Words for the Dead

by

Ryan Jesperson

Honors Thesis

Spring, 2003

Advisor:
Dr. Charles Argersinger
Music

Honors Thesis

PASS WITH DISTINCTION
Précis

In the last 100 years, classical music, or serious art music, has slowly grown out of style. In the nineteenth century classical music was the popular music. Today, art music has taken a more academic turn, and for the most part the general populace chooses to ignore it. As a composer of art music, I was faced with this reality when I decided to write *Words for the Dead*.

One of the more common criticisms of art music is that people can’t understand it—they can’t understand the relationships between complex harmonics, and to them it just sounds like noise. I mitigated this by adding a text. People can understand the text and the characters, and so as the music is presented with the text, they associate the music with certain emotions and characters and it starts to make sense. I also employed many common compositional devices in creating the opera such as motivic unity, repetition, and word painting.

In the paper I dissected the opera and find how and to what effect I use such compositional devices. I explain how things relate and the implications behind such relations. Especially important is the use of motivic unity. Motivic unity is often imperceptible to a casual listener. It is only through study that such subtleties are uncovered. Yet, the ear is not entirely fooled. As each new motive is found, one seems to find that subconsciously he/she already knew it was there. Repetition is important especially in relation to characterization and the development of metaphor.

*Words for the Dead* was premiered on January 22nd, 2004 at my senior composition recital.
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Advisor:
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Music
TO THE UNIVERSITY HONORS COLLEGE:

As thesis advisor for Ryan Jesperson.

I have read this paper and find it satisfactory.

[Signature]
Thesis Advisor

2/13/04 Date
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Words for the Dead

{A Chamber Opera in One Act}

-for eight voices and piano-
duration approximately 30 min.

Music and Libretto

by

Ryan Jesperson

2003
Words for the Dead  
running time approx. 30 min.

Cast of Characters

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

Wife – Mezzo Soprano – wife of the deceased.

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

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

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

Friend 2 – Baritone – friend of deceased.

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

Priest – Bass – has known all characters for a long time.
Words for the Dead
running time approx. 30 min.

Cast of Characters

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

Wife – Mezzo Soprano – wife of the deceased.

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

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

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

Friend 2 – Baritone – friend of deceased.

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

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

Voices:

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

Piano:

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

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

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

Libretto by Ryan Jesperson

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

Piano Intro

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

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

Scene I:

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

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

Friend 1 and 2: A very good man.

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

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

Wife steps aside

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

Wife steps back in

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

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

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

Sister: Yes, I know.

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

Ex-Wife steps aside

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

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

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

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

Friend 1: And we’d stay out all through the night.
Ex-Wife and Friend 1: Drinking and fighting *(EW only)* and sleeping around.

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

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

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

*Ex-Wife and Friend 1 both step back in.*

Sister: Do you remember that Fourth of July?

Wife: Oh yes, it was amazing.

Friend 1: It was fantastic.

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

*Sister steps aside*

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

*Sister steps back in, Ex-Wife’s Husband steps out*

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

*EW Husband steps back in*

Friend 1: It was a swell time.

Friend 2: A great time.

*Priest steps aside*

Priest: What sinners. They only speak of the past to forget the present. I was there when they all confessed their sins. Now they are drawn back in through death to visit the pain.
Priest steps back in. Piano simulates rain, all characters react to the increasing downpour.

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

End scene I

---

Piano Intro

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

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

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

Wife: You can say that again.

Sister: That’s right!

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

Friend 1 and 2: What about the funeral?

Son: It wasn’t all that bad.

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

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

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

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

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

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

EW Husband steps back in.

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

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

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

Sister: Why did you come?

EW Husband: I felt obligated.

Sister: But, why do you hurt me like this?
EW Husband: I try not to.

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

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

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

Friend 1: If I could be of assistance.

Wife: Of course.

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

Friend 2: Oh yes, excuse me.

