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Helen: An opera in one act

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HELEN:
AN OPERA IN ONE ACT

by

Garrett E. Hope

A DOCTORAL DOCUMENT

Presented to the Faculty of
The Graduate College at the University of Nebraska
In Partial Fulfillment of Requirements
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Major: Music

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HELEN: AN OPERA IN ONE ACT

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Adviser: Eric J. Richards

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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Secondly, thank you to my committee members for all the advice, guidance, and counsel you have provided me. I owe a special thank you and a debt of gratitude towards my composition instructors: Dr. Eric Richards, and Dr. Tyler G. White.

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Table of Contents

Cast of characters..............................................................................................................viii
Instrumentation...................................................................................................................ix
Synopsis...............................................................................................................................x
Scene 1.................................................................................................................................1
Scene 2.................................................................................................................................44
Scene 3...............................................................................................................................71
Scene 4...............................................................................................................................83
Scene 5.............................................................................................................................124
Scene 6.............................................................................................................................134
Scene 7.............................................................................................................................163
Scene 8.............................................................................................................................181
Appendix A: Libretto.......................................................................................................217
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.
I am not in a hurry.

It is past time you were married dear. Surely, you must
No. Of all the men___ in all the

think to mar-ry___ be-fore the end of the sea-son? Why?
Helen

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 the world, I would only like a few, and those few
I will never meet.

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 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 out - let
lest they be - tray you
in a mo - ment of un-war-i - ness.
First stu - dy, then ap -
You worry too much. Besides, all the men here annoy me.

prove, then love.
Mis - ter Bour - ham tru-ly out-lives his name, and on - ly speaks of his hounds. Mis - ter
Marshall is merely a boy, and acts and speaks and thinks like one. Mis-ter
Charm is a narcissistic pig who has no room in his eye for anyone’s image but his.
Aunt: Well, for all your words, you might not be able to escape. Mister Boarham is trying to catch...
Then may be not catch it. Wait! Who is that young man over there?

your eye.

That is
he looks like he means
the young Mr. Huntingdon, the son of your uncle's old friend.
He is a fine lad, that young one, but I have heard he is a bit wild - ish.

to speak with me.
What does, "a bit wild - ish" mean?  
(Arthur arrives, precluding the hunt from answering)
Helen: a piacere
My niece, Helen Lawrence, may I present to you Arthur Huntington.

SPOKEN: Pleased to meet you.

Arthur: SPOKEN: Pleased to meet you.
Switch at will between any of these pitches. Do not synchronize. Breathe at will. Stop at next cue.
Stop playing

Stop playing

Stop playing

\( \approx 130 \). Repeat Figure until cue.

You know I de-test

some en-joy-ment in spi-ting your tor-men-tors. Though I feel I have no rea-son to dread them as ri-vals, do I?
Fl.
Ob.
B. Cl.
Hn.
Mar.
Pno.

Ger.

Helen:

 THEM ALL. I HAVE NO REASON TO DETEST YOU! SHOULD I HAVE?

Aunt:

ARThUR:

AND ME? BUT WHAT ARE YOUR SENTIMENTS TOWARDS ME?

Vln. 1
Vln. 2
Vla.
Vc.
Db.
Helen: How do you regard me?

Arthur: Hel-er! Speak! How do you regard me?

Vln. 1: You are quite the most.
Helen

Arthur

beau-ti-ful wo-man in the room.  
When you walk in, all the lights turn towards you.
And certainly all the eyes of the men, and the envy...
You praise me too highly!

of the women.

How is praise given in truth
no tempo

Repeat many times and fade out

(no tempo)

eager to interrupt

(Aunt approaches)

Ex-cuse me,

ful-ness, praise that is too high?

no tempo

poco a poco dim.

no tempo

poco a poco dim.

no tempo

poco a poco dim.

no tempo

poco a poco dim.
(Seque)

He- len, I would like to in- tro- duce you to some-one else.

(To Helen)

Til a - gain we meet.
(Helen is changing into dressing gown, speaking/singing all the time)

Me? Boar-ham's wife? 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. But, but Arthur? Can he be any better? 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 wondrous joy,
Yet fleet-ing more than the ev-en-pres-ent birds,
The dove of my pas-sion lies un-said with
in my heart, Waiting for my tongue to give it flight, And
52
soft words of my pleasure, And give rise to tender emotions, Of which
What are you doing here?! You can't be here!

No, I don't see you!
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 noth-ing at all? And if I said I had
way? 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
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
words anyway, let my silence do the speaking.
If you ever wanted to know how I feel for you, you
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

Vln. 1

Vln. 2

Vla.

Ve.

