John Cage's "The Wonderful Widow of Eighteen Springs"

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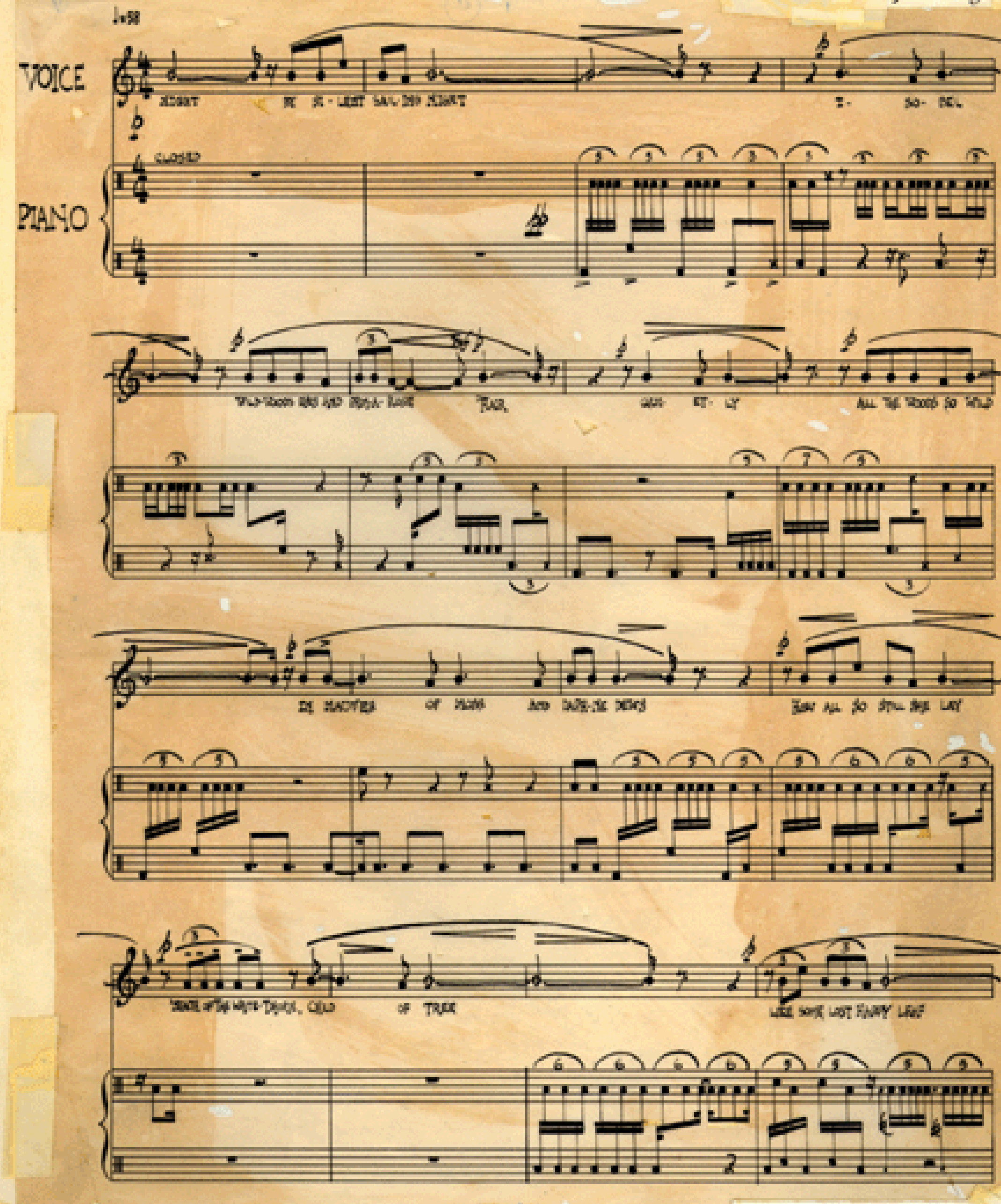
John Cage's setting of "The Wonderful Widow of Eighteen Springs" signals the beginning of what would become a profound and enduring fascination with the writings of James Joyce. Subsequent to this setting, composed in the fall of 1942, Cage would return to Joyce repeatedly throughout his career, using Joyce's words as the basis not only for a variety of musical compositions,[1] but also a series of literary projects including the mesostichic[2] and chance-inspired "writings" through *Finnegans Wake* and *Ulysses*.[3] It is *Finnegans Wake*, however, a novel Cage once described as "endless and attractive,"[4] that exerted the greatest influence on his work, and it is *Finnegans Wake* on which this early setting is based. The centrality of Joyce's novel to Cage's aesthetic outlook is captured in the composer's observation some forty years after his first encounter with the work that "we live, in a very deep sense, in the time of *Finnegans Wake*."[5]

