

DOMINICK ARGENTO'S *FROM THE DIARY OF VIRGINIA WOOLF*:  
A PREPARATION GUIDE FOR PERFORMERS

BY

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For my parents,  
Debbie and Jack,  
to whom I owe all of my success.

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## Introduction

On the morning of March 28, 1941, renowned English writer Virginia Woolf drowned herself in the river near her home. In addition to several critically-acclaimed novels, she left behind 26 volumes of personal diaries, which were published in an edited version by her husband Leonard in 1954. Twenty years later, while reading Virginia Woolf's writings in search of a suitable song text, American composer Dominick Argento chose excerpts from the diaries to form the text for a song cycle entitled *From the Diary of Virginia Woolf*. The work was premiered by Dame Janet Baker and Martin Isepp on January 5, 1975 in Orchestra Hall, Minneapolis, Minnesota as a commission for the Schubert Club of St. Paul. Several months later, it won the Pulitzer Prize in music. *From the Diary of Virginia Woolf* is no doubt an important work in the mezzo-soprano song repertoire, but it is quite an undertaking, both musically and dramatically. Argento uses motivic material and a twelve-tone row that evolves and intertwines in both the vocal and piano parts to connect the cycle as a whole and illuminate the text. Some of these nuances, however, are only brought to light through close score study.

A number of dissertations have been written on this cycle. Eric Garton's M.M. thesis from 1986 analyzes the cycle strictly in a theoretical sense; it maps most of the twelve-tone rows used as well as regions of tonality. Dr. Melinda Smashey's 1997 dissertation considers the relationship between text and piano accompaniment. Dr. Kihoon Yang uses a portion of his 2001 dissertation as a performance guide for the pianist. Dr. Noelle Woods' dissertation from 2005 focuses on the text and its biographical implications for Virginia Woolf. Dr. Jeanette Fontaine's dissertation from 2012 compares *From the Diary of Virginia Woolf* to Robert Schumann's song cycle *Frauenliebe und*

*-leben*. While all of these further the scholarship on the work, no one has yet compiled the necessary information to create a comprehensive preparation guide for singers who wish to study and perform it.

This document will be a guide for future performers of the cycle based on the existing scholarship as well as my own analysis, including: background information on the composer and the librettist; the relationship of text and music; melodic, rhythmic, and harmonic motives; the use of twelve-tone rows; and some suggestions for preparing a performance. My experience as a performer of contemporary music and instructor of music theory and aural skills has given me a working knowledge of both vocal and compositional techniques used in the work. This guide is not meant to dictate one specific interpretation but rather to provide the information to inspire future performers. It is my hope that this preparation guide will be used as a source by those wishing to gain a deeper knowledge and give a more informed performance of *From the Diary of Virginia Woolf*.

## **Background Information**

### **The Composer**

Dominick Argento was born to Italian parents in York, Pennsylvania on September 27, 1927. He gained an interest in music through the writings of George Gershwin, and began taking piano lessons and teaching himself harmony at the age of sixteen. After serving time in the military as a cryptographer in North Africa during World War II, he matriculated at Peabody Conservatory as a pianist. His harmony teacher, Nicholas Nabokov, encouraged him to focus on composition, and he rapidly shifted his sights towards vocal music. After graduating with his B.A. in 1951, he won a

Fulbright scholarship to study at the Cherubini Conservatory in Florence with Luigi Dallapiccola. Argento's study with Dallapiccola began to change his negative views on twelve-tone composition.<sup>1</sup> After returning from Italy he earned his M.M. at Peabody in 1954, studying with Henry Cowell, and eventually his Ph.D. at the Eastman School in 1957. In 1958, he took a job as composition professor at the University of Minnesota, a position he held until his retirement in 1997. He is one of the co-founders of what is now Minnesota Opera and is a member of the American Academy and Institute of Arts and Letters.<sup>2</sup>

His compositional output is heavily vocal, with fourteen operas, several significant song cycles, and numerous choral works. He has commented on the importance of writing vocal music, saying “[the voice] is the primary and original musical instrument, all other instruments being merely imitations of the voice.”<sup>3</sup> He has also stated that a central theme in his compositions for voice is self-discovery, and *From the Diary of Virginia Woolf* is the most obvious example of it.<sup>4</sup>

### **The Librettist**

Adeline Virginia Stephen was born on January 25, 1882, the third child of Leslie and Julia (née Jackson) Stephen. Both of her parents were widowed and had children from previous marriages. Leslie was a well-known historian and journalist, and was the

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<sup>1</sup> Virginia Saya. “Argento, Dominick,” *Oxford Music Online*, Oxford University Press, accessed October 18, 2013, <http://www.oxfordmusiconline.com/subscriber/article/grove/music/01222>.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

<sup>3</sup> Dominick Argento, “The Matter of Text,” *Journal of Singing: The Official Journal of the National Association of Teachers of Singing* (March/April 1988), 6.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid, 8.

founding editor of the *Dictionary of National Biography*.<sup>5</sup> Virginia was educated at home by her parents, her father greatly influencing her literary studies. In 1895 her mother died, which triggered a mental breakdown in Virginia during which she became severely nervous and depressed.<sup>6</sup>

The years 1895–1915 have been called the “twenty dark years” of Virginia Woolf’s life.<sup>7</sup> During the years 1895–1904, Virginia was sexually molested by her half-brother George;<sup>8</sup> this no doubt added to her fragile mental health. She once again experienced a breakdown and attempted suicide when her father died in 1904. In 1910 she experienced a breakdown so major that she was briefly institutionalized “at ‘Burley,’ Cambridge Park, Twickenham, a kind of polite madhouse for female lunatics.”<sup>9</sup> She was kept in bed in a darkened room where her writing, reading, and visitors were strictly controlled.<sup>10</sup>

In 1912 she married Leonard Woolf, a fellow writer, and through 1915 she experienced several major breakdowns and another suicide attempt, mostly brought on by anxiety over the criticisms she might receive for her recently completed novel, *The Voyage Out* (1915).<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Holly Wrench, “Giving Voice to Virginia Woolf: Finding the Musical Coalescence of Dominick Argento’s *From the Diary of Virginia Woolf*” (DMA diss., University of Kansas, 2005), 7.

<sup>6</sup> Quentin Bell, *Virginia Woolf: A Biography* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1972), 39.

<sup>7</sup> Lyndall Gordon, *Virginia Woolf: A Writer’s Life* (New York: W.W. Norton & Co., 1984), 52.

<sup>8</sup> Noelle Woods, “Reflections of a Life: Biographical Perspectives of Virginia Woolf Illuminated by the Music and Drama of Dominick Argento’s Song Cycle *From the Diary of Virginia Woolf*” (DMA diss., Ohio State University, 1996), 33-34.

<sup>9</sup> Bell, 164.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid.

<sup>11</sup> Woods, 36.

Around the time Virginia completed her next novel, *Night and Day* (1919), she began keeping a diary in which she would record her thoughts, observations, and writing exercises. Other novels followed, including *Mrs. Dalloway* (1925), *To the Lighthouse* (1927), and *The Waves* (1931), all during which she continued to write in the diary.

The onset and duration of World War II caused Virginia's mental health to decline further. On Friday, March 28, 1941, Virginia left letters for Leonard and her sister Vanessa, loaded her coat pocket with a large stone, and drowned herself in the River Ouse near her home. At the time of her death she had written twenty-six volumes of diaries.

Just over a decade later in 1954, Leonard compiled and excerpted Virginia's diaries for publication, writing in the preface:

The diary is too personal to be published as a whole during the lifetime of many people referred to in it...the present book is composed of extracts from Virginia Woolf's diaries.<sup>12</sup>

Twenty years later Dominick Argento chose excerpts from this publication for his song cycle.

## The Cycle

### Commission

In 1972 The Schubert Club of St. Paul commissioned Argento to write a set of songs for Jessye Norman. Knowing her voluptuous voice and classic stage presence, Argento decided to set excerpts of Sappho's love letters. Soon after he had decided on the text Norman canceled and was replaced with Beverly Sills. For Sills, Argento felt that

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<sup>12</sup> Virginia Woolf, *A Writer's Diary: Being Extracts From the Diary of Virginia Woolf*, edited by Leonard Woolf (London: Hogarth Press, 1953), vii-viii.

Sappho was unsuitable, so he instead considered writing something for her “actressy” personality and florid coloratura-soprano voice: a pastiche of Shakespearean heroines such as Ophelia and Cleopatra.<sup>13</sup> This arrangement also fell through. The Schubert Club then informed Argento that Janet Baker would be singing a recital with Martin Isepp in January 1975, and it would commission a cycle for her. Considering Janet Baker’s personality, Argento rejected the idea of the flashy Shakespearean heroines and instead narrowed his text search to the writings of Virginia Woolf. In a letter to Patricia Oreskovic he writes:

[Janet Baker] is such a sensitive and intelligent singer that I wanted a text to suit her artistry and exploit the emotional gamut she can cover. Woolf is also such a pure, clear writer—immaculate choice of words, original ideas, direct communication of thought through words with no fat, no padding, and above all, honest.<sup>14</sup>

It had been suggested by a fellow faculty member at the University of Minnesota that he use some excerpts from Woolf’s novel *The Waves*, but when Argento began reading through the publication of her diaries to learn more about her backstory, he realized that the diaries themselves were the perfect text.<sup>15</sup> He went through the diary choosing excerpts, finally narrowing them down to eight ranging from April 1919 to March 1941, the last one being three weeks before Woolf committed suicide.

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<sup>13</sup> Dominick Argento, *Catalogue Raisonné as Memoir: A Composer’s Life* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2004), 82.

<sup>14</sup> Patricia Oreskovic, “A Tutorial Paper on Composer Dominick Argento, and specifically his Song Cycle, *From the Diary of Virginia Woolf*” (State University at Buffalo, New York, 1976), Letter from Argento to Oreskovic, February 3, 1976.

<sup>15</sup> Eric W. Garton, “Dominick Argento’s *From the Diary of Virginia Woolf*: Elements of Tonality in Twelve Tone Composition” (MM thesis, Duquesne University, 1986), 48.

The cycle was completed in 1974 and sent to Janet Baker and Martin Isepp several months before the premiere, but due to conflicting schedules they did not actually rehearse together until the weekend of the premiere. In the recital on January 5, 1975, *From the Diary of Virginia Woolf* was given its world premiere, appearing in the first half of the program that began with Mozart's *Exsultate jubilate*. The recital's second half consisted of songs by Wolf, Fauré, Duparc, and Debussy.<sup>16</sup>

In April of that same year *From the Diary of Virginia Woolf* won the Pulitzer Prize in music.

### Composition

Argento chose eight chronological excerpts from the diaries, ranging from April, 1919 to March, 1941, twenty days before Woolf's suicide. "The entries document Woolf's journey of artistic self-discovery, and her dispassionate observations of her literary, emotional, social, and creative life."<sup>17</sup> Argento sought to create the twentieth-century version of Robert Schumann's *Frauenliebe und -leben*, a cycle which also consists of eight songs depicting a woman through the different stages of her life.<sup>18</sup> Like Schumann, Argento also echoes musical material from the first song in the last song, creating a symbolic cyclic motion.<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> Schubert Club of St. Paul, Minnesota, "The Schubert Club International Artist Series recital: Janet Baker, mezzo-soprano, Martin Isepp, pianist," printed program, (Orchestra Hall, MN: Sunday, January 5, 1975), 2.

<sup>17</sup> Carol Kimball, "Dominick Argento," *Song: A Guide to Art Song Style and Literature*, Revised Edition (Milwaukee, WI: Hal Leonard Corporation, 2005), 312.

