

Words for the Dead

{A Chamber Opera in One Act}

-for eight voices and piano-

duration approximately 30 min.

Music and Libretto

by

Ryan Jespersen

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Words for the Dead

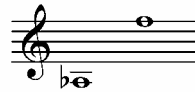
running time approx. 30 min.

Cast of Characters

Ex-Wife – Soprano – ex-wife to deceased,
mother of son.



Wife – Mezzo Soprano – wife of the
deceased.



Sister – Alto – Wife's sister,
formerly married to Ex-Wife's Husband.



Son – Tenor – son of deceased and Ex-Wife.



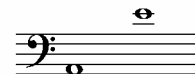
Friend 1 – Baritone – friend of deceased,
having an affair with Wife.



Friend 2 – Baritone – friend of deceased.



Ex-Wife's Husband – Baritone – formerly
married to Sister.



Priest – Bass – has known all characters for a long time.



Performance Notes:

Voices:

Accidentals apply throughout the measure, only in the octave of first occurrence, in the usual tradition; some 'courtesy accidentals' and naturals are provided however.

Piano:

Accidentals apply throughout the measure, only in the octave of first occurrence, in the usual tradition; some 'courtesy accidentals' and naturals are provided however.

The arrows above the piano arpeggios indicate the direction in which the pianist should roll the notes. If an arrow is not present, the notes should be rolled from bottom to top.

Measure 257 is designed to imitate the sound of rain. The pianist should strike the written notes, starting slowly and gradually adding notes. It should sound disorganized, like rain falling on a metal roof.

Words for the Dead

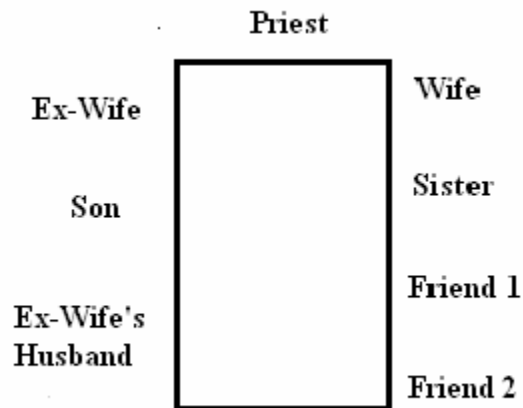
Libretto by Ryan Jespersen

The Story: The opera is set during a funeral for an unnamed man. Attending the funeral is the deceased's wife, ex-wife, son, wife's sister, ex-wife's husband, two friends, and a priest. The mourner's recount the deceased life, and in the process uncover secrets from their past that way heavily on the present.

Piano Intro

Cast enters at measure 37, walking to the beat of the piano. At measure 40 the wife drops a flower. She stops and picks it up. The procession continues and they gather around a casket set in the middle of the stage. The Priest stands at the top of the stage, followed clockwise by the wife, the wife's sister, friend 1, friend 2, the ex-wife's husband, the son, and the ex-wife.

Production Note: When characters "step aside," the lights go down on the rest of the group and focus on the single character, as if no one but the audience can hear what he/she is singing.



Scene I:

Priest: We are here to mourn the passing of...

Wife: My husband. Dead.

Priest: Poor thing, your husband was a good man.

Friend 1 and 2: A very good man.

Priest: Yes, and we are here to pay tribute to him, and honor his life. Would anybody like to start, with a few words?

Ex-Wife: I would. Although I am his ex-wife and we have been divorced for many years. I still remember how excited he'd get when I made lasagna. He'd get so excited he'd grab our baby son in his arms, and he'd dance through the room in a three-quarter waltz.

Wife steps aside

Wife: No, he didn't even like lasagna and they were divorced before the child turned six. Now she arrives with her rich husband, and flouts her money around as if to insult me.

Wife steps back in

Son: I did not know my father very well. But, I knew that he was a busy man.

Ex-Wife's Husband: Yes, yes. He was a busy man and a hard worker.

Friend 1: They don't even fit in here. They shouldn't have come. The little brat would even refuse to see his father.

Sister: Yes, I know.