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

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

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

Friend 1: But I can’t wait.

Wife: You’ll have to wait.

Priest: Your father was a good man.

Son: I know.

Priest: He was always virtuous and kind.

Son: I know.

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

Son: I know.

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

Son: But I have a father.

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

Son: I’m working through it.
Priest: Let God keep you honest and strong.

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

Ex-Wife: And what are you two discussing?

EW Husband and Sister: Nothing.

Friend I (to wife): What commotion.

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

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

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

Sister: Nothing.

Wife: Nothing.

EW Husband (to Wife): Who asked you?

Friend I: No one.

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

EW Husband: I see, already planning.

Wife: You have no right.

Friend I: It looks like you’re on a short leash.

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

Wife: But you were.

Sister: How dare you.

Ex-Wife: How dare you.

Sister and EW Husband: It was nothing.

Wife and Friend I: It was nothing.

Priest steps up waving his arms.

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

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

Son: Mother.

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

Cast exits to the beat of the piano.
Words for the Dead

{2003}
Words for the Dead
{A Chamber Opera in One Act}

Prelude

Music and Libretto by
Ryan Jesperson
2003

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Scene I (Outside)

Cast Enters
Grave

Wife drop flower, stops and picks it up.

Priest

We are here to mourn the passing of...
Poor thing, your husband was a good man.
Yes, and we are here to pay tribute to him, and honor his life. Would anybody like to start.

I would. Although I am his ex-wife and with a few words?
A Tempo

A tempo

we have been divorced for many years.

I still remember how ex-

Presto

Waltz-Like

cried he'd get, when I made lasagna.

He'd get so excited he'd

grab our baby son, in his arms, and he'd danced through the room.
in a three quarter waltz.

No— he didn’t even like lasagna and they were divorced before the child turn’d six.
Now she arrives with her rich husband, and flouts her money around as if to insult me.
I did not know my father very well, but I knew that he was a busy man and a hard worker.
Friend 1:

They don't even fit in here. They shouldn't have come. The little

Friend 1:

brother would even refuse to see his father.

Friend 2:

I remember the time when the mill was shut down.

Sister:

Yes, I know.
and we all couldn't work.

and just as it was looking to get worse

he said, "Shuck up boys, this is the time when we decline ourselves as men."

* Hold down notes for sympathetic vibration

* Use Pedal
Yet, his true self was nothing but drinking and fighting and womanizing they're all alike.

We were out of work and

spending too much time at the bars, drowning our sorrows in cheap house
And he'd stay out, all through the night.

And we'd stay

Drinking and fighting and

out, all through the night.

Drinking and fighting

sleeping around.

And sleeping around.

Words for the Dead pg. 13
he would never cheat. He was a faithful husband.

Said he couldn't do that. He would stay and drive us through the night, like a child steeped in boredom.

I only divorced him cause he was unfaithful.
And while he was faithful she was not sleeping with Mister Money bags.

Andante

Do you remember that Fourth of July?
Oh, yes it was a-maz-ing
The greatest time of my life I remember
it was fantastic.
colla voce

dad setting off thousands of fire-works
He was back and forth in his
work-shop all night preparing them. He said it was top secret and a surprise, and
185 Adagio

I had to wait and see them. And boy was it great.

He was still married to her, but his lust was for me.

After I turned him down, I found that my rich husband was cheating with...
his wife. Then when I went back to his workshop, he was with my sister.

That tramp.
Why... would she bring up such a time!

A Tempo

Is she trying to hurt me ______ with the past? She found me

kissing my new wife ______ our marriage had died long ago
It was a swell time

I was just moving on, but in hind-sight I was wrong.

What sinners. They only speak of the past to forget the present.
Adagio

Priest

I was there when they all confessed their sins, now they

Priest

are drawn back in through death to visit the pain.

Freely

accel. (for 15 secs)

And now let us move out of

(Simulate Rain)

God's tears indoors to recollect some more.

