

# Eric Hermansson's Soul

Opera by Jonathan Chenette

Libretto by Jonathan Chenette, based on Willa Cather's story of the same title (*The Cosmopolitan*, 28, April 1900, 633-44)

## Characters

Eric Hermansson, age 18 (Scene 1), then 20 (Scenes 2 to 6)	Tenor
Asa Skinner, age 48 (Scene 1), then 50 (Scenes 2 to 6)	Baritone
Margaret Elliott, age 24	Soprano
Wyllis Elliott, age 27, Margaret's brother	Baritone
Jerry Lockhart, age 36	Bass-Baritone
Eric and Margaret each have a dance double	

## Instrumentation

solo violin portraying the title character (may double as violin 1)  
fl, cl (A), 2 hns, tbn, hp, cel, perc (bs dr, sn dr, chimes, sus cymb, 3 tymps)  
2 vlns, vla, vc (or chamber orchestra strings)

## Setting

The Nebraska Divide

Scene 1 (Prelude): a Free Gospeller revival, the year 1898

Scenes 2-3: Jerry Lockhart's farm, threshing time, 2 years later

Scene 4 (Interlude): a Free Gospeller revival

Scene 5: Lockhart's farm

Scene 6 (Postlude): somewhere on the road to hell

Duration approx. 98'

**Eric Hermansson's Soul** was begun in 1986-87 and completed in 1993 with the generous support of fellowships from Grinnell College and the Associated Colleges of the Midwest. The premiere performances took place Sept. 11 and 24, 1993, at the Grinnell (IA) Community Center Theatre and Iowa City Old Brick.

## SYNOPSIS:

Eric Hermansson is a young, Norwegian immigrant fiddler working as a farmhand on the Nebraska Divide around the turn of the twentieth century. He speaks only haltingly, with great effort, but his music comes easily - indeed, it is the very spark of his soul. As the opera opens, Eric plays his fiddle to the vast prairies, which echo and respond to his music. Suddenly, the scene is interrupted by the bombast of Asa Skinner, an itinerant Free Gospeller revivalist, for whom fiddling and dancing are the devil's work. Through pleading and prayer, fervid visions and imperious commands, Asa wears Eric down, until, at the end of the scene, Eric smashes his violin to splinters. Praise the Lord; another soul saved! Throughout this first scene, Eric's role is portrayed through the music of the solo violin accompanying his dance double. All the singing is left to Preacher Skinner.

Scene 2 begins two years later, at the farmhouse of Jerry Lockhart. A woman from the East, Margaret Elliott, has come West with her brother Wyllis to the farm, owned by their family, on a final lark before settling down to genteel married life. In the prologue to the scene, she reflects on the vast beauty of the prairie and the joys of youth ("Prairie Autumn"). Her brother emerges from the house, and they tease each other good-naturedly about their travels and the contrast with their highly settled lives back in New York. Margaret tells Wyllis about her previous night's encounter with farmhand Eric, who was moved almost to tears by the music she played on the Lockhart's parlor organ. In the two years since scene 1, Eric has changed from one of the most free-spirited souls on the Nebraska Divide into one of the most down-trodden and faithful of Preacher Skinner's followers; but Margaret perceives his hidden soul and resolves to draw it out. She conspires with Lockhart to host a dance for that purpose, to be held on the night before she returns to New York.

Later that same day (scene 3), Margaret stands alone on the porch of the farmhouse reading a letter from her fiancée Reginald, when Eric walks in from the fields. She begs him to come to the dance the next night, and Eric consents, despite his vision of Asa Skinner's wrath at the prospect. After Margaret goes back into the house, Eric sings his first extended aria, a paean to her beauty tinged with despair for his own lost soul. Overhearing his final words, Margaret repeats the oddly relevant phrase from Reginald's letter: "A pale dream-maiden sits by a pale dream-cow."

