Helen: An opera in one act

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HELEN:

AN OPERA IN ONE ACT

by

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Helen is a one-act opera that tells the story of a woman whose husband would later betray her trust and love. It begins with her debut as an eligible young woman and ends with the husband’s demise. Through the course of the story it becomes apparent that her husband is both verbally and physically abusive as well as unfaithful to her. In the end her situation is redeemed through his death because his bacchanalian behavior resulted in his fatal sickness.

The opera is a retelling of a portion of The Tenant of Wildfell Hall by Anne Brontë, which was adapted as a libretto by Steven Soebbing. Originally published in 1848, Brontë’s story challenged traditional gender roles, the rights and power of the church to dictate behavior, the legal status of women and their property, and it highlighted the evils of domestic abuse and alcoholism. The novel is told in three parts framed as a first person narrative by the male protagonist. The libretto for this opera uses most of the events of the second part, a reading of Helen’s diary, and some key moments from the third. Librettist Steven Soebbing incorporated published poems of Anne Brontë and her sisters as content for the arias.
This opera is designed to be performed with a small cast of two females and two males. The woman playing the antagonist, Annabella, will be double-cast as Helen’s aunt. The music is written for a small chamber ensemble of twelve players including winds, strings, piano, and percussion.
Sola fide
Sola gratia
Solo Christus
Soli Deo gloria
Author’s Acknowledgements

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Cast of Characters

HELEN LAWRENCE/HUNTINGDON.......................................................mezzo-soprano
HELEN’S AUNT......................................................................................lyric soprano
ARTHUR HUNTINGDON, Helen’s husband..............................................tenor
ANNABELLA WILMOT, Lady Lowborough..............................................lyric soprano
LORD LOWBOROUGH, Arthur’s friend..................................................baritone
Instrumentation

Flute (doubles Piccolo)

Oboe (doubles English Horn)

Clarinet in B♭ (doubles Bass Clarinet in B♭)

Horn in F

Percussion (Snare Drum, Bass Drum, Suspended Cymbals, Tam-tam, Tom-toms, Glockenspiel, Marimba)

Piano

Guitar

Violin 1

Violin 2

Viola

Violoncello

Double Bass
Synopsis

SCENE 1: Parlor at the estate of Helen’s uncle and aunt

Helen’s debut as an eligible woman. After discussing issues of marriage and love with her aunt she meets Arthur for the first time.

SCENE 2: Helen’s bedroom at the estate of her uncle and aunt

Helen contemplates her potential suitors and begins to fixate on Arthur. Arthur appears in her window and the couple fall in love.

SCENE 3: Sitting room at the estate of Arthur and Helen Huntingdon

Helen and Arthur discuss his restlessness and agree to invite his friends to their estate in lieu of Arthur being away for the season.

SCENE 4: Parlor at the estate of Arthur and Helen Huntingdon

Arthur and Helen greet their guests, Lord and Lady Lowborough. Arthur and Lord Lowborough get drunk early, Helen and Annabella (Lady Lowborough) sing a duet, and Helen and Lord Lowborough play a game of chess.

SCENE 5: Garden at the estate of Arthur and Helen Huntingdon

Lord Lowborough reveals to Helen Arthur’s adulterous relationship with Annabella.
SCENE 6: Helen’s bedroom at the estate of Arthur and Helen Huntingdon

Helen laments her husband’s behavior, Arthur admits to the affair and physically and emotionally abuses her. Helen vows to escape from Arthur.

SCENE 7: Arthur’s bedroom

Helen returns to her husband upon learning that he may be fatally ill. Helen refuses to be intimidated by Arthur and denies him the company of his son until he agrees to release any parental and legal claim on the boy.

SCENE 8: Arthur’s bedroom

Arthur refuses to recognize how his behavior has led to the demise of his marriage and his well-being. Arthur and Helen stake claim in their beliefs before Arthur dies.
Helen

Aunt

It is past time you were married dear. Surely, you must

a tempo

I am not in a hurry.
Helen

Aunt

think to marry before the end of the season? Why?

No. Of all the men in all the
Helen: I would only like a few.

Aunt: And of those few, I will probably never meet most.
And if we meet, what are the chances of him being single, or, even being interested?
So, of all the men in the world, I would only like a few, and those few
Helen

I will never meet.

Aunt

Just make sure you choose well, you can boast a good family, a good fortune, and prospects,
How could beauty lead me astray?

and you have a fair share of beauty. Don't let beauty lead you astray.
Because my dear, Beauty is like money, they attract the worst sorts of men.
Beauty is mon-eye. you in-her-it it, through no good of your own self. No toil, no work.
Beauty is like money — men who could care less for the woman herself.
26

Helen: Mister Bourham truly outlives his name, and only speaks of his hounds. Mister
Helen: Marshall is merely a boy, and acts and speaks and thinks like one. Mister
Well, for all your words, you might not be able to escape. Mister Boar-ham is trying to catch
Helen: Then may he not catch it. Wait! Who is that young man over there?

Aunt: Your eye. That is
he looks like he means

the young Mr. Huntingdon, the son of your uncle's old friend.
Helen: to speak with me.

Aunt: He is a fine lad, that young one, but I have heard he is a bit wild-ish.
Helen:

"What does, "a bit wildish" mean?"

(Arthur arrives, precluding the Hunt from answering)

Aunt:

"Be careful!"
SPOKEN: Pleased to meet you.

My niece, Helen Lawrence, may I present to you Arthur Huntingdon.
Switch at will between any of these pitches. Do not synchronize. Breathe at will. Stop at next cue.

Bass Clarinet
in B♭ Switch at will between any of these pitches. Do not synchronize. Breathe at will. Stop at next cue.

Helen

I am ver-y much ob-liged to you. You saved me from some ve-ry un-plea-sant com-pan-y

(Aunt is called away)

Arthur

Don’t be too thank-ful. I take
36

Stop playing

Stop playing

Stop playing

Stop playing

\( \text{\textit{=} 130. Repeat Figure until cue.}} \)

\( \text{\textit{P}} \)

You know I detest

some enjoyment in spitting your tormentors. Though I feel I have no reason to dread them as rivals, do I?
Helen: them all. I have no reason to dis-test you! Should I have?