<sup>18</sup> Garton, 46.

<sup>19</sup> Gary Arvin and Julie Simson, "From the Diary of Virginia Woolf," (Lecture Recital, Indiana University Jacobs School of Music, Bloomington, IN, recorded November 7, 1994).

There are two overarching, intertwining themes present in the work: external observation and internal reflection. The external theme of Virginia Woolf as an observer is very apparent in “Hardy’s Funeral” and “Rome,” where she describes events in her everyday life. Internal reflection is explored more explicitly in “Anxiety,” “War,” and “Parents.” Considering which movements are external versus internal is extremely important in creating depth in Virginia Woolf as a character and overall contrast in the performance.

Musically, the songs of the cycle are tied together by use of a twelve-tone row, stated at the beginning of the song cycle in the singer’s first words, and then manipulated (by way of inversion, retrograde, and retrograde-inversion) and interwoven throughout each of the following seven songs. Argento excels in working the twelve-tone row into a tonal context at certain places, while at others presenting it straightforwardly as atonal music.

Preparing this work requires both dramatic and musical study. The singer should study Virginia Woolf as she would an operatic character by learning her background information and personality. It is equally important to study the composer and his musical style. As you learn the score, pay close attention to the markings. Argento is very detailed in his notation of tempi, articulations, dynamics, and descriptions in both the piano and voice parts.

### **Studying the Diary Excerpts**

While considering the texts, keep in mind that though the writing is poetic at times, they are not poems. The texts are excerpts of prose that originated as part of a personal diary. They should be studied in the original form and separate from the music.



It is strongly suggested that you read the texts from the 1954 publication of *A Writer's Diary* so that you can experience the writings within their context. Only the third excerpt, "Fancy," is complete in itself. All of the other texts Argento cut and pieced together himself. The texts presented here are only the excerpted ones, but where there are gaps in the writing, ellipses have been added. Argento obviously pieced the excerpts together musically, but take note where the original text has been omitted, repeated, and/or edited.

## **I. The Diary (April, 1919)**

### **Overview**

The first song includes the earliest of the diary excerpts and is aptly named "The Diary," both because it is the introduction to the cycle and the chosen text is about the diary itself. This movement is the most important in terms of introducing several textual and musical aspects used throughout the entire cycle. In terms of the text, we are introduced to Woolf and her style of writing. Musically, we discover several important motives, a clear presentation of the twelve-tone row, and foreshadowing of some of the songs to come.

When learning a large song cycle it is easy to overlook the first movement in order to get to the more dramatic or moving movements, but the composer has chosen to begin the cycle with this particular setting to introduce the entire work to the audience. Therefore it is the performer's job to understand and depict all the elements introduced.

### **Text**

What sort of diary should I like mine to be? Something...so elastic that it will embrace anything, solemn, slight or beautiful that comes into my mind. I should like it to resemble some deep old desk...in which one

flings a mass of odds and ends without looking them through. I should like to come back, after a year or two, and find that the collection had sorted itself and refined itself and coalesced, as such deposits so mysteriously do, into a mould, transparent enough to reflect the light of our life...<sup>20</sup>

Argento took this text from the middle of an entry Woolf made on Easter Sunday in April 1919. In the earlier part of the entry, Woolf comments on rereading portions of her diary; she consistently reread her writings, always editing and reflecting. It is interesting that she even reread her diary, a private writing medium she never intended to have published.

Since this chunk of text comes from the middle of an entry, Argento made the conscious decision to begin the cycle with a question: “What sort of diary should I like mine to be?” For the rest of the entry Woolf considers the possibilities. In the song cycle, not only does the singer answer the question in the first song, but Argento helps her answer it textually and musically throughout the rest of the cycle.

## Music

The themes presented in this first song are strongly representative of the cycle as a whole and Argento introduces each theme in the piano before it is heard in the voice. The first two notes in the right hand of the piano are characterized by the dotted eighth-sixteenth rhythm of a descending half-step. If you consider the final movement of the cycle, in mm. 55–58 you will see the same figure being used for the word “writing.” This motive saturates the first song, though we will not understand what it means until the very last. Thus musically the very first “word” of the song cycle is “writing.”

The piano introduction includes two recurring themes, represented in the treble line respectively in mm. 1–2 and 3–4. The first theme (mm. 1–2) has been dubbed the

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<sup>20</sup> Woolf, 13.

“contemplation” theme by Holly Wrench.<sup>21</sup> Each measure repeats a short four-note gesture like a sequence, evoking the feeling of turning a thought over in someone’s mind.<sup>22</sup> The second theme is labeled the “elastic” theme, since it occurs again on the text “something so elastic that it will embrace anything.”<sup>23</sup> It is cleverly made up of an ascending and descending gesture that stretches as it moves forward; in m. 3 it spans a major seventh and in m. 4 it spans a minor ninth. Both of these themes intertwine throughout the song in both the voice and piano parts.

In m. 7 when the voice enters, the twelve-tone row is first presented, alternating between the piano and voice through the first beat of m. 10.<sup>24</sup> The original or prime form of the row is: G#, D#, D, A#, G, C#, B, A, E, F, C, F#.

Figure 1: “The Diary,” mm. 7–10, prime form of twelve-tone row

The image shows a musical score for the piece "The Diary" from "From the Diary of Virginia Woolf" by Dominick Argento. It covers measures 7 through 10. The top staff is for the voice, with lyrics: "What sort of di-a-ry should I like mine to be?". The bottom staff is for the piano accompaniment. The piano part features a twelve-tone row, with notes numbered 1 through 12. The score includes performance markings such as "a tempo" and "molto tratt.". The key signature has one sharp (F#), and the time signature is 4/4.

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<sup>21</sup> Holly Wrench, “Giving Voice to Virginia Woolf: Finding the Musical Coalescence of Dominick Argento’s *From the Diary of Virginia Woolf*,” (DMA diss., University of Kansas, Music and Dance, 2005), 12.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid., 13.

<sup>24</sup> Melinda R. Smashey, “The Relationship of the Piano Accompaniments to the Texts and Vocal Lines in Dominick Argento’s *From the Diary of Virginia Woolf*” (DMA diss., Conservatory of Music, University of Missouri-Kansas City, 1997), 30.

Notice that the twelve-tone row occurs between double-bar lines at the ends of mm. 6 and 10. In addition to using double-bar lines to mark different sections in the music, Argento also uses them to mark the use of the twelve-tone row throughout the entire song cycle.

After the statement of the row and a repetition of the contemplation theme in mm. 11-12, the piano interlude in mm. 13-16 introduces yet another theme: the “contentment” theme.<sup>25</sup> This theme is characterized by four notes: a rising major sixth followed by a falling major sixth up a whole step. The place in which this theme is introduced is also harmonically stable with an arpeggiated G-major triad. The presence of the “contentment” theme and consonant G-major harmony reflect the pleasure Woolf finds in putting her thoughts into her diary. Notice at the end of the measure is a recurrence of the “writing” motive.

Figure 2: “The Diary,” mm. 13-14, “contentment” theme



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Measure 19 includes the text “solemn, slight or beautiful.” Woolf wishes her diary to envelop any of these things that come into her mind, so Argento chose to illuminate each particular adjective with a song in the cycle. “Hardy’s Funeral” is solemn, “Rome”

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<sup>25</sup> Smashey, 31.

is slight, and “Parents” is beautiful.<sup>26</sup> Not only do these adjectives pertain to the text, but the musical mood of each as well. Argento even writes the word “beautiful” on an ascending triplet, which is how the word is musically represented in the seventh song.

The prime form of the row (with some enharmonic respellings) returns in mm. 23–26 as the singer continues to answer the original question, and in mm. 26–28 the voice part is reduced to one pitch with the marking *quasi parlato* in m. 26 to imply the carelessness of tossing things aside. Immediately thereafter, an oscillating minor third (G#-B) appears in the piano before a strong emphasis on an E-major triad occurs in mm. 31-34. Vocal coach and teacher Gary Arvin called this oscillating minor third the “passage of time” theme.<sup>27</sup> In this case the passage of time refers to the future; Woolf pictures herself in the future looking back at the old diary entries. This theme returns in the final movement, but in this case the “passage of time” theme represents looking into the past, as Woolf does the exact thing she imagined herself doing in the first song.

Figure 3: “The Diary,” mm. 29–30, “passage of time” theme



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<sup>26</sup> Wrensch, 15.

<sup>27</sup> Arvin, Transcription of Lecture on *From the Diary of Virginia Woolf*, 7.

In mm. 31–32, the voice finally gets the “contentment” theme, consisting of the pitches B G# A# C#. Once again, the presence of the “contentment” theme and stability of the harmony portray the satisfaction Woolf will have, but this time it is due to her coming back to reread and reflect on her writings.

As the singer sings the text “into a mould,” the tone row returns in m. 39, once again between double-bar lines and with the pitches alternating between the piano and the voice, though this time it is inverted. It is significant that the word “mould” causes the restatement of the tone row, because it is the tone row that will serve as a mould for the whole cycle.<sup>28</sup> The continuation of the last line of the text is important for it is the answer to her original question: Woolf wants her diary to be a reflection of her life. It is immediately followed by the “contemplation” theme, emphasizing Woolf’s ever-churning mind, and finally finishes with the “contentment” theme in the piano to give the movement a hopeful yet unfinished end.

### **Preparation Suggestions**

1. Label the different themes in your score, both in the vocal and piano lines. It is helpful to see where they are woven into the music, especially when they occur in the piano underneath new text. For example, in mm. 26–28, though the voice is speaking of flinging a mass of odds and ends without looking them through, the piano first plays the “elastic” theme and then transitions into the “contemplation” theme, implying the diary will encompass even those small details, and they may be subconsciously turned over in the mind regardless of their insignificance.

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<sup>28</sup> Oreskovic, 12.

2. Pay close attention to the tempo changes. There are four tempi that recur throughout: quarter note = 84, 76, 66, and 63. They are subtly different, but will affect the emotional (and literal) pace of the song. Don't let the song fall into one steady tempo!
3. Study the first and last movements together. The last movement uses a significant portion of musical material from the first to round out the whole cycle. Consider how the two should be performed differently.

## II. Anxiety (October, 1920)

### Overview

Very quickly in the cycle Argento gives a glimpse of Woolf in a much darker state. This agitated movement is no doubt an example of Woolf experiencing a wave of depression and nervousness. "Anxiety" includes some of the least tonal-sounding melodies of the song cycle, and its presto tempo, unrelenting rhythmic motives, and shifting meter make it the most difficult to learn.

### Text

Why is life so tragic; so like a little strip of pavement over an abyss. I look down; I feel giddy; I wonder how I am ever to walk to the end. But why do I feel this: Now that I say it I don't feel it. The fire burns; we are going to hear the Beggar's Opera. Only it lies all about me; I can't keep my eyes shut... And with it all how happy I am—if it weren't for my feeling that it's a strip of pavement over an abyss.<sup>29</sup>

Reading the text in the original prose form emphasizes how short and abrupt each of the phrases is; the excerpt evokes a sense of furious nervousness, even paranoia. It is well-known that Woolf was a troubled woman and a history of depression already existed

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<sup>29</sup> Woolf, 27-28.


in her family.<sup>30</sup> Especially during the time period prior to her marriage to Leonard, she experienced several nervous breakdowns, bouts of depression, and was subjected to sexual abuse by her half-brother. Regardless of her improved health and literary success in 1920, Woolf obviously still struggled internally for sanity.<sup>31</sup>

## Music


The most striking features of this movement are the rhythm and dynamics. The unrelenting, driving force of the piano's eighth notes and the oscillation between emphasizing 6/8 meter and 3/4 meter portray Woolf's racing mind and quickly shifting thoughts, conveying intense urgency. Two rhythmic motives are utilized to musically represent this; the "racing mind" motive emphasizes 6/8 and the "Why?" motive emphasizes 3/4.