The night of the dance, Asa Skinner stands vigilant over his flock (scene 4) while Lockhart and Wyllis urge on the revelers outside the farmhouse (beginning, scene 5). A series of dances ends with Eric's lively rendition of an old Norwegian fiddle tune. Caught up in the spirit of the evening -- the spirit of his old life before Asa Skinner -- Eric is stunned when Margaret tells him that she must leave the next morning. Imagining that he has given up his soul for this night with her, he decides that he must take all that he can from it. He catches Margaret up in another dance, and then leads her out to the windmill tower, atop which they share a romantic interlude and Eric symbolically regains his soul/fiddle.

In the final scene, Asa Skinner confronts Eric and bemoans his foolishness for picking his fiddle back up, and thereby setting his soul back a thousand years from God. In dreamy exultation, Eric responds with the only line of poetry he knows, one that he dimly remembers from somewhere: "And a day shall be as a thousand years, and a thousand years as a day." Asa trudges offstage, while Eric fiddles in joyful communion with his soul.

## LIBRETTO:

Most of the libretto derives from the dialogue in Cather's story, which is in the public domain. Interpolations by the composer appear in brackets. The Prologue to Scene 2 is from Cather's poem "Prairie Spring," adapted by the composer to the autumnal setting of the opera.

### Scene 1: Prelude - Eric's Salvation

*Eric Hermannson sits alone on stage, under a single spotlight, playing his violin. As the music reaches a climax, a second spotlight comes on suddenly, illuminating Asa Skinner.*

**Asa.** Saul, Saul, why persecutest thou me? Is there a Saul here tonight who has stopped his ears to that gentle pleading, who has thrust a spear into that bleeding side? Think of it, my brothers, think of it; you are offered this wonderful love and you prefer the worm that dieth not and the fire which will not be quenched. What right have you to lose one of God's precious souls? Saul, Saul, why persecutest thou me?

*Eric resumes playing. Asa's wrath grows.*

**Asa.** [Get thee behind me, Satan! Is there a serpent in our midst, sinking its fangs into your weak flesh, bidding you eat the forbidden fruit? Do you crave gambling, dancing, drink, or the bittersweet seductive music of the devil's own violin? Oh foolish and perverse generation. You Danes, you Frenchies, you Bohemians, you Norwegians newly deposited on this soil - be assured that the Prince of Darkness shall have no rest in Nebraska. I, Asa Skinner, will root him out, and wrestle him to the ground. Away, away Satan. Get thee behind me!]

*While Asa recovers his breath, Eric plays as if confused.*

**Asa.** [Dear brothers, tonight God has given us a special work to do. He has delivered to our care a Norwegian youth whose soul is torn between the love of God and a crippling attachment to the dance hall and the violin. Pray, brothers, pray. We must help this soul break loose from its web of sin. Pray for God's saving grace to lift up a tormented soul.]

*Asa is lost in prayer. Eric sits frozen in place, showing signs of weakening.*

**Asa.** O brothers! I feel it coming, the blessing we have prayed for. I tell you the Spirit is coming! Just a little more prayer, brothers, a little more zeal, and He will be here. I can feel His cooling wing on my brow. Glory be to God forever and ever, amen!

"Eating honey and drinking wine,

Glory to the bleeding Lamb!

I am my Lord's and he is mine,

Glory to the bleeding Lamb!"

*Asa strikes up the hymn [and is gradually joined by members of an offstage choir]. As the hymn grows in intensity, Asa falls to his knees, pleading to God for Eric's soul. A groan of ultimate anguish rises from Eric's bowed head. Asa jumps immediately to his feet and cries out.*

**Asa.** Lazarus, come forth! Eric Hermannson, you are lost, going down at sea. In the name of God, and Jesus Christ his Son, I throw you the life line. Take hold! Almighty God, my soul for his!

