# VIRGIL THOMSON AND KENNETH KOCH: TEXT SETTING IN THE SONGS *MOSTLY ABOUT LOVE*

BY

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Abstract

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The songs of Virgil Thomson, a major musical figure in twentieth-century America, go largely unsung. As a composer, Thomson took special care in setting words to music. This is evident in his more popular works, the operas set to librettos by Gertrude Stein, *Four Saints in Three Acts* (1928) and *The Mother of Us All* (1947). The success of these works supports the importance of a close examination of Thomson's song repertoire.

This study examines four songs by Virgil Thomson set to poetry by Kenneth Koch. These four songs comprise the set *Mostly About Love* (1959): "Love Song," "Down at the Docks," "Let's Take a Walk," and "A Prayer to Saint Catherine." My approach utilizes the writings of Virgil Thomson and focuses on his use of "word-groups" discussed in his book *Music With Words: A Composer's View*. I examine the poetry of Kenneth Koch and the collaboration between Thomson and Koch. I provide a poetic and musical analysis to offer insight into the relationship between words and music in these songs. The purpose of this study is to reveal the lasting value of these songs, encourage their performance, and bring attention to Thomson's song literature.

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Thank you to my parents, Gary and Margie Thorne, for their patience, support, and confidence in my musical pursuits. Thank you to Victor Crome, my future husband, who showed me it was possible and inspired me to finish.

In memory of my grandmother,

Annebeth Louise Thorne

April 13, 1922–November 29, 2007

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## INTRODUCTION

Virgil Thomson feared that only his operas, those composed in his long-time collaboration with Gertrude Stein, would survive him.[1] He is best known for the operas *Four Saints in Three Acts* (1928) and *The Mother of Us All* (1947), but his musical legacy remains in diverse genres. As a student of Nadia Boulanger, he wrote *Sonata da chiesa* (1926), unusually scored for E-flat clarinet, D trumpet, viola, F horn, and trombone. In the orchestral genre, *Symphony on a Hymn Tune* (1928) shows his flair for referencing popular and church tunes, a stylistic trait that continues through his later work. His score to the documentary film *The Plow That Broke the Plain* (1936) includes cowboy songs and blues. The documentary film score, *Louisiana Story* (1948), for which Thomson won a Pulitzer Prize in 1948, is based on Acadian tunes and Southern hymns. His musical "portraits," mostly for piano, were composed from life as subjects sat for Thomson while he composed their likeness in music. Chamber music, ballet, choral music, and song are among the many works in the Thomson catalogue.

Thomson's musical style is straightforward, diatonic, often playful, and nostalgic in its suggestion of hymns or popular tunes. However, perhaps his most special gift was the way he set words to music. His method of text setting according to sounds and patterns of speech is the hallmark of his vocal music. Thomson's book, *Music With Words: A Composer's View*, contains his method of text setting and his recommendations to composers.[2] From candid remarks on opera to discussion of syllable stress, this book illuminates Thomson's own style as much as it recommends it to other composers.

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[1] Anthony Tommasini, "4 Saints, Yes, But 2 Sides," *New York Times*, 1 December 2002, A33.
[2] Virgil Thomson, *Music With Words: A Composer's View* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1989).

Virgil Thomson met poet Kenneth Koch (1925-2002) in the late 1950s while looking for a librettist for his next opera. Koch is best known for being a part of the New York School of Poets, a group influenced by European avant-garde artists and inspired by New York's Abstract Expressionist painters.[3] Koch's creative output includes twenty books of poetry, a novel, a book of stories, numerous plays, and works of nonfiction about teaching poetry. Thomson took interest in Koch's writing and they subsequently collaborated on three works: an opera libretto (1959), *Angelica* (which Thomson ultimately never set); a duet, *Collected Poems* (1959); and *Four Songs for Alice Esty*, published as *Mostly About Love* (1959).

Through an analysis of Koch's poems and Thomson's musical settings of them, I will provide the performer with an understanding of the relationship between words and music in the four songs of *Mostly About Love*: "Love Song," "Down at the Docks," "Let's Take a Walk," and "A Prayer to Saint Catherine."[4] An examination of Thomson's method of text setting using word-groups and his application of this method in these songs will reveal the texts' suitability to their settings. A comparison of Koch and Thomson's styles and methods will show that both poet and composer are committed to the primacy of the words themselves, that is the surface of the language.

The first chapter examines Thomson's method of text setting through an examination of his book *Music with Words: A Composer's View*. Thomson's method recommends creating word-groups with the words of a text before setting it to music. Thomson's definition of word-groups will be analyzed using the acoustical elements of

[3] The New York School of poets generally refers to poets John Ashbery, Kenneth Koch, Frank O'Hara, and James Schuyler.

[4] Thomson, *Mostly About Love, I-IV* (New York: Schirmer, 1964). Each song was published under a separate cover. I, "Love Song," 3-7; II, "Down at the Docks," 2-7; III, "Let's Take a Walk," 3-6; IV, "A Prayer to Saint Catherine," 3-6.

verbal prosody and the elements of poetic versification. Examples of Thomson's word-groups are included to further define how they are created and what they accomplish in setting text to music. It will be shown that Thomson's word-groups are a representation of a text's spoken utterance.

Interviews with composers Richard Hundley and Scott Wheeler will close Chapter 1. These composers, who knew and were mentored by Virgil Thomson, can speak first-hand to his approach to text setting and how that translates into their own music.

The second chapter is an analysis of two of Thomson's songs: "Take, O, Take Those Lips Away" (1956), with text by Shakespeare, and "Susie Asado" (1926), with text by Gertrude Stein.[5] Thomson offers word-groups for both of these song texts in *Music With Words*. These word-groups will be compared to his musical settings of the text, providing an example of how Thomson applied his word-group method to his own compositions. Analyzing texts in two disparate styles emphasizes the breadth of Thomson's method of text setting. This analysis will form the basis for the original word-groups created in Chapter 4 for texts set in Thomson's songs *Mostly About Love* (1959).[6]

The third chapter examines the work of Kenneth Koch, poet and author of the texts Thomson set to song in *Mostly About Love*. Thomson creates this set of four songs from four of Koch's poems, "To You," "Down at the Docks," "Spring," and "Chanson."[7] After a brief background of Koch's poetry, the importance of the surface of language to

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[5] Virgil Thomson, "Take, O, Take Those Lips Away," in *Shakespeare Songs* (New York: Southern, 1961), 4-5; Thomson, "Susie Asado," in *Cos Cob Song Volume* (New York: Boosey and Hawkes, 1962), 13-15.
[6] Virgil Thomson, *Mostly About Love*.
[7] Kenneth Koch, "To You," "Down at the Docks," "Spring," from *Thank You and Other Poems* (New York: Grove, 1962); Koch, "Chanson," unpublished typescript, MSS 29A/196/56, Virgil Thomson Papers, Irving S. Gilmore Music Library, Yale University.

Koch's poetry will be discussed. This discussion establishes the style of the poems in Thomson's set. The discussion of Koch's work will be followed by an elaboration of the working relationship between Koch and Thomson and a comparison of the styles of their work.

The final chapter offers an analysis of Thomson's four songs in the set *Mostly About Love*: "Love Song," "Down at the Docks," "Let's Take a Walk," and "A Prayer to Saint Catherine." Each song will receive a poetic and a musical analysis. The musical analysis will include my own word-groups and a discussion of how these newly created word-groups relate to Thomson's setting.

My experience as a singer defines in large part the technical and musical approach taken in this project. As a singer, one lives in two worlds: the world of words and the world of music. The world of words, languages, and poetry is a world of signs and signification, where the performer translates one meaning into another. The world of music is also a world of symbols, but offers another meaning when heard as absolute sound. Thomson's word-groups offer a singer a way to negotiate between these worlds. Through his word-groups he takes the words of a poet and represents visually how these words should be presented verbally. It is Thomson's conviction that the oral presentation, or how words are spoken, gives words meaning. Starting from the viewpoint that it is the singer's obligation to offer this meaning to an audience, Virgil Thomson has created a method to help the singer to communicate better with the listener. My purpose in this dissertation is to build on Thomson's work by offering the performer a deeper comprehension of Thomson's compositional process at the word level for a more informed performance.

## Chapter 1: VIRGIL THOMSON'S *MUSIC WITH WORDS*

### I. Introduction to the book *Music With Words*

Virgil Thomson's ability to set texts as chronologically and stylistically diverse as the songs of Shakespeare and the abstract texts of Gertrude Stein (these latter in two full-length operas) makes his career singular and his text-setting ability extraordinary. The methodologies and musical sensibilities that inform Thomson's text settings are incorporated in Thomson's last book, *Music With Words: A Composer's View*. Published in 1989, the book contains his advice to composers on writing vocal music. Because the book is a compilation of essays, its format does not present topics sequentially, nor does it provide a comprehensive compositional method. However, the book offers invaluable insight into Thomson's method of text-setting and his effort to establish a standard "method of operation" for vocal writing in English.[1]

In this chapter, I examine portions of the book that deal with Thomson's method of text-setting, primarily the creation of "word-groups" that, for Thomson, are essential in establishing how words will best be understood when spoken or sung. While Thomson includes opera and choral music in his analysis of vocal writing, the present discussion will be limited to his discussion of art song and will focus on the use of word-groups in setting poetry in song. Thomson's employment of word-groups will be central to my analyses of the composer's songs in subsequent chapters.

First, I will establish Thomson's purpose in setting words to music and his definition of word-groups will be presented. Then, my interpretation of word-groups will

[1] "I must explain at this point my aim, which is to establish a method of operation for vocal writing in English or in American. These languages can be considered for singing, I think, as identical." Virgil Thomson, *Music With Words: A Composer's View* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1989), 3.

be offered and the elements that compose word-groups will be explored. Thoughts on text-setting from composers Richard Hundley and Scott Wheeler will follow the interpretation.

### A. "The Marriage of Words and Music"

The first chapter of Thomson's book *Music With Words* discusses the history of the relationship between words and music from ancient Greece to Tin Pan Alley.[2] In comparing classical music to other styles of music, Thomson establishes that, while in "popular" music a composer and lyricist may work together, in art song music must be "fitted" to the words.[3] In his view, in performance the words of a concert song are not always easy to understand.[4] Thomson complains of what he perceives as the preference in classical vocal music for beautiful sounds over the comprehensibility of words.[5] One such example comes from a concert that he reviewed sung by a young Victoria de los Angeles: "Here is a vocal delight unique in our time. I must say that this delight, being attained wholly through vowel vocalism, was not accompanied by much clarity of enunciation."[6] Thomson's complaint leads to the main point of his vocal writing method: that making the text comprehensible should be the main priority of a composer. "Clarity of meaning is his [the composer's] first objective; second, a reasonable amount of feeling may be laid on. But not overindulgently, we hope, since enunciation must always take precedence."[7]

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[2] Thomson, *Music With Words*, 1.
[3] "In the world of serious music, on the other hand, it is poems that get music fitted to them." Ibid.
[4] "With art music, on the other hand, beauty of tone may well be the objective. One has to have words to write a concert song, but in performance these are not always easy to distinguish." Ibid.
[5] Ibid.
[6] Thomson, "Golden Throat," *New York Herald Tribune,* 25 October 1950, reprinted in *A Virgil Thomson Reader* (New York: Dutton, 1981), 346-347.
[7] Thomson, *Music With Words*, 2.

