DEGREES OF TURPITUDE

Richard Arndorfer

A Thesis
Submitted to the Graduate College of Bowling Green State University in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

MASTER OF MUSIC

May 2017

Committee:
Marilyn Shrude, Advisor
Christopher Dietz
ABSTRACT

Marilyn Shrude, Advisor

*Degrees of Turpitude* is a chamber opera for five sopranos (who also play percussion instruments) and piano. It is comprised of three scenes, each of which is a character piece based on someone from another medium (Avril Incandenza from the book *Infinite Jest* by David Foster Wallace, Williamson from the opera *The Difficulty of Crossing a Field* by David Lang, and Betty Elms/Diane Selwyn from the movie *Mulholland Drive* by David Lynch). By placing these seemingly unconnected characters together, different personas are created and a new story is told. *Degrees of Turpitude*, in classic operatic fashion, is about love, betrayal, and murder—life and death. It is a story of moral gradation in all its ambiguity. Story, however, might not be the correct word.
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

There are many people who deserve acknowledgment for this project: Marilyn Shrude, my advisor and composition professor, for her continual guidance, encouragement, mentorship, and support, for helping to make sure everything stayed on track, and for keeping me from losing it; Hillary LaBonte for organizing and coordinating almost everything involved with the MicroOpera production, for answering my questions and humoring my requests, and for singing in the opera and leading vocal rehearsals—she was a superhero; Kyle Schreiber for her directing, her help coordinating staging and lighting, and for giving me additional insight into the piece; Vincent Sauer for his fantastic piano playing, his help rehearsing, and his invaluable compositional commentary; Robert Jay Garza III for his percussion expertise, his help with revisions, and for being an amazing conductor; Amanda Williams, Alissa Plenzler, Bailey Maxfield, and Hayley Hoss, for the significant time and effort they spent preparing and for the wonderful performance that resulted; and Mavis MacNeil and Praecepta who, along with Hillary LaBonte and with support from the BGSU Opera Theatre and Voice and Composition Areas, produced the opera. I would also like to acknowledge Christopher Dietz, Mikel Kuehn, Bill Ryan, and Marlen Vavrikova who were all substantial parts of my musical, compositional, and personal development, as well as my parents Gwendolyn Wells and James Arndorfer who have been endlessly supportive and loving. An enormous thank you to all of those acknowledged; I could not have done this without them. Finally, I would like to extend an acknowledgement to Dictionary.com because, if ‘turpitude’ had not been the “Word of the Day,” this opera would be about something else entirely.
PERFORMANCE NOTES

Degrees of Turpitude was premiered on January 31, 2017 at Bowling Green State University in the College of Musical Arts’ Bryan Recital Hall. It was produced by Praecepta (BGSU’s Society of Composers Inc. Student Chapter) with support from the BGSU Opera Theatre and Voice and Composition Areas.

Original Cast: Amanda Williams (Soprano 1), Alissa Plenzler (Soprano 2), Bailey Maxfield (Soprano 3), Hayley Hoss (Soprano 4), Hillary LaBonte (Soprano 5), Vincent Sauer (Piano), Robert Jay Garza III (Conductor), and Kyle Schreiber (Director).

DURATION: 18’

SCENE 1 (Avril, Aria)
SCENE 2 (Williamson, Recitative)
SCENE 3 (Betty/Diane, Murder)

INSTRUMENTATION
5 Soprano Voices
Bass Drum (B. Dr.)
Brake Drum (B. Dm.)
Triangle (Trgl.)
Piano

NOTATIONAL CONVENTIONS

Boxed text indicates a lighting/staging direction. This will always appear at the top of the system, above the measure to which the direction applies.

Repeat boxed music for the duration of the arrow (unmetered).

The time above the fermata indicates how long the note or rest should be held.

Play all the bracketed material in the time indicated.

Transitions between each scene should be seamless and immediate. The opening attack of each new scene will cut off the held note at the end of the scene before it.
Shout the text.

Speak the text.

Sing as high as possible.

Dashes between nonsense syllables indicate gradual, continuous change. It should be hard to detect when the new syllable begins.

Bracketed text indicates an instrument specific stage direction. These will appear in the staff.

Fast, hard, loud hand smacks on the piano strings. Use broad exaggerated gestures. The drama is more important than the sound. Look wild, erratic, and primal.

