Dierdre: A Soap Opera, for Singers, Dancers, Players, Electronic Sounds and Projected Images

James Schwall
Western Michigan University

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Dierdre: A Soap Opera, for Singers, Dancers, Players, Electronic Sounds and Projected Images

James Schwall, M.M.
Western Michigan University, 1991

Dierdre: A Soap Opera is a chamber opera in one act, with dance, and takes about an hour to perform. There are six singing parts which may be performed by five singers. Two parts are for sopranos or mezzos, two for baritone, and one is designated tenor. All have fairly easy ranges. The piece also requires four percussionists and a pianist. Several interludes, called "breaks," are intended for modern dance. One of these breaks and the overture are for taped electronic music, realized by the composer. The libretto, also by the composer, involves the employees and regulars at a somewhat up-scale night club. The format is taken from a television soap opera. The plot advances during program "segments" which usually involve only the singers and piano. During "breaks," dancers perform with the percussion ensemble or with the taped music.
This work is respectfully dedicated to Ramon Zupko, without whom I may never have realized that, while anyone can string notes together when the muse hovers near by, a composer must learn to work alone.

Jim Schwall
March, 1991
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Dierdre: A soap opera, for singers, dancers, players, electronic sounds and projected images. [Original opera]

Schwall, James, M.M.
Western Michigan University, 1991

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Virtually all of the action of _Dierdre: A Soap Opera_ takes place inside a somewhat up-scale night club called "Storyville" which features jazz and probably has a long list of imported beers and wines. The characters include Al, a baritone, the owner of the club and, at forty-something, the oldest member of the ensemble. His employees include his house pianist and bar-room philosopher Clay, a tenor, who should be almost Al's age. Another employee, Dawn, a soprano or mezzo, the youngest member of the cast, is a part-time bartender while attending college. Regular customers include television news anchor-woman Kelley Ackerman, also a soprano or mezzo, who's about Clay's age and, in spite of her considerable experience, expects to be replaced at any time by some fresh-faced college communications major. Gavin VanAcker and his partner in an advertising agency, Walsh, can both be played by the same singer, a baritone. Gavin is a somewhat pathetic character, and Walsh is the story's self-styled ladies' man. Gavin's wife, Dierdre, never appears.

A suggested stage set-up would have the piano stage-right and fairly far down-stage so the area designated as "back bar" can consist of the area near the piano. Characters in scenes in this area could lean on and stand around the piano, and Clay might even sit on the edge of the piano bench. The percussion ensemble may be arranged in a semi-circle from the piano to stage left. Down-stage center are two bar segments, referred to as "front bar" and "middle bar," with the front bar being the section toward stage
left. If the down-stage ends of these segments almost meet and they angle toward the rear corners, with the customer side facing the audience, a character behind the bar in one scene can simply turn around to be in the other area. The scene in front of Gavin's house and Kelley's telephone call to Clay can be played down-stage, stage-left. For the "Title Music" singers can be placed anywhere that is convenient. Changes of scene are suggested by slides projected behind the singers and players, and dance movements take place down-stage of everything.

The format is taken from a television soap opera. The plot advances during program "segments." With the exception of the "Title Music," these involve only the singers and piano. During "breaks," which, in T. V. jargon include commercials, newsbreaks, station breaks, and all other non-program material, dancers perform with the percussion ensemble, except in Break III, which uses taped electronic music. The Title Music, which happens twice, involves all live performers. There is also an overture, which consists of taped electronic music, and during which performers find their places and house lights slowly fade to black as the first slide comes up behind the stage.

*Diirdre* is intended to be seamless. Segments always end with held tones in the piano, and percussion breaks always end with ringing metalophones. The overture ends, and Break III begins and ends, with a wind-like sound, which fades in and out. This wind-sound is also used after the last sound dies out as the lights fade to black and the last slide comes up. The piece ends in silence and darkness, except for the final slide.
The entire piece takes about an hour to perform. The following is a scene-by-scene listing of performers involved with approximate timings:

Overture (terminal break): taped electronic sounds. (4+ minutes)

Segment I, Scene 1: Dawn, Walsh, piano; middle bar.
- Scene 2: Al, Kelley, piano; front bar.
- Title Music: All singers, dancers, piano, percussion. (5 min.)