Thomson seeks a system of vocal writing in which the words are clearly understood and the music enhances the words' meaning. To establish such a system Thomson writes that the text must take precedence: "there has to be in the marriage of words and music a basic compatibility in which the text's exact shape and purpose dominate the union."[8] To achieve such a union between words and music, Thomson urges composers to analyze the text by dividing it into word-groups. Through this practice, a composer visually establishes how the text is spoken—the "idiomatic enunciation" of a text that will best convey the text's meaning.[9]

Thomson proposes that the meaning of a text is conveyed in how the text is spoken, and thus he directs composers to speak the text aloud before setting a text to music. Speaking the text aloud, according to Thomson, reveals word-groups that exist in the text. "Laying the text out in word-groups will at some point help toward clarifying both the plain meaning (if there is one) and its expression, its rhetoric."[10] I interpret Thomson's "plain meaning" as semantic meaning—the relation between signs and the things they refer to—and his "rhetoric" as syntactic meaning—the relation of signs to each other in formal structures. Establishing these word-groups, then, reveals the meaning of the text, both semantic and syntactic.

**B. Word-Groups**

Thomson's exact definition of word-groups is difficult to ascertain, because no single definition is presented. Instead, various definitions and examples are interspersed

[8] Ibid.
[9] "I suggest that beginning composers, and those whose native language is not ours, practice this analysis of texts into meaningful word-groupings as an exercise in the idiomatic enunciation of English. It cannot guide their melodic invention, but it will surely help toward giving to any text its maximum of plain speaking." Thomson, *Music With Words*, 20.
[10] Ibid., 74.

throughout *Music With Words*. In this section I will present Thomson's definitions of word-groups as he presents them and offer an explication of each definition.

**1. Word-Groups as Phonetic Units**

"…They [word-groups] are merely phonetic units that when strung out in a given order do produce a verbal discourse, and inevitably some kind of meaning."[11] Thomson emphasizes that word-groups represent an oral phenomenon and that this occurrence produces meaning: speaking the words conveys something to the listener that is unclear when the text is only silently read.

**2. Word-Groups That Function Like Words**

"These groups sound like words, and they operate like words in the sense that they have accents and durations that cannot, at least in English, be altered or interrupted without changing the meaning. Nor can they be punctuated, though compound words may accept a hyphen."[12] Dictionary.com defines "word" as "a unit of language, consisting of one or more spoken sounds or their written representation, that functions as a principal carrier of meaning."[13] According to Thomson, word-groups are units of language that convey meaning. Thomson's definition also contains elements of versification (accents) and prosody (duration) that will be addressed later in the chapter.

While Thomson's definition of word-groups above points out their similarities to words, his following statement asserts their differences: words offer multiple meanings, but word-groups focus those meanings into communication. "But the meaning of a discourse is not the result of their [words] looking in print like a string of words. It is the

[11] Ibid., 21.
[12] Ibid., 2-3.
[13] *Dictionary.com*, s.v. "word," Random House, http://dictionary.reference.com/browse/word (accessed March 29, 2009).

result of their being organized into word-groups."[14] If "discourse" is defined as a large unit of language based in a specific context, then Thomson's statement emphasizes that the meaning of this large unit of language, or discourse, is not established word-by-word but rather by the words' relation to each other, or their organization.[15] The way to establish the words' relation to each other is by word-groups, which are the visual representation of the verbal organization of words.

### 3. Meaning as Transmitted by Words Pronounced as Word-Groups

"Word-groups and groups of word-groups, which are where communication begins, are not indicated in the usual layouts of written or printed language...Groupings must therefore be determined by the speaker or, if they are to be sung, by the composer, before they can be presented to a listener. They are the minimal transmission units of either speech or song."[16] Thomson states that while words do have meanings, they merely denote, while feelings and thoughts are conveyed by word-groups.[17] Thomson's specific example refers to John Milton's sonnet, "On His Blindness:" "Nowhere in these lines is any single word meaningful. Only word-groups have that kind of reality."[18] Thomson's example indicates that the emotional power conveyed by Milton's sonnet is only possible when read as a whole. Thomson inadvertently touches on another point: the poetic

[14] Thomson, *Music With Words*, 2.
[15] Bronwen Martin and Felizitas Ringham, *Dictionary of Semiotics* (New York: Cassell, 2000), 51; Thomson, *Music With Words*, 16-17.
[16] Thomson, *Music With Words*, 17.
[17] "Words, translated into sounds, do have meanings, often several quite different meanings; but the transmission of thoughts or of feelings requires that the words be pronounced (or read) as word-groups. Ibid.
[18] Ibid., 3.

language is one in which the sound of the words is raised to the same level of importance as the meaning of the words themselves.[19]

### C. Prosody and Versification

The core of Thomson's book relates to two systems: *prosody*, the acoustic phenomenon of how one says words, and *versification*, how written words are organized on the page. These two systems have overlapping definitions and are sometimes used synonymously: Dictionary.com offers multiple definitions of prosody. It can mean "the science or study of poetic meters and versification," or "a particular or distinctive system of metrics and versification," or "the stress and intonation patterns of an utterance."[20] Because of Thomson's focus on the spoken utterance, the last definition, which is also the linguistic definition, is the most pertinent to this analysis.

Versification is the structure that governs words when they are set in poetry. In English, the standard measure of versification is an accentual-syllabic structure, and this structure is accounted for in metric feet.[21] In this structure, the pattern of accents is recognized, such as iambic and trochaic, and the number of syllables is accounted for by the number of feet in a line, such as pentameter and tetrameter.[22] Together these feet describe a line of poetry and scansion can be made to analyze these metrical elements, for instance, the meter of a poem can be iambic pentameter. Versification is related to

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[19] See also Kenneth Koch, *Making Your Own Days: The Pleasures of Reading and Writing Poetry* (New York: Touchstone, 1998), 20. "If we take the idea of a poetic language seriously, it can be defined first as a language in which the sound of the words is raised to an importance equal to that of their meaning, and also equal to the importance of grammar and syntax." Ibid.

[20] *Dictionary.com*, s.v. "prosody," Random House, http://dictionary.reference.com/browse/prosody (accessed February 28, 2009).

[21] David Baker, "Introduction," *Meter In English: A Critical Engagement*, ed. David Baker (Fayetteville: The University of Arkansas Press, 1996), xv. This book contains essays in response to Robert Wallace's "Meter in English" in which he proposes that accentual-syllabic verse is the only available metrical counting in English.

[22] Thomas R. Arp and Greg Johnson, *Sounds and Senses: An Introduction to Poetry*, 11th ed. (Boston: Thomson Wadsworth, 2005), 199-200.

prosody in that its stress or accent is orally demonstrated by the elements of prosody. The primary elements of prosody are frequency (which includes both pitch and timbre), duration (length), and intensity (loudness).[23] These elements of prosody are produced by the acoustical characteristics of speech, not always according to the meter of versification on the page.

Thomson's explanation of these issues is complicated by the fact that he uses the terms prosody and versification interchangeably. First, he describes verbal sounds as the same elements of prosody above: "returning to phonemes, individual sounds in any language can vary in length, loudness, in timbre (vocal color), and in pitch."[24] But later in the book he includes elements of versification in his description of verbal sounds.

> Let me repeat that the attributes of speech-sound are: *stress*, or accentuation, which in English is unvariable; *cadence*, which is extremely variable – but only within the limits of the third attribute, *quantity*, since certain sounds are considered extensible and others not.[25]

The "attributes of speech-sound" are in fact the prosodic elements of frequency, duration, and intensity, but Thomson lists them as stress, cadence, and quantity, combining the two systems of prosody and versification. The following points clarify the characteristics Thomson lists:

- Stress (accentuation) is a feature of versification.[26] The accentuation that Thomson refers to is syllabic stress, or the syllable that receives the primary stress of a word. Thomson also calls the primary stress of a word

[23] Susan Glaser, "The Missing Link: Connections Between Musical and Linguistic Prosody," *Contemporary Music Review* 19, no. 3 (2000): 136.
[24] Thomson, *Music With Words*, 4.
[25] Ibid., 9. Italics mine.
[26] Thomson uses the words "stress" and "accent" interchangeably.

"tonic accents."[27] Accents in versification are measured in metric feet as iambic, trochaic, anapestic, dactylic, and spondaic. Accents in versification are demonstrated through the elements of verbal prosody.

- Thomson defines cadence as the "up-and-downness" of a phrase.[28] What he calls cadence can also be defined as rhythm, which in speech is the natural rise and fall of the language.[29] Cadence combines both versification and prosody in that it is caused by the difference between accented and unaccented syllables, but it can also be caused by a change in pitch, intensity, or, what Thomson calls quantity in the passage above, duration.
- Quantity is, as Thomson points out, an attribute of speech-sound.[30] Quantity or duration denotes the length of a particular sound, and is an element of prosody not of versification.[31]

While Thomson describes the systems of prosody and versification interchangeably, modern linguistic scholars define them as two distinct systems: prosody denotes the qualities of an utterance based on the phonetic sounds of speech; versification denotes the metrical structure of a text based on numerical organization of stresses and syllables. Thomson brings these systems closer by creating word-groups, a representation of how the words are verbally spoken. By separating the definitions of prosody and

[27] "You cannot with impunity change the tonic accents of English words or word-groups, because if you do you change the meaning." Thomson, *Music With Words*, 8. Here, "tonic accent" is not to be confused with the musical term, in which emphasis is determined by pitch.
[28] Ibid., 4.
[29] Arp and Johnson, *Sound and Sense*, 195.
[30] The word "quantity" denotes the duration of a syllable. Karl Shapiro and Robert Beum, *The Prosody Handbook* (New York: Harper & Row, 1965), 23.
[31] Quantitative meter is not commonly recognized in English poetry. David Baker, "Introduction," *Meter in English*, xv.

versification it becomes easier to see where Thomson relies on the poetry and where he explores the spoken utterance in his word-groups.