Continuous glissando. Stems indicate beats within the measure.
PERCUSSION

Let vibrate.

**Brake Drum:** Mute drum with hand.
**Bass Drum:** Strike metal siding to produce a metallic sound.

Continuously scrape brake drum.

PIANO

Continuous arpeggio up the keyboard (white and black keys), like a big rolled cluster chord.

Cluster chord (white and black keys).

Cluster chord (white and black keys) into a single pitch. The pitch should be included in the cluster so that it is heard when the other fingers are lifted. There should be no rearticulation.

Keep pedal down.

Note: The piano should be played with the lid taken off. However, if absolutely necessary, it can be left on.
PHONETIC NOTATION

The score specifies sounds from the International Phonetic Alphabet (2005 revision). The English keywords provided represent a General American accent.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Vowel Sounds</th>
<th>Consonant Sounds</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>IPA</td>
<td>Keyword</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>i</td>
<td>ease, beet, fleece</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I</td>
<td>his, bit</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>e</td>
<td>take, bait, face</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ε</td>
<td>then, bet, dress</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>αe</td>
<td>sir, dirt</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>æ</td>
<td>trap, bath, ash</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>a</td>
<td>ah, not, stop</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ə</td>
<td>of, buh, sofa</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ə</td>
<td>palm, art</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>o</td>
<td>know, boat, snow</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ɔ</td>
<td>aught, bought, thought</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ʌ</td>
<td>uh, strut</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>u</td>
<td>foot, book, would</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>u</td>
<td>who, boot, goose</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>aɪ</td>
<td>Bite, light, dry</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
STAGE DIAGRAMS AND STAGE/LIGHTING DIRECTIONS

Stage diagrams were designed for Bryan Recital Hall in the College of Musical Arts at Bowling Green State University. Productions in other venues should use these diagrams as a guideline, but may adapt as needed.

All stage and lighting directions are provided in the score. Lighting directions are suggestions and need not be followed exactly—creativity is welcome. Stage directions, however, should be executed precisely.

It is preferred that Sopranos 1 and 2 have their parts memorized; however, if necessary, a stand may be placed center stage. Optionally, if Sopranos 3, 4, and 5 memorize their parts, then the other stands may be removed, but this is not expected.
Scene 1 Stage Setup

Directions

• m. 1: Start with lights off; performers enter in darkness; pianist starts to play. [S1, 3, 4, & 5]

• m. 3: Lights turn on; S3, 4, & 5 stand up and “attack” Piano.

• m. 5–8: S3 to Bass Drum; S4 & 5 duck down; fade to colored light.

• Letter A, m. 19: S4 & 5 stand up and attack Piano; light changes back.

• m. 22–24: S4 to Bass Drum; S3 to Brake Drum; fade to different colored light.

• Letter B, m. 39: S5 stand ups and attacks Piano; light changes back.

• m. 42–45: S5 to Bass Drum; S4 to Brake Drum; S3 to Triangle; fade to different colored light.

• Monologue 1, Letter C, m.53–57: fade to different colored light; slowly fade into other colors.

• Letter D, m. 58: lights turn back to normal; singers in 2nd half starting position (same as end of first half).

• m. 64: fade to colored light; S3 to Piano; S4 to Triangle; S5 to Brake Drum.

• m. 76–81: fade to normal light.

• Letter E, m. 82: change to dim, dark, colored light; S4 move to Piano; S5 stay in place.

• m. 90: brighten light.

• Letter F, m. 101: dim light.

• Monologue 2, Letter G, m. 110–111: fade to bright, warm light; cycle through colors slowly.

• m. 112–114: S3 to Triangle; S4 to Bass Drum; fade to green light.

• Letter H, m. 124: Change light.

• m. 126–end: S1 pulls S2 out from under the Piano to center stage; S3, 4, & 5 scramble around and move into position for Scene 2; flicker lights.
Directions

- m. 1: Piano hit and lights turn off; center stage lights slowly fade.
- m. 8–13: rest of lights fade in.
- Letter A, m. 14: peripheral (non-center) lights turn off.
- m. 22–30: rest of lights fade in.
- Letter B, m. 31: all lights turn off; peripheral lights slowly fade in.
- m. 40–54: center lights slowly fade in.
- m. 59–60: dim lights.
- Letter D, m. 85–102: center and peripheral lights slowly fade in and out at different intervals, never fully dimming.
- M. 103–110: Lights continue to fade in and out at different intervals, but now with the maximum brightness decreasing.
- m. 111: Lights off; S2 silently moves to Piano and becomes the page-turner; S1 silently moves to center stage (near Brake Drum) for Scene 3.
- m. 120: S3 moves to Bass Drum, waits until everyone is ready then hits Bass Drum to start Scene 3.