Aunt: And me?

Arthur: (ignoring Helen’s question) But what are your sen-
ti-ments to-wards me?
How do you regard me?

You are quite the most.
When you walk in, all the lights turn towards you.
40

And certainly all the eyes of the men, and the envy
Fl. -
Ob. -
B. Cl. -
Hn. -
Mar. -
Pno. -
Gtr. -
Helen -
Aunt -
Arthur -
Vln. 1 -
Vln. 2 -
Vla. -
Vc. -
Db. -

You praise me too highly!
of the women.
How is praise given in truth
fl. 178
no tempo

ob. no tempo

b. cl. no tempo

hn. no tempo

mar. no tempo

pno. no tempo

gr. Repeat many times and fade out no tempo

(aunt approaches) eager to interrupt mf a piacere

ex-cuse me,

arthur no tempo

ful-ness, praise that is too high?

vln. 1 poco a poco dim. no tempo

vln. 2 poco a poco dim. no tempo

vla. poco a poco dim. no tempo

vc. poco a poco dim. no tempo

db. poco a poco dim.
Helen, I would like to introduce you to someone else.

(To Helen)

Til again we meet.
Helen: Me? Boar-ham's wife? What an insult! What was I supposed to be? What was I supposed to do? His
(At this point, in her shift and turns to her easel)

( begins to sketch Arthur on her canvas)

in to him. But, but Ar-thur? Can he be any better? His eyes, his hair, his mouth,
Faster \( \times 96 \)

Fl.

Ob.

B. Cl.

Hn.

Mar.

Pno.

Gtr.

Helen

How can they speak such lovely words?
Can such lovely words be false?
How can I say I love you if I
don't know the words? To capture in words what the heart feels is wondrous joy,
Yet fleeting more than the ever-present birds,
The dove of my passion lies unsaid with
in my heart, Waiting for my tongue to give it flight, And
Helen

send it home to its rest- ing place in your ear, Where it shall flut- ter... its
soft words of my pleasure, And give rise to tender emotions, Of which
Fl.

Ob.

Cl.

Hn.

Mar.

Pno.

Gtr.

Helen

Arthur

Vln. 1

Vln. 2

Vla.

Vc.

Db.

on - by I could know,

For two,

For two were one and bound are
What are you doing here? You can't be here!

But I am here. Do you fear me Helen?
fear you. But you shouldn't be here! Go away! You can go and call tomorrow, at a

(Arthur closes the distance between them)

But why? When I have just met you?
Then I shall do just that, if you promise to accept my visit.
If I said I had feelings for you, what would you do? What would you do? Would you
act surprised and turn aside? Would you act demure and coy, and give a glance of your eyes
as if I said nothing at all?

And if I said I had
feelings for you, what would you do? what would you do? Would you turn a -
way? Would I ever see you again? Could we still be friends, or would you run and hide in childhood games?
If you ever want to know how I feel for you, you don't need to ask, Just truth?
look into my eyes and you will see how deeply I care for you.
If you ever wanted to know how I feel for you, you don't need to ask, I am not good with
If you ever wanted to know how I feel for you, you
If you ever wanted to know how I feel for you, you
words anyway, let my silence do the speaking.
Helen

don't need to ask, My lips weren't made to whisper words of passion, let my kiss carry the

Arthur

don't need to ask, Just look into your eyes and see the soul that I saw. And no words to express the beau
Helen
(Three and unspoken words. If you ever want to know)

Arthur
They saw within. If you ever want to know
Scene 3

Fl.

Ob.

Cl.

Hn.

T.A.

Pno.

Gtr.

Vln. 1

Vln. 2

Vla.

Vc.

Db.
More tea, dear?  (Helen opens her mouth to speak, Arthur slams hand down)

I'm tired of it. I've had enough.
You know God-damned well what I mean. Don't you ev-er get tired of be ing all "do - mes- tie"? Don't you just want to pull out
your out your hair and scream and say, "I'm a live, I can breath, and I won't be cooped up here for ev er!"
Well, you cer-tain-ly aren’t cooped up here, you spend half the year in Lon don! And what, pray tell, do you do there?
I never know, except to get the bills come next season!

Well, I'm sorry if I can't play the role of doting husband and
Helen:

Lit-tle Ar-thur hard-ly sees his fath-er!
What type of mod-el are you set-ting for him!

Arthur:

fath-er you so de-sire!
Diminuendo until out of breath

Helen:

We've been married seven and I feel I know you less than when I married you!

Arthur:

He's only five! What can he know of the world?
Switch at will between any of these pitches. Do not synchronize. Breath at will.

Helen

We bare-ly see you!

Arthur

And what is that to you? You love that lit-tle brat more than you ever loved me! Give me some at-ten-tion for
Helen: I do! Ar-thur, you’re my hus-band, I want to be with you! I can’t, lit-tle Ar-thur would not be up

Arthur: once! Then come with me to Lon-dom.
Helen: for the ride. It is too long at this age. What?

Arthur: getting excited. Then let's have the boys come here. I'll invite all my friends. Instead of months in the ci-
Are you sure?
tentatively

Arthur:
y, let's en-ter-tain them for a few months here in the coun-try. Yes! We will all get bet-ter ac-quain-
ted. SPOKEN: That is, after all, what you wanted, right?
Yes, I seem to re-call, but that was ov-er sev-en years a-go.

we make our de-but at the same part-y?  Ah, but I still re-
86

Fl.

Ob.

Cl.

Hn.

Tbn.

Pp.

Gt.

Helen

Anna.

Arth.

Lrd.

Vln. 1

Vln. 2

Vla.

Vc.

Db.

mem-ber you! Steal-ing the most el - i-gi-ble bach-e-lor right be-fore my eyes. Back then, you were ver-y luck-y.
Helen: seems you have done very well yourself. I am pleased to have you here.