Break I: Dancers, percussion. (6 1/2 min.)

Segment II, Scene 1: Dawn, Walsh, piano; middle bar.
- Scene 2: Dawn, piano, then Clay; middle bar.
- Scene 3: Al, Kelley, piano; front bar.
- Scene 4: Dawn, Clay, Al, piano, then Kelley; front bar. (5 min.)

Break II: dancers, percussion. (1 min.)

Segment III, Scene 1: Kelley, Gavin, piano; in front of Gavin's house (stage left).
- Scene 2: Clay, Al, piano; back bar.
- Scene 3: Dawn, then Kelley, piano; middle bar. (6 min.)

Break III: Dancers, taped music. (5+ min.)

Segment IV, Scene 1: Kelley, Clay, piano; middle bar.
- Scene 2: Dawn, Al, piano; front bar.
- Scene 3: Clay, piano, then Gavin; back bar. (8 min.)

Break IV: dancers, percussion. (1 min.)

Segment V, Scene 1: Kelley Clay, piano; Kelley stage left, Clay middle bar.
- Scene 2: Dawn, Al, piano; front bar.
- Scene 3: Clay, Gavin, piano, then Dawn; back bar. (3 min.)

Break V: Dancers, percussion. (5 1/2 min.)
Terminal Segment, Terminal Scene: Clay, Al, piano; front bar.

- Title Music: All singers, dancers, piano, percussion. (2 min.)
NOTES TO THE PERFORMERS

To all performers:

_Dierdre_ is intended to be a single movement. All “segments” and “breaks” should continue _attacca_.

To the pianist:

All accidentals apply throughout the measure in which they occur, but only in the octave in which they are written. “P” indicates damper pedal, “S” indicates sostenuto pedal, and a wavy line means a partial or flutter pedal.

To the singers:

Notes with “X” heads should have only an approximate pitch, as in “_sprechgesang_.” Stems without heads indicate words which should be spoken, but strictly within the notated rhythms. In all sung parts, delivery of the words is paramount. Spoken parts should be done in a sing-song manner; the difference between singing and speaking should not be absolute. Pronunciation should be colloquial. Depending on the number of syllables set, Dierdre is pronounced either “dee-air-druh” or “deer-druh.”
To the percussionists:

Several special signs are used for methods of playing suspended cymbals and tam-tam. An arrow pointed down calls for the instrument to be scraped outward from the center with a triangle beater or other metal object. A triangle above the note means strike it on the edge from the side, with the stick held perpendicular to the instrument. A "Y" means to strike with a wire brush, and an upside-down "U" indicates to hit the cymbal on the bell.

The four percussionists require the following equipment:

Percussion I - chimes (tubular bells), bells (orchestra bells), suspended cymbal, timbales (2), bass drum, and mouth siren. Strikers should include wooden sticks, yarn, felt, and hard rubber mallets, brushes, metal hammer, hard rubber hammer, metal beaters (for bells), bass drum beater, and a bow.

Percussion II - xylophone, small triangle, suspended cymbal, hi-hat, woodblock, and snare drum. Strikers should include wooden sticks, yarn and hard rubber mallets, brushes, and triangle beater.

Percussion III - concert marimba, triangle, tom-toms (2), tam-tam, and police whistle. Strikers should include hard and soft yarn mallets, hard and soft rubber mallets, brushes, and a bow.

Percussion IV - 23", 26", and 29" timpani, suspended cymbal, riveted suspended cymbal, and bird whistle. Strikers should include a variety of felt and yarn mallets, wooden sticks, and brushes.
OVERTURE

The overture consists of taped electronic sounds. From first audibility to the point at which movement has faded to a soft "wind" sound, duration is approximately four minutes. During this time the performers should find their places as the house lights very slowly fade to black and the first slide, the title slide containing the word "Dierdre," comes up on the screen behind the ensemble.
Segment I

Scene 1

(Middle Bar)

* Begin when motion in taped overture stops and fades to wind noise.
My name is Dawn, I study at the university. When I've had every course they teach I'll get a Ph.D.
I'm Walsh, and I'm a ladies man; I kiss 'em, they stay kissed.

there's a girl I haven't had, I put her on my list.