Directions

- m. 1–11: Bass Drum hit; lights turn on; S4 moves to Brake Drum; S5 moves to Triangle.
- Throughout: Constant slow fades into different colors, always changing, always at full brightness, independent of stage movement.
- Letter O, m. 164–end: S1 slowly moves towards Piano, gradually extends arm, and touches Piano right as its final note hits; lights turn off as soon as Piano is touched.
Degrees of Turpitude
Scene 1 (Avril, Aria)

Music and words by Richard Arndorfer
(inspired by David Foster Wallace, David Lang, and David Lynch, with some text adapted from David Foster Wallace, Mac Wellman, Ambrose Bierce, and David Lynch)

Blackout. Performers quietly enter.

\[ \text{Soprano 1} \]
\( \text{Stand dead center inside the square created by the piano and three drums, each in a separate corner} \)
\[ \text{Soprano 2} \]
\( \text{Sit behind or under the piano} \)
\[ \text{Soprano 3, 4, 5} \]
\( \text{Kneel down at the side of the piano} \)
\[ \text{Piano} \]
\( \text{Continuous upward arpeggio, like a big rolled cluster chord} \)

\( \text{F} \)
\( \text{Fast, hard, loud hand smacks on the piano strings} \)
\( \text{Use broad, exaggerated gestures} \)

\( \text{Sleep. Sit down.} \)

\( \text{Transitions between phonemes should always be continuous (the prior phoneme should fuse into the next). English should be sung like normal.} \)
Take it easy.

Take your time.

Bedtime. Slow and steady.

Rest your eyes.

Conservation.

Light changes back.

Stop!

No ar a!

Sta(m) a!

(Bass Drum)

tap metal siding with stick

aggressive

hand smacks on Piano strings

[Stand up]

[Stand up]
Fade to different colored light.

Soup and savory. Eat your fill for.

Heart and gravy.

[Walk towards Brake Drum (keep beater)]

[Walk towards Bass Drum]

[Duck back down]

(Duck back down)
Eat: fulfill your nea - a - ū g - m - i - ḷ jā

(Brake Drum) (mute with hand)

(Bass Drum)

tap metal siding with stick

(Sim.)

Light changes back.

Fade to different colored light.

(Brake Drum) [Walk towards Triangle (keep beater)]

(Bass Drum) [Walk towards Brake Drum (keep beater)]

[Walk towards Bass Drum]

(Sim.)
Bask. How is it? Does it feel done? See yourself. Number one. Will do. Proud well de-serv-ed. Soak m-

Triangle

Brake Drum

Bass Drum

Pno.

Fade to different colored light, slowly fade into other colors.

Speak (sincerely, to audience, while also reassuring yourself): "Look into my eyes. See them glowing? I’m the kind of mother you can tell that just looking at her daughter brings her joy. I am not intrusive or smothering. I know that she knows that I am there for her. I do not bring things up unless she brings them up and I have let her know that she can always feel comfortable asking me for help. I have let her know this, but not in a pesky, invasive way. I do not say 'you can tell me anything' at every opportunity. Instead, I demonstrate. Silently. Powerfully. Lovingly. I always show affection. I exude affection. I have fed her fruits and vegetables. I have only wanted the best." [at least 10 seconds of silence before moving on]
Stop! n-o-a-m-ja a ja ò-e-ò ò A ò a m La-da-da...

Fade to colored light

Gaze. Look to oth-ers. At them. Seek them. Know what you ad-

---

Fade to normal light.

---

strike low strings inside Piano with beater

---

p

---

(%)
Change to dim, dark colored light.

S 1

S 3

S 4

[S4 Piano (keep beater)]

S 5

[Stay in place]

Pno.

90


S 3

S 4

(Brake Drum)

S 5

Pno.