Db.
(Kiss outside window, Arthur leaves, curtain down)

Helen: thousand unspoken words. If you ever wanted to know

Arthur: ty I saw within. If you ever wanted to know
More tea, dear? (Helen opens her mouth to speak, Arthur slams hand down.)

I'm tired of it. I've had enough.
Arthur: You know God-damned well what I mean. Don't you ev-er get tired of be-ing all "do- mes-tic"? Don't you just want to pull out
your out your hair and scream and say, "I'm alive, I can breathe, and I won't be cooped up here for ever!"
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 dotting husband and
Lit-tle Ar-thur hard-ly sees his fath-er! What type of mod-el are you set-ting for him!

fath-er you so de-sire!
We've been married seven and I feel I know you less than when I married you!

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 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...
Helen
I do! Ar-thur, you're my hus-band, I want to be with you!

Arthur
once!

I can't, lit-tle Ar-thur would not be up

Then come with me to Lon-don.
Helen: for the ride. It is too long at this age.

Arthur: getting excited

Then let's have the boys come here. I'll invite all my friends. Instead of months in the c...
Are you sure?

tentatively

Yes! We will all get bet-ter ac-quain-
ted. SPOKEN: That is, after all, what you wanted, right?

ty, let's en-ter-tain them for a few months here in the coun-
try.
Please, Annabel la. I remember you, didn’t

Low borough, may I present you to my wife Helen.
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-
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.
seems you have done very well yourself. I am pleased to have you here.

Arthur

Come, let us leave the men-folk to their sporting.
You do your hus-band proud.

(To mirror where Annabella admires herself)

Walk with me. I don'tlook too bad at all. Yes, I am ver-y beau-ti-ful.
I am sure your hus-band is ver-y pleased with you.

But Hel-en, tell me, is your hus-band pleased with you?
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
no tempo

f

no tempo
To B. Cl.

no tempo

fp

no tempo

f

p

no tempo

a placere

Are you quite finished?

a placere

1 am quite finished, and pleased with myself.

no tempo

no tempo

no tempo

no tempo

no tempo

no tempo

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.
Picc.  
Gb.  
Cl.  
Hn.  
S. D.  
Pno.  
Gtr.  
Helen  
Anna.  
Arthur  
Lord L.  
Vln. 1  
Vln. 2  
Vla.  
Vc.  
Db.  

They must have found the alcohol.

They are my friend since he for
Picc.  

Obo.  

Cl.  

Hn.  

S. D.  

Pno.  

Gtr.  

Helen  

Anna.  

Arthur  

gives us all our sins,  
To our pal up in the pul-pit let us all raise a stein,  

Lord L.  

gives us all our sins,  
To our pal up in the pul-pit let us all raise a stein,  

Vln. 1  

Vln. 2  

Vla.  

Vc.  

Db.
When I'm sad - dened you are there, in - deed you are a friend of mine, In - stead of wat - er give us
w cheese juice! Je sus is my friend since he turned wa- ter in- to wine,

w cheese juice! Je sus is my friend since he turned wa- ter in- to wine,
you can hold off the cups for another hour, it is just past dinner time.

Why for-sake pleasure in the presence of such
Why drink your self into a swoon before the evening pleasures can be fully enjoyed?

Com pun-y?

Then let us fill the evening
My keyboard skills are as lacking as re-fine-ment is lacking in your taste.

with mer-i-ment. Ann-a-bel-la, why not play us a tune.
On-ly if our hos-tess would care to join me in a du-et.

Well, ob-vi-ous-ly your tongue is not lack-ing, so sing us a tune.
Yes! Sing us "The Wild Rose Briar."
Arthur: Are you familiar with it?
Love is like the wild rose briar, Friendship, like...
bri-ar is sweet in the spring,
The wild rose bri-ar is sweet in the spring,
Its sum-mer blos-soms

bri-ar is sweet in the spring,
The wild rose bri-ar is sweet in the spring,
Its sum-mer blos-soms
scent the air: Its sum-mer blos-soms scent the air: Yet wait till win-ter comes a-gain,
And who will call, will call the wild brier fair? Then scorn the silly rose wreath.

Who will call the wild brier fair? Then scorn the silly rose wreath.

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

"now, And deck thee with the holly's sheen. That when December ber"
Fl. 424 - no tempo
Ob. - no tempo
Cl. - no tempo
Hn. - no tempo
Sn. D. - no tempo
Pr. - no tempo
Gr. - no tempo
Helen - no tempo
Anna - no tempo
Arthur - no tempo a piacere
Lord L. - no tempo a piacere

Tru-er words were nev-er spok-en. Don't you a gree, Ar-thur?