*Asa throws his arms out and lifts his quivering face. Eric rises, his lips set and lightning in his eyes. He takes his violin by the neck and crushes it to splinters across his knee.*

**Asa.** [Praise the Lord! The devil's hold is broken.]

*Eric appears vanquished; Asa triumphant. Sudden darkness.*

## Scene 2: The Temptation

*After a moment, the lights rise on Margaret Elliot looking out from the wide piazza of a ranch house where she is buffeted by gusts of a hot, south wind. A windmill stands in the foreground. Fields of corn stretch endlessly to the horizon. Laborers return from work in the fields as the sun descends.*

**Margaret.** Evening and the flat-land,  
rich and somber, always silent.  
The miles of [golden grain,  
the soil] heavy and black,  
full of strength, [full of] harshness.  
The growing [corn], 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 [golden] fields,  
flashing like a star out of the twilight;  
Youth with its insupportable sweetness,  
its fierce necessity,  
its sharp desire;  
Singing and singing,  
Out of the lips of silence,  
Out of the earthy dusk.

Evening and the flat-land,  
the eternal, unresponsive sky.

*Wyllis appears in the doorway.*

**Margaret.** [Wyllis, must we really go back to New York?]

**Wyllis.** [You tell me, Sis. It's your beau who's so anxious for our return.]

**Margaret.** [Yes, I don't suppose Reginald will ever understand my attraction for these vast, open lands.]

**Wyllis.** [Besides, if we don't resolve to go back on our own, this wind will likely carry us there anyway. You remember when we ran up against a wind like this] in Algiers, I told you it came from [Nebraska?] {Kansas, in the original} It's the keynote of this country.

*Wyllis touches his sister's hand and adopts a gentler tone.*

**Wyllis.** Margaret, we could not face much more of this. Roughing it's dangerous business; sleeping in sod houses, dining in railroad camps, riding on horseback through the Black Hills, and now sitting in this infernal Nebraska sunshine - it's enough to take the taste out of things. I hope it's paid you for your restlessness.

**Margaret.** Paid me for my restlessness? Why, Wyllis, I haven't been so happy since we were children and were going to discover the ruins of Troy together some day. All those tensions we spoke of last winter are gone for good now! I believe I could just stay on here forever and let the world go on its own gait.

*Wyllis brushes the pipe ashes away from the silk handkerchief knotted about his neck and stares moodily at the skyline.*

**Wyllis.** No, Margaret, you're mistaken. This would bore you after a while. You can't shake the fever of the other life. I tried it [when I was out here years ago.] You see we've made our dissipations so dainty and respectable that they've gone further in than the flesh, and taken hold of the ego proper. You could not rest, even here. The war cry would follow you.

**Margaret.** You don't waste words, Wyllis, but you never miss fire. I talk more than you do, without saying half so much. You must have learned the art of silence from these taciturn Norwegians. I think I like silent men.

**Wyllis.** Naturally, since you've decided to marry the most brilliant talker you know.

*Silence. Sighs of the hot wind through the morning-glory vines.*

**Margaret.** Tell me, Wyllis, were many of the Norwegians you used to know as interesting as Eric Hermansson?

**Wyllis.** Who, Siegfried? Well, no. He used to be the flower of the Norwegian youth in my day, and he's rather an exception, even now. He has retrograded, though. The bonds of the soil have tightened on him, I fancy.

**Margaret.** Siegfried? Come, that's rather good, Wyllis. He looks like a dragon-slayer. What makes him so different from [Mr. Lockhart's other hired hands?] I can talk to him; he seems quite like a human being.

**Wyllis.** Well, I don't read Bourget as much as my cultured sister, and I'm not so well up in analysis, but I fancy it's because one keeps cherishing a perfectly unwarranted suspicion that underneath that big, hulking anatomy of his, he may conceal a soul somewhere. Nicht wahr?

**Margaret.** Something like that, except that it's more than a suspicion. He has a soul, and he makes it known, somehow, without speaking.