Cage composed "The Wonderful Widow" in response to a commission from the soprano Janet Fairbank (1903-1947), whom he had met during his brief appointment at the Chicago Institute of Design in 1941-1942. Fairbank was an ambitious amateur singer from a wealthy family with close ties to the Chicago arts community. Her grandfather, the turn-of-the-century industrialist Nathaniel K. Fairbank, had been a trustee and major benefactor of the Art Institute of Chicago, the Chicago Symphony Orchestra and the Chicago Club. Her mother was the novelist and political activist Janet Ayer Fairbank; and her aunt, Margaret Ayer Barnes, was a popular, Pulitzer prize-winning author. While her own career included occasional appearances with the Chicago Symphony Orchestra, the Chicago Opera, the Grant Park Orchestra, and the San Carlo Opera Company, the younger Fairbank would eventually make her mark as a proponent of contemporary art song. Throughout the 1940s, she commissioned and performed over one hundred songs by recognized and aspiring composers (including Virgil Thomson, David Diamond, Francis Poulenc, Benjamin Britten, Lou Harrison, Olivier Messiaen, Ned Rorem, and Gottfried von Einem), which she presented in Chicago and at an annual series of recitals at New York's Carnegie Chamber Music Hall. Endowed with modest vocal abilities, Fairbank nevertheless endeared herself to critics and advocates of modern music by her tasteful and intelligent performances and her tireless promotion of contemporary music. Her success in this regard can be measured by the fact that publishers

THE WONDERFUL WIDOW OF EIGHTEEN SPRINGS

John Cage



came to purchase the songs she commissioned even before they had been premiered. Fairbank herself felt that her greatest achievement lay in acquainting American audiences with the wealth of serious vocal literature being written by contemporary American composers. Her interest in Cage proved prescient, for the Carnegie Hall recital that occasioned the setting of "The Wonderful Widow" coincided with the composer's now-famous concert at the Museum of Modern Art, an event that placed the young Cage at the vanguard of modern music.[6]

The choice of song text for the Fairbank commission was apparently left to Cage, for he later recalled scanning a copy of *Finnegans Wake* (purchased shortly after it appeared in book form in 1939, but left largely unread) in search of a lyrical passage to set. He eventually decided on a memorable vignette of the infant Isobel (556.1-22) who, among other names, is identified as "the wonderful widow of eighteen springs."[7] The melodious quality of the passage is indebted not only to its immediate context--a lullaby for a beautiful child--or the remarkable consonance, clarity, and fluidity of Joyce's language, but also to the novelist's admission that one of his chief inspirations for the passage was the traditional tune "The Woods So Wild."[8]

Cage's song text, condensed and rearranged from Joyce's original, only intensifies the lyrical dimension of the passage, for it highlights both the sylvan imagery with which the child is described ("wildwood's eyes and primarose hair," "like some losthappy leaf," "like blowing flower stilled") and a number of key alliterative phrases ("in mauves of moss and daphnedews," "win me, woo me, wed me, ah weary me!") that give rise to the passage's lilting lyricism.