Lights Fade

Words for the Dead pg. 21
Scene II (Inside)

263  Andante \( \frac{3}{2} \)

\[ \text{Tempo I \( \frac{3}{2} \)} \]

278  A Tempo \( \frac{3}{2} \)

Words for the Dead pg. 22
It isn't all that bad... at all.

That's right!

You can say that again.

Wow, what a storm.

It isn't all that bad... at all.
Words for the Dead pg. 26
Can you believe that squeaky woman?

Bringing up such memories out of the still past?

She is only trying to

hurt our love.

But what is our love?
What is our love? All she ever does is whine and cry. I pay her to stay away.

It didn’t use to be like this, is this the fate of all wives?

I can smell (sniff) the bills in his wallet and to think you didn’t get anything.
Sister

I was naive and senseless at the time.

His lawyer left me with nothing.

Why did you come?

E.W. Husband and Wife bump into each other.

Wife

Sister

Smile promised me everything, but his lawyer left me with nothing.
Sister

I fell obligated

But, why do you hurt me like this?

Ex-W.

Hush

I try not to

But that's when it hurt me the most.

Wife

Yes, yes.

Ex-W.

Hush

I wish. I'm sorry.

Words for the Dead pg. 30
Wife: Yes, it's sad but I'll be fine.

Of course.

Friend 1: If I could be of assistance...

Friend 2: Is the priest calling you over there?

Wife: Oh yes, excuse me...
Words for the Dead pg. 13
Son: But I have, a father. He is a good man.

Friend 2: I'm working through it, but losing someone close, it just must be so hard.

Priest: Let God keep you honest and strong.
Andante

Giocoso

mf

mf

Nothing.

Nothing.

mf

mf

Allegro

Wife

Friend

Sister

mf

Words for the Dead pg. 35
Something foul is in the air. What is all this?

You two seem cozy.

Who asked you?
I soW. 
I sh. 

You have no right.

It looks like you're on a short leash.

But you were

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

Words for the Dead pg. 37
Words for the Dead pg. 38
nough. Watching this circle of the pit has seared me Dear-ly. You all—lie and sin and for-get.

Adagio

There was a time when you all were hap-py. But your own de-sires led you a-stray. Now you are mis-er-a-ble, and
Priest: you pine for the past, but you can't have it. You are punished for your choices.

Friend 2: Lies, cheats, and stand-by.

Priest: and you can't change your path.

Friend 2: Why would you let them fall? Just to satisfy your God?
Adagio

Why not help and counsel human kindness? I am tired of all your idleness.

Friend 2

You all were once happy, but you threw it away for blind ambition and lust.

colla voice

Don't let this man lecture you on what you have reaped. Instead, look toward the future as a blank slate, where
you can make amends, if not for you, for your children.

Wife and Son leave

My husband...

Rest of cast exits
Part II

“Compositional Strategies in Words for the Dead”
Part II

"Compositional Strategies in *Words for the Dead*"
Compositional Strategies in *Words for the Dead*

by Ryan Jesperson

For the last 300 years, music has been controlled by the idea of tonality. Compositions were written with the idea that a single note would have more weight than all others. This note is called the tonic or more simply, is the name of the key center. Composers would create this feeling of tonality through the use of certain harmonies, scales, and rhythms.

As the years passed, composers often devised new ways to push the boundaries of tonality. Eventually, in the late nineteenth century and early twentieth century, composers began to write music that was not subservient to a tonic note. Instead, the music was in a constant searching state, often never settling into any sort of key center. This sort of music has been given the largely-encompassing name of atonal music.

Atonal compositions are generally considered to lack the strong sense of major/minor tonality that was developed in the 17-19th centuries. *Words for the Dead* is an opera created using atonal principles. Yet, even though the opera is not governed by a tonal center, it is controlled using other compositional devices. Techniques such as motivic unity, repetition, and word painting help create a unified structure throughout. Without the safety of a key center, the interaction and relevance of these cohesive elements becomes extremely important to the success or failure of the piece.