**Wyllis.** *(Smiling.)* I always have my doubts about loquacious souls.

**Margaret.** *(Unheeding.)* I knew it from the first, from the way he spoke about the suicide of his cousin. That kind of blunt pathos can't be summoned at will in anybody. But last night when I sang for him I was doubly sure. I haven't told you about that yet! Better light your pipe again. *(As Wyllis lights his pipe, a parlor organ on a pedestal rolls quietly onto the stage. During the following, Margaret seats herself at the parlor organ and begins playing.)* You see, I was pumping away at that old parlor organ to please Mrs. Lockhart, when Eric stumbled in on me in the dark. *(Eric enters.)* In some inarticulate manner he made me understand that he wanted me to sing for him.

**[Eric.]** Sing. . . sing. . . keep singing.]

**Margaret.** I sang only the old things, of course, and I played the intermezzo from Cavalleria Rusticana. He shuffled his feet and twisted [up] his big hands and blurted out that he [never knew there was music like that in the world.]

**[Eric]** *(simultaneously with the above)* I never knew there was music like that in the world.]

**Margaret.** Why, [Wyllis,] there were tears in his voice! Yes, like Rosetti, I *heard* his tears. Then it dawned on me that [this] was probably the first good music he had ever heard. Think of it, to care for music as he does and never to hear it, never to know it exists, to long for it as we long for other perfect experiences that never come. I can't tell you what music means to that man. I never saw any one so susceptible to it. It gave him speech, he became alive. When I had finished the intermezzo, he began [talking.]

- Eric.** *(Weakly, as if in a trance.)* I had a little, crippled brother who I loved and used to carry everywhere in my arms. He died [from a fall off that windmill.]
- Margaret.** *(During the following, Eric walks slowly offstage.)* He did not wait for encouragement. He took up the story and told it slowly, as if to himself, just rose up and told his own woe to answer Mascagni's. It overcame me.
- Wyllis.** Poor devil, and so you've given him a new woe. *(Shakes his head in mock exasperation.)* Now he'll go on wanting Grieg and Schubert the rest of his days and never getting them. That's a girl's philanthropy for you! He'll just go on wanting Grieg and Schubert.
- [Lockhart.** *(Calling from inside the house.)* Miss Elliott.]
- [Margaret.** Yes, Mr. Lockhart.]
- [Lockhart.** *(Sees her and strides out on the porch, a broad smile on his face.)* Miss Elliott. I've found the music for your dance tomorrow night, and they're fine musicians too - as good as you'll find in these parts anyways. ] Olaf Oleson will bring his accordion and Molly, my daughter-in-law, will play the parlor organ - when she's not lookin' after the grub - and a little chap from Frenchtown will bring his violin - though the French don't mix with the Norwegians much.
- Margaret.** Delightful! Delightful, Mr. Lockhart! That dance will be the feature of our trip, and it's so nice of you to set it up for us. We'll see the Norwegians in character at last.
- Wyllis.** See here, Lockhart, I'll settle with you for backing her in this crazy scheme. She's done crazy things enough on this trip, but to talk of dancing all night with a gang of half-mad Norwegians and taking the carriage at four to catch the six o'clock train out of Riverton - well, it's tommy-rot, that's what it is! Tommy-rot!
- Margaret.** Wyllis, I leave it to your sovereign power of reason to decide whether it's not easier to stay up all night than to get up at three in the morning. To get up at three, think what that means! No, sir, I prefer to keep my vigil and then [crawl into a comfortable berth on a sleeping car.]
- Wyllis.** But what do you want with the Norwegians? I thought you were tired of dancing.
- Margaret.** Tired of dancing, all right! But I want to see a Norwegian dance, and I intend to. It will be something to remember next month at Newport, when we have to dance and don't want to. Remember your own theory that contrast is the only thing that makes life endurable!
- [Wyllis.** I did say that, I remember, though I regret it now.]
- Margaret.** And Mr. Lockhart, what about the guests?
- Lockhart.** Well, I guess we'll have a couple dozen, though it's pretty hard to get a crowd together here any more. You see, most of 'em have gone over to the Free Gospellers, and they'd rather put their feet in the fire than shake 'em to a fiddle.
- Margaret.** *(Gesturing impatiently.)* Those Free Gospellers have just cast an evil spell on this country [, it seems to me.]
- Lockhart.** *(Cautiously.)* Well, I don't just like to pass judgment on any Christian sect, but if you're to know [God's] chosen [people] by their works, [then] the Gospellers can't make a very proud showin', an' that's a fact. They're responsible for a few suicides, and they've sent a good-sized delegation to the state insane asylum, an' I don't see as they've made the rest of us much better than we were before. Take that chap