Anna: Come, let us leave the men-folk to their sport-ing.
You do your hus-band proud.
(To mirror where Annabella admires herself)

Walk with me. I don't look too bad at all. Yes, I am ver-y beau-ti-ful.
Helen: I don't know. I do the best I can.

If it is not, may God grant me what I lack.

Anna: But is your best good enough?
Pretty words. What they lack for in action, they more than compensate with noble...
Picc. no tempo
Ob. no tempo
Cl. no tempo
Hn. no tempo
B. D. fp no tempo
Tom-t. no tempo
Pno. no tempo
Gtr. no tempo
Helen no tempo a piacere
Anna. are you quite finished? a piacere
Arth. ten - ti - ments. I am quite finished, and pleased with my - self.
Lord L. no tempo
Vln. 1 no tempo
Vln. 2 no tempo
Vla. no tempo
Ve. no tempo
Db. fp no tempo
hope you make a very good wife for your husband, Helen. Now, I figure we should find them; I can hear them singing.
They must have found the alcohol.

The parson is my friend since he for
gives us all our sins,  
To our pal up in the pulpit let us all raise a stein,
When I'm sad-den you are there, in-deed you are a friend of mine, In-stead of wa-ter give us
Picc. 337
Ob.  f
Cl.  f
Bass Clarinet in Fb
Hn.  f
S. D.  f
Pro.  mp
Gtr.
Helen
Anna
Arthur
Lord L.  wine!
Vln. 1
Vln. 2
Vla.
Vc.
Db.
To our pal above in heav'n let us all raise a stein,
When I'm thirsty you are there, in-
No tempo

A piacere

My good... a piacere

Men, men, surely

Lord L.

deed you are a friend of mine, instead of water baptize wine!

Vln. 1

Vln. 2

Vla.

Vc.

Db.

Repeat until next cue.

No tempo

Repeat until next cue.

Repeat until next cue.

Repeat until next cue.

No tempo

No tempo

No tempo

No tempo

No tempo

No tempo

No tempo
you can hold off the cups for another hour, it is just past dinner time.

Arthur

Why for-sake pleasure in the presence of such
Amma.

Why drink your-self into a stupor. be fore the e\'nings ples-sures can be ful ly en-joyed?

Arthur

corn pun-y?

Lord L.

Then let us fill the e\'ning
My keyboard skills are as lacking as refinement is lacking in your taste.

with merri-ment. Ann-a-bell-a, why not play us a tune.
Anna: Only if our hostess would care to join me in a duet.

Arthur: Well, obviously your tongue is not lacking, so sing us a tune.
"Yes! Sing us "The Wild Rose Bria."
Arthur, are you fa-mi-lar with it?"

On-ly too well.
_The holy tree,_

_The holy is dark when the rose briar blooms, but which will bloom most constantly?_
bri-ar is sweet in the spring,

The wild rose bri-ar is sweet in the spring,

Its summer blossoms
scent the air: Its sum-mer blos-soms scent the air: Yet wait till win-ter comes an-gain,

And
Helen
And who will call, will call... the wild... briar_ fair?
Then scorn... the sil-ly rose wreath

Anna
who will call And who will call... the wild... briar_ fair?
Then scorn the sil-ly rose wreath

Arthur

Lord L.

Vln. 1

Vln. 2

Vla.

Vc.

Db.
Helen:

now, And deck thee with the holly's sheen. That when 

Anna:

now, And deck thee with the holly's sheen. That when De-cem-ber 

Arthur: 

Lord L. 

Vln. 1 

Vln. 2 

Vla. 

Vc. 

Db.
thy brow He still may leave thy garland green.

blights thy brow He still may leave thy garland green.
Fl.  
no tempo

Ob.  
no tempo

Cl.  
no tempo

Hn.  
no tempo

S. D.  
no tempo

Pno.  
no tempo

Gtr.  
no tempo

Helen  
no tempo

Anna  
no tempo

Arthur  
no tempo

Lord L.  
no tempo

Vln. 1  
no tempo

Vln. 2  
no tempo

Vla.  
no tempo

Vc.  
no tempo

Db.  
no tempo

Trite and over-hand-ed. Sub-tle

Tru-er words were nev-er spok-en. Don't you a gree, Ar-thur?
None for me, I beg you. I never could figure out which piece

ty is more my game.

Per-haps then we should move to a game of chess?
He - len will sure-ly play, she is al-ways best-ing the men.

I must see this then, if noth-ing
Nothing you could ever could possibly restore. Hon or.

else than to restore. Hon or.

Speak for yourself.
(All pause, and watch Helen and Lord L. begin chess game)

Chess play-ers are so un so-cia-ble, they are no com-pa-ny for an-y
Fl.

Ob.

Cl.

Hn.

S. D.

Pno.

Gtr.

Helen

\(\text{a piacere}\)

I have captured your pawn with my bishop.

\text{(Annabella leaves)}

Anna.

but themselves.

Arthur

Lord L.

\(\text{mp}\)

It is those bishops that trouble me.
but the bold knight can overleap the reverend gentlemen, and now those sacred persons once removed, I shall have all
Fl.

Ob.

Cl.

Hn.

S. D.

Pno.

Gtr.

Helen

Arthur

What keen game-sters you are! Why Helen, your hand trembles as if you had staked your life upon

Lord L.

be-tore me.

Vln. 1

Vln. 2

Vla.

Vc.

Db.
Helen: What do you mean?

Arthur: (Arthur leaves) It. I wouldn't beat her, she'll hate you if you do. I see it in her eyes. (Watching Arthur leave with loathing) I despise your husband.
Don't tell me you don't know! Your husband disappears for months at my estate. At one time I thought it was for me, his old
friend. But then I saw what was happening, but I couldn't stop it. Ann - a - bell - a had already given birth, and if
(Attacca)

You don't know what you're talk-ing a-bout!