Brighten light.
The world is love so feel it.

Dim light.

Speak (slowly, lovingly, with a hint of guilt): "Hello again. You may remember me from my previous role as the specter of death. But in this moment, I am your life and light. Unequivocal and unconditional. It is death and rebirth. Taking away to give back again. And vice versa. Please know how very, very, very sorry I am."

Cycle through pitches. About 2–4 seconds between each. Play in any octave and in any order. Must play two different pitches/octaves before returning to a previous one. Texture should feel sparse and random.

Continue until soprano 1 speaks last line ("Please know how very, very, very sorry I am").

Fade to bright, warm light. Cycle through colors slowly.
Fade to green light.


[Walk to Triangle (keep beater)]

(Triangle)

[Walk to Bass Drum (keep beater)]

(Bass Drum)

Brake Drum

Brake Drum

Bass Drum

(Bass Drum)

(Triangle)

Triangle

You are bet-ter. More is bet-ter. More is mer-ri-er. And work you hard-er. You de- serve it. You de- serve it.

(Triangle)

(Bass Drum)

(Brake Drum)

(Brake Drum)

(Pno.)

(Pno.)
Change light.  Flicker lights.

[Calmly, slowly pull Soprano 2 out from behind or under the Piano to the center of the stage, then walk off]

[Drop beater, scramble around erratically for a bit before moving into position for scene 2]

[Drop beater, scramble around erratically for a bit before moving into position for scene 2]

[Drop beater, scramble around erratically for a bit before moving into position for scene 2]

space between notes should be as long as necessary for the singers to get into position.

attacca

Pno.
Scene 2 (Williamson, Recitative)

Blackout. Slowly fade in center stage lights.

Speak: "5 AM"
(Wait for Piano hit to speak text)
"Wake up.
Walk outside."
"It is cold and dark and damp."
"The sky is filled with stars."
"Inside I hear."

Hear

Piano

fad in other lights.

"Honey!"
"Sugar!"
"The day is long already."

Dear.

* All text should be spoken where indicated, but may be moved slightly for more natural phrasing. Avoid talking at the same time the Piano plays a chord.
That means coffee, eggs, "fuelin' up,"

There's work to do. "Like always."
"Yes today is an ordinary day," "except that,"

"6 AM" "There's work to do,"
"Fields to tend to."
"Day by day." "Like always."

Fade in other lights.

Turn off peripheral (non-center) lights.

Fade in other lights.
Turn off all lights. Slowly fade in peripheral lights.

"by the end of it," "I'll be..."

"It is 1854" "and there is talk of secession."
"Civil War"  "It's not hate,"  "more a difference of values."

"Does it matter how sacred the union?"

"When there are fundamental disagreements?"

"Can I be forgiven for leaving"

"when love is gone?"

"more a difference of values."

"Does it matter how sacred the union?"

"When there are fundamental disagreements?"

"Can I be forgiven for leaving"

"when love is gone?"

"more a difference of values."

"Does it matter how sacred the union?"

"When there are fundamental disagreements?"

"Can I be forgiven for leaving"

"when love is gone?"

"more a difference of values."

"Does it matter how sacred the union?"

"When there are fundamental disagreements?"

"Can I be forgiven for leaving"

"when love is gone?"

"more a difference of values."

"Does it matter how sacred the union?"

"When there are fundamental disagreements?"

"Can I be forgiven for leaving"

"when love is gone?"

"more a difference of values."

"Does it matter how sacred the union?"

"When there are fundamental disagreements?"

"Can I be forgiven for leaving"

"when love is gone?"

"more a difference of values."

"Does it matter how sacred the union?"

"When there are fundamental disagreements?"

"Can I be forgiven for leaving"

"when love is gone?"

"more a difference of values."

"Does it matter how sacred the union?"

"When there are fundamental disagreements?"

"Can I be forgiven for leaving"

"when love is gone?"

"more a difference of values."

"Does it matter how sacred the union?"

"When there are fundamental disagreements?"

"Can I be forgiven for leaving"

"when love is gone?"

"more a difference of values."

"Does it matter how sacred the union?"

"When there are fundamental disagreements?"

"Can I be forgiven for leaving"

"when love is gone?"

"more a difference of values."

"Does it matter how sacred the union?"

"When there are fundamental disagreements?"