Eric [Hermannson], for instance; he used to be the spryest dancer in all this section[, but] now he's got no ambition [at all,] and he's glum as a preacher. I don't suppose we can even get him to come in for the dance tomorrow night.

**Margaret.** Why, he must dance, we can't let him off. Why, I intend to dance with him myself!

**Lockhart.** I'm afraid he won't dance. I asked him this morning if he'd help us out and he said, (*imitating Eric's labored English*) 'I don't dance now, any more.'

**Margaret.** (*Embarrassed. Then mischievously.*) We'll see about that, sir. I'll not admit that I am beaten until I have asked him myself.

*Darkness*

### Scene 3: The Fall

*Several hours later; evening of the same day. Margaret stands alone against a rail on Lockhart's porch admiring the reddening sky. Slowly she draws out a letter and begins to read.*

**Margaret.** 'My Dearest Margaret: If I should attempt to say *how like a winter hath thine absence been*, I should incur the risk of being tedious. Really, it takes the sparkle out of everything. Having nothing better to do, and not caring to go anywhere in particular without you, I remained in the city until Jack Courtwell noted my general despondency and brought me down here to his place on the sound to manage some open-air theatricals he is getting up. As You Like It is of course the piece selected. Miss Harrison plays Rosalind. I wish you had been here to take the part. Miss Harrison reads her lines well, but she is either a maiden-all-forlorn or a tomboy; insists on reading into the part all sorts of deeper meanings and highly colored suggestions wholly out of harmony with the pastoral setting. (*At this, Margaret looks up and interjects almost laughingly:*) What to you know about pastoral settings, Reginald? (*Then, returning to the letter:*)

[The] new pictures [for our parlor] arrived last week on the *Gascogne*. The Puvis de Chavannes is even more beautiful than I thought it in Paris. A pale dream-maiden sits by a pale dream-cow and a stream of anemic water flows at her feet. The Constant, you will remember, I got because you admired it. It is here in all its florid splendor, the whole dominated by a glowing sensuousness. The drapery of the female figure is as wonderful as you said; the fabric all barbaric pearl and gold, painted with an easy, effortless voluptuousness, and that white, gleaming line of African coast in the background recalls memories of you very precious to me. But it is useless to deny that Constant irritates me. His brilliancy always makes me suspect him of cheapness.

*Margaret glances through the remaining pages of the letter.*

**Margaret.** [*Shaking her head.*] What a strange love-letter! How eloquent. How long. How unquestionably Reginald! [*Thoughtfully; murmuring.*] Oh, it is all so little, so little there. When everything else is so dwarfed, why should one expect love to be great? Why should one try to read highly colored suggestions into a life like that? If I could only find one thing in it all that mattered greatly, one thing that would warm me when I am alone! Will life never give me that one great moment?

*Eric appears, walking in from the fields. He halts, as his glance meets Margaret's eyes.*

**Margaret.** [Eric, is it cool enough for a walk out in the sun now?]

**Eric.** (*Haltingly.*) Yes, I think so, now.

*Margaret rises and begins walking. Eric hesitates to follow.*

**Margaret.** [Come along, please, won't you?]

*A long silence, as they walk. Eric stays behind her and tries to imagine her face. There are more thoughts crowded into his head than he has ever experienced before.*

**Eric.** *(Suddenly mustering courage to say something that has been preoccupying him. But still timidly.)* I want to ask you if I go to New York to work, if I hear music like you sang last night?

**Margaret.** *(Surprised. Then a look of pity.)* Well, you might - but you'd lose a good deal else. You'd be out of atmosphere, somehow. I should not like that [at all].