Cage the composer imprints his unique stamp on the setting in a number of ways. By deleting much of the original punctuation, he negates the ornate, clausal rhythms that underlie the structure and sense of Joyce's original passage. A further negational effect is created by placing all words in capital letters. What results is a depersonalization of Joyce's literary "voice," an early intimation perhaps of Cage's desire to release art from the constraints of individual taste and self-expression. Cage's approach to melodic style contributes likewise to the nonexpressive neutrality of the setting. The melody unfolds as a hypnotic incantation based on three pitches only. According to Cage, these pitches should be understood as delimiting a basic register rather than serving as fixed tones. He explains that the melodic line may be transposed to any pitch level, "in order to employ a low and comfortable range," and he further advises the vocalist to sing without the aid of vibrato, "as in folk-singing."[9]Despite the chantlike reserve of the vocal line, Cage maintains an emotional involvement with the text. Out of Joyce's fractured phrases, he has shaped a coherent, sensitively structured song text consisting of an opening section that lovingly describes the infant Isobel, a climactic section based on a series of action verbs and alliterative trochees ("win me, woo me, wed me") and a dénouement that contemplates additional names for the child ("Night Isobel, Sister Isobel, Saintette Isobel, Madame Isa Veuve La Belle"). On a musical level, Cage imbues the melody with a sense of psychological purpose and rhetorical continuity by the deliberate rise and fall of the vocal line. For example, he uses the lower, adjacent pair of notes for the basic functions of recitation and cadence, with the gap created by the third, upper note serving as an element of contrast. Indeed, Cage openly acknowledged that his musical ideas had been inspired by "impressions received from the text."[10]

The true hallmark of the setting is not Cage's approach to melodic style, however, but his innovative approach to the piano accompaniment. Doubtless guided by his recent experiments with the prepared piano in *Bacchanale* (1940), Cage created a percussive accompaniment based on various knocks and taps produced by the pianist's knuckles and fingers at different spots on the outside of the instrument. Instructions regarding the interpretation of Cage's notation are provided in the introductory comments to the score. Round note heads, for example, are to be played with the fingers, whereas x-shaped note heads are to be played with the knuckles. The lowest space on the staff indicates the underside of the piano. Note especially the lack of clefs on both of the piano's "percussion staves." The piano accompaniment proceeds largely independently of the vocal part; in fact, Cage maintained that he had "no rhythmic structure or method" in mind as he composed the piece.[11] What the voice and piano parts share in common is an emphasis on simple additive rhythmic patterns and indeterminate sounds rather than determinate pitches.

Cage's setting of "The Wonderful Widow" soon became one of his most frequently performed compositions,[12] yet the critical response to the song following its premiere by Fairbank was less than favorable. Writing for the journal *Modern Music*, Arthur Berger counted "The Wonderful Widow" among the works on Fairbank's program that were "less hackneyed and cheap," but in the same breath rejected the song as "juvenile and unfertile."[13] The critic for the *New York Herald Tribune*, identified only as J.D.B., exercised a certain impartiality by acknowledging that he had found "none of the [evening's] songs particularly worthwhile."[14] Writing for the *New York Times*, Nicholas Slonimsky reserved critical judgment on the evening's repertoire (which included selections by Virgil Thomson, David Diamond, David Van Vactor, Ernst Bacon, Béla Wilda, Harry K. Lamont, Paul Bowles, Paul Creston, Theodore Chanler, John Sacco, Mary Howe, and Charles Naginski), but he commended Fairbank for her effort and accomplishments.[15] A radio rebroadcast of "The Wonderful Widow" in 1944 also elicited an unfavorable response. Charles Mills found the song "disappointingly self-enclosed and eccentrically hopeless," adding "I hope this example is unrepresentative of [Cage's] talents."[16] One of the few favorably disposed toward the song was Susan Thiemann, who, in reviewing the published score in 1961, offered the following, perceptive observations:

This essentially rhythmic speech set against a patterned percussive accompaniment cannot be considered a song in the usual sense. Cage, however, is such an innovator that one often loses sight of the fact that if one does not expect conventional sounds, his music is often very well constructed. Here, for example, the composer weaves a hypnotically compelling pattern of rhythmic tension and relaxation, akin to certain non-Western music, which is very appropriate for Joyce's moody prose. The climaxing syncopation on the alliterative passage "win me, woo me, wed me" is most effective.[17]

The document shown here, an autograph copy of the song prepared by the composer on a transparent sheet, speaks to both the publication history of Cage's compositions and the status of music publishing after World War II. Cage later recalled that, until the early 1960s, the performance of his music was problematic due to the fact that he had not secured a publisher. (For Fairbank's performance of "The Wonderful Widow," he had to prepare seperate autograph copies of the song; Fairbank's copy is currently preserved with her estate as deposited at the Newberry Library in Chicago.) As Cage tells it, he chose the firm of C.F. Peters one day in 1960, while browsing through a New York telephone book. His inquiries over the phone were met with enthusiasm by Walter Hinrichsen, founder of the firm's American branch and an aficionado of contemporary American music; Cage signed an exclusive contract with Peters over lunch that very day.[18]

One of the composer's first works to be offered by Peters, "The Wonderful Widow" was printed by means of a process know alternately as diazotype, ozalid, or whiteprint. Popular in the years immediately following World War II, this photographic process allowed for the facsimile reproduction of a composer's manuscript, a method that was considerably cheaper and more efficient than engraving. The copy-ready manuscript shown herin was used for the Peters edition; note especially the indications for the size of reduction and the places on the sheet that have been cut out with a razor to eliminate signs of smudging.

[1] These include: the *Concerto for Piano and Orchestra* (1958), which features a vocal solo that draws on *Finnegans Wake*; a choral project inspired by the celebrated Ten Thunderclaps from *Finnegans Wake*, conceived in 1967 but realized only in 1982 as *Atlas Borealis; Child of Tree* (1975) for piano and amplified plant material, inspired by a phrase used in "The Wonderful Widow"; the radio montage *Roaratorio, an Irish Circus on Finnegans Wake* (1979); "Nowth upon Nacht" (1984), a companion setting to "The Wonderful Widow"; and ASLSP (1985), a piano piece inspired by the final paragraph of *Finnegans Wake*.

[2] "Mesostic" is a coinage for one of Cage's writing techniques. As he explains in I-VI (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1990), p. 1, "I write texts. Most of the time they're mesostics. It was Norman O. Brown who said mesostics describes what you are writing. Like acrostics, mesostics are written in the conventional way horizontally, but at the same time they follow a vertical rule, down the middle not down the edge as in an acrostic, a string which spells a word or name, not necessarily connected with what is being written, though it may be."

[3] These include: the series of five "writings" through *Finnegans Wake*, dating from 1976-1980; *James Joyce, Marcel Duchamp, Erik Satie: An Alphabet* (1980); and additional essays and lectures that Cage acknowledged as generally indebted to Joyce, many of which are collected in M: *Writings* '67-'72 (Middletown, Conn.: Wesleyan University Press, 1973), *Empty Words: Writings* '73-'78 (Middletown, Conn.: Wesleyan University Press, 1979) and I-VI (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1990). Significantly, Joyce also provided the basis for one of Cage's final works, *Muoyce II (Writing through Ulysses*, 1992), the premiere of which was preempted by the composer's death in August 1992.

[4] "About Roaratorio: An Irish Circus on Finnegans Wake," in *Dream Chamber/About Roaratorio*, ed. Robert O' Driscoll (Toronto: The Black Brick Press, 1982), p. 76.

[5] See John Cage and Richard Kostelanetz, "Talking about Writings through Finnegans Wake," in *A John Cage Reader in Celebration of his 70th Birthday*, comp. and ed. Peter Gena and Jonathan Brent, suppl. ed. Don Gillespie (New York/London/Frankfurt: C.F. Peters Corporation, 1982), p. 146.