*Words for the Dead* examines the life of a dead man and the impact he had on the friends and family he left behind. It takes place at his funeral, which is attended by his wife, ex-wife, son, ex-wife’s current husband, wife’s sister, two friends, and a priest. As
the service progresses, the characters recount incidents (both aloud and internally) from their lives that have had a major influence on their present situation. *Words for the Dead* initially focuses on the dead man, but as it progresses, the focus switches from the deceased to the less-than-perfect lives of the people he left behind.

**Scene I**

The prelude to the first scene is created using leit-motifs from the scene itself. This way, when familiar phrases return in the scene, the audience will recognize that this material has been presented before, and thus must have symbolic value. For instance, measures two and three return thematically later in measures 129 and 130 (ex 1). The return is accented by Friend 2’s line explaining the virtues of the dead man. So from the beginning there is a fight between the dissonant qualities of the music itself and virtuous aspect of the lyrical meaning.

![Ex. 1](image)

Similarly, as measures two and three explore the virtues of the dead man, measures 23-26 explore the confused state of his romantic life. Measures 23-26 echo the Sister’s decree of love in measures 193-196. The line she says is, “He was still married to her, but his love was for me” (ex 2).
The perplexities of the romantic endeavors of all the characters create a large gray area that seems ambiguously moral. One of the large themes of the opera is the blame conducted through infidelity. Neither the Ex-Wife or the dead man can carry the blame for their divorce; both were unfaithful and unhappy, but yet each need to blame the other in order to move on. The whimsical melody sung by the Sister is a sour reminder of both an ambiguous moral question and the similar struggle between the correctness of dissonance and consonance.

One of the first major themes is introduced as the characters enter the stage. The piano is playing two successive chords, both rather dissonant, that seem to imply a funeral march. In measures 44-45, a strangely lyrical melody announces that the vocalists are about to begin (ex. 3)

The same melody also plays as the characters leave the stage in scene II, giving the scenes a feeling of symmetry. The Priest begins singing in measure 46 of scene I, and his melody seems to be almost an inversion of the preceding theme (ex. 4).
It is set over the same two piano chords that supported the theme in measures 44-45, and ends with a similar descending perfect fourth. The melody is derived from the Phrygian scale, which is a common Gregorian Chant mode and is associated with medieval sacred music. But, before he can give a name to the deceased, the Wife upstages him with a theatrical cry for her husband. The clash of the Wife’s ascending tritone hints at the insincerity of her act, but yet it seems a normal response to the death of a loved one. It appears that she is unable to accept his death. This weakness in regards to reality becomes a reoccurring theme as each character is forced to acknowledge his/her past decisions.

After the Priest consoles the Wife, the two friends present one of the major motives that will appear throughout the opera (ex. 5).
Although the exclamation seems sincere, it will become the symbol of awkwardness as the opera continues. It will be used by Friend 2 again in measure 383 after he inadvertently implies that the son does not have a father. In fact, the son has been raised to think of the Ex-Wife's Husband as his father and was not friendly toward his actual father. The "Good Man" motive is also presented in the prelude before the second scene, in a section that will be discussed at length later.

In measure 58 the piano plays one of the signature motives for the entire piece. But, unlike some of the other motives that are associated with lyrics or characters, this motive exists purely in the piano part. It is distinguishable because of its lively nature and extreme register (ex. 6)

![Ex. 6 m. 58](image)

Although the motive does not function as a leit-motif for any one character, it still creates a large amount of tension due to the pause in the underlying static rhythm and the drastic change in the register of the piano. In a way it is almost like a dramatic pause, or a breath before a long soliloquy. The motive moves up a perfect fourth, then back down to the first pitch, then back up to a clashing major second a major third and tritone away from the original note. This is then repeated up a minor third with the final notes falling a tritone and augmented fifth (F# and G#) away from the C. It is the stretching of the melody that creates the tension, especially in relation to the heroic-sounding ascending perfect fourth and the clashing major second.
Another important use of motive and repetition is how they are used to paint the lyrics being sung. From measures 61-82 the Ex-Wife recounts her short marriage to the deceased. In it, she makes a trivial declaration about how much he had liked lasagna (ex. 7).