**Eric.** Then I not go.

*Margaret turns her face to hide a smile. She is a trifle amused and a trifle annoyed.*

**Margaret.** *(Suddenly, with resolution.)* But I'll tell you what I do want you to do, Eric. I want you to dance with us tomorrow night[. You can] teach [us] some of the Norwegian dances; they say you know them all. Won't you [come]?

**Eric.** *(Reflecting. Quietly.)* Yes, I [guess I] will, [*(under his breath)* though my soul go to hell.]

*The lights suddenly redden. The devil appears, possibly behind a scrim, playing Eric's fiddle and mocking him. Eric cowers. Unaware of Eric's torment, Margaret steps quickly into the house so as not to allow Eric a chance to change his mind. Finally the devil disappears and the lighting returns to normal.*

**Eric.** *(With growing resolution, and then suddenly, with new powers of speech.)* You are the only beautiful thing that has ever come close to me. You came like an angel out of the sky. You are like the music you sing, you are like the stars and the snow on the mountains where I played when I was a little boy. You are like all that I wanted once and never had. You are all that [Preacher Skinner has] killed in me. I die for you tonight, tomorrow, for all eternity. I love you more than Christ who died for me, more than I'm afraid of hell or hope for heaven.

**Margaret.** *(Having overheard Eric, she muses from the house.)* 'A pale dream-maiden sits by a pale dream-cow.'

*The curtain falls slowly.*



#### Scene 4: Interlude - Asa's Vigilance

*The evening passes and the next day. As darkness descends, a spotlight brightens, illuminating Asa Skinner at the Saturday night prayer meeting. He addresses the crowd, as in the Prelude.*

**Asa.** [God-fearing people of Nebraska, pay heed when I tell you there's a danger lurking in our midst. Not one mile from this place, this very night, all manner of human souls are flirting with the fiendish fires of hell, for the frippery of drink and dance and debauchery. Pay heed, pay heed! In the blink of an eye, you may find yourself in Satan's snare. I offer you God's protection on your souls, and His grace to heal the hearts of the wounded before it is too late. For the wages of sin is death, and one night of folly may reap a thousand years in hell.]

*Sudden darkness.*

#### Scene 5: One Night of Grace

*When the lights rise again, the dance at Lockhart's is underway. Lights blaze all around, illuminating a slightly tipsy Jerry Lockhart as he addresses Wyllis Elliott and the rest of the assembled crowd (or the audience, in a small production). There is dancing and whooping in the intervals between his verses.*

**Lockhart.** [Welcome, welcome to our dance. You will see everyone having a good time. In Nebraska that's rare enough; so drink, dance, stay late, stay sober if you can, and welcome, welcome to our dance.]

*Dancing.*

**Lockhart.** [Welcome, welcome to our dance. Hot liquor inside, hot blood in the heart. Hot guys and hot gals slipping out in the dark to climb that windmill and steal a kiss; and they're most welcome to our dance.]

*More dancing.*

**Wyllis.** [Mister Lockhart, what do you say; have you ever seen such a sight in Nebraska? All these Norwegians throwing themselves into the spirit of the evening with abandon. It's refreshing to see such fire in their eyes as they prize this one night of freedom from all their toil and all their troubles. Noone could take this night away from them.]

**Lockhart.** *(Together with a repeat of what Wyllis has just said.)* [Welcome, welcome to our dance. The music and dancing's the finest you'll find in Nebraska tonight; so drink, dance, stay late, stay sober if you must, but you're most welcome to our dance. Welcome, welcome.]