Interestingly, there exists in linguistics a method of dividing units of speech that is similar to Thomson's word-groups. "Chunking," also called "suprasegmental chunking," divides speech into units of information, such as phrases or clauses that may or may not be syntactical units.[32] Suprasegmentals are features superimposed on the syllables of an utterance that include stress, pitch, and length.[33] Suprasegmental chunking is achieved by notating intonation and acoustical phenomenon.[34] Thomson's method of word-grouping is similar to chunking; however at times, Thomson's word-groups are closer to versification, adhering more closely to the syllabification and word stress of the poetry than to its inherent acoustical possibilities.

[32] Sue Peppé and John Maidment, "Prosody on the Web," Department of Phonetics & Linguistics, University College London, June 2000. http://www.eptotd.btinternet.co.uk/pow/powin.htm.
[33] *Encylopaedia Britannica Online*. s.v. "phonetics" http://search.eb.com/eb/article-69026 (accessed March 1, 2009).
[34] Chunking is of particular interest in the study of acquisition of English for the non-native speaker. The use of chunking can aid in both comprehension and accent modification. Judy B. Gilbert, *Clear Speech: Pronunciation and Listening Comprehension in American English* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984); Christine Barb, "Suprasegmentals and Comprehensibility: A Comparative Study in Accent Modification" (PhD dissertation, 2005), soar.wichita.edu/dspace/bitstream/10057/570/3/d05005.pdf; Barbara Seidlhofer and Christiane Dalton-Puffer, "Appropriate Units in Pronunciation Teaching: Some Programmatic Pointers," *International Journal of Applied Linguistics* 5, no. 1 (1995): 135-146.

## II. Thomson on the Elements of Word-Groups

In describing his word-groups Thomson uses terms from both prosody and versification. To clarify how Thomson establishes his word-groups this section is divided into elements from both systems: frequency, duration, and intensity, cadence, and stress. Timbre, which Thomson also considers a contributing oral (prosodic) occurrence in the creation of word-groups, will be discussed under the heading of frequency. Thomson describes cadence in terms of prosodic elements (pitch and duration), but since it relates to rhythm and versification it will be considered separately. Stress, a component of versification that can be emphasized by prosody, will be discussed last.

### A. Frequency

#### 1. Pitch

Pitch represents the perception of the fundamental frequency of a sound.[35] In speech, pitch, or the highness or lowness of an utterance can affect the meaning of a phrase. For instance, the pitch at which someone says the word, "no," can indicate how the speaker's utterance will be perceived: excitedly, reluctantly, sarcastically, emphatically, for example, and to what degree.[36] Because of this, variance in pitch creates variance in meaning within a phrase.

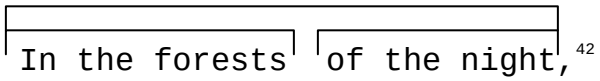
In speech, in which no exact pitch is specified, sounds are higher or lower in comparison to other utterances of a phrase. Musical pitch can create added meaning to a

[35] Voiced sounds are produced by vibrations of the vocal folds that create regular pulses of air pressure. These regular fluctuations of air pressure, or periodic waves, are measured by their rate of repetition in cycles per second or hertz (Hz). This rate is the fundamental frequency of a sound. *Encyclopaedia Britannica Online*, s.v. "phonetics," http://search.eb.com/eb/article-69027, (accessed March 1, 2009).
[36] "Prosody on the Web" presents recordings of the word "no" spoken at different pitches and a correlating chart giving the fundamental frequency patterns for the recorded utterances. Peppé and Maidment, "Prosody on the Web," http://www.eptotd.btinternet.co.uk/pow/powtut3-1.htm.

word by its arrangement in a musical phrase or by where the pitch lies in a singer's range. A composer assigns a precise pitch to a vocal phrase to give meaning to a text.

In his song "La Valse Grégorienne" set to poems by George Hugnet, Thomson creates a light, non-dramatic mood by keeping the song in a limited range of pitch.[37] While the vocal range spans an eleventh (D4-G5), the tessitura of the song lies in an even smaller range on the top notes of the staff (B4-F5).[38] For a soprano, this tessitura is not particularly high and "avoids any need for strain."[39] Thomson chose not to set the text in the singer's lower middle range or the speaking range, which would produce a more declamatory or speech-like sound. By keeping the singer in the upper range Thomson achieves the mood he desires which is "poetic, not declamatory."[40]

In Thomson's setting of William Blake's "The Tiger" the phrase, "In the forests of the night" approximates the pitch descent of the spoken phrase.[41] Thomson sets the word-groups as follows:



[42]

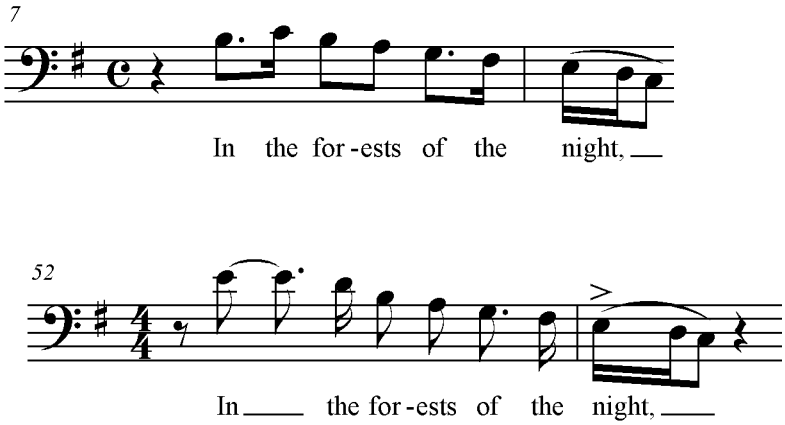
The word-groups approximate areas of spoken pitch or where pitch indicates a phrase closure. "In the forests" begins and ends on approximately the same pitch or the same pitch area. "Of the night" ends on a lower pitch than it began. Speaking the

[37] Thomson, *La Valse Grégorienne*, (New York: Southern, 1940), 2-7.
[38] Throughout this document I use the Acoustical Society of America system of octave identification: C4=middle C.
[39] Thomson, *Music With Words*, 79.
[40] Thomson, *Music With Words*, 79.
[41] Thomson set Blake's "The Tyger" twice, in 1926 and in 1951. Thomson, "The Tiger," in *Romantic American Art Songs* (New York: Schirmer, 1990), 202-206; Thomson, "Tiger! Tiger!" in *Five Songs from William Blake*, (New York: Southern, 1953), 7-11. This example refers to the later setting in *Five Songs from William Blake*. Thomson gives word-groups for the entire text. Thomson, *Music with Words*, 18.
[42] Ibid.

complete phrase, according to its double word-group, encourages the descending pitch of the phrase and the end of the phrase.[43]

In both instances of this phrase in the song, Thomson sets the entire phrase in a descending line, similar to the spoken pitch experience.

Figure 1.1: Musical Example, "Tiger! Tiger!" mm. 7-8 and mm. 52-53[44]




**2. Timbre**

In vocal production, timbre is determined both by the fundamental frequency of a sound and its harmonic overtones.[45] While pitch is determined by the fundamental frequency, or the rate of repetition of the cycles of air pressure, timbre has more to do

[43] Thomson defines a double word-group: "Double or triple word-groups do allow, if the speaker or composer so chooses, a slight hesitation between the groups, though not a real pause." Ibid., 20.
[44] Thomson, "Tiger! Tiger!" In *Five Songs from William Blake*, 7, 11.
[45] Harmonics are integer multiples of the fundamental frequency. An overtone is any resonant frequency above the fundamental, but in music, harmonics and overtones are often used synonymously. Murrary Campbell, "Overtone," In *Grove Music Online, Oxford Music Online*, http://www.oxfordmusiconline.com/subscriber/article/grove/music/20615 (accessed March 30, 2009); Guy Oldham and others, "Harmonics," In *Grove Music Online, Oxford Music Online*, http://www.oxfordmusiconline.com/subscriber/article/grove/music/50023 (accessed March 30, 2009); Barbara M. Doscher, *The Functional Unity of the Singing Voice*, 2nd ed. (Lanham, MD: Scarecrow Press, 1994), 93.

with the small variations in air pressure.[46] These variations, which affect the harmonic overtones, are produced by air within the vocal tract. Changes within the vocal tract caused by the throat, mouth, or lips will change the harmonic overtones and thus the timbre of the sound.[47]

Thomson defines timbre as a quality of a phoneme or an individual sound.[48] He pays particular attention to the timbre of vowels: "[The vowels] are commonly classed for timbre as open, closed or nasal."[49] In voice production, it is the resonance patterns created within the vocal tract that produces recognizable vowels.[50] Thomson's description of closed or nasal is accurate in describing timbre as these describe changes to the vocal tract.

**B. Duration**

The English language is too imprecise in its vowel lengths to produce a quantitative meter of poetry that would be based on the time duration of each syllable.[51] However, short vowel sounds are roughly equivalent to a shorter utterance (as long

[46] *Encyclopaedia Britannica Online*, s.v. "phonetics," http://search.eb.com/eb/article-69027 (accessed March 1, 2009).
[47] "Complex tones, such as those generated by the larynx, are composed of frequencies that are integral multiples of the lowest frequency. The first component is the fundamental frequency (the first harmonic), and the others are overtones. A partial is a harmonic component of this complex tone, and the sound spectrum is made up of the resonance frequencies, which produce peaks, called formants." Richard Miller, *The Structure of Singing: System and Art in Vocal Technique* (New York: Schirmer, 1996), 50.
[48] Thomson, *Music With Words*, 4.
[49] Ibid., 10.
[50] "All vowels, per se, have resonance but each vowel has its own distinct pattern of resonance that is the result of the number, frequencies and energy distribution of the overtones that are present." Claude E. Kantner and Robert West, *Phonetics: An Introduction to the Principles of Phonetic Science from the Point of View of English Speech* (New York: Harper, 1960), 68.
[51] David Baker, "Introduction," *Meter In English*, xv.

vowels are roughly equivalent to longer utterances) and can be recorded quantitatively.[52] These short and long vowel sounds are influenced by their surrounding consonants.