Figure 4: "Anxiety,"

m. 1, "racing mind" motive



m. 4, "Why?" motive



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<sup>30</sup> Woods, 30.

<sup>31</sup> Smashey, 45.



The “racing mind” motive is an apt name for the first motive since it begins the song and creates the agitated setting. The “Why?” motive receives its name from being associated with the word in Woolf’s text, which is then exploited by Argento. Though Woolf only writes the “Why?” twice in her diary entry, Argento chooses to repeat the word (and motive) nineteen times in his setting of the voice part. Additionally, the rhythmic motive repeats in the piano part sixty-three more times throughout the song.

The dynamic range of the piece spans from pianissimo to fortissimo, sometimes shifting between the two within only a couple of measures. The dynamics are constantly growing and fading to depict quickly-changing thoughts and edginess.

The melodic material, though seemingly random, is organized by the tone-row established in “The Diary.” It is, however, inverted and transposed down a whole step to begin on F#: F#, B, C, E, G, C#, D#, F, A#, A, D, G#. The first half of the row (pitches 1–7) is presented in the text “Why is life so tragic,” (mm. 1–3) beginning in the piano and then transferring into the voice part. (There are some repeated pitches.)

Figure 5: “Anxiety,” anacrusis and mm. 1–3, first portion of twelve-tone row

The musical score for Figure 5 shows the anacrusis and the first three measures of the piece. The piano part is written in 8/8 time. The right hand plays a rhythmic motive consisting of eighth notes, while the left hand plays a melodic line. The vocal line begins with the lyrics "Why is life so tragic;". The first seven notes of the twelve-tone row are circled and numbered 1 through 7. The piano part starts with a dynamic marking of *mp*.

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On the text “so like a little strip” (mm. 9–10), pitches 6 and 7 are repeated followed by pitches 8–11. The twelfth pitch, G#, is not stated until m.14 in the piano.

Figure 6: “Anxiety,” mm. 9–10, second portion of twelve-tone row

The image shows a musical score for the piece "Anxiety" by Dominick Argento. It features three staves. The top staff is the vocal line, with lyrics "so like a lit-tle strip" written below it. Above the notes in the vocal line are pitch numbers 6, 7, 8, 9, 10, and 11, indicating a twelve-tone row. The middle staff is the piano accompaniment, marked "sub.P leggiero". The bottom staff is another piano accompaniment line, also marked "sub.P leggiero". The music is in a minor key, as indicated by the key signature (one flat).

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Notice that between the two sections of the tone row (mm. 4-8), the voice repeats Eb and Db on the “Why?” motive, which are notes 6 and 7 of the tone row, effectively connecting the two phrases of text.

The next sections of music (mm. 18–21 and 27–28) are exact inversions of the music above. Using the inversion of the tone row now creates a descending line to depict the text, “I look down.”

A section worth noticing is mm. 49–62 where the harmony briefly calms down. During the text “we are going to hear the Beggar’s Opera” the vocal line and treble line of the piano are in 3/4 while the bass of the piano plays the 6/8 rhythmic motive on a steady Bb, implying that while Woolf experiences everyday activities, her anxiety is

ever-present.<sup>32</sup> Immediately following this text Argento quotes a rhythmic variation of the opening song from *The Beggar's Opera* by John Pepusch and John Gay in the piano's treble line (mm. 59–60). This can be considered the “occupation” theme. The following images compare the quotation and original melody. The top image shows Gay's original melody in g minor. The bottom shows Argento's transposition to b minor with slight rhythmic modification. Notice how the “occupation” theme first emphasizes 6/8 and then 3/4.

Figure 8: “Thro’ all the employments of life” from *The Beggar's Opera*, mm. 5-6

The image shows a musical score for two staves. The top staff is a vocal line in G minor, with a blue box highlighting the first six measures. The lyrics are "all the employments of life, Each". The bottom staff is a piano accompaniment in G minor, starting with a piano (*p*) dynamic. The score is numbered 33 in the bottom right corner.

Figure 7: “Anxiety,” mm. 59–60, “occupation” theme

The image shows a musical score for two staves. The top staff is a piano treble line in B minor, with a blue box highlighting the first six measures. The bottom staff is a piano bass line in B minor. The score is numbered 33 in the bottom right corner.

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<sup>32</sup> Woods, 41.

<sup>33</sup> Pepusch, 5.

It is appropriate to call this the “occupation” theme not only because the melody’s original text speaks about employment, but also in the last movement of the song cycle the *Beggar’s Opera* melody returns as Woolf comments that “occupation is essential.”<sup>34</sup> It is a truly ingenious adaptation of the musical quotation.

The “occupation” theme is repeated several times in the next few measures in both hands of the pianist but by m. 67 it has dissipated back into the incessant “Why?” motive. The movement ends soundly in b minor with the pianist’s left hand holding a low B octave to portray the abyss over which Woolf imagines she is standing.

### Preparation Suggestions

- III. Because the vocal lines are rapid and skip around a lot, it may be useful to take the rhythm out completely and practice the pitches very slowly. This will help with navigating register shifts, vowel equalization, and legato line.
- IV. This movement is by far the most difficult to put together with a pianist. The piano doubles the vocal line every time, so rhythmic precision is essential. Practice the ensemble work at a slower tempo until both performers are comfortable and then increase the tempo slightly. Repeat this process until you are up to a performance tempo that is comfortable for both.
- V. In pieces that are rapid, staccato, and tense such as this one, it is very easy for a singer to allow tension to creep into the voice while pursuing the drama of the subject. Allow the pianist to emphasize the drama through the rhythmic material so as not to strain the voice.<sup>35</sup>

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<sup>34</sup> Woolf, 351.

<sup>35</sup> Woods, 43.

- VI. Mark in your score which measures emphasize 6/8 and which measures emphasize 3/4. There are some measures that include both emphases. In these cases, consider the text as well as what will make the measure easier to count for collaboration with the pianist.

### III. Fancy (February, 1927)

#### Overview

At only 26 measures, this is the shortest movement in the cycle with the smallest amount of text. This song plays with the contrasts between the short phrases, as Argento illuminates Woolf's description of the new idea she has for a play.

#### Text

Why not invent a new kind of play; as for instance:

Woman thinks...<sup>36</sup>

He does.

Organ plays.

She writes.

They say:

She sings.

Night speaks

They miss<sup>37</sup>

Argento included this entry as a look into how Woolf's mind works.<sup>38</sup> The text served as a writing exercise for Woolf, a sort of brainstorming. After the initial question is posed, the description consists of short phrases consisting of a subject and a verb. In her doctoral dissertation, Woods argues that it was the basis on which Woolf's novel *The Waves* (1931) was formed.<sup>39</sup> In an interview, Argento suggested that the man and woman

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<sup>36</sup> This ellipsis was actually written by Woolf in her diary entry.

<sup>37</sup> Woolf, 103.

<sup>38</sup> Garton, 49.

<sup>39</sup> Woods, 51

mentioned are a husband and wife who move through time living their separate lives while “missing” each other.<sup>40</sup> It could even be proposed that Woolf is talking of her husband and herself, though Argento refutes this hypothesis. Regardless of who the characters are, the point is that this peculiar little excerpt actually tells a story.

## Music

The cohesion of this song lies in the application of the tone row in several places as well as the interval of a perfect fourth. Besides these two overarching aspects, the song seems to be a pastiche of different styles. Indeed, Argento succeeds in preserving the short textual phrases by contrasting the harmony, melody, and meter of each.

The piano part in mm. 1–2 and 4–5 are exact inversions of each other. Both start on Ab, and the right hand of the first phrase expands up in fourths while the left hand of the second phrase expands down in fourths. When the vocal line is added to the piano part, both phrases include the tone-row; the first is the inversion and the second is the original.

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<sup>40</sup> Garton, 50.

Figure 9: “Fancy,” piano parts of mm. 1–2 and 4–5

The image shows two systems of piano music for the piece "Fancy". The first system covers measures 1 and 2. The treble clef part starts with a melody marked *f - like a fanfare* and *sfz*, with accents and slurs. The bass clef part provides a rhythmic accompaniment. The second system covers measures 4 and 5. The treble clef part is marked *a tempo* and *f*, featuring triplets and a *sfz* marking. The bass clef part continues the accompaniment. The piece concludes with a *poco ra* marking and a *mp* dynamic.

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Each of the sections of music has a dynamic marking followed by a short description. In the beginning the music is marked *forte – like a fanfare*. This, along with the strongly articulated fourths, creates the sense of a trumpet call, heralding Woolf’s new idea. At “Woman thinks,” the texture completely changes. The marking is *mezzo-piano – dolce* and the vocal line is embellished by Ab-major arpeggiated triplets. Looking through the rest of the movement, every time “She” is mentioned, the piano plays consonant, arpeggiated triplets. This contrasts greatly with “He does,” where there is a harsh DMM7 sonority and the marking *mezzo-forte – deciso*. Notice that the “female” measure is written with flats and the “male” measure is written with sharps to further contrast them.

Figure 10: "Fancy," mm. 8-9

The image shows a musical score for two staves. The top staff is for the vocal line, and the bottom staff is for the piano accompaniment. The score is divided into two sections: mm. 8-9 and mm. 10-11. The first section is marked 'Adagio (♩ = 88) mp-dolce' and the second section is marked 'Andante (♩ = 104) mf-deciso'. The vocal line has lyrics: 'Wom-an thinks. He does.' The piano accompaniment features triplet patterns in both hands. The piano part is marked 'mp' in the first section and 'sub. mf' in the second section.

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In mm. 14-16 the original tone-row is spelled out by the roots of all of the block chords in the piano. In m. 14 there is an Ab major chord, followed by an Eb major chord, which then moves to D major, and so on. Mm. 17-19 break the pattern to present the tone-row in its prime form, alternating between the humming voice and left hand of the piano. Mm. 20-22 continue the row started in mm. 14-16 with block chords. Another interesting feature is that on the text "They miss" the chords in the piano do not quite match up to the vocal line; they literally "miss" each other. The song ends with an echo of the female music used for "Woman thinks," which certainly could be attributed to Woolf and her life's work.<sup>41</sup>

<sup>41</sup> Harriett Sigal, "The Concert Vocal Works of Dominick Argento: A Performance Analysis" (Ph.D. diss., New York University, 1983), 250.



## Preparation Suggestions

1. Though this seems like a simple song compared to the rest, the difficulty lies in the tuning of the voice to the piano. There are several places where the piano plays a major chord and the voice must enter on a pitch that is not in the chord. The hardest places to tune are m. 10 on the word “plays,” where the voice must sing a D over an Eb-major chord, and in m. 11 on the word “writes” where the voice must sing a Bb over a G major chord. In both cases the singer is singing a pitch that is a half-step off from one of the pitches of the chord played by the piano. Spend some extra time focusing on these sonorities to get the tuning in a good place.
2. There are some places where the vocal line does not look like it fits into the piano’s chord, but the pitch is just spelled enharmonically. Circle these places in the score where the voice does fit into the chord, so you know when you should land consonantly with the piano. For example, this occurs in me. 20 where the voice enters on an Eb above a B major chord: Eb is D# respelled.
3. Argento gives the performers much to work with in terms of contrast between the phrases. Experiment with different vocal colors to enhance the contrasts.
4. In the premiere, Janet Baker actually sang the “hum” part in mm. 17–19 on a neutral syllable.<sup>42</sup> This may have been the result of a balance issue. If humming isn’t making enough sound, consider singing the part on a soft [u] or [o] instead.