Friend 2: I remember the time when the mill was shut down, and we all couldn't work. And just as it was looking to get worse, he said, "Buck up boys, this is the time, when we define ourselves as men."

Ex-Wife steps aside

Ex-Wife: Yet, his true self was nothing but drinking and fighting and womanizing they're all alike.

Friend 1 steps aside to the opposite side of the stage.

Friend 1: We were out of work and spending too much time at the bars, drowning our sorrows in cheap booze.

Ex-Wife: And he'd stay out all through the night.

Friend 1: And we'd stay out all through the night.

Ex-Wife and Friend 1: Drinking and fighting (*EW only*) and sleeping around.

Friend 1: and sleeping around. But, he would never cheat. He was a faithful husband. Said he couldn't do that. He would stay and drive us through the night, like a child steeped in boredom.

Ex-Wife: I only divorced him 'cause he was unfaithful.

Friend 1: And while he was faithful she was out sleeping with Mister Moneybags.

Ex-Wife and Friend 1 both step back in.

Sister: Do you remember that Fourth of July?

Wife: Oh yes it was amazing.

Friend 1: It was fantastic.

Son: The greatest time, of my life. I remember dad setting off thousands of fireworks. He was back and forth in his workshop all night preparing them. He said it was top secret and a surprise, and I had to wait and see them. And boy was it great.

Sister steps aside

Sister: He was still married to her, but his lust was for me. After I turned him down, I found that my rich husband was cheating with his wife. Then when I went back to his workshop, he was with my sister. That tramp.

Sister steps back in, Ex-Wife's Husband steps out

EW Husband: Why, would she bring up such a time? Is she trying to hurt me with the past? She found me kissing my new wife. Our marriage had died long ago. I was just moving on, but in hindsight I was wrong.

EW Husband steps back in

Friend 1: It was a swell time.

Friend 2: A great time.

Priest steps aside

Priest: What sinners. They only speak of the past to forget the present. I was there when they all confessed their sins. Now they are drawn back in through death to visit the pain.

Priest steps back in. Piano simulates rain, all characters react to the increasing downpour.

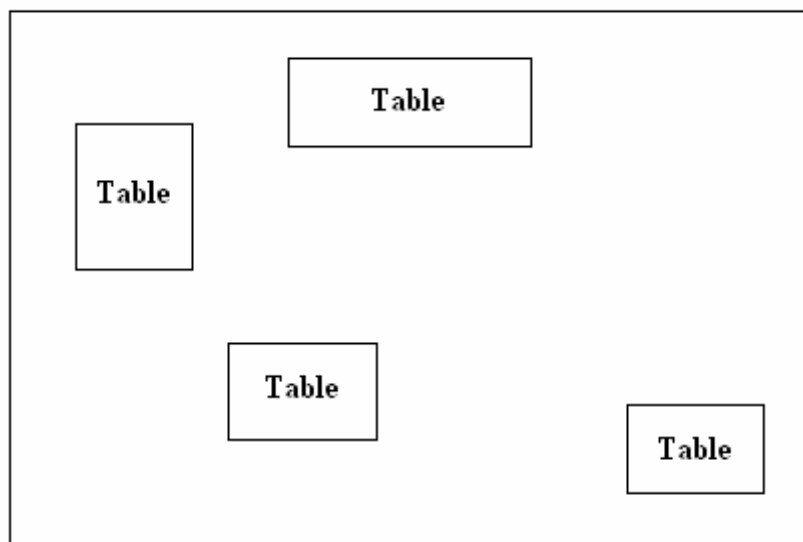
Priest: And now let us move out of God's tears indoors to recollect some more.

End scene I

Piano Intro

The stage is now decorated like a reception hall in a funeral home. The characters are all gathered around each other. The cast will begin the scene standing close together, but after measure 310 the groups needs to disperse to different sections of the set. Groups that are not singing should mimic a silent conversation with each other. This way when they have a line it appears effortless, as if the volume had just been randomly turned up on their conversation.

(Possible Set Design, with obstructions that keep characters separated)



Scene II

Friend 1 (*to Wife*): Wow, what a storm.

Wife: You can say that again.

Sister: That's right!