Thomson discusses duration by specifically dealing with the "extensions" of vowel and consonant sounds.[53] "A pattern of lengths – or quantities, as they are called in the classroom – deals with syllables, and the vowel lengths in these are mostly controlled by consonants."[54]

Thomson classifies vowels for duration as long or short, although they are variable in length.[55] "*Home* is a long word; one can make it quite long but not really short, because both its vowel and its final consonant invite holding. *Pit* is a completely short word; it cannot be extended at all and understood. Two short consonants here cut off at both ends a vowel already short."[56]

Thomson allows that consonants can vary in length, but does not recommend "undue prolongation" of consonants as a matter of "good style in art singing."[57] The consonants that can be extended, such as *h*, *m*, *l*, and *n*, suggested by Thomson, allow for extending the vowel sounds of a word, as in the words, *home* and *lane*.[58] Thomson points out short vowels can also be lengthened by long consonants: *rest* and *love*, but that the same short vowels can be shortened by short consonants: *pet* and *putt*. Long vowels can also be shortened by short consonants, as in *pope* and *gate*.

---

[52] Pétur Knúttson, "English Vowel Length," http://www3.hi.is/~peturk/KENNSLA/02/TOP/VowelLength0.html, from A. C. Gimson, *An Introduction to the Pronunciation of Enlgish* 3rd ed. (London: Edward Arnold).
[53] Thomson, *Music With Words*, 32.
[54] Ibid., 32.
[55] Ibid., 10.
[56] Ibid.
[57] Ibid.
[58] This and the following examples: *rest*, *love*, *pet*, *put*, *pope*, *gate*, are taken from Thomson's *Music With Words*. Ibid.

The song "Susie Asado," set to a poem by Gertrude Stein will be analyzed in detail in the next chapter, but the first line provides an excellent example of how Thomson translates a short word, "sweet," into a single word-group.[59] Each word receives its own word-group emphasizing the consonant sound [t] that makes the word short. The last word-group does not adhere to this group and instead emphasizes the pun on the word "sweetie," evidence that Thomson's word-groups heed both prosodic elements and elements of poetry.

Sweet | sweet | sweet | sweet | sweet tea![60]

In Thomson's song "Tiger! Tiger!" the word-groups in the last line allow for an extension of the consonant sound [l] in "fearful" to prepare for the last word, "symmetry."[61]

Dare frame | thy fearful | symmetry?[62]

Thomson explains: "For either recitation or singing, the *l* sound of *fearful* requires, in order not to disappear altogether before the *s*, a certain extension plus maybe even a short holding back to prepare for the *symmetry* idea."[63] Thomson intends for the "l" of "fearful" to be held with lift before the word "symmetry" which he indicates by separating the word "symmetry" into a new word-group.

[59] Thomson, *Cos Cob Song Volume*, "Susie Asado" (New York: Boosey and Hawkes, 1962), 13-15.
[60] The word-groups are Thomson's. Thomson, *Music With Words*, 20.
[61] Thomson, "Tiger! Tiger!" In *Five Songs from William Blake*, 11.
[62] The word-groups are Thomson's. Thomson, *Music With Words*, 18-19.
[63] Ibid., 33.

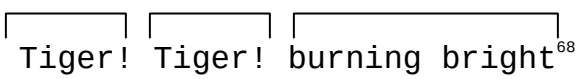
**C. Intensity**

Intensity can be carefully controlled in music by the composer's indication of dynamic, the sign given in musical notation to indicate the relative loudness and degree of accentuation.[64] Thomson's greatest concern with intensity is with a singer unnecessarily changing the dynamic to emphasize the stress of a word or syllable.

> Two prohibitions that I find it very important to suggest are any alteration of the customary stresses in English words and word-groups, or any change in volume that might be used to produce those accents. Accents produced by a throat push, or by any semblance of *fp*, are anathema in singing. They injure the voice and are ugly anyway. A musical phrase correctly prosodized by the composer will need no gratuitous accenting by the singer.[65]

An interruption of a consistent dynamic can interrupt the comprehension of the music. "A sustained line at any volume in any range is the norm of musical utterance today, even for instruments of percussion. Any alteration of this for expressive purposes must be clearly intentional; otherwise it creates a misunderstanding."[66]

In his song "Tiger! Tiger!" the tiger is depicted in *forte* dynamic and the lamb is depicted in *piano* dynamic.[67] The force of the tiger is represented in Thomson's word-groups in how each repetition the word receives its own group.



[68]

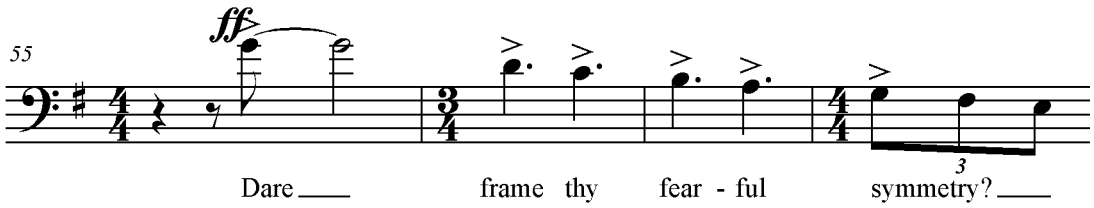
[64] *The Oxford Companion To Music* in *Oxford Online*, s.v. "dynamic," www.oxfordmusiconline.com.
[65] Thomson, *Music With Words*, 30.
[66] Ibid., 36.
[67] Ibid., 98.
[68] Ibid., 19.

The lamb is marked as a part of a double word-group implying the timidity of the lamb.

Did he who made the Lamb make thee?[69]

In the same song, the line, "Dare frame thy fearful symmetry?" is set *fortissimo* with accents written over each note.

Figure 1.2: Musical Example, "Tiger! Tiger!" mm. 55-58[70]




Thomson's word-groups, however, do not reflect this intensity:

Dare frame thy fearful symmetry?[71]

The emphatic setting is a reflection of the poetry. This is the last line and the climax of the poem. The word "dare," is a challenge to God, the "immortal hand or eye," and also creates a variation in the repeated refrain of the opening lines, where the phrase is weaker with the use of the word "could:" "What immortal hand or eye / Could frame thy fearful symmetry."[72] The alliteration and consonance of "frame" and "fearful" also encourage the power of the line.

[69] Ibid.
[70] Thomson, "Tiger! Tiger!" In *Five Songs from William Blake*, 11.
[71] Thomson, *Music With Words*, 19.
[72] William Blake, "The Tyger," *Songs of Experience* in *Poems and Prophecies* (New York: Knopf, 1927), 28-29.

**D. Cadence**

Thomson writes that cadence is produced by the "extensibility" or the duration of vowel sounds.[73] At another point, he writes that cadence is also produced by the "up-and-downness" of a melody, so cadence can also be considered within the prosodic element pitch.[74] "The vowel sounds in such music [art music] are, on the other hand, on account of their extensibility, the carriers of the free (or expressive) element in song, the up-and-downness of a melody, which I call cadence."[75] While Thomson defines cadence in terms of verbal prosody, cadence closely relates to the rhythm of poetry, the observance of elements of versification such as word stress, line division, and meter.[76]

**E. Stress**

The most constant element in Thomson's word-groups is stress, or the prominence of one syllable compared to another.[77] "In spoken English, syllabic stresses are as firmly a part of any word-group as are its vowels and consonants, and these stresses cannot be altered, as was remarked earlier, without changing the meaning of the phrase in which they occur."[78] Stress is a feature of versification's metric structure, and this stress is expressed in speech by prosodic elements.[79] Thomson wrote, "Stresses, in English, are not free at all; they are fixed for both speech and singing. You cannot with impunity change the tonic accents of English words or word-groups, because if you do you change the meaning."[80] A tonic accent is a syllable that receives the primary stress in a word, sometimes indicated by pitch. In a phrase composed of one-syllable words, the

[73] Ibid., 9.
[74] Ibid., 4.
[75] Ibid., 12.
[76] Koch, *Making Your Own Days*, 27-49.
[77] Thomson uses "stress" and "accent" synonymously.
[78] Ibid., 32.
[79] Here, metric structure is defined as syllables that can be counted or assigned a quantity.
[80] Thomson, *Music With* Words, 8.

stress or "tonic accent" can be determined by the speaker and will therefore determine the meaning, as in the phrase, "Give me the knife!"

> When Macbeth, about to commit a regicide, seems to hesitate, his wife cries, "Give me the knife!" Now every actress must have decided in advance which word in that exclamation to emphasize, *give* or *me* or *knife*, because in her choice lies the possibility of three distinct meanings.[81]

Herein lies the difficulty of defining prosody and versification. Scansion of this phrase would reveal a stress on "give" and "knife," but, as indicated by Thomson, an actress has options for where she places the stress when giving the line.[82] This passage illustrates how closely versification and prosody work; versification indicates stresses that can be interrupted or displaced by prosodic elements.

In conclusion, the elements that compose word-groups come from both its verbal utterance and its formal structure, so much so that Thomson classifies prosodic elements and versification together. "Conventional patterns of versification are of three kinds – lengths, stresses, and rhymes."[83] Length, as was discussed under the topic of duration, is a prosodic element. Stress and rhyme are elements of versification in that they provide organization for a text.

The elements of prosody and versification provide pattern and rhythm for a text. Word-groups are a visual indication of these patterns and rhythms upon which a vocal

[81] Ibid., 8. The line Thomson refers to is from Verdi's opera Macbeth. Act I, Scene 13. Lady Macbeth's line in the libretto is "Dammi il ferro," which Thomson has translated as "Give me the knife." In Shakespeare's play Lady Macbeth has a similar line in Act II, Scene 2, line 67, "Give me the daggers."
[82] Thomson, *Music With Words*, 8.
[83] Ibid., 32.

setting or melody can be based. Patterns and rhythms combine to provide the text's "shape," preparing it for its union with music in song.[84]

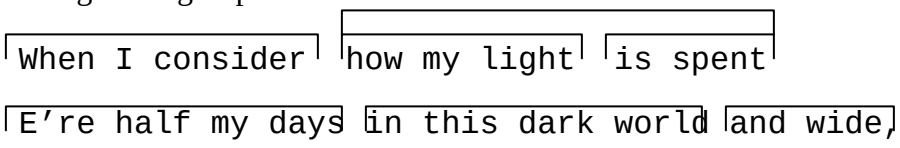
[84] Ibid., 1.

**III. Examples of Thomson's Word-Groups**

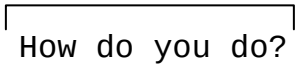
The following examples illustrate Thomson's process when parsing text into word-groups. The first is an example from John Milton's sonnet, "On His Blindness."

> When I consider how my light is spent
> E're half my days in this dark world and wide,[85]
>
> What are the word-groups here? "When I consider" is the first; this represents a thought minimally stated. "How my light is spent" is another; it is almost divisible into two thoughts, but not quite. "E're half my days" is clearly the next statement, followed by "in this dark world," and finally "and wide," this last an extention [*sic*] of "dark world," but independent of it.[86]

The resulting word-group is:




The phrase "How do you do?" is an example of a complete word-group contained in a sentence. Thomson is vague in his explanation of why these words group together. My explanation is that this phrase acts syntactically, only making sense when said together. Thomson also touches on punctuation, which does not always indicate how a phrase is spoken.