So, baby, when are you goin' out with.

Segment 1, Scene 1 - 3
DAWN

Gee, I'm awfully busy.

WALSH

Well, you seem to have time to me?

This is my job. I serve the beer and hang around here.
wine and make your daiquiris, Mister
(Fill in well-known local name—president, etc.)

Go home and

Hey, call me Walsh. What do you do when you get done?

Segment I, Scene 1
study

That's going to have to wait— for now.

What about fun!

---

WALSH

Come on, Baby, I know how to take care of little girls— like—

---

you. I'll show— you things you never knew existed. I know how— to
(DAWN)  (to audience)

Boy, is this guy a sleaze or what? I really

please.

don't have the time.

You're making a big mistake. I'm the best

Segment 1, Scene 1 - 7
I'll keep that in mind.

you're gonna find.

no sense running from me,

that fast.
Segment I: Scene 2

rit. ------------ d=108 AL

'am the friendly bartender, you can call me Al.'

take their keys, then drive them home, I'm everybody's pal.
My name is Kelley Ackerman, you see me on T.V. If anything should happen here, you'll get the news from me.

Segment I, Scene 2 - 2
KELLEY

Fancy meeting you here.

AL

Guess I just love my

There's never anything new here. Too

work. What's new?
bad I can't go on the air and talk about local adultery.

Yeah, too

So, how's Dierdre

bad.
Memories—are for—ever—
They can't be taken away.

Memories—are for—ever—
They can't be taken away.

Memories—are for—ever—
They can't be taken away.

Segment I, Title Music 2
You can't change anything if it happened yesterday. Still there's

You can't change anything if it happened yesterday. Still there's

You can't change anything if it happened yesterday. Still there's
Break I

(softly)

J = 168

bass drum - felt mallet

3

bells - handle of mallet

handle

xylophone

syrinx

timpani

2

near center, hand muffled

2

cymbal bell - handle of mallet - letting
- Bass drum - mallet
- Toms on ring with handles
- Timpani - mallets
- Marimba
- Xylophone
- Cymbals - open
- Let ring throughout
- Let ring through triangle (triangle mallet)

Break 1 - 6
J J (J= UO)

III

IV

3

r

1

r

with bow

 timpans, mutes and slow gliss

ppp

---

J=J (d= 120)

bass drum, felt mallets

rubber mallets, no drums, snares on

(mallets and triangle, brisk)

cymbal, chord (timpani mallets)

Break I - III

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Segment II

(PIANO)

Scene 1

WALSH

Well, I gotta run.

I got a chump

waitin' to be fleeced. You should think about what I said, and
Think about this too: I can make it worth your while.

(Walsh)

Bright girl. While you're thinking, think about this: to have the
money is to wield the ax.

Segment II, Scene 2
(Middle Bar)

CLAY

I'm Clay, and I'm a piano man with a gift for gab. Al

DAWN

(spoken) Hi, Clay.

(CLAY) It doesn't pay me much, but he forgets about my tab.
Hello ma jolie fleur. Little talk-a-tale with brother Walsh, eh?

He scares me.

Aw, don't fret about Walsh. I think his mother was

Segment II, Scene 2-2
Frightened by a human being. His buddy Gavin's not too bad, though.

I think he's still a hippy at heart. All trust.

He trusts a snake like Mab to be his partner.

Segment II - Scene 2-3
and he picked Miss Upwardly Mobile for a wife.

Go Piggery.

What are those songs you play sometimes in the afternoon?

Just little things of mine.
Why don't you play them at night?

(spooken)

Nah, people just like what's familiar.

That's 'posed to be a secret.

Say, I hear you came in-to some dough.

Segment II-Scene 2-5
Then you picked the wrong financial advisor. I suppose you'll be... 