Ex-Wife and Husband: It isn't all that bad at all.

Friend 1 and 2: What about the funeral?

Son: It wasn't all that bad.

Wife, Sister, Friend 1 and 2: It wasn't all that bad.

Priest: We are here to mourn the passing of...

Wife, Sister, Son, Friend 1 and 2, EW Husband: We are here, to mourn the passing of...

The mourners scatter into three groups: The Ex-Wife and her Husband, The Wife and her Sister, and Friend's 1 and 2, the Son, and the Priest.

Ex-Wife: Can you believe that squeaky woman? Bring up such memories out of the still past?

EW Husband: She is only trying to hurt our love. *He steps aside.* But what is our love? What is our love? All she ever does is whine and cry. I pay her to stay away, it didn't use to be like this. Is this the fate of all wives?

EW Husband steps back in.

Wife: I can smell (*sniff*) the bills in his wallet and to think you didn't get anything.

Sister: I was naïve and senseless at the time. His smile promised me everything, but his lawyer left me with nothing.

Wife leaves toward Friend 1 and 2. EW Husband bumps into Sister.

Sister: Why did you come?

EW Husband: I felt obligated.

Sister: But, why do you hurt me like this?

EW Husband: I try not to.

Sister: But that's when it hurts the most.

EW Husband: I... I... I wish, I'm sorry.

Wife: Yes, yes, yes, it's sad but I'll be fine.

Friend 1: If I could be of assistance.

Wife: Of course.

Friend 1 (*to Friend 2*): Is the priest calling you over there?

Friend 2: Oh yes, excuse me.

Friend 2 leaves toward Priest and Son. Wife and Friend 1 step closer to one another.

Friend 1: Will I see you tonight? Let me see you tonight.

Wife: My sister is staying over. But, we can meet up tomorrow.

Friend 1: But I can't wait.

Wife: You'll have to wait.

Priest: Your father was a good man.

Son: I know.

Priest: He was always virtuous and kind.

Son: I know.

Priest: A fine role model for a lad like yourself.

Son: I know.

Friend 2: A child shouldn't be denied a father.

Son: But I have, a father.

Friend 2: He is a good man, but losing someone close, it just must be so hard.

Son: I'm working through it.

Priest: Let God keep you honest and strong.

Ex-Wife steps over next to EW Husband and Sister.

Ex-Wife: And what are you two discussing?

EW Husband and Sister: Nothing.

Friend 1 *(to wife)*: What commotion.

Wife: We should go and make sure she isn't ruining the day.

Friend 1 and Wife walk over to Ex-Wife, EW Husband, and Sister.

Ex-Wife: Something foul is in the air. What is all this?

Sister: Nothing.

Wife: Nothing.

EW Husband *(to Wife)*: Who asked you?

Friend 1: No one.

Ex-Wife *(to Friend 1 and Wife)*: You two seem cozy.

EW Husband: I see, already planning.

Wife: You have no right.

Friend 1: It looks like you're on a short leash.

EW Husband: At least I'm not trying to tie new ones.

Wife: But you were.

Sister: How dare you.

Ex-Wife: How dare you.

Sister and EW Husband: It was nothing.

Wife and Friend 1: It was nothing.

Ex-Wife, Sister, Wife, Son, Friend 1, EW Husband: Nothing.

Priest steps up waving his arms.

Priest: Enough. Watching this circle of the pit has scorched me dearly. You all lie and sin and forget. There was a time when you all were happy. But your own desires led you astray. Now you are miserable, and you pine for the past, but you can't have it. You are punished for your choices and you can't change your path.

Friend 2: Lies, cheats, and *(turning toward Priest)* stander's by. Why would you let them fall? Just to satisfy your god? Why not help and council human kindness? *(Turns back toward the rest of the group)* I am tired of all your idleness. You all were once happy, but you threw it away for blind ambition and lust. Don't let this man lecture you on what you have reaped. Instead, look toward the future as a blank slate, where you can make amends, if not for you, for your children.

Son: Mother.

Ex-Wife *(looking away from her husband to outside where the casket is being buried)*:
My husband.

Cast exits to the beat of the piano.