> "How do you do?" is a word-group. Its constituent words, though frequently used in other groupings, here have to be said together. All

[85] From John Milton's "On His Blindness," quoted in Thomson's *Music with Words*, 3.
[86] Ibid., 3.

> word-groups behave like words, this particular group as if it were a four-syllable word with a tonic accent on the last. Any attempt to separate the syllables or to misplace the accent will produce confusion. Also, though punctuated as a question, it is never so pronounced, being simply a salutation, nothing more.[87]

The phrase "just a minute" is an example of a double word-group. The double word-group indicates a phrase that can be stressed in different ways.

> "Just a minute" is not so straightforward. It can be broken apart into two elements, and accented in several different ways. Like Lady Macbeth's "Give me the knife," it can change its meaning with different stresses. It is therefore a dual group, not a single one, and must be represented as just | a minute.[88]

[87] Ibid., 17.
[88] Ibid., 20.

## IV. Thomson's Legacy of Text-Setting

Some composers who were taught and mentored by Thomson have adapted elements of Thomson's word-group method in their own song settings. Two composers who were willing to be interviewed for this study are Richard Hundley and Scott Wheeler. Richard Hundley is primarily a song composer and was influenced by Thomson's method of text setting. Scott Wheeler also studied text setting with Thomson, but his compositions span many genres. Wheeler's opera *The Construction of Boston* set to a libretto by Kenneth Koch is also of interest to this study. I was most interested to know their interpretations of Thomson's method of word-groups and text setting and how that translated into their own vocal works.

### A. Richard Hundley

Richard Hundley met Virgil Thomson in 1962. While Thomson was not Hundley's formal teacher, they would play each other's music and Mr. Hundley recalls, "If I needed to know something, I always had someone I could ask."[89]

"We used to play each other's music all the time and he would bang away at my songs. And my songs often required *cantabile* and *dolce* and so forth, and nuances and beautiful singing. He'd bang away and hit all these wrong notes, and I'd say, "Virgil, what are you doing!" He said, "I'm giving it the test of time."[90]

Mr. Hundley's concern with how text is spoken is evident in the way he asked me to read the text of a song to him before I sang it. "Oh you've got to hear the words, always. I always speak the words continuously before I ever set it to music. I'm not a composer that has the manuscript paper there and the poem here and I read a line and

[89] Richard Hundley, in interview with the author, August 4, 2006.
[90] Hundley, interview. Mr. Hundley's life as a protégé of Virgil Thomson is loosely portrayed in James Purdy's novel, *Out With the Stars* (London: P. Owen, 1992).

go… I have to hear it, see. I learned that from Virgil…The problem with young composers is that they never speak the words."[91]

Hundley read a couple of lines from a poem he was reading by John Webster, grouping the words as follows.

Call for the robin-redbreast | and the wren,
Since o'er shady groves | they hover[92]

Grammatically, the first word-group forms a complete sentence, which proves to be a "minimal thought" as in Thomson's example of the Milton couplet below. "And the wren" adds to the sentence much as "and wide" adds to the end of Thomson's Milton example.[93]

When I consider | how my light | is spent
E're half my days | in this dark world | and wide,

While "and the wren" cannot stand on its own as a complete sentence, it does form a complete direct object of the previous clause. The next line begins a new word-group indicated by the punctuation and the beginning of a subordinate clause. The word-groups in this line separate the subject and verb from the rest of the clause. Mr. Hundley's word-groups divide somewhat grammatically, but they also separate rhythmically according to the poetic stress.

Mr. Hundley asked me to speak the same lines and listen for the pauses. When I spoke the lines, it became clear that pauses occur naturally before a conjunction or punctuation; in listening for the pauses the stresses and rhythm of the word-groups

[91] Hundley, interview.
[92] John Webster, "Call for the robin-redbreast and the wren," *The White Devil* (originally published in London, 1612, now in public domain). Accessed at *Representative Poetry Online*, http://rpo.library.utoronto.ca/poem/2267.html.
[93] Thomson, *Music With Words*, 3.

become audible as well. The first word-group ends in the trochaic rhythm and the repeated [r] sound, "robin redbreast." Keeping in mind Thomson's views about short consonants, the ending consonant [t] seems to offer a suitable closure to the word-group. Continuing this trochaic pattern for the rest of the line gives the normally unstressed word, "and," a slight stress, which provides an alternating rhythmic word-group, "and the wren," stress-unstress-stress.

**B. Scott Wheeler**

Composer Scott Wheeler met Thomson in the late 1970s through a mutual friend and composer, Rodney Lister. Wheeler recalled a conversation in which Lister asked Thomson how he knew how to set the text for the opera *The Mother of Us All*. Thomson answered, "I've worked it out. I've got the recipes; they don't teach it in the schools."[94] Thomson invited Lister and Wheeler to study with him in New York. There, Wheeler studied not only text-setting, but orchestration with Thomson. Wheeler and Lister were hired by Thomson to orchestrate several of his "Piano Portraits," as Thomson's energy was flagging in his later years.[95]

Wheeler recalled bringing the orchestrations to the Hotel Chelsea for Thomson to "poke at" and correct.[96] Afterward, Wheeler would take them back to his apartment to make the corrections and then bring them back again for further review. This was the same method in which Thomson helped Wheeler with his own songs. Wheeler recalls Thomson as "the only composition teacher I ever had who would take his pencil to your manuscript and say 'that's not right,' and did something else. Rodney [Lister] really

[94] Scott Wheeler, interview with the author, March 24, 2007.
[95] Thomson, *Eleven Portraits for Orchestra* (New York: Boosey and Hawkes, 1982). Scott Wheeler orchestrated three portraits: No. 6, "Scott Wheeler: Free Wheeling," (1981); No. 7, "Dennis Russell Davies: In a Hammock," (1982); No. 8, "Richard Flender: Solid, Not Stolid," (1981).
[96] Wheeler, interview.

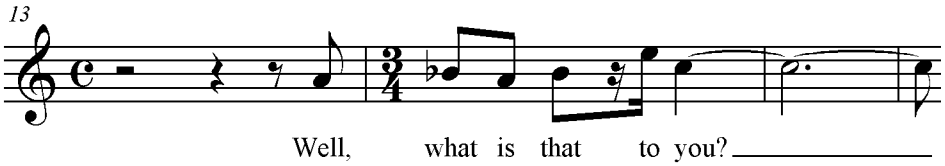
objected to this, but I figured… this guy's not going to be around forever, I'm gonna have my whole life to do it my way."[97]

Wheeler described his admiration for Thomson's ability to set "discursive" text such as Kenneth Koch's poetry that Thomson set in his songs *Mostly About Love*: "You've got a couple of problems when setting stuff like that. Virgil had so much experience with [Gertrude] Stein in dealing with it and how to manage both the discursive and the overall, overarching dramatic shape and can you create both. And that's what I find is most impressive. Virgil was most pleased himself with 'Prayer to Saint Catherine;' that was the one he was proudest of because of the different voices. I disagree, I think they're all great, but I actually think that 'Love Song' is most impressive as a piece of text setting because I find that the discursive quality of the text is so challenging and he does such a beautiful job of pulling it together."[98]

Wheeler believes that the use of word-groups makes the words comprehensible.[99] "They [word-groups] can be broken for various good reasons, but if they are routinely ignored the text setting tends to seem pretty random and vocal music tends to go a bit flat."[100] A phrase from Wheeler's song, "Thursday" from his cycle *Wasting the Night* reveals how closely Wheeler adheres to the sounds of the words. I asked him to explain a sixteenth rest that separated the words "that" and "to."

[97] Wheeler, interview.
[98] Wheeler, interview.
[99] "Yes I do use word groups – it's the only way to make words comprehensible." Scott Wheeler, e-mail message to the author, March 17, 2007.
[100] Scott Wheeler, e-mail message to the author, March 17, 2007.

Figure 1.3: Musical Example, "Thursday," mm. 13-14[101]




He explained, "I think the only idea of that little rest is not one of syntax or rhetoric but merely of phonology."[102] He intended for the final "t" of "that" to be stopped, but not aspirated, and that the following word "to" should begin with the aspirated "t." With this explanation, my interpretation would assign the phrase two word-groups, indicating this break.

Well, what is that | to you?

[101] Wheeler, "Thursday," *Wasting the Night*, Piano/Vocal Score (Scott Wheeler Music, 1990), 5.
[102] Wheeler, e-mail message to the author, February 28, 2009.

## VII. Application of Word-Groups in Song

Thomson's word-groups have been established as an organizational tool for a text. Word-groups are the visual representation of a text's spoken utterance. Thomson borrows from both the system of prosody (the acoustic characteristics of speech) and versification (the metrical structure of words) to produce word-groups. For Thomson word-groups clarify both the semantic meaning and the syntactical meaning, allowing a composer to create music that is best suited to the text. The next chapter examines just this: Thomson's own word-groups will be compared to the songs he set to the same text. The examination will reveal how closely Thomson applied the word-groups to his own songs.

## Chapter 2: ANALYSIS OF SONGS TO TEXTS BY SHAKESPEARE AND STEIN

This chapter explores two songs by Virgil Thomson, one to text by William Shakespeare, "Take, O, Take Those Lips Away," and the other to text by Gertrude Stein, "Susie Asado." Thomson creates word-groups for both of these texts in his book *Music with Words*.[1] In this chapter I will examine the methodology of Thomson's word-groups, first through an analysis of the poetry and then through an analysis of the songs themselves. Comparing the musical features of the songs to Thomson's word-groups reveals his reading of the poem and his own textual analysis. Exploring the function of word-groups in two antithetical texts—one Elizabethan and one twentieth-century avant-garde—will provide a foundation for the word-groups I construct for the songs in the set *Mostly About Love* in Chapter 4.

[1] Virgil Thomson, *Music with Words: A Composer's View* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1989), 19-20.