"Can I be forgiven for leaving"

"when love is gone?"

"more a difference of values."

"Does it matter how sacred the union?"

"When there are fundamental disagreements?"

"Can I be forgiven for leaving"

"when love is gone?"

"more a difference of values."

"Does it matter how sacred the union?"

"When there are fundamental disagreements?"

"Can I be forgiven for leaving"

"when love is gone?"

"more a difference of values."

"Does it matter how sacred the union?"

"When there are fundamental disagreements?"

"Can I be forgiven for leaving"

"when love is gone?"

"more a difference of values."

"Does it matter how sacred the union?"

"When there are fundamental disagreements?"

"Can I be forgiven for leaving"

"when love is gone?"

"more a difference of values."

"Does it matter how sacred the union?"

"When there are fundamental disagreements?"

"Can I be forgiven for leaving"

"when love is gone?"

"more a difference of values."

"Does it matter how sacred the union?"

"When there are fundamental disagreements?"

"Can I be forgiven for leaving"

"when love is gone?"

"more a difference of values."

"Does it matter how sacred the union?"

"When there are fundamental disagreements?"

"Can I be forgiven for leaving"

"when love is gone?"

"more a difference of values."

"Does it matter how sacred the union?"

"When there are fundamental disagreements?"

"Can I be forgiven for leaving"

"when love is gone?"

"more a difference of values."

"Does it matter how sacred the union?"

"When there are fundamental disagreements?"

"Can I be forgiven for leaving"

"when love is gone?"

"more a difference of values."

"Does it matter how sacred the union?"

"When there are fundamental disagreements?"

"Can I be forgiven for leaving"

"when love is gone?"

"more a difference of values."

"Does it matter how sacred the union?"

"When there are fundamental disagreements?"

"Can I be forgiven for leaving"

"when love is gone?"

"more a difference of values."

"Does it matter how sacred the union?"

"When there are fundamental disagreements?"

"Can I be forgiven for leaving"

"when love is gone?"

"more a difference of values."

"Does it matter how sacred the union?"

"When there are fundamental disagreements?"

"Can I be forgiven for leaving"

"when love is gone?"

"more a difference of values."

"Does it matter how sacred the union?"

"When there are fundamental disagreements?"

"Can I be forgiven for leaving"

"when love is gone?"

"more a difference of values."

"Does it matter how sacred the union?"

"When there are fundamental disagreements?"

"Can I be forgiven for leaving"

"when love is gone?"

"more a difference of values."

"Does it matter how sacred the union?"

"When there are fundamental disagreements?"

"Can I be forgiven for leaving"

"when love is gone?"

"more a difference of values."

"Does it matter how sacred the union?"

"When there are fundamental disagreements?"

"Can I be forgiven for leaving"

"when love is gone?"

"more a difference of values."

"Does it matter how sacred the union?"

"When there are fundamental disagreements?"

"Can I be forgiven for leaving"

"when love is gone?"

"more a difference of values."

"Does it matter how sacred the union?"

"When there are fundamental disagreements?"

"Can I be forgiven for leaving"

"when love is gone?"

"more a difference of values."

"Does it matter how sacred the union?"

"When there are fundamental disagreements?"
Slowly fade peripheral and center lights in and out at different intervals, never fully dimming.

"I throw away the stump of my cigar" "I was gone." "Music and shadow passed over me" "at that time" "lost her mind." "Gone." "She said." "Gone." "Music and shadow passed over me" "and I was gone."

Continue to fade lights in and out, but now with the maximum brightness decreasing.

Lights off. Soprano 2 silently moves to the Piano and becomes pageturner. Soprano 1 silently moves to center stage for scene 3.

She was right.

I was gone.
Scene 3 (Betty/Diane, Murder)

\( \text{\textcopyright 70 (or faster)} \)

Throughout: Constant slow fades into different colors, always changing, always at full brightness.

Soprano 1

wait until Soprano 1 is in position

Soprano 3 (Bass Drum)

Soprano 4 (Brake Drum)

Soprano 5 (Triangle)

\( \frac{a}{\text{(P)} \text{shout)} (N^2)} \)

\( \text{(2m)} \) (8m)
[slowly move towards the Piano and extend arm]
Blackout.

[touch Piano on downbeat as if triggering blackout]

highest note possible