No, I think I'll keep working. I like it here; I'd... 

What for?
Segment II - Scene 3

(From Bar)

KELLEY

So, how's Dierdre?

AL
Well, I have. She told me Tricia was a fool to leave a

haven't seen her lately.

stud like you.

(speaking quietly)

Is that so.

It's

She thinks you're quite the lover.

I think she talks too much.

Segment II - Scene 3 - 2.
(KELLEY)

true, then! You're sleeping with Di-er-are.

I didn't know she was married.

she'd never been in here before. Trish had just left me, and I was lonely.

Segment II - Scene 2-3
but in the morning she told me, and I've never been with her.

(a tempo)

Segment II - Scene 3 - 4
Segment II Scene 4

DAWN

Boy, that was a tough one, I'm so tired and I've still got to

CLAY

If one—more tur—key

AL

One—more Sa—

write a paper this weekend. I don't suppose either of you are ex—pert—

(asks for my way) I'm gonna shoot him;

tur—day night. One more— Sa—tur—day—
on Thomas Hardy's novel? No, I guess not.

I really am, I mean— it.

night. One more—

MELLEY (entering)  
(spoken) (sung without tempo)

Hey, did you guys catch my ten o'clock?
(DAWN)

No, we were all really busy right up until midnight.

KELLEY

Then you don't know about it?

Know about what?

Uh... uh.

Nop.
(KELLEY)
The story of the year, that's what. Dierdre Van Asperen has disappeared.

(DAUN)
She didn't come home last night.

What do you mean, disappeared?

How's that?

What?
Garvin went to the police this morning. They found her briefcase by her place.

Mercedes in the parking lot by her office. They think she's been abducted.

Tempo

Maybe worse.

(let ring till sound dies)

(attacca)

Segment II - Scene 4-5
Break II

Players I, II, and IV-wooden sticks on everything; let all sounds ring

\( \text{at} \)

\( \text{acc} \)

\( \text{chimes} \)

\( \text{chimes} \)

\( \text{closed} \)

\( \text{shades} \)

\( \text{rubber mallets} \)

\( \text{rubber mallets} \)

\( \text{timp} \)

\( \text{timp} \)

\( \text{timp} \)

\( \text{timp} \)
Segment III

Scene 1

(Stage-Left)

KELLEY (Spoken to audience) This is the home of Gavin and Diordre VanAsperen. Just four days ago Diordre mysteriously disappeared from the parking lot of her downtown office building. As of today, police have virtually no clues as to what may have happened. Gavin VanAsperen, who hasn't spoken to the press since the disappearance, has asked us to allow him to tape a message to his wife, in the hope that she, or anyone having information, will see the broadcast. (Turning)

MR. VANASPEREN?

(Repeat as necessary)
Gavin

I just want her back. I'm her...

husband. We've been married for eleven years.

Dee has a mother, father, family. We all love her very

Segment III - Scene 1-2

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Id like to say this to Dierdre: (sigh) I love you, Dierdre. (sniff)

Bren is waiting at home. (sob) Your flowers are blooming.

(soft) (sob) Dee Dee, I know you're strong. I know you can survive.

Segment III - Scene 1-3

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KELLEY (spoken to audience)

Anyone having information is asked to call (inset) name of local police department. This is Kelley Ackerman for Q-six news.

KELLEY (spoken to audience)

I know you will survive. (sub) (sobbing-. . . )

Segments III - Scene 1-4

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Segment III - Scene 2

(to audience, when Gavin doesn't respond)

A-anything I can do to help...

Anything...

Oh well...

(Back Bar) (as previously)

Left hand staccato throughout this scene

You got that right, Buddy.

Pretty weird about Dierdre, huh?

Think they'll
Wherever they find her, credit cards.

Was your find her?

Oh, you know about that, huh?

time with her that bad?

Segment III - Scene 2 - 2
Why didn't you

Couldn't miss it; you left by the front door.

Tell me she was married!

Not my business, pal.

Segment III - Scene 2-3
(CLAY)

I heard something interesting about Dawn the other day. Seems she came.