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<sup>42</sup> Janet Baker and Martin Isepp, *From the Diary of Virginia Woolf*, Dominick Argento (composer), live recording on D’note Classics DND-1019, January 5, 1975, CD.

## IV. Hardy's Funeral (January, 1928)

### Overview

“Hardy’s Funeral” and “Rome” are the most external of all of the movements in the cycle; they are each mostly a collection of observations Woolf has made in her everyday life. This one in particular captures not only her observations but also her sense of humor. The voice and piano have specific characters in this song. The singer, naturally, represents Woolf, who is experiencing the funeral of the famous poet Thomas Hardy, while the piano becomes the environment; it gives the audience a “musical view” of the cathedral, choir, organ, and funeral procession. Though some of the song is humorous, it takes a downturn toward the end where the funeral causes Woolf to reflect on the point of her own life.

### Text

Yesterday we went to Hardy’s funeral. What did I think of? Of Max Beerbohm’s letter...or a lecture...about women’s writing. At intervals some emotion broke in. But I doubt the capacity of the human animal for being dignified in ceremony. One catches a bishop’s frown and twitch; sees his polished shiny nose; suspects the rapt spectacled young priest, gazing at the cross he carries, of being a humbug;...next here is the coffin, an overgrown one; like a stage coffin, covered with a white satin cloth; bearers elderly gentlemen rather red and stiff, holding to the corners; pigeons flying outside,...procession to poets corner;<sup>43</sup> dramatic “In sure and certain hope of immortality” perhaps melodramatic...Over all this broods for me some uneasy sense of change and mortality and how partings are deaths; and then a sense of my own fame...and a sense of the futility of it all.<sup>44</sup>

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<sup>43</sup> In the 1954 publication, “poets corner” is spelled without any punctuation or capitalization. In Argento’s music the phrase is spelled “poet’s corner” with an apostrophe. The real name of the place is “Poets’ Corner,” a section of Westminster Abbey named such due to the high number of poets, playwrights and writers buried there.

<sup>44</sup> Woolf, 120.

This is the largest excerpt of text Argento chose to set. It mostly consists of Woolf describing the events at the funeral and her wandering thoughts during the event. As the funeral processes she finds herself thinking about a lecture about women’s writing and a letter by Max Beerbohm, who was a critic of Woolf’s literature.<sup>45</sup> Her comments on the funeral are quite satirical, calling the pallbearers red and stiff and saying she suspects the pious, young priest of being a fake. But after she admits that her observations may be melodramatic, she turns instead to a melancholy reflection on her own existence.

## Music

There are two musical organizations present in this song. The first one, which spans through the text “for being dignified in ceremony,” is an unmetred and unmeasured section. Marked *soleenne e meditativo* (“solemn and meditative”), the section begins with octaves in the bass of the piano playing “like an intonation.” The first line of music is the tone-row transposed down a half step to begin on G.

**Figure 11: “Hardy’s Funeral,” first line, “chant” theme**

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After the statement of the row, the right hand of the piano plays several open fifths in such a rhythm that suggests the text “Requiem aeternam” (“rest eternal”).

<sup>45</sup> Woods, 68.

Figure 12: “Hardy’s Funeral,” second line, “requiem aeternam” theme



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Argento has attempted to evoke the sense of being at a funeral in a large cathedral by drawing on Gregorian chant-like melodies, which can definitely be heard in the low octaves and open fifth sonorities. In addition to this, he also plays with the contrast of the ceremony and Woolf’s drifting thoughts. The uneven rhythm and wandering nature of the vocal line are present as the stately piano part tries to “maintain the surface dignity of the occasion.”<sup>46</sup>

The second organization starts at the text, “One catches a bishop’s frown,” and is strictly metered in 2/4. The slow sauntering tempo and repetitive sixteenth-dotted eighth motive represent the funeral procession, with Woolf commenting on the people passing by in it. Notice that during mm. 35–53, the piano actually is playing from 3 staves, as would an organist. The bottom staff would be played by the organ’s foot pedals while the top treble staves would be played by the left and right hand. The pianist not only has to

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<sup>46</sup> Sigal, 253.

play off of these three staves, but also must employ all three of the piano's foot pedals, which makes for a very complicated section.<sup>47</sup>

### Preparation Suggestions

1. This is a very difficult and active piece for the pianist, much more so than for the singer. The piano must portray the cathedral, chant, organ, procession, even the flying pigeons. Make sure to give your pianist ample time to prepare the score.
2. Since there is no meter in the chant section, really take liberties with time there. Take full advantage of the fermatas, as if you were singing in a large cathedral and needed the sound to clear before moving on to the next phrase.
3. Make sure, as with the other movements, to translate the descriptions printed in the music. There are several places where the style is imperative to understanding the text. For example, the very beginning of the vocal part is, "Yesterday we went to Hardy's funeral." Any knowledgeable performer would make this dramatic and sorrowful, yet the dynamic marking of mezzo-piano Argento writes *senza tristezza* ("without sadness"). He does not want the phrase to be dramatic, but instead candid and dry, for Woolf goes on to describe how she lets her mind carelessly wander.
4. Oreskovic sent her recording of the song cycle to Argento and asked him to critique it for her. In a letter back, he wrote specifically that "Hardy's Funeral" was "generally too slow and too earnest. I'd like more humor ('un po' divertito') to prevail, a sad amusement but nothing serious."<sup>48</sup> Make sure that this movement

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<sup>47</sup> Kihoon Yang, "Preparation and Performance of Song Cycles and an Opera by Dominick Argento: A Guide for the Pianist" (DMA diss., University of Maryland, College Park, 2001), 48.

<sup>48</sup> Argento, letter to Oreskovic. 1976.

doesn't get too melodramatic and instead exploit the contrasts between the drama of the piano part and the playful words of the vocal part.

## V. Rome (May, 1935)

### Overview

Like "Hardy's Funeral," "Rome" is a song full of external observations. Woolf comments on the various things she sees while sitting in a café in Rome, while Argento's music strives to set the scene. Also similarly as in "Hardy's Funeral," the song turns to internal reflection at the end as Woolf considers an event in her life, creating a juxtaposition of Rome's carefree environment and Woolf's inner conflict.

### Text

Rome: tea. Tea in café. Ladies in bright coats and white hats. Music. Look out and see people like movies... Ices. Old man who haunts the Greco... Fierce large jowled old ladies... talking about Monaco (; about) Talleyrand. Some very poor black wispy women. The effect of dowdiness produced by wispy hair. (Rome. Sunday café... Very cold...) The Prime Minister's letter offering to recommend me for the Companion of Honour. No.<sup>49</sup>

The Order of the Companions of Honour was instituted in 1917 by George V to recognize men and women for services of national importance.<sup>50</sup> It definitely would have been (and still is) an achievement to receive, but Virginia Woolf obviously did not want the recognition.

This excerpt is the only one in which Argento revises the text in ways other than simply omitting certain phrases; he adds repetitions and moves around text (shown in

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<sup>49</sup> Woolf, 240.

<sup>50</sup> "Companions of Honour," The official website of British Monarchy, accessed April 1, 2014, [www.royal.gov.uk/MonarchUK/Honours/CompanionsofHonour.aspx](http://www.royal.gov.uk/MonarchUK/Honours/CompanionsofHonour.aspx).

parentheses above), as well as even manipulating the subject in one of the phrases.

Because of the differences between Woolf's original diary entry and Argento's edited version, it is important to see the text in the original form. The brackets indicate text that Argento omitted.

Rome: tea. Tea in café. Ladies in bright coats and white hats. Music. Look out and see people like movies. [Abyssinia. Children lugging. Café haunters.] Ices. Old man who haunts the Greco.

Sunday café: [N. and A. drawing.] Very cold. [Rome a mitigated but perceptible Sunday.] Fierce large jowled old ladies. [Q.] talking about Monaco. Talleyrand. Some very poor black wispy women. The effect of dowdiness produced by wispy hair. The Prime Minister's letter offering to recommend me for the Companion of Honour. No.

A question to consider: how does Argento's editing affect the original entry? In the original format it is more obvious that Woolf has written two different sets of observations. (There are actually two *additional* sets of observations in the original diary entry: one about Lake Trasimen and one about Brafani.) With Argento's editing we are given one long observation instead of two. A comparison of these two formats also reveals Argento's edits to the "Sunday café" observations. The first edit places "Sunday café" and "Very cold" later in the text, coming directly before the thought about the Prime Minister's letter. Instead of "Sunday café" being a place in which Woolf is sitting, it seems to be included in the long list of things Woolf sees. In other words, "Sunday café" is changed from setting to object. The other edit occurs where Argento takes "Q." out of the text and combines "Fierce large jowled old ladies" and "talking about Monaco." In her diary entries, Woolf frequently abbreviated the names of her family and close friends. "Q." indicates Woolf's nephew, Quentin. (Earlier in the entry, she refers to "N. and A. drawing," which represent Woolf's sister and niece, Nessa and Angelica

respectively.) With the omission of “Q.,” instead of Quentin speaking about Monaco and Talleyrand, the “fierce large jowled old ladies” are speaking about them. Argento also repeats the word “talking” to create an image of a cluster of gossiping old women.

Argento’s editing certainly affects the presence of people. It is evident in the original entry that Woolf is surrounded by her family. In addition to the mentioning of her sister and her children, it is known that Woolf went on this trip with her husband, Leonard. It is possible that Vanessa’s husband, Clive, was also there. When Argento edits out the other present members of Woolf’s family, it invokes a sense of isolation for Woolf. In a way this absence of people creates a contrast between the colorful chaos of Rome and Woolf sitting alone observing all of it.

The result of Argento’s edits is a rambling stream of short phrases that creates a pastiche of sights. While the short sentence structure is similar to that of “Fancy,” the vivid imagery depicted is much more similar to that in “Hardy’s Funeral.” The positive vibrancy of Woolf’s external observations offer ample opportunities for acting during performance, especially to provide contrast with the last two sentences of the text, which turn to negative thoughts about not accepting the Companion of Honour.

## Music

The similarities to “Hardy’s Funeral” do not end with the text. Indeed, the music in “Rome” also shares many traits, including the role of the pianist as scene-setter. In “Hardy’s Funeral,” the piano takes on several roles to describe the scene, from the chant-like introduction to the organ-playing in the middle. In Rome, the piano “comes off sounding like a café tune, particularly in the middle of it, marked, ‘like a mandolin.’”<sup>51</sup>

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<sup>51</sup> Garton, 23.



This song follows an ABA form, where the piano’s “café music” accompanies the A section (mm. 1–21, 51–70) and the “mandolin music” supports the B section (mm. 22–51). It is significant that this is the first movement in the cycle that utilizes a key signature. The three flats suggest Eb major/c minor, and indeed the c-minor tonality is confirmed in the first three measures. “Rome” is definitely the most tonally-stable song of the cycle, with the possible exception of “Parents,” though “Rome” begins and ends firmly within a key (c minor), whereas “Parents” has a tonally-ambiguous conclusion.