Vln. 1 - no tempo
Vln. 2 - no tempo
Vla. - no tempo
Vc. - no tempo
Db. - no tempo

Trite and ov-er-hand-ed. Sub-tle
None for me, I beg you. I never could figure out which piece

"a piacere"

ty is more my game.

Perhaps then we should move to a game of chess?
Fl.

Gob.

Cl.

Hn.

S. D.

Gtr.

Helen

Anna

Arthur

He - len will sure-ly play, she is al - ways best-ing the men.

Lord L.

I must see this then, if noth-ing

Vln. 1

Vln. 2

Vla.

Vc.

Db.
Nothing you could ever do could possibly restore male honor.

Else than to restore male honor.  

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
Helen

a piacere

I have captured your pawn with my bishop.

(Annabella leaves)

Anna.

but themselves.

Arthur

Lord L.

It is those bishops that trouble me.

Vln. 1

Vln. 2

Vla.

Vc.

Db.
but the bold knight can over-leap the reverend gentlemen, and now those sacred persons once removed, I shall have all
Fl.  
Ob.  
Cl.  
Hn.  
S. D.  
Pro.  
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-fore me.  

Vln. 1  
Vln. 2  
Vla.  
Vc.  
Db.
Helen

Arthur

Lord L.

Vln. 1

Vln. 2

Vla.

Vc.

Db.

(p)

Hensed

What do you mean?

(Arthur leaves)

(Watching Arthur leave with loathing)

I despise your husband.
Fl.

Ob.

Cl.

Hn.

B. D.

T. t.

Pno.

Gr.

Helen

Arthur

Lord L.

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

Vln. 1

Vln. 2

Vla.

Ve.

Db.

Repeat until next cue

Muted

poco a poco cresc.

Repeat until next cue.
friend. But then I saw what was happening, but I couldn't stop it. Ann - a - bell - a had al - read - y given birth, and if
(Attacca)

Helen

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

Lord L.

I challenged Arthur to a duel, I would be ridiculed.

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)

No tempo

Helen

Anna.

Ah, Arthur it was here you kissed that woman.

Arthur

Well,

Lord L.

No tempo

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.
Arthur: Not one bit, by all that’s sacred!  
Lord L.: You see, even your husband has betrayed you.

It is you I love, you who complete...
Muted
Slowly cres. & dim. repeat until next cue

as if whispered

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

my happiness.

Arthur

Lord L.

Vln. 1

Vln. 2

Vla.

Vc.

Db.
You should not conspire with your wife and my

Helen

you re-turn to her

Arthur

On-ly in bo-dy. My heart re-mains with you.
Helen: hin-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.

Vln. 1

Vln. 2

Vla.

Vc.

Db.
But one day?

She is a fool, he will say...
Truly?

I never say a word. I don't

what ever he can to get what he wants.
There is nothing left for me.

Yes, it is over.

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
e-vents I can-not be-gin to fath-om,
Where do I go from here? I don’t know the an-swer,
I am alone, 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-doned, 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

night. (Arthur enters)

For what?

My du-ty?

Arthur

He-len, where were you? Our guests were wait-ing!

For you to do your du-ty and be their hos-tess.
What of your duty? Is your duty to play me false with Annabel? Is it your duty to be an adulterer?
Helen
For your wife's sake, please cease...

Arthur
My wife? What wife? I have no wife. Or

Vln. 1
\( p \)
\( j=88 \) Repeat until next cue

Vln. 2
\( p \)
\( j=88 \) Repeat until next cue

Vla.
\( p \)
\( j=88 \) Repeat until next cue

Vc.
\( p \)
\( j=88 \) Repeat until next cue

Db.
if I have, she means nothing to me. My wife is worthless to me, I told Lord Low-boy rough I have no use for you. I
I say that what he priz-es so light-ly will not be long in his pos-ses-sion.

Helen

told him just that! What say you now?
Poor ignorant Helen. Do you think you be so melancholy as a grand heroine? And die for your broken heart!
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 cannot leave and when I want you for myself, you cannot
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)

Arthur

Your soul is use- less. I own your bod- y, and the thing that you hold most dear, your son.

(Seems about to rape her; 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,
Flute
To Piec-no tempo

Eng. Hn.
no tempo

B. Cl.
no tempo

Hn.
no tempo

Tom-t.
no tempo

Pro.

with loathing
a piacere

Gtr.

Helen
1 will not bow be-fore you, Be-neath no man will I

(Arthur leaves)
E-ven your dreams are not your own.

Vln. 1
no tempo

Vln. 2
no tempo

Vla.
no tempo

Vc.
no tempo

Db.
no tempo
cow-er, You might sti-fle me, En-gage an un-for-tun-ate end for me, Fill my life with salt, 'Til I find it hard-ly worth
Fl.
Eng. Hn.
B. Cl.
Hn.
Tom-t.
Pno.
Gtr.
Helen
Vln. 1
Vln. 2
Vla.
Vc.
Db.