(AL)

I don't know. Uh-huh.

So why do you suppose she keeps working here?
Yeah, right. She's buried in something to do at school.

something to do.

She's here because of you, Buddy.

If you're nuts.

Segment III - Scene 2 - 5
o-pon your eyes, you see things. old enough to be her father.

Come on, I'm old enough to be her father.

Would I know you'd say that? I'll tell you what else I see.

You look at her the same way she looks at you.
Hey, she's just a kid, she doesn't need me screwing up her life.

Don't you ask her? Maybe she should find someone younger.

She doesn't know...

Segment III - Scene 2 - 7
She seems to have caught Walsh's attention.

(Gives CLAY a dirty look)

Segment III - Scene 3

(Dawn)

Hi, Kelley. Any news on Dierdre?
No, but it's a real circus downtown,

Friends are starting candlelight vigils every night in Dierdre's parking lot,

The county prosecutor's treating it as a homicide,

Segment III - Scene 3-2
The family hired a bunch of psychics who are talking about caves and running water.

So while the boy scouts are scouring riverbanks, the cops are searching.

(Dawn)

(Relley)

Do you think it was someone she knew?

I don't think downtown basements.
(KELLEY)

anything yet, except it's nice having a real story to cover. Gavin's in the clear. They're

(DAWN)

Here's your drink.

(KELLEY)

checking out her clients now. Thanks.

Segment III - Scene 3-4
Kelley, did you ever go out with Walsh?

Not on your life, Honey. I may be

(KELLEY)

lonly

but I'm not stupid.

(attacka)

(build III)

music begins

Segment III - Scene 3
BREAK III

Break III is for dancers and taped electronic sounds. The taped music begins and ends with a quiet “wind” sound, which is intended to overlap the preceding and following “segments.” Duration of the piece, not including this sound, is about five minutes.
Segment IV

Scene 1
(Middle Bar)

KELLEY

Hi, sailor.

DCLAY

Little

(attack)

Girls shouldn't say things like that if they don't want to get into trouble.

*Begin when mute-in taped interlude stops and fades to wind noise.*
what do you think about Di-er-dre?

I think a cadre of terrorists got her; that's the only way she'd abandon her Benz.

Jeez, you really are cynical.
Get off it; you were born this way.

No, just a realist. I suppose you're idealism.

And work in T. V.? No way. You have to be either a cynic, or an alco-
in-carnate.
holie, I thought you'd never ask.
Buy you a drink!

Are you seeing anybody these days?
No.

No either.
(ether)

What are we waiting for?

What are we waiting for?

Segment III Scene 1 - 5
(They start to leave together—then KELLEY pulls up.) It may be

just for the moment. (They start to leave again—CLAY pulls up.)

Segment III, Scene 1 - 6
It may be
I can't look at hobbles and I can't stand fences. It may be
Just for the moment, but the moment sounds fine to

Segment II, Scene 1-7
Segment IV - Scene 2

Dawn: I hear you've come into some money.
So much for secrets in this place.

I suppose now you'll be going to

...may be. I haven't made up my mind.

School full time? That's too bad for

Segment IV, Scene 2-2
Who says I'm quitting?
me. You're a lot of help.
why would you keep working here

I might have reasons. Maybe it's fun.
if you didn't have to!

Segment II, Scene 2-3
Dammit, Down, it's not fun. Listen, don't worry 'bout Storyville. We'll manage with-

You might not have to.

out your help. Clay thinks you've got a

Segment IV, Scene 2 - 4
Is that what he said, a crush?

(crushed)

crush on me.

No, he said... Look.

I don't care. No you're not.

I'm too old. I'm too jaded. I'm used...

Segment III, Scene 2-5
I don't need a warranty; just tell me you don't want me.

merchandise.

I'm too young. I'm too naive.

That would be a lie. I don't care. No, you're

Segment IV, Scene 2-6
I'm untried merchandise.

'Long as there's a warranty, Don't

Tell me you really want me.

Stop before I cry.

The only.