1 chal- lenged Ar-thur to a duel, I would be rid-i-culed. Why do you doubt my word? I can show you.
(Helen and Lord L. move on stage, but are unseen by Arthur and Annabella, who are in the garden)

Helen: no tempo

Anna: no tempo a piacere

Ah, Arthur it was here you kissed that woman.

Arthur: no tempo

Well,

Lord L.

Vln. 1

Vln. 2

Vla.

Vc.

Db.
But tell me, don't you love her

I couldn't help it. You know I must keep straight with her as long as I can.
Piec.

Ob.

B. Cl.

Hn.

B. D.

Pno.

Gtr.

Helen

Anna.

Arthur

Not one bit, by all that's sac~red! as if whispered

It is you I love, you who complete

Lord L.

You see, even your hus~band has be~trayed you.
Muted: Slowly cres. & dim. repeat until next cue

Helen:
No! He is just trying to make me jealous, just like when we first met!

Anna:
You say that every day and every night, but yet

Arthur:
my happiness.

Lord L.
You should not conspire with your wife and my

you re-turn to her

On-ly in bo-dy. My heart re-mains with you.
Helen
hus-band to play tricks on me!

Anna.
Say we will be to-ge-ther one day!

Arthur
In time, but I

Lord L.
This is no joke.
But one day?

can nev-er leave He-len and you can nev-er leave your hus-band. Yes, soon-er I hope rath-er than lat er.

She is a fool, he will say
Picc.

Ob.

B. Cl.

Hn.

Muted

Slowly cres. & dim. repeat until next cue

B. D.

Pno.

Repeat until next cue

Gtr.

Repeat until next cue

Helen

Anna.

Arthur

Tru - ly?

I nev - er say a word I don't

Lord L.

whatever he can to get what he wants.

Vln. 1

Vln. 2

Vla.

Repeat until next cue

Vc.

Db.
Helen: There is nothing left for me.

Yes, it is over.

Lord L.: Do you see how he has shamed you?
(In Helen's room, she is crying)

a tempo

A - - - lone,
for - got - ten,
a - ban - doned, I leave this place, It has noth - ing but old mem - ries, Their joy blurred by time and
Events I cannot begin to fathom.
Where do I go from here?
I don't know the answer.
I am a lone,  
In a night of darkening skies, How did this come to pass? I don’t know, I don’t.
know if it was me, Where do I go from here? I am lost, For-got-ten, and a-
ban-done, My soul is stretched, Stretched so thin, I feel it might break, Lost, a-
lone and forgotten, I huddle here, try -
Helen:

ing to gather myself, in a world of ever-darkening
Helen

(Arthur enters)

H-e-l-e-n, where were you? Our guests were waiting!

For you to do your du-t-y and be their hos-tess.

n

Vln. 1

Vln. 2

Vla.

Vc.

Db.
Helen: What of your duty? Is your duty to play me false with Annabel? Is it your duty to be an adulterer?
For your wife's sake, please cease...

My wife? What wife? I have no wife. Or
if I have, she means nothing to me. My wife is worth less to me, I told Lord Low-both rough I have no use for you. I
Helen: I say that what he prizes so light-ly will not be long in his pos-ses-sion.

Arthur: told him just that! What say you now?
Poor ignor-ant Hel-en. Do you think to be so mel-an-choly as a grand her-o-ine And die for your brok-en heart!
Helen: By no means! My heart is too dried to be brok-en, and I mean to live as long as I can.
You have no other option than to live under my roof. You can not leave and when I want you for myself, you can not
By law, you are a man and free to do as you please, but though you might own my body, you shall never own my soul.

choose but to yield.
(Arthur slaps Helen and pushes her onto the bed)

Seems about to rape her, stops at the last moment

Your soul is use-less. I own your bod-y, and the thing that you hold most dear, your son.
Sleep now, but know that you sleep in a bed that is owned by me, in a house that is owned by me, on an estate that is owned by me,
Arpeggiate at will, repeat until next cue.

with loathing
a piacere

I will not bow before you, Be-neth no man will I

Even your dreams are not your own.
cover, You might sit, me, Engage an unfor-tune end for me, Fill my life with salt, Til I find it hard-ly worth
Helen

living, You might silence my voice, Burn my writings In a fury of flames, I will not stop, You might
Helen

kill my dreams, End-ing their lives as you will end mine own,

Rise up, And si-lence me, As you nev-er can.
Scene 7

Fl.  $m=66$  no tempo

Eng. Hn.  no tempo

B. Cl.  no tempo

Hn.  no tempo

B. D.  no tempo

Pno.  no tempo

Gr.  no tempo

Helen  no tempo  a piacere

Arthur  no tempo  a piacere

Vln. 1  no tempo

Vln. 2  no tempo

Vla.  no tempo

Vc.  no tempo

Db.  no tempo
I received a letter from my aunt describing your condition. And I am pleased you came so far to nurse me back to health.
your de-bau-ch-er-y. Be-sides, you left me with lit-tle choice. You would have tak-en my son by law. There is

Arthur

Our son.
Helen: precious little of you left in him. I have seen to that.

Arthur: That can be rectified. I thought you might en-
You will not die. The doctor said you’d be fine with rest and

joy watching me die.
Helen: moderation of drink.

Arthur: Pish. That fool knows nothing. Where is my
He is sure. You can see him when you are feeling better.
Whenever he is, you will not
son? Is he here?
see him un-till you have prom-ised to leave him com-pl-etely un-der my care and pro tec-tion.

No, let me
Helen: No.  
Arthur: see him now. It must be so.  
Helen: I swear it, as God in heav-en!  
Arthur: Now, let me see him!
toiled for you, I clung to you, begged for your love, I was in awe of you, you, my be
love-d. And then there was nothing. You had it all and pushed it.
poco accel.

Helen
all a-way, A-way for paint-ed whores and emp-ty bot-tles. Did they fill you? Did you rest

Arthur

Vln. 1

Vln. 2

Vla.

Vc.