Beginning in measure 98, the Wife steps aside and internally rips apart the Ex-Wife’s story. She begins by claiming that he never liked lasagna (ex. 8).

The Ex-Wife’s “lasagna” descends from a Bb-Ab chromatically. The Wife mimics this by moving from a Bb-Ab-A, but then leaps to a C#, melodically changing the word to suit her own purposes. She goes on to add that the Ex-Wife and the deceased were divorced before their son turned six (see ex. 8). This line is somewhat sequential in relation to the preceding line in its ebb and flow. But instead of ending on a similar
major third like “lasagna”), she ends with a more sinister-sounding minor third, giving the line a sour and acrid twang.

The Wife’s soliloquy is internal, so in real time, nothing has happened since the Ex-Wife’s story. Feeling obligated, the son adds a short addendum to his mother’s story. This is set up with a three-note motive that comes to symbolize the ignorance of the son (ex. 9).

The three-note motive will find its way into every line the Son sings, and will be a constant reminder that he is naïve about the facts of his parent’s lives. In measure 109 the Son sings a pentatonic melody over the top of the three-note motive. This melody is too sweet in relation to the rest of the piece, so it is immediately met with skepticism. Immediately the Ex-Wife’s Husband echoes the sentiments of the young child with a similar pentatonic melody (ex. 10).

In measure 118, Friend 1 starts to show his true feelings toward the Ex-Wife and her family. After the Son and Ex-Wife’s Husband have given their lackadaisical
statements, Friend 1 leans over to the Sister and mocks their attempts, exclaiming, "They don't even fit in her, they shouldn't have come. The little brat would even refuse to see his father." He sings this over top of a conglomerated accompaniment of the Son's and Ex-Wife's Husband's motivic material. The same material that branded the Son and Ex-Wife's Husband as insincere is now being used to mock them. Yet, simultaneously, it must be recognized that this material and its underlying meaning can also be used against Friend 1—as if to imply that he is being similarly naïve about the relationship between the Son and the deceased.

With Friend 1 obviously on the side of the Wife and Sister, it appears that two opposing groups are forming. The only remaining independent, other than the Priest, is Friend 2. Sensing he is the only undecided, and also in response to the growing tension between the two sides, he steps forward and tells an uplifting story about a time when the deceased helped everyone through a hard time. In the middle of his story, after a growing crescendo of triplets Friend 2 quotes the deceased as saying, "Buck up boys, this is the time when we define ourselves as men" (m. 129-130). This is the same melodic material that was delivered in measures two and three. It is important to the overall theme of the opera because it implies that the only person willing to acknowledge and accept responsibility for his actions is dead and all the living characters are afraid to look at themselves with similarly strong moral conviction.

Yet, the deceased by no means died with a clear conscious. The Ex-Wife immediately steps aside and internally bashes her ex-husband's misdeeds. In an interesting twist, Friend 1 simultaneously begins an internal recollection of the events surrounding the mill closure. Ironically, both versions are quite similar except for one
for the deceased and seems convinced that what she is saying is the truth. Friend 1
begins in the same mode, but instead of ascending step-wise, he incorporates two
dramatic leaps, first down a perfect fifth, then up a minor seventh to further emphasize
his point (see ex. 12, m. 161).

Regardless of who sounds the most correct, both are wrong to some extent. The
Ex-Wife claims that she divorced him because he was unfaithful, but neglects to think
about her affair with her present husband. Friend 1 believes that the deceased never
cheated, which is true at that point in time. Soon, however, the audience discovers that in
fact the deceased carried on more than one illicit affair.