Segment II, Scene 2.
(As GAVIN enters) Hey, Sport, how ya holdin' up?

GAVIN

What's with the past guess. How well did you know BeeBee?

Segment III, Scene 3-2.
I mean how well do you? Did you know she kept a diary?

(Cavin)

(Clay just shrugs.) I found it last night. I thought there might be a clue, so I started reading from the back.

About
four months back I found your name.

I slept with my wife.

I didn't know she was married. I'd never been in here be-
I had just moved here and I was lonely.

But in the morning she told me, and I've never been with her an-

(Hold pedal 'til percussion begins.)

Segment II, Scene 3-5
Break IV

Player II—cymbal roll with wire brush, woodblock with wooden mallet—dynamics are

effective. The cymbal only—woodblock is p. throughout.

J=90

tiny gal-hard mallets
cymbal—wire brush—mallets

I
SF P
PPPP P

II
P
PPPP P

III
PPPP P

PPPP P

III
PPPP P

PPPP P

PPPP P

IV
tiny gal-hard mallets
cymbal—wire brush—mallet

PPPP P

PPPP P
Segment 3

(calla) Scene 1 (CLAY middle bar - KIRKLEY stage-left)

Hi, it's Storyville.

me. Flash! hold the presses. Di-er-dre Van Asperen is (See-air-drink)

What's up?
(KELLEY)

back from the land of speculation. She just called from Las Vegas.

(Apparently she's had amnesia for the last month and)

(KELLEY)

just got her memory back. Gotta go. Watch me at

(CLAY)

Yeah, sure.
Only if it includes breakfast.

You bet. Dinner later?

You're on.
Segment V: Scene 2
(Front Bar)

DAWN
Did you hear yet?

AL
Bierdre? Yeah, Kelley called Clay.

get hit on the head and not know who you are or where you live.

Yeah, I guess that
You don't believe it, do you?
would be pretty bad.

I have no reason to be...

I'll bet the press will be horrible.

lieve or disbelieve.

Kelley

Segment IV, Scene 2-2

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Only cause she's a woman.

I don't know yet; we'll see.

Segment V - Scene 3
(Back Bar)
CLAY

Hey, Sport, looks like you get your wife back. Are you

GAUIN

Uh-huh.

(to audience)

numb or just stoned?

Remember that diary? I read it

Segment II, Scene 3-2
all. I couldn't stop. You weren't the only one; there were others, lots of others, even Walsh.

Segment IV, Scene 3-3
(Gavin)

night I had the vasectomy she insisted on she was with him.

guess you never really know any one; just the little piece they

choose to show you. I don't know what to do; take her back; leave her;

Segment 7, Scene 2-4
(CLAY)
Well that never works. Sounds like you'd never
maybe try to get even.

(GAVIN)
catch up anyway. Nothing. Well, you've got to tell her you know
what!

Segment V, Scene 3–5
(CLAY)

Then decide if it's worth working out.

(DAWN) (entering)

Clay, I can't wait for

(GAVIN)

Al to close out; I really need to get home and study

I'm just

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(Gavin)

leaving, Dawn, I can drop you off.

(attack)
Break IV
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(tacet)  

**Terminal Segment**

*(Front Bar)*

**CLAY** (entering)

**AL**

---

You're here early.

Left hand staccato this scene

---

I don't want a

I'm not sure I want to serve you before noon.

---
drink, but maybe you should have one. Buddy, something's happened. Kelley just got a call. Dawn's at the hospital.

Terminal Segment 2.
She was raped last night. (sotto voce)

Oh God, no. What...

Is she hurt bad?

Kelley said it's not bad physically.

God-damn

Terminal Segment - 3
No, hang on, not Gavin. He's too confused to hurt anybody. Ap-

Gavin I'll kill him.

(parenthetically)

(CLAY)

...parently they stopped off at Welchi's on the way home. For some reason, Gavin

(said)

left her there. Walchi roped her.

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Memories are forever, they can't be taken away.

Memories are forever, they can't be taken away.
You can't change anything if it happened yesterday. Still there's

chimes

small triangle-bearer-let ring