Db.
was your fool, your clown, your joke.
Your promises are nothing, your words are emp...
Fl.  
Eng. Hn.  
B. Cl.  
Hn.  
B. D.  
Pno.  
Keep sustain pedal down until next cue  
Gtr.  
Helen  
Arthur  
Vln. 1  
Vln. 2  
Vla.  
Vc.  
Db.
Helen: say then?
Arthur: Bring it to me.
Don't you think you have had e-nough? The
You've been wai-er-ing the wine a-gain.
doctor warned you... Regardless, even worried, you have had three bot-tles to-day!

To hell with him.

Three bot-tles of
Helen: Ar-thur please, don't ex-ert your-self.
Arthur: your wai-ered wine is one glass of true wine. Woman, I will do as I please.
Pl.  
Ob.  
B. Cl.  
Hn.  
B. D.  
Pno.  
Gtr.  
Helen  
Arthur  
Vln. 1  
Vln. 2  
Vla.  
Ve.  
Db.  

What, do you think I am your precious Jesus and can turn your water into my wine?
Je sus is my friend since he turned water into wine,
To our pal above in heav'n let us all raise a stein,
When I'm thirsty you are there, in-deed you are a friend of mine, In stead of water bap-tise wine! Je-sus is my friend la, la, la,
no tempo

Helen

Ar - thur, stop this!

I will do what I want! You want-ed to keep me down, to con - trol me. I am my own man!

no tempo

Arthur
Helen: mp

Arthur: mf

Helen: Please, let me help you!

Arthur: Oh you, now you help me. Where were you when I got into this mess? Off on holiday?
Fl.

Ob.

B. Cl.

Hn.

B. D.

Pno.

Gtr.

Helen:

trying to save our son. So he wouldn't become some-one like you!

Arthur:

And what is so bad about me, Helen? Tell me, I never felt
bad? Your goodness comes at the expense of any fun. When was the last time you smiled?

1 am still here, and
Fl.
Ob.
B. Cl.
Hn.
B. D.
Pno.
Gtr.

Helen

You take everything to excess. You drink, you whore, you gamble.

Arthur

But at what price!? Well at least I
That is - n't true and you know it. Whatever I am to-day, you made me it.

Arthur

Do it with passion!
I am responsible for what you have become, but you are not responsible for what I have become. Come now, Helen. I am
None that I wished. I might have my failings, but I am trying.

here dying now. How much of a hand did you play in that?
Helen

to do the best I can with what God gave me.

Arthur

God agin! Can't you begin to see past him, and
I am not so blind that I

see the people right in front of you? You are so in awe of God that you are blind to the world!
Helen: I cannot see your failings. I might not be perfect, but at least I am not afraid to try to better myself.

Arthur: Afraid? You think me a
cow-ard? No cow-ard soul is mine, No trem-bler in the world's sphere, I see
Heaven's glories shine, But Hell I do not fear. Vain are the
Worthless as withered weeds, I will not listen to what you say.
A tempo (j=88)

My guide is my heart, My passions and my lust, The greatest joy from any part,
In that and only do I trust. Come down o hell, Painful, torturous and hot, In
I believe in one God, the
flames let me dwell, I fear you not. I believe in one God, the
Father and the Almighty, Creator of heaven and earth of all that is unseen.

Father and the Almighty, Creator of desire and lust of all that is seen and unseen.
seen and unseen. I believe in one Lord,

I believe in one Lord, myself, eternally begotten of pleasure, Sex from sex, and
Jesus Christ, the only Son of God, eternal

drink from drink, one woman or two women, bedding, or playing with our being with each other,
To Priece.

Helen: ly be-got-ten of the Fath-er, For us and for our salva-tion he

Arthur: Through this all joy was made, for us and our hap-pi-ness, I be-lieve in my-self, and on-ly my
**Helen**

I believe in one Lord, Jesus Christ. Amen.

**Arthur**

and the life that might or might not come. Amen.

*(Arthur dies)*
Appendix A: Libretto

Helen: An opera in one act

Written by Steven Soebbing

Adapted from the novel, The Tenant of Wildfell Hall, by Anne Brontë

Scene 1

(dance music, party)

AUNT

It is past time you were married dear.

HELEN

I am not in a hurry.

AUNT

Surely you must think to marry before the end of the season?

HELEN

No.
HELEN

Of all the men in all the world I would only like a few. And of those few, I will probably never meet most. And if we meet, what are the chances of him being single, or even being interested? So, of all the men in all the world, I would only like a few and those few I will never meet.

AUNT

Just make sure you choose well, you can boast a good family, a good fortune and prospects, and you have a fair share of beauty. Do not let beauty lead you astray.

HELEN

How could beauty lead me astray?

AUNT

Because my dear, beauty is like money, they attract the worst sorts of men. Beauty is like money, you inherit it, through no good of your own self. No toil, no work. Beauty is like money, men who like both could care less for the woman herself.
Keep watch, keep a guard over your eyes and ears as inlets of your heart, and over your lips as the outlet, lest they betray you in a moment of unwariness. First study, then approve, then love.

HELEN

You worry too much. Besides, all the men here annoy me. Mr. Boarham truly outlives his name, and only speaks of his hounds. Mr. Marshall is merely a boy, and acts and speaks and thinks like one. Mr. Clurem is a narcissitic pig, who has no room in his eye for anyone’s image but his own.

AUNT

Well, for all your words you might not be able to escape. Mr. Boarham is trying to catch your eye.

HELEN

Then may he not catch it. Wait, who is that young man over there?

AUNT

That is the young Mr. Huntingdon, the son of your uncle’s old friend.
HELEN

He looks like he means to speak with me.

AUNT

He’s a fine lad, that young one, but I have heard he is a bit wildish. Be careful!

HELEN

What does “a bit wildish” mean?

(Arthur arrives, precluding the Aunt from answering)

AUNT

My niece, Helen Lawrence, may I present to you Arthur Huntingdon.

ARTHUR and HELEN

Pleased to meet you.

(Aunt is called away)

HELEN

I am very much obliged to you. You have saved me from some very unpleasant company.
ARTHUR

Don’t be too thankful. I take some enjoyment in spiting your tormentor.

