”*

Railway and road meet paths of poetry.

Coast-to-coast walkers commune with contented sheep.

The Kirkby Stephen church organ resounds *“Thanks be to God”*

and the brass band intones fond farewells.

[ Keith Orrell ]

Flow down, cold rivulet, to the sea,

Thy tribute wave deliver:

No more by thee my steps shall be,

For ever and for ever.

[ Alfred Lord Tennyson: *A Farewell* ]

**III SEVERN** Why does Afon Hafren flow east when neighbours flow west?

Gentle forest streams mutate, meander, aggrandize with haste

forging paths through county towns to the birth of industry.

Magnificent, grand, and sinister….

[ Keith Orrell ]

I will make you cower in an upstairs room.

I will make foul water flow

sweep front doors aside

swamp each room with filth,

carry away all the stuff

you call life.

I will gouge my banks away,

make boulders, big as tanks, grind along.

Enemy invader,

I will storm over fields

rip up rail tracks and roads

surge through towns.

I will knock down the frail and the elderly

send cars, coffins on four wheels,

lurching and scraping down the street.

I will feed the insatiable sea

which will eat away at coastlines

so that homes drop from clifftops.

Water will rise in your cellar

crawling under your backdoor at night.

[ Tricia Robinson: *River* ]

**IV MERSEY** The mighty Mersey –

bringer of abundance, wealth and prosperity,

a great artery flowing worldwide –

vibrant in commerce and maritime history.

The ebb and flow of life along its shore,

mirrors its fortune as in time of yore.

A river of hope for those in its vicinity,

rich in legends and tales of bravery.

The river’s sights and sounds are ever changing,

The colours and tones, constantly merging.

Early ferries piloted by monks in habits.

Centuries later, three Queens danced its currents.

The deep low hum of engines idling,

Lapping water, ship’s hooters whooping.

Travellers’ footfall on the wooden jetty,

‘Ferry ‘cross the Mersey’ heralds the tannoy.

The Mersey’s many facets range

from silky smooth to furious rage.

Some nights it’s indigo eddies are sprinkled

with silver shards – as tho’ the moon’s fragmented.

Sunrise and sunsets are glorious to behold

as pewter waters turn to molten gold.

This two-way portal from past to present

Surges forward, steadfast and supremely confident.

[ Rhiannon Liddell: *Mersey Moments* ]