Figure 13: “Rome,” mm. 1–7, beginning of A section: “café music”

Lento e languido (♩ = 58 ca.)  
*tratt. .... a tempo* *mp* *mf* *mp*

Rome:

*tratt. .... a tempo*

*mf*

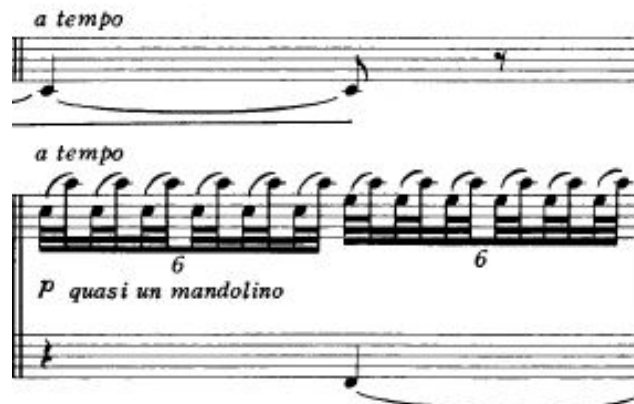
*tratt. .... a tempo* *mf* 3

tea. *tratt. .... a tempo* Tea in ca - fé. 3

*pp*

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Figure 14: “Rome,” m. 22, beginning of B section: “mandolin music”



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While the song can be divided into an ABA structure and has many tonal traits, these are almost exclusively characterized by the piano. The piano part depicts the café and mandolin with melodious tunes gravitating toward the key of c minor, while the voice part seems to be almost independent of its counterpart. This represents the singer being detached from the setting, merely an observer. The vocal part’s short, speech-like phrases seem to glide over the piano part with conflicting pitches and differing rhythms, only lining up with it in a few spots. This is because the vocal part sings six complete renditions of the tone row in different forms throughout the song. Every pitch in the vocal part has a place in the row (though keep in mind that Argento repeated pitches every once in a while to accommodate the text). The rows in the vocal part can be seen in the following measures: mm. 2–21, mm. 24–30, mm. 31–38, mm. 44–51, mm. 52–63, and mm. 63–70. The row statements are complete, though the end of a row does not always necessarily coincide with the end of a musical or textual phrase. For example, the second row finishes in the middle of the phrase “Old man who haunts the Greco.” The second

row finishes on the word “the” and the third row begins with the word “Greco.” The fifth and sixth rows begin seamlessly as well in the middle of m. 63, where the fifth row finishes on the last syllable of “offering” and the sixth begins on the word “to.”

There are two of the rows however that emphasize the overall c-minor tonality. The first row, which occurs in mm. 2–21, is in transposed retrograde. Because of this, the last three pitches of the tone row are F#, G, and C, sung on the repetitions of “Rome.” These pitches can be considered in the context of c minor as scale degrees #4, 5, and 1, and are placed above predominant, dominant and tonic sonorities in the piano, which bring the phrase to an authentic cadence in c minor. This is one of the ways that Argento utilized twelve-tone rows in tonal composition.<sup>52</sup> The same technique is used in the last row at the very end of the piece on the repetitions of “No.”

In m. 21, Argento uses the word “Music” to transition into the B section. The B section (mm. 22–38) is characterized by piano accompaniment that mimics a mandolin as Woolf continues to describe more observations. The tone row is present both in the piano and the voice. In the voice, the tone row appears for the second, third, and fourth times. The second row is in transposed retrograde and the latter two are in transposed retrograde-inversion.

The piano part of the B section does much more than merely accompany the voice as a mandolin. Underneath the surface of the strumming mandolin is the presence of the original tone row in its prime form. Considering the first movement once again, the prime form of the row is associated with Woolf asking herself, “What sort of diary should I like mine to be?” and her answer of wanting it “to resemble a deep old desk...of odds and

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<sup>52</sup> Garton, 25.

ends.” This musical recall represents that the observations of Rome are just some of the odds and ends that would end up in Woolf’s diary.<sup>53</sup> This relationship is further developed through the piano interlude in mm. 39–44, where the piano part greatly resembles the piano part in “The Diary” in mm. 23–25, though it is displaced by an octave.<sup>54</sup>

Figure 15: “Rome,” mm. 39–43, quotation of mm. 23–25 of “The Diary



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The interlude contains the first nine pitches of the original tone row in its prime form (with some enharmonic spellings); the voice sings the last three pitches in the following measure. The addition of rising fourths in the bass add some tonal context for the interlude, implying a descending sequence that is interrupted in m. 43. Contrary to the piano part in “The Diary,” the piano interlude in “Rome” boasts a *fortissimo* dynamic and *pesante* (“heavy”) marking in m. 39, creating an almost abrasive recollection of the diary.

<sup>53</sup> Smashey, 111-12.

<sup>54</sup> *Ibid.*, 111.

When it is compared to the phrases that precede it however, the loud and heavy interlude can be attributed to Woolf's ever-growing passion for observation, which Argento emphasizes by adding *poco a poco crescendo* that goes from m. 26 all the way through to the piano interlude in m. 39. The recollection in the piano interlude is really the destination of the entire B section. Directly after the interlude, the voice part returns to soft dynamics and Argento asks for a *dolce* vocal color as Woolf calms down.

It is significant to note that this section also bears some striking resemblances to a short interlude from Act III of Puccini's *Tosca*.

Figure 16: Interlude in Puccini's *Tosca*, rehearsal number 31

The image displays a musical score for Puccini's *Tosca*, rehearsal number 31. It consists of two systems of music. The top system is a piano interlude in 2/4 time, marked "LARGO CON GRAVITÀ" with a tempo of quarter note = 52. The piano part features a descending sequence of rising fourths in the bass (circled in blue), a descending tritone in the soprano (circled in red), and descending minor seconds in the inner voices (circled in orange). The bottom system is a vocal part for Casamatta, with the lyrics: "casamatta, in modo però di poter spiare quanto succede sulla piattaforma) up a position L. from which she can see what takes place on the platform.)" The vocal line is marked "espressivo" and "pp". The piano accompaniment continues with similar harmonic patterns. The page number 55 is visible in the bottom right corner.

Beginning with the tempo marking of quarter note = 52, the interlude presents the same descending sequence of rising fourths in the bass (shown in blue), descending tritone in the soprano (shown in red) as well as some of the descending minor seconds in the inner voices (shown in orange). In addition to the musical similarities, *Tosca* is an opera that takes place in Rome. In his lecture on the song cycle, Professor Gary Arvin

<sup>55</sup> Giacomo Puccini, *Tosca* (New York: G. Ricordi & Co., 1905), 323.

commented that he did not believe it was a coincidence that “the heroine of Tosca was also a fiercely strong-willed woman who ultimately chose to commit suicide rather than lose her freedom.”<sup>56</sup> This is yet another clever quotation by the composer.

The anacrusis to m. 52 brings back the A section’s “café music,” though this time an octave lower, and Woolf seems to return to her original relaxed state of observing. The text takes an unexpected turn inward to self-reflection as she considers the Prime Minister’s recommendation for the Companion of Honour. It is abrupt how this thought comes up, as if she cares about it as little as the blasé people she watches outside on the street. Argento adds a crescendo as the phrase goes on, mounting to a *forte* at the end of “Honor,” but noticing the differing dynamics in the voice and piano it is as if Argento wants the “café music” to eventually drown out this negative thought. The soft dynamics of the last few measures imply Woolf simply stating without passion or anger that she would not be accepting anything.

### Preparation Suggestions

1. Because the tone rows in the vocal part are mostly independent of the piano accompaniment, it can be hard for the singer to find and tune the pitches. Write each tone row on staff paper, taking out the repeating notes to practice the intervals on a neutral syllable. Learning the rows out of context will help with tuning, since many times the piano does not play the singer’s pitches.
2. The pianist and singer should take advantage of the *lento e languido* marking and the abundance of triplets in this piece. These features are meant to encourage a relaxed, almost lazy mood.

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<sup>56</sup> Arvin, 12.

3. Argento is careful to place rests in between each of the short phrases to emphasize the presence of short, separate thoughts. Make sure to observe them. For example, in mm. 8–11, he places a breath mark and rest in between “Ladies in bright coats” and “and white hats.” He is insistent on separating those two thoughts, so they should not be sung in one breath.
4. This movement and the next produce the largest contrast in the entire cycle. “Rome” is almost completely external observation while “War” is virtually all internal introspection. The former is meant to create a relaxed, content setting whereas the latter cultivates anxiety and fear. It is important for the performers to emphasize the contrast through color choices and presentation.

## VI. War (June, 1940)

### Overview

The last three songs of the cycle are meant to be grouped together to become one uninterrupted *scena*, all featuring texts from within the last year of Woolf’s life.<sup>57</sup>

According to Argento, the first of the songs, “War,” is “in effect, a long, long cadenza for the voice.”<sup>58</sup> This dramatic and vocally-demanding song attempts to portray Woolf’s inner anxiety induced by the horrors of World War II. It also includes a dark foreshadowing of her imminent death.

### Text

This, I thought yesterday, may be my last walk...the war—our waiting while the knives sharpen for the operation—has taken away the outer wall of security. No echo comes back. I have no surroundings...Those familiar

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<sup>57</sup> Wrench, 26.

<sup>58</sup> Roger Scanlan, “Spotlight on Contemporary American Composers,” *NATS Bulletin* 32 (February/March 1976): 52.

circumvolutions—those standards—which have for so many years given back an echo and so thickened my identity are all wide and wild as the desert now. I mean, there is no “autumn,” no winter. We pour to the edge of a precipice...and then?<sup>59</sup> I can’t conceive that there will be a 27<sup>th</sup> June 1941.<sup>60</sup>

The threat of World War II to Woolf and her family was very real in 1940. By June, the Germans had control of Belgium, Holland, and France, and air raids were a common occurrence in England.<sup>61</sup> The Woolfs’ London home had recently been partially destroyed by a bomb, though fortunately at the time they had been living at their summer home in Rodmell.<sup>62</sup> Furthermore, Woolf’s husband, Leonard, was Jewish, and both of their names were apparently on an “arrest list” made by the Gestapo in preparation for an invasion in July 1940.<sup>63</sup> The Woolfs expected no mercy from the Nazis were an attack to take place, so they made their own preparations for suicide. At first they had planned to commit suicide by inhaling exhaust fumes from their car, but they eventually obtained lethal doses of morphine from Woolf’s brother Adrian Stephen.<sup>64</sup>

With the thought of war ever on her mind, Virginia Woolf constantly used it as a subject in her writing. She commented frequently on the sounds of air raids and bombs. In her diary entry from September 11, 1940 she wrote about watching a plane be shot down from the sky.<sup>65</sup> While there is a considerable amount of vivid imagery of the horrors of World War II in Woolf’s diary entries, Argento decided to forgo the external observations and instead chose an excerpt that illuminates Woolf’s internal feelings.

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<sup>59</sup> This ellipsis was written by the author.

<sup>60</sup> Woolf, 324-5.

<sup>61</sup> Smashey, 119.

<sup>62</sup> Woods, 109.

<sup>63</sup> Wrensch, 26.

<sup>64</sup> Smashey, 119.

<sup>65</sup> Woolf, 334.