Though I feel I have no reason to dread them as rivals do I?

HELEN

You know I detest them all.

ARTHUR

And me?

HELEN

I have no reason to detest you!

(Slyly)

Should I have?

ARTHUR

(ignoring Helen)

But what are your sentiments towards me? Helen! Speak! How do you regard me?
HELEN

(flustered)

How do you regard me?

ARTHUR

You are quite the most beautiful woman in the room. When you walk in, all the lights turn to you, and certainly all the eyes of the men, and all the envy of the women.

HELEN

You praise me too highly!

ARTHUR

How is praise given in truthfulness, praise that is too high?

AUNT

Excuse me, Helen, I would like to introduce you to someone else.

ARTHUR

Till again we meet.
Scene 2

(Change of scene to Helen’s room and her changing into dressing gown, speaking/singing all the time)

HELEN

Me? Mr. Boarham’s wife? What an insult?

What was I supposed to be?

What was I supposed to do?

His mindless, meaningless words of hunting, hunting, hunting!

The only prey in his sights was me, and I refuse to give in to him.

(At this point, in her shift and turns to her easel.)

But Arthur? Can he be any better?

(begins to sketch Arthur on her canvas)

His eyes, his hair, his mouth, how can they speak such lovely words?

Can such lovely words be false?

How can I say I love you if I don’t know the words?

To capture in words what the heart feels is wonderous joy

Yet fleeting more than the ever-present birds

The dove of my passion lies unsaid within my heart

Waiting for my tongue to give it flight

And send it home to its resting place in your ear

Where it shall flutter its soft words of my pleasure
And give rise to tender emotions
Of which only I could only know,
For two….

ARTHUR
(finishing the poem, coming in through a window)
For two were one and bound are we!

HELEN
What are you doing here!!???? You can’t be here!

ARTHUR
But I am here. Do you fear me Helen?

HELEN
No, I don’t fear you. But you shouldn’t be here! Go away!

(Arthur closes the distance between them)

ARTHUR
But why? When I have just met you?
HELEN

You can go and call tomorrow, at a proper hour.

ARTHUR

Then I shall do just that...

(with a slight smile)

if you promise to accept my visit.

If I said I had feelings for you, what would you do?

Would you act surprised and turn aside?

Would you act demure and coy, and give a glance of your eyes as if I said nothing at all?

And if I said I had feelings for you, what would you do?

Would you turn away?

Would I ever see you again, could we still be friends, or would you run and hide in childhood games?

Is a feeling denied a far better feeling than a feeling spoken with too much truth?

I’ll go now.
(leaving out the window)

Duet

HELEN

If you ever wanted to know how I feel for you, you don’t need to ask.
Just look into my eyes and you will see how deeply I care for you.

ARTHUR

If you ever wanted to know how I feel for you, you don’t need to ask.
I am not good with words anyway, let my silence do the speaking.

HELEN and ARTHUR

If you ever wanted to know how I feel for you, you don’t need to ask.
My lips weren’t made to whisper words of passion, let my kiss carry the
thousand unspoken words.

If you ever wanted to know how I fell for you, you don’t need to ask.
Just look into your eyes, and see the soul that I saw.
And no words to express the beauty I saw within.

(Kiss outside window, Arthur leaves, curtain down)
Scene 3

HELEN

More tea, dear?

ARTHUR

I’m tired of it.

(Helen opens her mouth to speak, Arthur slams hand down)

I’ve had enough.

HELEN

What do you mean?

ARTHUR

You know God-damned well what I mean. Don’t you ever get tired of being all “Domestic”? Don’t you just want to pull out your hair and scream and say, “I’m alive, I can breath, and I won’t be cooped up here forever!”

HELEN

Well, you certainly aren’t cooped up here, you spend half the year in London! And what, pray tell, do you do there? I never know, except to get the bills come next season!
ARTHUR
Well, I’m sorry if I can’t play the role of the doting husband and father you so desire!

HELEN
Little Arthur hardly sees his father! What type of model are you setting for him!

ARTHUR
He’s only five! What can he know of the world!?

HELEN
We’ve been married seven, and I feel I know you even less than when I married you! We barely see you!

ARTHUR
And what is that to you? You love that little brat more than you ever loved me! Give me some attention for once!

HELEN
I do! Arthur, you’re my husband, I want to be with you!
ARTHUR

Then come with me to London.

HELEN

I can’t, little Arthur would not be up for the ride—it is too long at his age.

ARTHUR

Then let’s have the boys come here.

HELEN

What?

ARTHUR

I’ll invite all my friends. Instead of months in the city, let’s entertain them for a few months here in the country.

HELEN

Are you sure…

ARTHUR

Yes! We will all get better acquainted. That is, after all, what you wanted, right?
Scene 4

ARTHUR

Lord and Lady Lowborough, may I present you to my wife Helen.

LADY LOWBOROUGH

Please, Annabella. I remember you, didn’t we make our debut at the same party?

HELEN

Yes, I seem to recall, but that was over seven years ago.

LADY LOWBOROUGH

Ah, but I still remember you—stealing the most eligible bachelor right before my eyes. Back then, you were very lucky.

HELEN

It seems you have done very well yourself. I am pleased to have you here.

LADY LOWBOROUGH

Come, let us leave the menfolk to their sporting. Walk with me.

(to mirror where Annabella admires herself)

I don’t look too bad at all.
HELEN
You do your husband proud.

LADY LOWBOROUGH
Yes, I am very beautiful.

HELEN
I am sure your husband is very pleased with you.

LADY LOWBOROUGH
But Helen, tell me, is YOUR husband pleased with YOU?

HELEN
I don’t know. I do the best I can.

LADY LOWBOROUGH
But is your best good enough?

HELEN
If it is not, may God grant me what I lack.
LADY LOWBOROUGH
Pretty words. What they lack for in action, they more than compensate with noble sentiments.