*More dancing. First Wyllis with Mr. Lockhart; then Margaret with Eric, at the end of which Margaret motions for Eric to dance alone; Eric gives in to please her.*

**Wyllis.** [Eric, what fine playing.]

**Lockhart.** [Yes, I'll warrant] the devil's [on the] loose again!

**Margaret.** [Delightful music, Eric. I'll always remember my last night in Nebraska thanks to you.]

**Eric.** *(Not wanting to believe her.)* [Your last night in Nebraska?]

**Margaret.** [Yes, we leave in the morning.]

**Eric.** [In the morning, you leave?]

**Margaret.** [Yes.]

**Eric.** You not come back any more?

**Margaret.** No, I expect not. You see, it's a long [way] half-way across the continent.

**Eric.** *(In a tone that attempts to conceal bitterness.)* [I see, a long way.]

*The music resumes; a slow waltz, during which Margaret, who realizes she has hurt Eric, tries to draw him out by placing her hands in his and motioning for him to dance with her. Suddenly, Eric takes hold of Margaret and begins to spin around the room with unrelenting energy.*

**Margaret.** *(Feeling faint.)* Stop, stop, stop. I'm growing faint in here! *(They stop.)* [Eric,] let us go out[side for some fresh air?]

*They go out, Margaret leading. They both stare at the vast expanse of field and sky broken only by the windmill in the foreground.*

**Margaret.** [How cool it feels tonight.]

**Eric.** [Yes, like the wind from the sea in my village when I was a little boy. *(Suddenly, gesturing towards the windmill; on an impulse.)* You ought to feel the wind from the top of the windmill tower.] You like to go up? I not let you fall.

**Margaret.** *(Amused by the idea.)* [I think I'd like that, Eric. Please watch out for me]. I used to be able to climb, when I was a little girl.

*They climb. On the platform at the top, they drink the scene in with an awed silence.*

**Margaret.** How sweet the corn smells at night.

**Eric.** Yes, like the flowers that grow in paradise, I think.

**Margaret.** [How brightly shine the stars.]

**Eric.** [Yes, they light the way for the rising of the moon.]

**Margaret.** [How vast the skies.]

**Eric.** [They reach around the world.]

**Both.** [How I want this night to last forever!]

**Margaret.** [And to think I could live this dream at the top of a tower at the end of the world in Nebraska.]

**Eric.** [To live this dream tonight, I gladly pay the price.]

**Margaret.** *(Together with Eric.)* [I'll live this dream on a tower at the end of the world in Nebraska.]

**Eric.** *(Together with Margaret.)* [I'll live this dream tonight and tomorrow I'll tread the flames of hell.]

*Eric and Margaret are serenaded by a solitary fiddler (possibly dressed as the devil, as in scene 3), who plays from below.*

**Both.** How sweet the corn smells at night.

*The devil disappears, but his fiddle puts on a magical show, accompanied by the winds and fields and stars and moon. Eric regains his soul. The moon bursts forth in all its glory.*

**Margaret.** [Eric, all I'll ever] know of love I leave on your lips tonight.

**Eric.** [Miss Elliott, all my soul I give for you tonight.]

*They kiss.*

### **Scene 6: Postlude - The Day of Reckoning**

*The single spotlight from the beginning comes on. Eric sits playing the violin just before dawn. As the sun rises, Asa's shadow begins to cast itself towards Eric, looming larger and larger.*

**Asa.** *(Singing as he comes onstage:)*

"Eating honey and drinking wine,

Glory to the bleeding Lamb!

I am my Lord's and he is mine,

Glory to the bleeding Lamb!"

[Eric Hermansson, how can you throw your life away like this? Two years ago, I staked my soul to save you for the kingdom of heaven, and now you do the devil's bidding; yes, you do the devil's bidding with your violin! I pray to God for his strength to lead you out of darkness into light again.]

**Eric.** *(Slowly, deliberately.)* [Preacher Skinner, last night I saw the beauty of the heavens and the Earth at last.]

**Asa.** [Eric Hermansson, how could you be such a fool?] I thought God had set his mark on you if ever he had on any man. O foolish and perverse generation. O foolish and perverse generation; for things like this you set your soul back a thousand years from God.

**Eric.** *(To himself, with dreamy exultation, quoting from the only poetry he knows.)* 'And a day shall be as a thousand years, and a thousand years as a day.'