It is apparent from Woolf's commentary on the war that she had become fairly obsessed with the absence of a future, both for her physical self as well as her literary and artistic self. Of course the presence of war greatly diverted the public's attention away from the arts, and Woolf no doubt felt the effect. Within this particular excerpt she speaks of the war taking away their security. This "security" not only means the physical security of her family and country, but her mental confidence as a writer. She goes on to say that "no echo comes back," implying that there is no audience to critique her work and "thicken her identity" as a writer.<sup>66</sup> The loss of "those standards which have for so many years given back an echo" caused her to lose her grounding and confidence as an artist, and in turn may very well have triggered her mental health to decline. There is certainly a deliriousness as she considers the lack of future for her writing and herself. "I can't conceive that there will be a 27<sup>th</sup> June 1941" is obviously a menacing omen, since she would kill herself before she saw that date.<sup>67</sup>

Argento's excerpt omits a fair amount of text from the June 22, 1940 diary entry, but it is worth noting that though this entry is actually a combination of two entries, one from June 22 and one from June 27. The two entries were edited and combined by Leonard Woolf when he published the diaries. This is why it makes more sense that Virginia Woolf wrote that she could not conceive there being a 27<sup>th</sup> June 1941, since she was writing on the same date in 1940.

## Music

The song, which has no time signature or bar lines, consists of three independent and contrasting lines: the voice, pianist's right hand, and pianist's left hand. The pianist's

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<sup>66</sup> Woolf, 325.

<sup>67</sup> Ibid.

right hand has no key signature while the left hand and voice parts have a key signature of three sharps. The pitches of all three lines are comprised from the tone row. Argento instructs the pianist to “keep [the] sustaining pedal depressed as indicated throughout to pick up undertones and sympathetic vibrations,”<sup>68</sup> thereby creating an eerie “echo” that is very significant to the text.

The pianist’s role in this song is not so much to accompany the singer, but instead to supply motives that represent the sounds of war that are ever-present in Woolf’s mind. The right hand is concentrated in the very high registers of the piano and plays repetitions of a single pitch in rapid rhythmic spurts with a decreasing dynamic. The notes increase in length and the addition of a *rallentando* cause each statement to slow down. Smashey dubs this the “siren” theme, suggesting it represents the sound of an ambulance siren or air raid alarm.<sup>69</sup> I believe however a more appropriate name for the motive is the “machine-gun” theme, representing its rapid fire. The rhythmical slowing of the theme can perhaps represent a growing distance between it and Woolf, whether it be literal or mental.

Figure 17: “War,” first line, “machine-gun” theme



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<sup>68</sup> Argento, *From the Diary of Virginia Woolf*, 25.

<sup>69</sup> Smashey, 120.

It appears randomly throughout the song, many times occurring at the end of the voice part's phrases though a few times occurring simultaneously. The left hand of the pianist only plays two pitches the entire time: G# and C# in low-registered octaves. This motive is called the "war" theme, since the singer sings it on the text "the war" on the second system of the second page of the score.<sup>70</sup>

Figure 18: "War," sixth line, "war" theme



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This theme is then echoed throughout the piece with varying rhythm and dynamics, and with the dominant to tonic movement of G# to C#, it becomes like a march that subtly implies a tonal center of C#. Argento stated in an interview with Eric Garton that this C# pedal is a foreshadowing of the last song, in which a series of chords are played over a C# pedal.<sup>71</sup> The "war" theme appears sporadically throughout the song, with a variation of dynamics that may imply the differing degrees of intensity with which Woolf considers the war. At times, the war is very present in her mind, and in the music this is represented by loud dynamics and harsh articulation. There are also times when

<sup>70</sup> Smashey, 127.

<sup>71</sup> Argento, from Garton, 57.

she is not thinking about it as much, so the dynamics are very soft, with long rhythmic durations. Regardless of the soft dynamics, however, the strings continue to vibrate throughout due to the depressed sustaining pedal, suggesting that the war is always looming.

The vocal line is completely independent of the piano, only very rarely coinciding rhythmically. In setting the text, Argento's main objective is "to portray Woolf's changing disposition as her thoughts shift from reflective and composed to racing and uncontrollable."<sup>72</sup> He achieves this by contrasting the dynamics and articulations of portions of phrases, many times separating them by fermatas over rests. Observing these rests allows the performers to create uncomfortable suspended silences as the singer listens for the "echo" that Woolf so desperately wants to hear. Argento chose to repeat portions of phrases and words to portray this echo, which ironically does not exist. Instead, the singer must produce her own echo.<sup>73</sup>

The first sentence of text is stated two and a half times, tonicizing A major on "This I thought yesterday" and g minor on "may be my last walk." In these four and a half lines of music, the singer's part includes pitches 4–10 of the retrograde tone row while the piano is comprised of the rest of the pitches. In the last repetition of the text, the singer says only the first part of the sentence before interrupting herself with "the war," introducing the "war" theme in the voice that is then echoed throughout in the left hand of the piano for the rest of the song.

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<sup>72</sup> Smashey, 129.

<sup>73</sup> Argento, letter to Oreskovic, February 3, 1976.

The text “our waiting while the knives sharpen for the operation” outlines a D major triad with increasingly faster rhythmic durations and a *crescendo* until the phrase ends very abruptly and simultaneously with the “war” theme in the piano. Smashey names this melodic and rhythmic material the “panic” theme, since its snowballing and repetitive features create the image of Woolf’s increasingly desperate and insecure feelings about the impending war.<sup>74</sup> The *accelerando* and *crescendo* is so quick and intense that the phrase’s end is almost abrasive. Because the accelerating rhythm is so pertinent to this theme, I believe that it is significant to label that in the theme name, so “increasing panic” theme is a more appropriate name. The abrupt end of the theme is followed by a fermata over a rest, as if the singer is waiting, desperately hoping that someone is listening and will respond to her. Instead, she is forced to continue by herself. Argento sets several of the text phrases with modified versions of the “increasing panic” theme, portraying Woolf’s mounting anxiety as she desperately searches for an audience (and a purpose) in life.

Figure 19: “War,” fifth and sixth lines, “increasing panic” theme



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<sup>74</sup> Smashey, 127

Argento continues to play with echoes in the bottom line of the second page of the score where the singer sings “the war” and “has taken away,” the first time loudly and the second time softly as a self-created echo. On the third line of the third page the singer sings the text “No echo comes back” and it is followed by another fermata. Once again the singer must provide her own echo, which is done using a modified version of the “increasing panic” theme.

As stated earlier, there is an abundance of fermatas over rests following the most of the singer’s phrases, as if she is waiting for an answer. Sometimes she makes her own echo, and other times she is defeated and just continues to the next phrase. For example, at the top of the fourth page of the song she sings, “I have no surroundings,” with markings of *forte* and *agitato*, cultivating desperation and wildness. Argento then writes a fermata over a rest and *lunga*. This rest can be interpreted as her searching for a response. When none is given, instead of doing it herself, she just continues on to explain that “those familiar circumvolutions” are no longer present to give her confidence; the war has taken them away. The music of “those familiar circumvolutions” is lifted from of the “chant” theme from “Hardy’s Funeral.”

The music from “those standards” to “...as the desert now” includes the most passionate singing in the entire song. On the bottom of page four Argento even writes *disperato* as the singer moves an interval of a minor ninth to color the word “wide.” Following this, the phrase “wild as the desert now” is brought to life by a modified version of the “increasing panic” theme wrought with dissonant intervals instead of triads. Note that this is one of the few places where the “machine-gun” theme appears simultaneously with voice part.

The passionate outcry of her existence at the present time contrasts with a dim outlook of the future; when Woolf looks forward she sees nothing, implied by her saying that “there is no ‘autumn,’ no winter.” Argento sets the text prior to this statement, “I mean” on a descending half-step, calling back a rhythmically-augmented version of the cycle’s very first theme: the “writing” theme. The following words are set to part of the original tone row introduced in “The Diary,” though transposed. It could be implied that not only does Woolf not see an autumn or winter in the future, but she also doesn’t see her diary or herself.

Figure 20: “War,” seventeenth line, quotes from “The Diary”

The image shows a musical score for a vocal line and piano accompaniment. The vocal line is on a single staff with a treble clef, marked with a piano (*p*) dynamic and the tempo marking *molto cantabile*. The lyrics are "I mean, there is no 'au - tumn,'". The piano accompaniment is shown on a grand staff (treble and bass clefs) with a piano (*p*) dynamic. The score includes a fermata over the final note of the vocal line.

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After another wild outcry using the modified “increasing panic” motive, Woolf asks the dark question, “and then?” This is set on a rising diminished fifth, contrasting with the “war” motive’s interval of a perfect fourth.<sup>75</sup> Additionally, the “war” motive echoes the voice in the piano.

<sup>75</sup> Wrench, 30.

The answer to her question is quite grave: she can't conceive that there will be a 27<sup>th</sup> June 1941 because she will be dead. The sentence is set with the same melody (transposed) as the beginning of the song, though this time the "war" motive accompanies the voice. The left hand of the piano and voice part join together for "nine-teen for-ty-one," all on G# with increasing dynamics. Woods compares this repeating G# to "the tolling of a death knell."<sup>76</sup>

Figure 21: "War," penultimate line, "death knell" theme



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The piece ends with two repetitions of the "machine-gun" theme and two strikes of the G# "death knell." The pianist is instructed to hold the last G# for a long time and then go directly to the next movement. The pitch G# has been established throughout the song as a dominant figure, so its use at the end signifies that Woolf's end is not quite here yet, but it is inevitable.

<sup>76</sup> Woods, 120.



## Preparation Suggestions

1. One of the most underrated yet important aspects of this song is the presence of fermatas, especially those over rests. There are twenty-five places that include fermatas, and twenty-one of those occur when the singer is not singing. Do not be afraid of taking time and expanding these silences. They suspend time and emphasize the absence of a meter.
2. Like in “Rome,” the voice part is independent of the piano part. It would be helpful to circle the few places where pitches in the piano part and voice part match. Other than that, the singer has to rely on intervals to learn the melody.
3. Take out the rhythm in those phrases that include the “increasing panic” theme and learn the pitches by themselves. Then add back in the rhythm. This process will make it easier to navigate the large intervals at a fast pace, like “of security” on the top of the third page.
4. Noelle Woods asks several questions pertaining to the sound effects of the piano that are worth considering: “Where are the sounds coming from? Are they real or in her head? How would she react?”<sup>77</sup> She is adamant however about not allowing the dramatic presentation to step over the line to melodrama. Plan presentational gestures and expressions that are effective but not over the top.
5. As always, Argento is very specific in his articulation markings, so be sure to translate and observe all of them. Almost every phrase has a different one and they help to create contrast between each of Woolf’s quickly shifting thoughts.

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<sup>77</sup> Woods, 121.

## VII. Parents (December, 1940)

### Overview

Instead of moving forward into the grim future, the cycle moves seamlessly into the past. Using the sound of G# from “War,” its repetitions are reinterpreted as scale degree three of E major, which becomes the key of “Parents.” The cycle’s penultimate song finds Woolf looking back at her father’s old memoirs and remembering her childhood. “Parents” is abundant with romanticized melodies and lush, consonant harmonies as Woolf reminisces about her loving mother and father, but just as she seems to become genuinely content in her reverie, she is jolted back to the present by the sounds of war.

### Text

How beautiful they were, those old people—I mean father and mother—how simple, how clear, how untroubled. I have been dipping into old letters and father’s memoirs. He loved her: oh and was so candid and reasonable and transparent...How serene and gay even, their life reads to me: no mud; no whirlpools. And so human—with the children and the little hum and song of the nursery. But if I read as a contemporary I shall lose my child’s vision and so must stop. Nothing turbulent; nothing involved; no introspection.<sup>78</sup>

England was very much in the midst of war at the end of 1940. Though an actual invasion had not yet taken place, air raids were a common occurrence. The Woolfs had permanently moved to their summer home in Rodmell to escape the perils of London. Though the war was raging on, Quentin Bell described Virginia Woolf during this time as “almost imperturbable.”<sup>79</sup> She had just finished her final novel, *Between the Acts*, in November and was generally in good health and high spirits.<sup>80</sup> At the time of this diary

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<sup>78</sup> Woolf, 346.