HELEN
Are you quite finished…

LADY LOWBOROUGH
I’m quite finished, and pleased with myself. I hope you make a very GOOD wife for your husband, Helen. Now, I figure we should find them, I can hear them singing—they must have already found the alcohol.

ARTHUR and LORD LOWBOROUGH
The parson is my friend since he forgives us all our sins.
To our pal up in the pulpit let us all raise a stein
When I’m saddened you are there, indeed you are a friend of mine
Instead of water, give us wine!

Jesus is my friend since he turned water into wine
To our pal above in heaven let us all raise a stein
When I’m thirsty you are there, indeed you are a friend of mine
Instead of water, baptize wine!
HELEN

My goodne…

LADY LOWBOROUGH

Men, men, surely you can hold off the cups for another hour—it is just past dinner time.

ARTHUR

Why forsake pleasure in the presence of such company?

LADY LOWBOROUGH

Why drink yourself into a stupor before the evenings pleasures can be fully enjoyed?

LORD LOWBOROUGH

Then let us fill the evening with merriment. Annabella, why not play us a tune.

LADY LOWBOROUGH

My keyboard skills are as lacking as refinement is lacking in your taste.
LORD LOWBOROUGH

Well, obviously your tongue is not lacking, so sing us a tune.

LADY LOWBOROUGH

Only if our hostess would care to join me in a duet.

LORD LOWBOROUGH

Yes! Sing us “The Wild Rose Briar.” Arthur, are you familiar with it?

ARTHUR

Only too well.

Duet

LADY LOWBOROUGH and HELEN

Love is like the wild rose briar

Friendship, like the holly tree,

The holly is dark when the rose briar blooms

But which will bloom most constantly?

The wild rose briar is sweet in spring,

Its summer blossoms scent the air:

Yet wait till winter comes again
And who will call the wild-briar fair?

Then scorn the silly rose-wreath now
And deck thee with the holly’s sheen.
That when December blights thy brow
He still may leave thy garland green.

LORD LOWBOROUGH
Truer words were never spoken. Don’t you agree Arthur?

ARTHUR
Trite and overhanded. Subtlety is more my game.

LORD LOWBOROUGH
Perhaps then we should move to a game of chess?

LADY LOWBOROUGH
None for me, I beg you. I never could figure out which piece went where.

ARTHUR
Helen will surely play, she is always besting the men.
LORD LOWBOROUGH

I must see this then, if nothing else than to restore male honor.

ARTHUR

Nothing you will ever do could possibly restore male honor.

LORD LOWBOROUGH

Speak for yourself.

(pause)

ANNABELLA

Chess players are so unsociable, they are no company for any but themselves.

(Leaves)

HELEN

I have captured your pawn with my bishop.

LORD LOWBOROUGH

It is those bishops that trouble me, but the bold knight can overleap the reverend gentlemen, and now, those sacred persons once removed, I shall have all before me.
ARTHUR

What keen gamesters you are! Why Helen, your hand trembles as if you had staked your life upon it. I wouldn’t beat her, she’ll hate you if you do—I see it in her eyes.

(Leaves)

LORD LOWBOROUGH

I despise your husband.

HELEN

What do you mean?

LORD LOWBOROUGH

Don’t tell me you don’t know! Your husband disappears for months at my estate. At one time I thought it was for me, his old friend. But then I saw what was happening, but I couldn’t stop it. Annabella had already given birth and if I challenged Arthur to a duel, I would be ridiculed.

HELEN

You don’t know what you’re talking about!
LORD LOWBOROUGH

Why do you doubt my word? I can show you.

Scene 5

(Lord Lowborough and Helen see Arthur and Lady Lowborough without being seen)

LADY LOWBOROUGH

Ah, Arthur, it was here you kissed that woman.

ARTHUR

Well, I couldn’t help it. You know I must keep straight with her as long as I can. Haven’t I seen you kiss your dolt of a husband, scores of times? And do I ever complain?

LADY LOWBOROUGH

But tell me, don’t you love her still?

ARTHUR

Not one bit, by all that’s sacred!

LORD LOWBOROUGH

You see, even your husband has betrayed you.
ARTHUR

It is you I love, you who completes my happiness.

HELEN

No, he is just trying to make me jealous, just like when we first met!

LADY LOWBOROUGH

You say that every day and every night, but yet you return to her.

ARTHUR

Only in body. My heart remains with you.

HELEN

You should not conspire with your wife and my husband to play tricks on me!

LORD LOWBOROUGH

This is no joke.

LADY LOWBOROUGH

Say we will be together one day!
ARTHUR

In time, but I can never leave Helen and you can never leave your husband.

LADY LOWBOROUGH

But one day?

ARTHUR

Yes, sooner I hope rather than later.

LORD LOWBOROUGH

She is a fool, he will say whatever he can to get what he wants.

LADY LOWBOROUGH

Truly?

ARTHUR

I never say a word I don’t mean.

HELEN

There is nothing left for me.
LORD LOWBOROUGH

Do you see how he has shamed you?

HELEN

Yes, it is over.

Scene 6

(In Helen’s room)

HELEN

Alone, forgotten, abandoned

I leave this place

It has nothing but old memories

Their joy blurred by time

And events I cannot begin to fathom

Where do I go from here?

I don’t know the answer

I am alone

In a night of ever darkening skies

How did this come to pass?

I don’t know

I don’t know if it was me
Where do I go from here?
I am lost
Forgotten
And abandoned
My soul is stretched
Stretched so thin
I feel it might break
Lost, alone and forgotten
I huddle here
Trying to gather myself
In a world of ever-darkening night

(Arthur enters)

ARTHUR

Helen, where were you? Our guests were waiting!

HELEN

For what?

ARTHUR

For you to do your duty and be their hostess.
HELEN

My duty? What of your duty? Is your duty to play me false with Annabella? Is it your duty to be an adulterer? For your wife’s sake, please cease.…

ARTHUR

My wife! What wife? I have no wife. Or if I have, she means nothing to me. My wife is worthless to me—I told Lord Lowborough I have no use for you. I told him just that. What say you now?

