

Dust to Dirt

Elena Specht

2017

Duration: 10 minutes

opera scene

Dust to Dirt takes place in rural Kansas in 1935, a time in which the Great Depression and the Dust Bowl were causing significant economic hardship in the Great Plains. Poor farming practices and severe drought caused the top layer of soil to turn to dust, which strong winds blew across the Plains in massive dust storms. Farmers struggled to grow the crops that they had previously relied on to make a living. The combined environmental and economic crises drove many families out of the Plains, hoping to find better work elsewhere.

Dust to Dirt takes place in the home of Thomas (baritone) and Mary (soprano) Mayfield. Alice (mezzo-soprano) is the oldest of their three children, and she helps take care of her younger siblings. Like their neighbors, Thomas and Mary are struggling through the Depression, but are relatively fortunate for their area. Thomas, Mary, and Alice are working in their home on a normal evening when they notice their neighbor, John Collins (tenor), is coming to their house. John's wife has recently died, leaving him alone to raise three young children in an impossible climate. When John arrives, he informs Thomas and Mary that things have gotten so bad that he's foreclosed on his property and the bank is taking his house. With no options left, John makes an impossible request of his neighbors: that they take in his three children for an unspecified length of time while he goes west, looking for work. Thomas and Mary are left to determine whether they can afford to help him out, at serious risk to their own family. Ultimately, they are forced to answer the question: in the face of hardship, what obligation do we have to our neighbor?

The four characters sing the phrase "dirt to dust" as they mourn the loss of their former livelihood and productivity. Too often they have watched the dust blow across the land where they had previously grown wheat in rich, healthy soil. But they also sing "dust to dirt" hopefully, looking forward to some unknown point in the future when the land will return to its former fruitfulness and they will be able to resume their normal lives.

Dust to Dirt was written as a part of the University of Colorado Boulder's New Opera Works – Composer Fellows' Initiative. It was premiered on June 17, 2017.

Parts:

Soprano

Mezzo-Soprano

Tenor

Baritone

Piano