<sup>79</sup> Bell, 461.

<sup>80</sup> Smashey 139.

entry she had begun reading memoirs about her parents in their younger years, causing Woolf to reminisce about her childhood.

It is well-known that Woolf had a turbulent upbringing. Death plagued her family, beginning when Woolf's mother, Julia Stephen, died in 1895 at the age of 49; Virginia was just 13 years old. Woolf's father, Leslie Stephen, became a widower for the second time and apparently did not fare well in the coming years. He lived in "a state of despairing, oppressive, guilt-ridden gloom."<sup>81</sup> Fortunately Leslie and Virginia developed a connection through a love of literature, and he was responsible for much of her education.<sup>82</sup>

The memories brought Woolf back to a time before death and despair, quite possibly to a time even before she was born. Her diary entry describes her parents as young, simple people who were very much in love. While Woolf had very warm memories of her parents when she was a child, now that she was a grown woman with life experience, it must have been quite a discovery for her to now understand how content they were together. This text is really a combination of observation and introspection; Woolf was reminiscing about her parents externally, but also subtly comparing their life to hers internally. She comments on their life being "simple...clear...untroubled," and with this in mind, the reverie can be understood as bittersweet. This argument is strengthened by the end of the entry. She forces herself to stop reading so as not to lose the visions of her parents as a child, which are also simple

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<sup>81</sup> Bell, 42.

<sup>82</sup> Wrensch, 32.

and untroubled. She does not want her newly discovered thoughts of her parents to cause her to reflect on how troubled and turbulent her life has become.

Argento used almost the entirety of this short diary entry, only leaving out one short phrase. In setting this text he chose to edit only by including a few repetitions of the first phrase, “how beautiful they were.”

## Music

The music of “Parents” contrasts greatly with that of “War.” “War” represents Woolf’s present thoughts of panic and instability through absence of tonality, dissonant melodies, unrelated piano and vocal parts, and quickly shifting dynamics and articulations. The first 32 measures of “Parents” represent Woolf’s memories of warmth and contentment through lush tonal harmonies, tuneful melodies, complementary piano and vocal parts, and an overall delicate and sweet environment.

This portion of music can be divided up into three parts. Mm. 1–9 constitute the A section. A tonality of E major is established very strongly in the beginning, and though it includes some chromatic passing and neighbor tones, it remains in E major for the whole section. The piano part can be described as a stately, Elgar-esque processional that includes a descending bass line with complementing soprano and alto melodies in the right hand.<sup>83</sup> The intertwining treble melodies are representative of Woolf’s parents existing harmoniously together as life (represented by the bass) marches onward; the voice part naturally represents Woolf reading about them. Though the melody is syllabic and set in a natural speech pattern, its diatonic features creating an appealing legato line.

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<sup>83</sup> Woods, 138.

This few measures of music and text is repeated several times throughout the song as a sort of refrain.

Figure 22: “Parents,” mm. 1–2, refrain

Largo ed affettuoso (♩ = 69 ca.)

*pp*

How beau-ti-ful they were, \_\_\_\_\_

*pp*

*quasi pizzicato*

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Mm. 5–6 contain the tone row, though it is expertly integrated into the tonal framework that it is virtually imperceptible. It is in its original form, transposed up a half step.

Figure 23: “Parents,” mm. 5–6, tone row

*poch. dim. e rall.*

sim-nle. how clear. how un-troub-led. \_\_\_\_\_

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 12

*p*

11

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Following the statement of the tone row is a refrain of the first phrase, “how beautiful they were,” which is sung twice. An *accelerando* in m. 9 leads into the B section, which spans from mm. 10–13. Woolf speaks directly about reading her father’s memoirs and commenting on how much he loved her mother. According to Smashey:

Soon after his wife’s death, Leslie Stephen devoted an entire volume to Julia’s memory. The purpose of the book was to allow their children, several of whom were quite young at the time of her death, to understand and appreciate their mother. This volume, which was published under the title *The Mausoleum Book* in 1977, is probably the book Woolf describes in her diary as her father’s “memoirs.”<sup>84</sup>

The relationship of the piano and voice changes in this section to illustrate Woolf reading this memoir. The melody of the piano (shown in blue) represents her father writing about her mother, and then the voice part (shown in orange) echoes the piano’s melody to represent Woolf reading the words.

Figure 24: “Parents,” mm. 10–11, voice echoing piano melody

The image shows a musical score for the piece "Parents" from the opera "The Diary of Virginia Woolf". It features two systems of music. The top system is the vocal line, and the bottom system is the piano accompaniment. The vocal line is highlighted with an orange box, and the piano melody is highlighted with a blue box. The lyrics are "I have been dip-ping in-to old let-ters". The tempo is marked "Semplice e dolce" with a quarter note equal to 50 beats per minute. The dynamics are marked "mp". There are triplets in both the vocal and piano parts.

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<sup>84</sup> Smashey, 145.

In mm. 14–22, there is a return to the A section. Mm. 14–15 present some transitional material where the piano’s right hand returns to playing two complementary lines to represent Woolf’s parents as she continues to comment on her father, though the bass line is different from the original A section. Mm. 16–17 repeat the tone row from mm. 5–6, bringing back the stately bass part from the beginning, and the refrain reoccurs in mm. 18–19. Mm. 20–22 repeat that transitional material with the complementary triplets in the piano, but also includes the original bass line, more closely tying it to the A section.

Mm. 23–26 present new musical material with a compound meter of 12/16 and a marking of *tempo di valse*, accompanying Woolf’s thoughts of how gay and uncomplicated her parents’ life together seemed to her. The piano’s waltz emphasizes the “carefree and romantic impression” Woolf has formed of her parents.<sup>85</sup> Argento sets the text “no mud; no whirlpools” in simple meter to clash against the compound meter of the piano, which Wrensch suggests is a comparison of Woolf’s complicated life to her parents’ simple one.<sup>86</sup> But actually the more important reason for setting m. 25 in simple meter is to accentuate another statement of the tone row, which is shared between the voice part and tenor part of the piano.

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<sup>85</sup> Smashey, 149.

<sup>86</sup> Wrensch, 34.

Figure 25: "Parents," mm. 25–26, tone row

The image shows a musical score for the piece "Parents" by Dominick Argento, measures 25-26. The score is written for voice and piano. The vocal line is in the upper staff, and the piano accompaniment is in the lower two staves. The key signature is one sharp (F#), and the time signature is 4/4. The lyrics are: "no mud; no whirl-pools. Sim-ple, clear, gay, se". The tone row is indicated by circled notes in the vocal line, with numbers 2, 3, 6, 7, and 10 above them. The piano accompaniment features a complex rhythmic pattern with many sixteenth notes. Performance markings include *pp* (pianissimo) at the beginning and end, and *poco dim. e rall.* (poco diminuendo e rallentando) in the middle. Measure numbers 1, 4, 5, 8, 9, 11, and 12 are marked below the piano part.

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The B section returns in mm. 27–30, transposed up a half step. Mm. 31–32 bring back the transitional material from mm. 14–15, though the singer is just singing “O” instead of text, perhaps representing the “little hum and song of the nursery,” but definitely implying that Woolf is completely caught up in her reverie, soothed by the memories she has conjured.

These memories are abruptly cut short by a resurgence of the “machine-gun” theme from “War” in mm. 33–34. This is obviously a musical edit by Argento. There is nothing in the original text that suggests Woolf is thinking about war while she is writing this entry, but there must be something that causes her to decide not to read her father’s memoirs any longer. So in this case, the reoccurrence of the “machine-gun” theme is not so much a literal representation of war as it is a representation of Woolf being pulled back to the present time.



Figure 26: “Parents,” mm. 32–34, recall of “machine-gun” theme

The musical score for "Parents" (mm. 32-34) is presented in three staves. The top staff is the vocal line, starting with a fermata and the word "niente". The middle staff is the piano right hand, featuring a "machine-gun" theme with triplets and a tempo marking of quarter note = 108. The bottom staff is the piano left hand, also featuring triplets. Dynamics include *fpp*, *fp*, *p*, and *fpp*. Performance instructions include "tranco p" and "rall. come prima".

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Mm. 35–40 are a huge contrast to the rest of the song. Instead of the warm, romantic music of the nineteenth century, the performers present a stark, speech-like statement of the twelve-tone row, representing the twentieth century. Marked with *semplice* and *quasi parlato*, the singer says that she must stop reading to preserve her “child’s vision,” for she would not want to look back and tarnish those warm memories with the complications of her present life. In mm. 38–40 the piano recalls the “death knell” theme from “War,” but with diminishing dynamics. This could represent the troubles of the present, including the war and Woolf’s own struggle with life, receding into the back of her mind.

Instead of ending the song with the end of the text, Argento chooses to bring back the refrain once more in mm. 41–43. This time however the piano plays the melody, as if the memoirs sitting in Woolf’s hands are enticing her to continue reading since she has briefly forgotten her troubles. Woolf begins to be drawn back into reading but stops again, and the musical phrase is left unfinished. The pianist is instructed to allow the held

chord to fade away completely and then start the eighth and final song immediately. In doing so, the final movement is actually a reaction to the end of “Parents.” Instead of continuing to read, she stops and says, “No: I intend no introspection.” Therefore it is imperative that “Parents” moves seamlessly into “Last Entry.”

Figure 27: "Parents," mm. 35–44, tone row, "death knell" theme, and refrain

*Semplice* ( $\text{♩} = 50 \text{ ca.}$ )  
*mp quasi parlato*

But if I read as a con-tem-po-ra-ry I shall lose my child's vi-sion

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8

and so — must stop. Noth-ing tur-bu-lent; noth-ing in-

9

1 2 3 4 5

6

volved; no in-tro-spec-tion.

How beau-ti-ful — they... —

*Allow to fade away completely; begin No. 8 immediately thereafter.*

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## Preparation Suggestions

1. “Parents’ demands a keen sensitivity to the balance between delusion and reality; tranquility and denial.”<sup>87</sup> Argento creates a beautiful musical environment that is very difficult to leave, like someone not wanting to come back from a relaxing vacation. The performers must play with the line between delusion and reality, especially on the last page as Argento forces the performers to flip-flop between Woolf’s states of mind.
2. Because this song does not involve intense shifting emotions, it can end up being portrayed by one emotion throughout. Write in a different emotion or attitude for each new phrase so your presentation continues to change and doesn’t become one-dimensional. For example, instead of singing the whole first page as “happy,” try singing mm. 1–3 as “sentimental,” m. 4 as “explanatory,” and mm. 5–6 as “content.” Each of these adjectives add to the general “happy” attitude, but the subtle emotional shifts will add depth to the presentation.
3. Some of the ascending figures in the vocal part are very difficult for a mezzo-soprano, especially due to the diminuendos. Practice the figures in mm. 14–16 and 31–33 without the diminuendo on a steady *mezzo-forte* to get comfortable with the register shifts and then add in the correct dynamics.
4. Due to its placement late in the song cycle as well as its delicate nature, “Parents” can be one of the most difficult songs to perform, especially when it follows “War.” Make sure to release the breath constantly throughout so as

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<sup>87</sup> Woods, 145.

not to become tense when trying to achieve soft dynamics and delicate colors in the voice.

## VIII. Last Entry (March, 1941)

### Overview

The final movement of *From the Diary of Virginia Woolf* is a representation of Woolf's final struggle with mental illness. The text of "Last Entry" is taken from Woolf's final diary entry in the 1954 publication, written just twenty days before her suicide. The song produces no new musical themes, instead recalling material from each of the seven preceding songs to present a culmination of Woolf's life through her diary and a musical conclusion to Argento's cycle.