HELEN

I say that what he prizes so lightly will not be long in his possession.

ARTHUR

Poor ignorant Helen. Do you think to be so melancholy as a grand heroine and die for your broken heart!

HELEN

By no means. My heart is too dried to be broken and I mean to live as long as I can.
ARTHUR

You have no other option than to live under my roof. You cannot leave and when I want you for myself, you cannot choose but to yield.

HELEN

By law, you are a man and free to do as you please, but though you might own my body, you shall never own my soul.

ARTHUR

(Slaps her and pushes her onto the bed)

Your soul is useless. I own your body and the thing that you hold most dear—your son.

(seems about to go further into rape, stops at the last moment)

Sleep now, but know that you sleep in a bed that is owned by me, in a house that is owned by me, on an estate that is owned by me. Even your dreams are not your own.

(Arthur leaves)

HELEN

I will not bow before you

Beneath no man will I cower

You might stifle me
Engage an unfortunate end for me
Fill my life with salt
Till I find it hardly worth living
You might silence my voice
Burn my writings
In a fury of flames
I will not stop
You might kill my dreams
Ending their lives as you will end mine own
Rise up
And silence me
As you never can.

Scene 7

(Helen walks into her husband's bedroom)

ARTHUR

Wife.

HELEN

Mr. Huntingdon.
ARTHUR

I am pleased you came so far to nurse me back to health.

HELEN

I received a letter from my aunt describing your condition—and your debauchery.

Besides, you left me with little choice. You would have taken my son by law.

ARTHUR

Our son.

HELEN

There is precious little of you left in him. I have seen to that.

ARTHUR

That can be rectified. I thought you might enjoy watching me die.

HELEN

You will not die. The doctor said you would be fine with rest and moderation of drink.
ARTHUR

Pish. That fool knows nothing—where is my son?

HELEN

He is safe. You can see him when you are feeling better.

ARTHUR

Is he here?

HELEN

Wherever he is, you will not see him until you have promised to leave him completely under my care and protection. To let me take him away whenever and to wherever I please, if I judge it necessary. But that is for tomorrow.

ARTHUR

No, let me see him now. It must be so.

HELEN

No.
ARTHUR

I swear it, as God in Heaven! Now, let me see him!

HELEN

I cannot trust your oaths or promises.

You have led me astray before.

I trusted you, I loved you

I sacrificed and toiled for you

I clung to you, begged for your love

I was in awe of you-- you, my beloved.

And then there was nothing

You had it all and pushed it all away

away for painted whores and empty bottles

Did they fill you? Did you rest easy in their arms?

Did they make you forget?

I was your fool, your clown, your joke.

your promises are nothing,

your words empty

I must have a written agreement.

Do you have nothing to say then?
ARTHUR

Bring it to me.

Scene 8

ARTHUR

You've been watering the wine again.

HELEN

Don't you think you have had enough? The doctor warned you...

ARTHUR

To hell with him...

HELEN

Regardless, even watered, you have had three bottles today!

ARTHUR

Three bottles of your watered wine is one glass of true wine.

HELEN

Arthur please, don't exert yourself
ARTHUR

Woman, I will do as I please.

(to Helen)

What, do you think I am your precious Jesus and can turn your water into
my wine?

(recap of drinking song from Scene 4)

Jesus is my friend since he turned water into wine
To our pal above in heaven let us all raise a stein
When I'm thirsty you are there, indeed you are a friend of mine
Instead of water, baptize wine!

La, la la...

(getting weaker)

HELEN

Arthur, stop this!

ARTHUR

I will do what I want! You wanted to keep me down, to control me. I am
my own man!
HELEN

Please, let me help you!

ARTHUR

Oh yes, now you help me-- where were you when I got into this mess? Off on holiday?

HELEN

I was trying to save our son-- so he wouldn't become someone like you!

ARTHUR

And what is so bad about me, Helen? Tell me, I never felt good enough for you. I tried at first, but you wore me out. Always so damn perfect all the time. Can't you just live a little bit? Would that be so bad? Your goodness comes at the expense of any fun- when was the last time you smiled?

HELEN

I am still here and healthy.

ARTHUR

But at what price!?
HELEN

You take everything to excess. You drink, you whore, you gamble

ARTHUR

Well at least I do it with passion!

HELEN

That isn't true and you know it. Whatever I am today you made me it.

ARTHUR

So I am responsible for what you have become but You are not responsible for what I have become. Come now, Helen. I am here dying now-- how much of a hand did you play in that?

HELEN

None that I wished. I might have my failings, but I am trying to do the best I can with what God gave me.

ARTHUR

God again, can't you begin to see past him and see the people right in front of you? You are so in awe of God that you are blind to the world!
HELEN

I am not so blind that I cannot see your failings. I might not be perfect, but at least I am not afraid to try to better myself.

ARTHUR

Afraid? You think me a coward?

No coward soul is mine
No trembler in the world's sphere
I see Heaven's glories shine
But Hell I do not fear.

Vain are the thousand creeds
From empty churches on the way
Worthless as withered weeds
I will not listen to what you say

My guide is my heart
My passions and my lust
The greatest joy from any part
In that and only that I trust
Come down o hell,

Painful, torturous and hot

In flames let me dwell

I fear you not

Duet

ARTHUR

I believe in one god the father and the almighty creator of desire and lust
of all that is seen and unseen. I believe in one lord, myself
eternally begotten of pleasure. Sex from sex, and drink from drink. One
woman or two women, bedding, or playing with our being with each other.
Through all this joy was made. For us and for our happiness

I believe in myself, and only myself. I acknowledge nothing and no
authority. I look for the next day and the next conquest, and the life that
might or might not come. Amen.

HELEN

I believe in one god the Father and the Almighty Creator of heaven and
earth of all that is seen and unseen.
I believe in one Lord, Jesus Christ, the only Son of God, eternally begotten of the Father.

For us and for our salvation he came down from heaven: he suffered death and rose again

I believe in one Lord, Jesus Christ. Amen.

(Arthur dies)