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 mine own,
Rise up, And silence me, As you never can.
Scene 7

Fl.
Eng. Hn.
B. Cl.
Hn.
B. D.
Pno.
Gr.
Helen
Arthur
Vln. 1
Vln. 2
Vla.
Vc.
Db.

no tempo
no tempo
no tempo
no tempo
no tempo
no tempo
no tempo
no tempo
no tempo
no tempo
no tempo
no tempo
no tempo
no tempo
no tempo

a piacere
Mise-en
Hantingdon.
a piacere
Wife.
I received a letter from my aunt describing your condition. And I am pleased you came so far to nurse me back to health.
Helen: your debauchery. Besides, you left me with little choice. You would have taken my son by law. There is

Arthur: Our son.
pre-ious lit-tle of you left in him. I have seen to that.

That can be rec-ti- fied. I thought you might en-
You will not die. The doctor said you'd be fine with rest and
joy watching me die.
moderation of drink.

Pish. That fool knows nothing. Where is my
Helen: He is safe. You can see him when you are feeling better. Wherever he is, you will not

Arthur: son? Is he here?
see him un-till you have promised to leave him completely under my care and protection.

No, let me
Arthur: See him now. It must be so. I swear it, as God in heaven! Now, let me see him!
I cannot trust your oaths or promises. You have led me astray.
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 painted whores and empty bottles. Did they fill you? Did you rest

Arthur:
A tempo (\( \dot{\omega} = 72 \))

Helen: was it in their arms? Did they make you forget?

Arthur:
Helen: was your fool, your clown, your joke.
Your promises are nothing,
Your words are empty.
Helen: I must have a written agreement. Do you have nothing to

Arthur: no tempo

Vln. 1: no tempo

Vln. 2: no tempo

Vla. no tempo

Vc. no tempo

Db. no tempo
Helen

say then?

a piacere

mp

Arthur

Bring____ it to me.

Vln. 1

Vln. 2

Vla.

Vc.

Db.
Scene 8

Fl.

Eng. Hn.

B. Cl.

Hn.

B. D.

Pno.

Gtr.

Vln. 1

Vln. 2

Vla.

Vc.

Db.
Fl.

To Eng. Hn.
no tempo

Ob.

no tempo

B. Cl.

no tempo

Hn.

no tempo

B. D.

j=128 Repeat until next cue
no tempo

Pno.

PP

no tempo

Gtr.

no tempo

Helen

no tempo

a piacere
mf

Don't you think you have had e- nough?

The

Arthur

no tempo

a piacere
mf

You've been wat- er-ing the wine a- gain.

Vln. 1

no tempo

Vln. 2

no tempo

Vla.

no tempo

Vc.

no tempo

Db.

no tempo
doctor warned you... Regardless, even worried, you have had three bottles today!

To hell with him. Three bottles of
Arthur, please don't exert yourself.

Your watery wine is one glass of true wine. Woman, I will do as I please.
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 wa - ter in - to wine,
To our pal a - bove 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 wa-ter bap-tize wine! Je-sus is my friend la, la, la,
Arthur

I will do what I want! You want-ed to keep me down, to con-trol me. I am my own man!
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?"
Helen: 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.
always so damn perfect all the time. Can't you just live a little bit? Would that be so

1 am still here, and

bad? Your good-ness comes at the ex-pense of an-y fun. When was the last time you smiled?
Helen: You take eve-ry-thing to ex-cess. You drink, you whore, you gam-ble.

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

Arthur: do it with passion!
I am re-spon-si-ble for what you have be-come, but you are not re-spon-si-ble for what I have be-come. Come now, Hel-en. 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 again! Can't you begin to see past him, and

Vln. 1

mf

Vln. 2

mf

Vla.

mf

Ve.

mf

Db.

mf
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

a tempo
Heaven's glories shine, But HELL I do not fear. Vain are the
thou-sand creeds, From em-py church-es on the way,
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 great est joy... from any part,
In that only do I trust. Come down o' hell, Painless, tournous and hot, In
I believe in one God, the

flames let me dwell, I fear you not.

I believe in one God, the
seen and unseen.
I believe in one Lord,

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

Arthur
drink from drink, one woman or two women, bed-ding, or play-ing with our be-ing with each oth-er,
came down from heaven. He suffered death and rose again,

self, I acknowledge nothing and no authority, I look for the next day... and the next conquest,
I believe in one Lord, Jesus Christ.

and the life that might or might not come.

(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.
AUNT

Why?

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?
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)