### Text

No: I intend no introspection. I mark Henry James' sentence: observe perpetually. Observe the oncome of age. Observe greed. Observe my own despondency. By that means it becomes serviceable. Or so I hope. I insist on spending this time to the best advantage. I will go down with my colours flying...Occupation is essential. And now with some pleasure I find that it's seven; and must cook dinner. Haddock and sausage meat. I think it is true that one gains a certain hold on sausage and haddock by writing them down.<sup>88</sup>

[...to come back after a year or two, and find that the collection had sorted itself and refined itself and coalesced, as such deposits so mysteriously do, into a mould transparent enough to reflect the light of our life.]<sup>89</sup>

Woolf's diary entry, written on March 8, 1941, shows that she knows her end is inevitably near. She is well aware that she is struggling with depression and mental illness, but she refuses to let it take her without a fight. She marks Henry James' sentence

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<sup>88</sup> Woolf, 351.

<sup>89</sup> Ibid., 13.

regarding constant observation, something she has done her entire life. She comments that if she observes and acknowledges her own depression that she may be able to make use of it, hopefully. She accepts that she will die soon, but she will take advantage of the time she has left by doing things she enjoys, including writing, since “occupation is essential,” and caring for her home and husband by cooking dinner. In a part of the same entry which Argento chose not to set, Woolf writes, “Suppose I bought a ticket at the Museum; biked in daily and read history. Suppose I selected one dominant figure in every age and wrote round and about.”<sup>90</sup> Even in her disheartened state she considers enjoyable activities to pass the time and comes up with an idea for a new writing project.

This diary entry is almost completely reflection on herself, though she ironically says that she means no introspection, and when she realizes that she has indeed been reflecting internally, she moves her focus to the external as she writes of cooking dinner. Her writing takes a turn back toward introspection with her last sentence as she considers grasping the concept of sausage and haddock more fully after writing down the words.

It is here that Argento creates an even stronger internalization with bringing back a portion of text from the first entry. In setting the text, he chooses to repeat the last phrase of the March 8 diary entry, “by writing them down,” each time taking out a word until only left with “writing,” which creates the impression of a trance.<sup>91</sup> The thought of “writing” then transports the listener back to Woolf’s original reason for keeping a diary: to return to it after some time and find a reflection of her life within it.

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<sup>90</sup> Woolf, 351.

<sup>91</sup> Woods, 156.

In forming the excerpt for the music, Argento creates a text that is very much like that of “Parents.” Most of the text is introspection into Woolf’s thoughts and feelings, but then she is jolted back to reality by her decision not to allow any more introspection. In both cases she is drawn back in: in “Parents” by the original melody in the piano, and in “Last Entry” by the idea of “writing.” Where they differ slightly is that in “Parents,” she leaves her reverie very quickly to return to the present, implied by Argento’s cutting short the last phrase, but in “Last Entry” Woolf actually does return to a time where she was content and happy. This is represented by the recapitulation of a large section of text from the first diary entry.

### **Music**

According to Smashey, the song is divided into three sections. The first section spans mm. 1–27 and introduces music that is unique to the song. In the beginning, the right hand of the piano sets up a steady rhythm that emphasizes the big beats of the 12/8 measure and plays nothing but consonant major triads. The left hand plays an arpeggiated C#-major triad that strongly implies a tonal center of C# major. This pedal does not change until the pick-up to m. 12. The right hand plays a series of major triads on the big beats whose roots make up the notes of the tone row. For example, the triad in the piano’s right hand in m. 1 is a C#-major triad, then the triad in m. 2 is a G#-major triad, and in m. 3 there is a G-major triad. Every measure includes one triad except for m. 10, which contains two, and the pattern completes the entire tone row in m. 11. The voice part consists of many syncopated repetitions of “No,” though Woolf only writes it once in her diary. The repetitions of the word along with the voice part’s inability to line up rhythmically with the constant piano represents Woolf’s struggle for sanity and her

incapability of obtaining it. “It was a symptom of Virginia’s madness that she could not admit that she was mentally ill,” writes Quentin Bell in his biography of Woolf.<sup>92</sup>

Argento reflects this in his text-setting. Even when the voice part is singing on the big beats, the singer sings in duplets over the compound meter in the piano, as if she refuses to conform to a normal life.

Figure 28: “Last Entry,” mm. 1–4

*Risoluto ed appassionato* (♩ = 60-63)

1 2

3 4

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<sup>92</sup> Bell, 224.



A portion of the “contemplation” theme returns in mm. 12–15 as Woolf’s words imply self-discovery, first in the voice part and then in the middle of the piano part. Argento brings the text “By that means it becomes serviceable” to a musical pause, implying that perhaps Woolf has found a positive solution to her problems. But her text falters with “Or so I hope,” and the driving piano part and conflicting repetitions of “No” return as she struggles once again. Mm. 17–27 are similar to the opening measures in voicing, though the pedal tone has switched from C# to B. In m. 25, as Woolf speaks of occupation being essential, Argento cleverly recalls the “occupation” theme from “Anxiety” in the right hand. At this point, Argento chooses to repeat the word “observe,” representing Woolf’s life-long activity which she has turned into an occupation. “Through observation she is able to maintain an objective distance,” and Argento repeats the word “observe” as if Woolf is trying to force herself to observe so as not to let self-reflection “lead to greater anguish.”<sup>93</sup>

The repetitions of the word “observe” shift the song to the next section, mm. 28–58, during which material from each of the preceding seven songs is recalled in the piano. The recollection begins in m. 28 with the “requiem aeternam” theme from “Hardy’s Funeral,” one of the movements most closely associated with Woolf’s external observation. In m. 29 there is a short, subtle repetition of the “occupation” theme from “Anxiety.” Mm. 30–33 bring back the “café music” from “Rome,” the other movement very closely associated with external observation. Mm. 34–36 are comprised of the opening music from “Parents,” a song that is more equally distributed between observation and reflection. Then mm. 37–38 bring back the gender-differentiated themes

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<sup>93</sup> Wrensch, 36.

on the text “Woman thinks...He does” from “Fancy,” a song in which Woolf is internally thinking of a new project, but also quite possibly reflecting on her own life and marriage. After a grand pause in m. 39, mm. 40–41 recall the “death knell” theme from “War,” heralding Woolf’s impending death. This song is almost completely an internal one where she is reflecting on her own fate. Thus, the themes are recalled in order of external observation to internal reflection. The singer continues to stress how she must “observe” during all of these times, but when death comes there will be no more observation.

The appearance of the “death knell” theme in the midst of Woolf’s observations implies that death is always looming, regardless of her work. Argento chooses not to have the singer sing “observe” over it because she will not observe her own death. Indeed, Woolf said it would be the “one experience [she] will never describe.”<sup>94</sup> It is as if Woolf stops to hear the death knell and acknowledges that her death will come soon, but she will finish what she has to before it happens. Measure 42 brings back music from the very beginning of the song cycle, the first time the tone row appeared, but this time the text is light and observational as Woolf speaks of cooking dinner. Behind this simple text and return to earlier music seems to be a serenity and peace, as if Woolf has come to terms with her impending death. Indeed, the original “contentment” theme returns in m. 48 as Woolf considers haddock and sausage meat.

Just as the singer is pulled back into the memoirs by the piano’s melody in “Parents,” she is once again pulled into a trance by the words, “by writing them down.” She repeats the phrase, each time dropping a word until she is left only with “writing.”<sup>95</sup>

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<sup>94</sup> Bell, 226.

<sup>95</sup> Woods, 156.

It is here that the dotted eighth-sixteenth half-step motive is paired with the word “writing,” which was introduced as the “writing” theme in the very first song.

Figure 29: “Last Entry,” mm. 53–59, emergence of “writing” theme, “passage of time” theme

The musical score consists of two systems. The first system shows the vocal line and piano accompaniment for measures 53-59. The vocal line has lyrics: "had-dock by writ-ing them down... by writ-ing them down... by writ-ing them...". The piano accompaniment features a dotted eighth-sixteenth half-step motive. Performance markings include *poco pib f*, *mf*, and *mp*. The second system continues the vocal line with lyrics: "by writ-ing... writ-ing... (... to come)". The piano accompaniment includes markings for *p*, *legato*, *rall. sognando*, and *dim.*

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The recurrence of the theme is a gentle musical reminder of her primary goal in writing the diary: to come back after a time and reflect upon the life within it.<sup>96</sup> Argento goes further than just implying this goal; he replicates the final 16 measures of the first song, just as Schumann did in *Frauenliebe und –leben*, to complete the cyclical motion. The piano however does not sound the last note of the “contentment” theme in the final

<sup>96</sup> Wrench, 37.

two measures. While the cycle is completed, quite like her diary, this unfinished phrase represents the one significant event that still remains for Woolf: her death.<sup>97</sup>

### Preparation Suggestions

1. Because the repetitions of “No” follow no particular pattern, it may be useful to mark the strong beats in the vocal part to help keep time.
2. Measure 16 is literally a pause in the chaos of the first 27 measures of music. Take advantage of the abundance of fermatas to really suspend time there. The same goes for the grand pause that occurs in 39. Do not be afraid of the silence; it is quite unexpected when the measures before include a huge crescendo to *fortissimo*.
3. Consider that “Last Entry” is similar to “Parents” in that there is a blurring of the boundaries between reality and delusion, accentuated by Argento in his musical setting. The movement begins very much in reality, but where does it turn to delusion? Does delusion take over with the resurgence of text and music from “The Diary?” Or does it happen sooner, perhaps after the recall of the “death knell” theme?
4. In m. 49 Argento marks the music *mezzo parlato* (“half-spoken”). Use this through the following four measures to really contrast with the legato lines he writes in mm. 53–58. The *mezzo parlato* section almost acts as a recitative to the aria that is resurgence of music from “The Diary.”

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<sup>97</sup> Smashey, 178.

5. Something to consider is the difference between the end of “The Diary” and the end of “Last Entry.” It is virtually the same music (with small differences in the piano part), so how should one present them differently in performance?

## Conclusion

The first steps to learning a piece of music are to learn the text, pitches, and rhythm. This however is just the beginning. To give a genuine performance the singer must delve deeper into the score (the composer’s intentions) and character (the librettist’s intentions). This paper attempts to provide a source which allows the reader to further discover the intentions of the composer and librettist through background information as well as highlighting nuances in the score. The deeper the knowledge a performer has of these intentions, the more successful she will be at portraying them to the audience in performance. The central themes of *From the Diary of Virginia Woolf* are self-reflection and self-discovery, and the work itself is meant to inspire those themes in the audience themselves. Argento states this quite literally in an article published in *The NATS*

*Bulletin*:

I believe that art—and music especially—is a form of communication; however, I think it is less a matter of communication between the artist and the viewer/reader/ or listener than a matter of communication between the viewer/reader/ or listener and himself, provoked by the artist’s skill.<sup>98</sup>

In other words, Argento states that the point of art is to allow the audience to reflect upon themselves and let the art move them. It is the artist’s job to skillfully guide them to self-reflection and self-discovery through performance. The score of *From the*

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<sup>98</sup> Dominick Argento, “The Composer and the Singer” (*The NATS Bulletin*, May, 1977), 18-19.

*Diary of Virginia Woolf* is rich with musical and textual details that make it such a moving experience for both the performers and audience. It is my hope that illuminating many of these aspects will encourage singers and pianists to give a more informed performance of the work.

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