This information is revealed by the Sister, starting on measure 193. The piano has
just played an interlude after an extensive speech by the Son. The interlude is built upon
a pentatonic scale which prolongs and enforces the Son’s naiveté surrounding a certain
4th of July. The Son talks about his father staying out in his workshop preparing
fireworks. It isn’t until the Sister starts talking about her time out in the workshop that
the audience realizes there was more going on than just fireworks. The Sister explains
that she was once married to the Ex-Wife’s current husband, and that she turned the
deceased down when he made his advances. Then, when she left the workshop she found
that her husband was cheating with the Ex-Wife (his current wife). One of the most
romantic motives occurs as she is telling this. It begins on measure 201 and continues
through 202. Melodically, it is nothing more than a whole step, but when added with the
accompaniment this creates an emotional tritone to major third suspension (ex. 13).
Scene II

The second scene opens with a prelude similar to the first scene. But, while the first prelude was intended to prepare the listener for important upcoming motivic and thematic events, the second prelude is intended to remind the audience of the important events of the first scene. All the material present in the second prelude is connected to the overarching theme of responsibility and acknowledgement.

After many of the major themes are repeated, the prelude ends with a new section that was heard truncated in the first prelude, but did not appear at all in the first scene. Measure 289 begins with an octave pedal on a low D, with loud chords being pounded out in the upper register (ex. 16).

This drastic change in tempo and texture represents the budding changes that are accruing within each character. The rain at the end of the first scene symbolically washed them clean of guilt and sin, and now in the second scene all they have to do is accept the change and pursue a better lifestyle. This change will not be easy, and some will be forced to accept the change, even if they don’t want to.

The vocal beginning of the second scene is one of two instances when the entire group sings together. This sets up the small conversations that will develop most of scene II. Unlike scene I, which is mostly internal reactions, scene II takes place almost
entirely in reality. It is set in the reception hall at the cemetery. After some petty bickering between factions, the entire cast breaks apart into small groups, with each group getting bits and pieces of their conversation broadcasted to the audience.

The first group to receive center stage is the Ex-Wife and her Husband. She begins by whining to him about the Wife and her Sister. The Ex-Wife’s Husband seems almost noncommittal when he replies, “She is only trying to hurt our love” (m. 318) (ex. 17).

The use of the whole-tone scale creates an unresolved feeling of ambiguity. Since the whole-tone scale is built off of consecutive major seconds and is thus a symmetrical scale, it never seems to end or offer a resolution point. Then, in measure 320 the Ex-Wife’s Husband’s cluster chords return, signifying that he has something important to say.

After the Ex-Wife’s Husband finishes, the Wife and the Sister begin a discussion across the room. This marks the first appearance of the ostinato that will be used for the next 50 measures. The ostinato creates a driving pulse that helps connect the sudden changes between character groups. It is also used as a static backdrop to which a character can demonstrate change. This is immediately demonstrated in measure 334 when the Sister responds to the Wife by singing, “I was naïve” (ex. 18).
At this instant she descends along the F major scale from Bb-F. It sounds quite simple, especially with the implied D minor harmony of the ostinato. After she finishes her speech to the Wife, she bumps into her ex-husband (Ex-Wife’s Husband). Her first line is identical in rhythm and starting and ending pitches, but the scale has changed, implying a little more chromatic dissonance (ex. 19).

Beginning in measure 358, many of the characters start reinserting material from earlier in the opera. This isn’t necessarily fair to the characters in relation to their development, but the repetition of earlier music helps remind the listener of what had been said previously. Measure 358 involves Friend 1 using the Priest’s opening motive to ask Friend 2 if the Priest was calling him (ex. 20).
Measure 373 ends with the Priest consoling the Son using the exact same melody he had used in measure 49 to console the Wife (ex. 21)

The Priest continues with thematically similar material, all of which is intended to make him sound one-dimensional. This creates a sense of surprise in measure 420 when he makes his big soliloquy rebuking all the other characters.