## I. Background and Poetic Analysis of "Take, O, Take Those Lips Away"[2]

**Take, o take those lips away**
From *Measure for Measure*
William Shakespeare

Take, o take those lips away
   that so sweetly were forsworn,
And those eyes the break of day
   lights that do mislead the morn;
But my kisses bring again,
                bring again;
Seals of love, but seal'd in vain,
                seal'd in vain.[3]

### A. Shakespeare's Text

Shakespeare used music in all of his plays and much has been written on its many uses in his plays.[4] In Shakespeare's time, music framed the beginning and ending of a play, popular songs were quoted or alluded to in the drama, and characters sang and sometimes accompanied themselves on the stage.[5] The short lyric poem, "Take, o take those lips away," is from the fourth act of Shakespeare's *Measure for Measure* (1604) and was intended to be sung within the play.[6] The stage directions indicate a boy is to sing the song, and he might have accompanied himself or been accompanied by a lute.[7]

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[2] The poem's opening line is spelled and punctuated differently in various editions. For this study the poem title will be punctuated: "Take, O Take Those Lips Away," according to the Arden edition, and Thomson's song will be punctuated: "Take, O, Take Those Lips Away" according to Virgil Thomson's setting. Virgil Thomson, "Take, O, Take Those Lips Away," in *Shakespeare Songs* (New York: Southern, 1961), 4-5; William Shakespeare's *Measure for Measure*, Arden edition, ed. J. W. Lever (London: Metheun, 1965; London: Thomson Learning, 2006), 4.1.1-8.

[3] Shakespeare, *Measure for Measure*, 4.1.1-8.

[4] For references on the general use of music in Shakespeare plays see: David Lindley, *Shakespeare and Music* (London: Thomson Learning, 2006); John Long, *Shakespeare's Use of Muisc* (Gainesville, FL: University of Florida Press, 1955); Randy Neighbarger, *An Outward Show: Music for Shakespeare on the London Stage, 1660-1830* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1992); Frederick W. Sternfield, *Music in Shakespearean Tragedy* (London: Routledge and Keagan Paul; New York: Dover, 1963); Christopher Wilson, *Shakespeare and Music* (New York: Da Capo Press, 1977).

[5] Ross Duffin, *Shakespeare Songbook* (New York, London: Norton, 2004), 11-14; Lindley, *Shakespeare and Music*, 169.

[6] The play was probably written in 1604 the year of its first performance. The script was first printed in the First Folio of 1623.

[7] Lindley, *Shakespeare and Music*, 169, note 56. David Lindley alludes to the possibility that a boy might have accompanied himself. According to Duffin, of the two earliest surviving settings, one is for keyboard and one is for lute. Duffin, *Shakespeare Songs*, 379.

The song accompanies the entrance of the character Mariana. The song describes Mariana's rejection by her lover Angelo and enhances the melancholy of her character.

The poem consists of one quatrain and one couplet, with the final two feet of each line of the couplet repeated. The rhyme pattern is *ababcc*, similar to the rhyme scheme of the final sestet of a Shakespeare sonnet.[8] The meter of the poem, catalectic trochaic tetrameter, deviates from the standard iambic pentameter that permeates Shakespeare's plays.[9] The trochee's stress on the first syllable is at odds with the iambic pattern, which stresses the second syllable. At times the trochee is not as pronounced, resulting in an implied iambic pattern beginning with an anacrusis (unstressed syllable): "and those eýes the bréak of dáy." The poem is in trochaic tetrameter, a form in which the most consistent stresses occur on the first syllable of the metric foot.

Metaphor is the primary poetic device used in the poem. The lover's eyes represent the sun of dawn. The deception that the eyes achieve by fooling the morning is the same deception of someone betraying a lover.[10] The metaphor of the lips as a seal of false love is also found in Shakespeare's Sonnet 142: "…those lips of thine, / That have profaned their scarlet ornaments / And seal'd false bonds of love as oft as mine…"[11]

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[8] Other songs in Shakespeare's plays have the same rhyme scheme: "Fear no more," *Cymbeline*, 4.2.236-282 and "Wedding is great Juno's crown," *As You Like It*, 5.4.141-146.

[9] The poem is composed of four metric feet (tetrameter) in a stressed-unstressed pattern (trochaic) with an extra accented syllable at the end of each line (catalexis).

[10] In her book on Elizabethan poetry, Winifred Maynard makes this observation on the metaphor within the song: "The translucent imagery becomes more luminous as it expands in the mind: the metaphor linking eyes and daybreak arouses connotations that are congruent – light, brightness, softness – making the change to a false dawn carry the shock of betrayal." Winifred Maynard, *Elizabethan Lyric Poetry and Its Music* (Clarendon Press: Oxford, 1986) 208.

[11] William Shakespeare, Sonnet 142, in Helen Vendler, *The Art of Shakespeare's Sonnets* (Belknap: Cambridge, MA, 1997), 597. It is possible that the "seals of love" were meant as a more literal symbol. In *Shakespeare and the Law* Barton writes, "written instruments under seal (which were referred to as 'deeds' or 'indentures' or 'specialties') were so commonly used as symbols of love and kisses by poets of that day that the metaphor would have become trite, if Shakespeare had not made it immortal in such passages." Dunbar Plunket Barton, *Shakespeare and the Law* (London: Faber and Gwyer, 1929; Union, New Jersey: The Lawbook Exchange, Ltd, 1999), 131.

The paradox of the poem is exposed in the dialogue between the Duke and Mariana that follows the song, which expresses the idea that music can create melancholy, but pleasure can be taken in sadness.[12] The similar paradox is foreshadowed in the poetry of the song; the lips that have perjured themselves taste sweet; pleasure was taken in the thing that subsequently produces pain. "Take those lips away / that so sweetly were forsworn."

**B. Background to Thomson's Shakespeare Settings**

In 1956, Thomson was commissioned to compose incidental music for productions of *King John* and *Measure for Measure* to be performed at the American Shakespeare Festival in Stratford, Connecticut.[13] John Houseman, Thomson's friend and Artistic Director of the festival, offered the commission.[14] The following year Thomson again was commissioned to write music for three plays on the Festival's 1957 season: *Othello*, *The Merchant of Venice*, and *Much Ado About Nothing*.[15] Thomson later

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[12] The lines that follow the song:

Mariana: Break off thy song, and haste thee quick away;
Here comes a man of comfort, whose advice
Hath often still'd my brawling discontent.
I cry you mercy sir, and well could wish
You had not found me here so music.
Let me excuse me, and believe me so;
My mirth it much displeas'd, but pleas'd my woe.

Duke: 'Tis good; though music oft hath such a charm
To make bad good, and good provoke to harm.[12] 15

[13] Thomson had already written music for Shakespeare plays, most significantly for a 1936 production of *Macbeth* directed by Orson Welles, and for a 1952 production of *King Lear*, starring Welles, for the Ford Foundation's TV-Radio Workshop. See Virgil Thomson Foundation, *Virgil Thomson Works: Incidental Music*, www.virgilthomson.org/worksfiles/incidental.doc (accessed June 18, 2008).

[14] Thomson was grateful for the commissions. After resigning his position at the New York Herald Tribune in 1954 his income had decreased significantly. Apparently, he had sworn he would "never again write music for a Shakespeare play." Letter from Virgil Thomson to Lou Harrison, 26 May 1956, *Selected Letters of Virgil Thomson*, ed. Tim Page and Vanessa Weeks Page, (New York: Summit Books, 1988), 293; Anthony Tommasini, *Virgil Thomson: Composer on the Aisle* (New York: Norton, 1997), 436.

[15] Katherine Hepburn was among the company's players during 1957 season. She played Portia in *The Merchant of Venice* and played Beatrice opposite Alfred Drake's Benedick in *Much Ado About Nothing*.

assembled five of the songs written for these plays and published them as *Shakespeare Songs* in 1961. The five songs were: "Was This Fair Face the Cause?," "Take, O, Take Those Lips Away," "Tell Me Where is Fancy Bred," "Pardon, Goddess of the Night," and "Sigh No More, Ladies."[16]

"Adding music to Shakespeare's plays is for the composer a discipline of modesty," Thomson wrote in a 1959 article.[17] Because Thomson felt music must serve the dramatic intention of the play he writes that the composer is limited and "boxed in to the play's bare needs."[18] Thomson advises that, "Everywhere the music must be straightforward, speak quickly, take no time at all out of the play's dramatic pacing."[19]

Co-directors John Houseman and Jack Landau set the 1956 production of *Measure for Measure* in nineteenth-century Vienna. Thomson's music for the play reflected this artistic decision and much of it contains, according to John Cage, "waltzes on the Schubert and Lanner models."[20] In his music for Shakespeare plays, Thomson approved of prioritizing the theatrical setting above the play's historic authenticity. "Stage music need not be historically authentic, but it should help to evoke, like the

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Claire McGlinchee, "Stratford, Connecticut, Shakespeare Festival 1957," *Shakespeare Quarterly* 8, no. 4 (Autumn 1957): 508-509.

[16] The text for "Was This Fair Face the Cause?" comes from *All's Well That Ends Well*, but was inserted into the play *The Merchant of Venice*. "Take, O, Take Those Lips Away" is from *Measure for Measure*, "Tell Me Where is Fancy Bred" is from *The Merchant of Venice*, "Pardon, Goddess of the Night" and "Sigh No More, Ladies" are from *Much Ado About Nothing*. Thomson, *Shakespeare Songs*.

[17] Thomson, "Music for 'Much Ado'," *Theatre Arts* (June 1959), in *A Virgil Thomson Reader* (New York: E. P. Dutton, 1981), 381.

[18] Ibid.

[19] Ibid., 382.

[20] John Cage writes, "*Measure for Measure* was presented as taking place in early nineteenth-century Vienna, which allowed Thomson to write waltzes on the Schubert and Lanner models." Kathleen Hoover and John Cage, *Virgil Thomson: His Life and Music* (New York: Thomas Yoseloff, 1959), 241. Joseph Lanner (1803-1843) was a violinist and composer. Lanner and his colleague Johann Strauss I are considered the fathers of the Viennese waltz. Mosco Carner and Herbert Krenn, "Lanner, Joseph," in *Grove Music Online, Oxford Music Online*, http://www.oxfordmusiconline.com/subscriber/article/grove/music/16000 (accessed March 18, 2009).

settings and the costumes, whatever time and place the director has chosen to evoke in his production."[21]

Thomson set "Take, O, Take Those Lips Away" in a simple style in order to serve the play's pacing and foreground Shakespeare's form. The song presents simple harmonies, an arching melody, square four-bar phrases, and a slow waltz character. The form of the piece follows a straightforward binary construction. The A section is in C major and begins with an eight-measure introduction marked *piano*. The B section briefly jumps to the subdominant key area by introducing a B-flat (m. 25) before returning to C major. The 3/4 time signature implies a waltz, but the tempo marking of *very slowly* maintains the melancholy love song character.

