

Texan Tenebrae **Mark-Anthony Turnage**

Sex, drugs, money—not your typical classical concert fare. Yet these topics simmer underneath the surface of Mark-Anthony Turnage’s *Texan Tenebrae*, a nine-minute lamentation derived from his opera *Anna Nicole*, which premiered at the Royal Opera House in 2011.

The opera recounts the life of the Playboy model and tabloid sensation Anna Nicole Smith, known for her lengthy and highly publicized court battles over the estate of her second, octogenarian husband, the suspicious death of her 20-year-old son, and for disputes from several sexual partners over the paternity of her daughter. Smith died from a drug overdose in 2007 at the age of 39. A peculiar heroine to showcase on the operatic stage, Turnage took advantage of the discordant threads of Smith’s life by volleying between the absurdity and tragedy of a poor, young woman consumed by fame and fortune, turning Smith’s story into compelling theater.

There seems no one better equipped to take on such extremes than Turnage, an English composer known both for his edgy, modernist language and for a whimsical, and often satirical, appropriation of popular and vernacular styles, such as jazz, blues, and rock. In interviews, the 54-year-old Turnage cites his time spent in America—notably at the Tanglewood Institute in the ‘80s and during his position as composer-in-residence with the Chicago Symphony Orchestra from 2006-2010—for a continuing cultivation of American popular music. No music is too lowbrow; for instance, Turnage funneled Beyoncé’s “Single Ladies” through his compositional prism for a 2010 work called *Hammered Out*, fooling critics at the premiere but not the audience. Pop quotations aside, his music often draws associations with Berg and Stravinsky.

Texan Tenebrae is a stand-alone, single-movement orchestral work of music that appears in the interlude to Act II of *Anna Nicole*. It was a joint commission by the Canary Islands Music Festival, the Royal Concertgebouw Orchestra, and the Chicago Symphony Orchestra, with the first performance by the London Philharmonic Orchestra at the Auditorio de Tenerife in Spain in 2010. It was recorded and released in 2012 by the London Philharmonic Orchestra on its in-house label. Though the work doesn’t include some of the more tongue-and-cheek music in the opera, it does foreshadow the troubled circumstances and needless conclusion of Smith’s life. The word “tenebrae” is Latin for darkness or death; “Texan” refers to Smith’s home state.

Tolling, dissonant bells open the work and gradually yield to the lyricism of a strange, despondent melody. A flowing secondary theme is introduced and then juxtaposed with yet a third of bluesy, quipping grace notes, jazzy notes provided by two soprano saxophones in the orchestration. Intensity builds through increasingly shrill woodwinds and strings with the brass section blaring in counterpoint—the many plot points unraveling for Smith—until the bell-toll returns, signally a brute end to the work and Smith’s life.

Note by Anna Reguero.