In a big succession, three of the characters all reuse earlier material. It begins in measure 408 with the Ex-Wife’s Husband accusing Friend 1 over the accompaniment of his cluster chords. After the Wife shows outrage, Friend 1 responds to his accusation with an insult (ex. 22).
The Ex-Wife’s Husband fights back, this time employing a motive from early in the first scene (ex. 23)

Similar to the Priest, Friend 2 is a static character throughout the opera. In comparison to all the other characters he is the most innocent and pure. This changes in measure 431 when he takes his first and only moral stand during the funeral. The Priest has just concluded his reprimand of all the characters for their wickedness, but Friend 2 doesn’t agree with it. He contends that the Priest is as guilty as the rest for standing by idly and watching them all succumb to their own desires. Friend 2’s speech contains many motivic elements that have been developed throughout the opera and are now coming to fruition. Measure 437 is probably the most well-developed. It contains the consecutive tritone to major third suspensions that have so far been used to symbolize
infidelity and dishonesty, so when Friend 2 uses it, it is simultaneously as a function to remind the characters of their past happiness, and to imply why they are not currently happy (ex. 24).

As Friend 2 finishes, all the characters stand still, finally understanding what their lives are like. The only person who physically responds is the Son, who runs to his mother for solace. Then, as they are leaving, the Ex-Wife utters the final line, an ambiguous calling for her husband that echoes the Wife’s cry in measure 48 (ex. 25).

All the cast exits to the same static chords that opened the first scene. They leave solemnly, not for the sake of the deceased, but because of their own predicaments.

The title, *Words for the Dead*, seems to implicate the living mourners more than the deceased man. All the characters seem dead inside, twisted around because of greed and lust until they are no longer recognizable from their former selves. The grittiness of the subject matter makes the use of atonal elements seem understandable. These
characters are not governed by any moral laws, so metaphorically, neither should the
music be governed by tonal laws. The chromaticism of the melodies and accompaniment
bring out a heightened emotional state that doesn’t seem to ever let up. Repetition and
motivic development are very important in developing characterization and metaphor
throughout. Without a cohesive force such as motivic unity and repetition, the music
would have sounded unassociated and haphazardly strung together. With the use of
motivic unity and repetition as a structural force, the music is free to wander and find life
in places tonality never would have thought to look.
Sources Consulted

Note: Although not cited in the paper, the study of these texts were invaluable before, during, and after the composition of Words for the Dead.

Abell interviews Brahms, Joachim, and other composers, asking them how they are inspired and other questions about their compositional and performance habits.

The Pulitzer Prize winner in 1975, Argento's use of melody as word painting is superb and the piano accompaniment is both supportive and expressive.

An atonal concerto for piano and chamber orchestra that incorporates many compositional approaches that I admire.

A modern chamber opera. Barber uses many interesting approaches, including the use of internal monologue from each character.

Another modern opera. Bartók's opera is exceptional in its use of simultaneities. Certain orchestrational aspects are also superb.

The pinnacle of atonal opera. Berg's use of atonality in both melody and accompaniment is meticulously done.

Pleasants argues that atonal music is harsh on the ear of the listener and therefore unneeded.

Another compositional training manual from one of the 20th centuries greatest composers.
Stravinsky’s masterpiece ballet. The piece is more focused on rhythm than melody. Innovative throughout, The Rite of Spring influenced everything that came after it.

Stravinsky discusses his approach to composition and how he structures his compositions.

Wagner’s treatise on music and art. Wagner discusses how he imagines the future of art and why it will occur.

The opera that stretched all conceived notions of tonality. Influenced all aspects of art including, including other revolutionaries Nietzsche and Joyce.