Thomson made revisions to the song before publishing it in 1961. A comparison of the 1956 production score and the 1961 published version show these differences. First, the production score is in B♭ major and the published score is in C major. The accompaniment is also different between the two: in the production score, the arpeggiated accompaniment is played every measure, but in the published score the arpeggio is played only every two measures, allowing the last note of the arpeggio to ring for three beats.[22] In addition, the original production score was written for tack piano and voice while the published score is for piano and voice.[23]

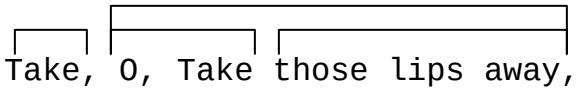
*Measure for Measure* played from July 5 to September 9, 1956 and the reviews of the production were mainly positive. The *Shakespeare Quarterly*, reporting on the season at Stratford, found *Measure for Measure* to be "the best of the three productions" of the

[21] Thomson, *A Virgil Thomson Reader*, 382.
[22] Thomson, "Measure for Measure, Incidental Music," score, 1956, MSS 29/16/11, Virgil Thomson Papers, Irving S. Gilmore Library, Yale University.
[23] Ibid. John Cage describes the tack piano used as "a piano with tacks placed in the hammers to alter the timbre of the strings." Hoover and Cage, *Virgil Thomson*, 241.

season.[24] Critic Walter Kerr writing for the *New York Herald Tribune*, Thomson's former newspaper, found the play to be a "summertime revel."[25] Brooks Atkinson at the *New York Times* called the play "a winning piece of theatre," and commented that David Colson sang this premiere of Thomson's song with "innocent charm."[26]

### C. Musical Analysis of "Take, O, Take Those Lips Away" with Thomson's Word-Groups[27]

Figure 2.1: Word-groups, "Take, O, Take Those Lips Away," line 1[28]

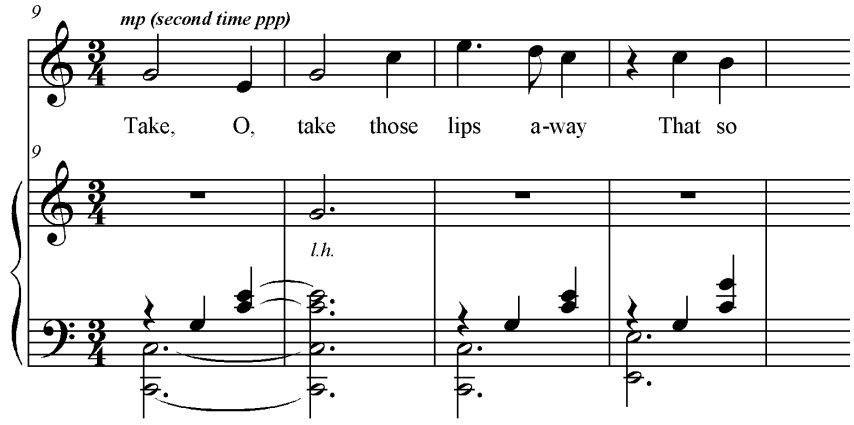



In this six-line poem Thomson adheres to Shakespeare's formal structure by beginning a new word-group at the beginning of each line of poetry. The first word, "take," is given its own word-group. The trochaic meter of the poem is preserved in Thomson's word-group, establishing stress on the first syllable of the line. The word's musical importance is established by its position in the measure and its duration: the word "take" is set on as a half-note on the downbeat, although the voice sings this sensitively at *mezzo piano*. The trochaic meter (stressed-unstressed) of the poem is mirrored in the half-note/quarter-note rhythm that permeates the piece. This long/short rhythm also serves the

[24] Richard Hosley, "The Second Season at Stratford, Connecticut," *Shakespeare Quarterly* 7, no. 4 (Autumn 1956): 401.
[25] Walter Kerr, Review of *Measure for Measure*, *New York Herald Tribune*, 8 July 1956.
[26] Brooks Atkinson, "The Theatre: 'Measure for Measure' Shakespeare's Comedy Acted in Stratford," *New York Times*, 29 June 1956, 16.
[27] I have based my musical analysis on Thomson's published score. Thomson, "Take, O, Take Those Lips Away," from *Shakespeare Songs* (New York: Southern, 1961), 4-5. In addition, the score from Thomson's incidental music for the play was also consulted. Thomson, "Measure for Measure, Incidental Music," score, 1956, MSS 29/16/11, Virgil Thomson Papers.
[28] Thomson, *Music With Words*, 19. For text that accompanies Thomson's word-groups, I will use punctuation and capitalization taken from Thomson's text.

waltz character of Thomson's setting. The arpeggiations in the piano accompaniment evoke a lute or guitar accompaniment (Figure 2.2).[29]

Figure 2.2: Musical Example, "Take, O, Take Those Lips Away," mm. 9-12

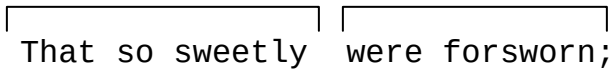



The word-group for the word "take" is followed by a double-word group, in which Thomson allows "a slight hesitation between the groups, though not a real pause."[30] This hesitation indicated by the word-groups allows time for the consonants between the words "take" and "those," ([k] and [ð]), to be articulated.[31] The arch of the musical phrase is formed according to this double-word group, "O, take those lips away," which is sung above a tonic harmony (Figure 2.2). "O," the first word of the group, is the lowest note of the phrase and "lips," is the highest note of the phrase an octave above. The phrase ebbs on the last word of the group "away," coming to rest on the tonic note C5. Thomson found that the grouping of this line compressed the words "lips away" into

[29] Thomson suggests the guitar-like accompaniment in his commentary on the song. *Music with Words*, 92.
[30] Ibid., 20.
[31] Symbols in brackets represent phonemes according to the International Phonetic Alphabet. [k] is the unvoiced stop-plosive as in the first sound of the word *kit*. [ð] is the voice fricative as in the first sound of the word *then*. Joan Wall, *International Phonetic Alphabet for Singers* (Dallas, TX: PST…Inc., 1989), 142, 166; Madeleine Marshall, *The Singer's Manual of English Diction* (New York: Schirmer, 1946), 74, 87.

a strong unit.[32] Thomson's word-group containing this unit, however, begins on the unstressed word "those." The strong unit, "lips away," is combined with the anacrusic setting of the word "those" creating a word-group that bridges the bar line.

Figure 2.3: Word-groups, "Take, O, Take Those Lips Away," line 2[33]




Thomson treats each line of the quatrain as one vocal phrase, that is, a phrase that is sung on one breath. This is evident in his word-groups, which close at the end of each line of the poem. The second line is divided into two word-groups and each group is set to two measures of music. The stressed syllables of "sweet-ly" and "were" are emphasized metrically and rhythmically; by virtue of their downbeat setting on half-notes. This is the same treatment found in the opening vocal phrase on the syllables, "Take, O, Take those," creating the half-note/quarter-note rhythm for two measures.

Musically, Thomson continues to follow Shakespeare's metric stress. Thomson even makes up for the stressed, but unimportant word, "that," by setting it on the second beat and including it with "so" as an anacrusis to the more important word, "sweetly." Here ends the first complete musical phrase, melodically beginning and ending on the same pitch (G4), with a climax on the word "lips." Musical emphasis on the word "lips" follows the dramatic intent of the poetry. Vocally highlighting the word "lips" provides musical foreshadowing of later lines when the words "kisses" and "seals" are mentioned.

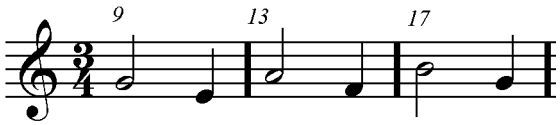
[32] Thomson, *Music With Words*, 17-18.
[33] Ibid., 19.

Figure 2.4: Word-groups, “Take, O, Take Those Lips Away,” line 3[34]

⌈And those eyes,⌉ ⌈the break of day,⌉

In this phrase the word stress is again emphasized with a half-note on the downbeat of the measure. The rhythmic similarities found in the first three phrases (half-note/quarter-note) are emphasized by the use of the interval of a third. All three of these vocal phrases contain descending thirds in the half-note/quarter-note rhythm. Most prominent are the thirds, G-E, A-F, and B-G, in measures 9, 13, and 17 respectively (Figure 2.5). The ascending line created by the first note of each interval, G, A, B, or scale degrees 5, 6, 7, creates a larger tonal movement. The word “day” in m. 19 is set on the tonic C, although its impact is weakened by the first inversion harmony in the bass. The word is sung on an ascending third (C5-E5), which also lessens the impact of tonic but provides aural imagery of daybreak or the rising sun.

Figure 2.5: Musical Example, “Take, O, Take Those Lips Away,” mm. 9, 13, 17




Thomson’s word-groups are consistent with his musical setting, but are not consistent with the poetry. Thomson’s musical setting emphasizes the words “eyes” and “day,” but the composer also adds stress to the unimportant word “and” in order to create

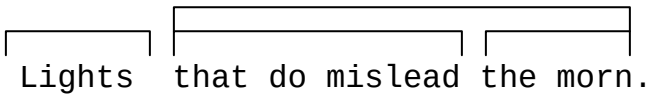
[34] Thomson, *Music With Words*, 19.

continuity within the vocal line with rhythm and pitch sequence (mm. 17-18). The emphasis on the word "and" is only consistent with the poetry if it is analyzed in strict trochaic meter. Thomson does not follow the strict trochaic meter, however, because he does not musically emphasize the following stressed syllable "break." Thus, Thomson's musical setting follows neither the trochaic meter nor the iambic meter, though his word-groups could be interpreted as both (Figure 2.6). This is an example where the musical elements redefine the poetic stresses.

Figure 2.6: Table, Comparative Scansion in "Take, O, Take Those Lips Away"

| **Scansion** | | **Word-Group** |
|---|---|---|
| Iambic | And those eýes the bréak of dáy | |
| Trochaic | Ańd those eýes the bréak of dáy | And those eyes the break of day |

Figure 2.7: Word-groups, "Take, O, Take Those Lips Away," line 4[35]




The vocal phrase sung on the fourth line of the poem, "Lights that do mislead the morn," completes the quatrain and the *abab* rhyme scheme. The phrase begins with an ascending third on the word "lights," though not in the familiar half-note/quarter-note rhythm. The variation in rhythm is evidence of the separate word-group that Thomson assigned to "lights." The highest pitch of the piece, F5, is sung during the word "lights," reminding the listener of the alliteration with the word "lips" sung on the highest note of

[35] Ibid., 19.

the first phrase. The peaks created in both phrases create an arch for the larger eight-bar phrase and provide balance within the A section. The section comes to rest on the tonic C in m. 23 as was anticipated by the larger tonal movement created by the ascending line found in the pattern of descending thirds.