[6] Fairbank's career and her role as a patron of modern music have yet to arouse serious interest among the scholarly community. The information above has been gleaned from miscellaneous sources, including: an article by Edith Borroff that briefly outlines Fairbank's career and inventories part of her creative estate, "The Fairbank Collection," *College Music Syposium* 16 (1976): 105-22; an unsigned article entitled "Song Plugger" found in *Time*, 48 (December 16, 1946): 50; various obituaries for Fairbank following her death on September 27, 1947; and reviews of her recitals, including those discussed

below.

[7] The details surrounding Cage's early familiarity with *Finnegans Wake* and the text chosen for the Fairbank commission are reported in: John Cage, introduction to *Writings through Finnegans Wake* (Tulsa, Oklahoma: University of Tulsa, 1978), n.p., and "Writing for the Second Time through Finnegans Wake," in Empty Words, p. 133; John Cage and Klaus Schöning, "Laughtears: Gespräch über 'Roaratorio. Ein irischer Circus über Finnegans Wake' Auszüge," in *John Cage: Kunst als Grenzbeschreitung: John Cage und die Moderne*, ed. Ulrich Bischoff (Düsseldorf: Richter-Verlag, 1991), p. 83; and David Revill, *The Roaring Silence: John Cage, A Life* (New York: Arcade Publishing, 1992), pp. 82, 254.

[8] Richard Ellmann, ed., *Letters of James Joyce* (New York: Viking Press, 1966), vol. 3, pp. 138-39. Joyce's attribution of "The Woods So Wild" to William Byrd (1543-1623), which is reiterated throughout the literature, is misleading. Joyce's inspiration for the passage was probably one of numerous turn-of-the-century arrangements of the Tudor court song "As I walked the Wode so wylde." The song is associated with Byrd, not by way of a song setting, but rather a set of keyboard variations that appeared in the seventeenth-century *Fitzwilliam Virginal Book*. Since Joyce disposed of much of his library, his direct source for the tune remains open to question. One possibility that unites all of the evidence cited above is Granville Bantock's vocal arrangement of the tune, entitled "The Woods So Wild" and published in his *One Hundred Songs of England* (Boston: Oliver Ditson Co., 1914), see esp. pp. xiv, 14.

[9] See his introductory notes to the score, *The Wonderful Widow of Eighteen Springs* (New York/London/Frankfurt: C.F. Peters Corporation, 1961), n.p.

[10] See Cage's notes to *The 25-Year Retrospective Concert of the Music of John Cage* (1959), private issue recording by George Avakian (K08Y 1499-1504), n.p.

[11] Ibid.

[12] Robert Dunn's catalogue of Cage's works, compiled in the early 1960s, lists eleven performances of the song, including four by the artistic duo of Cathy Berberian and Luciano Berio; see *John Cage* (New York: Henmar Press, Inc., 1962), p. 22.

[13] Arthur Berger, "Spring Season, 1943," *Modern Music* 20 (1943): 256.

[14] J.D.B., "Janet Fairbank Is Heard in American Song Recital," *New York Herald Tribune*, March 6, 1943, p. 8.

[15] N.[icholas] S.[lonimsky], "Janet Fairbanks [sic] Heard: Soprano Presents Elaborate List of Songs, with 12 Novelties," *New York Times*, March 6, 1943, p. 8. Additional reviews of a similar nature may be found in *Musical America* 63 (March 25, 1943): 18, and *The Musical Courier* 127 (March 20, 1943): p. 9.

[16] Charles Mills, "Over the Air," *Modern Music* 21 (March/April 1944): p. 191.

[17] Susan Thiemann, "Music Reviews," *Notes* 19 (March 1962): p. 346.

[18] See John Cage and Richard Kostelanetz, "Autobiography," in *Conversing with Cage* (New York: Limelight Editions, 1988), p. 21; and the composer's "Statement by John Cage," in *An Introduction to Music Publishing*, ed. Carolyn Sachs (New York: C.F. Peters Corporation, 1981), p. 17.