Figure 2.8: Word-groups, "Take, O, Take Those Lips Away," lines 5-6[36]

But my kisses bring again, bring again,

Seals of love, but seal'd in vain, Seald' in vain.

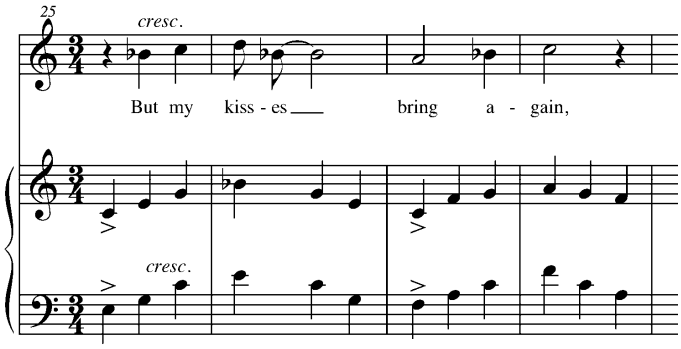
In the B section (mm. 25-40), Thomson creates four four-bar phrases with the remaining couplet, smoothing the idiosyncratic rhythm created by the repeat of the final two feet of these lines, "bring again" and "seal'd in vain." Thomson's word-groups divide each poetic line into three, but musically each line is divided in half, creating four-bar musical phrases for the "extra" feet. In both instances, the first two word-groups are set to four measures of music and the third word-group is set to four measures of music. Thomson has made the final couplet of poetry musically symmetrical to the first four lines of the poem.

This section contrasts the A section by a change in accompaniment texture. The left and right hands move in parallel motion, first in quarter-note ascending and descending arpeggios, then in scalar motion, before returning to the same arpeggios of the A section in m. 33 (Figure 2.9). The B♭4 in the voice and the piano (mm. 24-25)

[36] Ibid., 19.

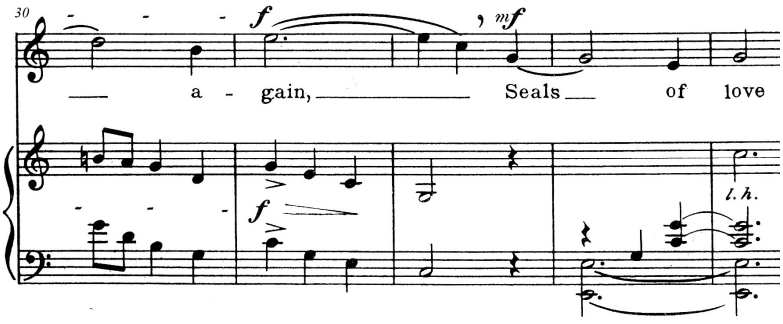
serves to tonicize F major. Thomson avoids stress on the first word of the line ("but") by setting it on the second beat of the measure. Focus on the stress of the first syllable of "kisses" is enhanced by its rhythm and its placement on the downbeat of the measure. The half-note/quarter-note rhythm returns in the voice in m. 27.

Figure 2.9: Musical Example, "Take, O, Take Those Lips Away," mm. 25-28




The crescendo of mm. 25-31 builds to a climactic *forte* in m. 31, sung on the word "again," which is tied over the bar line and resolved on beat two, giving the effect of a fermata (m. 32, Figure 2.10). This rhythmic shift brings out the last line of the poem, which begins on the third beat of m. 32. In preparation, the singer may wish to make a slight decrescendo, as written in the piano part, to start the next phrase *mezzo forte*. The breath mark indicated in m. 32 is also useful, preparing the singer for the rhythmic syncopation.

Figure 2.10: Musical Example, "Take, O, Take Those Lips Away," mm. 30-33




This syncopation catches the listener off-guard, but the familiar half-note/quarter-note rhythm returns in m. 34. The melody and rhythm of mm. 33-34 echo the opening of the piece. The final vocal phrase, sung on "Seal'd in vain," makes one last use of syncopation by beginning on the second beat of the measure. This phrase is marked *dimuendo e rallentando* easing the voice into a repeat of the song at the very soft dynamic which Thomson marks: *ppp*.

Thomson's song is most remarkable for its unadorned simplicity, giving Shakespeare's text a straightforward setting. Shakespeare's poem, however, contains possible metric variations that Thomson overlooks in favor of musical consistency.

**II. Virgil Thomson, Gertrude Stein, and "Susie Asado"**

The two dominant figures in Thomson's creative life were Gertrude Stein and Erik Satie. Thomson used Satie's penchant for simplicity to elucidate the obscure texts of Gertrude Stein. As a young American in 1920s Paris, Thomson he soaked up the world of avant-garde art, music, and literature that bubbled out of the cafés and salons. Jean Cocteau came to Thomson's premiere of *Capital Capitals* (a vocal piece set to text by Gertrude Stein) at the home of Duchesse de Clermont-Tonnerre. Ezra Pound once tried to convince Thomson that he would be famous if he would "stick" with him.[37] George Antheil invited Thomson to the premiere of his *Ballet Méchanique* presented at the Théâtre des Champs-Elysées.[38] James Joyce "never failed" to tell Thomson he liked his work when he came to hear him. [39] Developing his craft among these giants of modernism undoubtedly influenced his work.

It was his collaboration with Stein that allowed Thomson to achieve his modernist ideal of text setting: "if a text is set correctly for the sound of it, the meaning will take care of itself."[40] A correlation one can make between Stein and Thomson is that both took serious interest in visual art and its respective artists: Stein in the cubism of Picasso and Matisse and Thomson in the neo-classicism of Eugène and Leonid Berman and Christian Bérard.[41] Perhaps this is where they found the inspiration to push the edges of their

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[37] Virgil Thomson, *Virgil Thomson* (New York: Knopf, 1966), 81.
[38] "…a final gala at the Théâtre des Champs-Elysées presented for the first time publicly his [Antheil's] *Ballet méchanique*, played with lots of percussion including two airplane propellers, but only one mechanical piano. I did not attend this concert, since no work of mine was on the program and since I was a little disturbed by George's [Antheil] and Ezra's [Pound] secrecy with regard to material benefits." Thomson, *Virgil Thomson*, 81.
[39] Ibid., 77.
[40] Ibid., 90.
[41] Eugène Berman (1899-1972) and his brother Leonid Berman (1896-1976) were Russian painters living in Paris at the time Thomson knew them. Christian Bérard (1902-1949) was a French painter and stage designer. All three are considered "neo-romantics" or "neo-humanists" for their self-conscious traditional

genres: Stein in her democratization of words in her poetry and Thomson in his refusal to accept atonal music. The crowning achievement of their modernist aesthetic was realized in the opera *Four Saints in Three Acts* (1928) in which Thomson's ideal of text setting was attained in a large-scale work.

The literary canon of Gertrude Stein's works and its accompanying critical literature is vast. Similarly substantial is the literature on Stein and Thomson's famous collaboration in *Four Saints in Three Acts* and *The Mother of Us All* (1947). This study will focus exclusively and more narrowly on "Susie Asado," a "portrait" poem by Stein set to music by Thomson.[42] Various critical approaches to this poem will be discussed and these discussions inform the poetic and musical analysis that follows.

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style. *Grove Art Online*, s.v. "Bérard, Christian," http://www.oxfordartonline.com/subscriber/article/grove/art/T008011 (accessed March 18, 2009).

[42] Thomson set four songs to Stein's texts: "Susie Asado" (1926), "Preciosilla" (1927), "Portrait of F. B." (1929), and "Film: Deux soeurs qui sont pas soeurs" (1930). Also to Stein's text is "Capital Capitals" (1927) for four male voices.

## A. Gertrude Stein

### 1. Stein's Portraits and Critical Approaches to Them

"Susie Asado" is a short portrait poem by Gertrude Stein written in the summer of 1912 and later published in a 1922 collection of poems *Geography and Plays*.[43] Stein called this poem, and others like it, a portrait because she hoped to capture a subject's essence much as a painting does. The subject of "Susie Asado" is "La Argentina," a flamenco dancer whom Gertrude Stein and Alice Toklas had "discovered" in Madrid on their tour of Spain.[44] Like other portraits of this period, the poem contains disrupted syntax and interruption of the semantic function of words.[45] There are multiple layers of signification as words function in sound and rhythm to create images and associations beyond their grammatical meanings.[46] Her portraits also established a connection between the visuality of the subject and the sensory aspect, or sound, of a word.[47] "I needed to completely face the difficulty of how to include what is *seen* with *hearing* and *listening*."[48]

An avid art collector and a friend to many artists of her time, Stein was steeped in the art world of Paris. Modern scholars emphasize Stein's interest in art and her friendship with artists like Picasso, Braque, Matisse, and Gris to make a connection

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[43] In her notes Cyrena N. Pondrom suggests that "Susie Asado" was written in 1912. Cyrena N. Pondrom, "Notes on Contents and Dates of Compositions ," in *Geography and Plays*, by Gertrude Stein (Boston, MA: The Four Seas Company, 1922; Madison, WI: University of Wisconsin Press, 1993), 424.
[44] Gertrude Stein, *The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1933; New York: Vintage Books, 1990), 118. Mellow identifies the name of the dancer and Pondrom identifies her as the subject of "Susie Asado." James Mellow, *Charmed Circle: Gertrude Stein and Company* (New York: Praeger, 1974), 161. Pondrom, "Notes," in *Geography and Plays*, by Gertrude Stein, 424.
[45] Wendy Steiner, "The Steinian Portrait," in *Critical Essays on Gertrude Stein*, ed. Michael J. Hoffman (Boston: G. K. Hall, 1986), 136.
[46] Marianne DeKoven, *A Different Language: Gertrude Stein's Experimental Writing* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1983), 68.
[47] Steiner, "The Steinian Portrait," 136.
[48] Gertrude Stein, *Lectures in America* (New York: Random House, 1935; Boston: Beacon Press, 1985), 189 (italics mine).

between her portraits and their paintings. Some take concepts from the visual arts in addition to linguistics and gender awareness to interpret works of this period in Stein's corpus, and specifically her "Susie Asado." Many apply concepts from cubism to make sense of the challenge of interpretation Stein's writing presents.[49, 50] These interpretations of Stein's work are important to this study because they identify the same characteristics Thomson recognizes in his word-groups: the sounds of the words are intricately connected to their meaning.

Randa Dubnick applies structuralist language to both Stein's portraits and cubist paintings to draw parallels from both genres.[51] Dubnick finds Stein's work operates within the dichotomy of linguistic operations identified as "*selection* (choice of signifying elements: vocabulary) and *combination* (ordering of elements: spatial or syntactic)."[52] Dubnick finds that the commonality between Stein's writing and cubist painting is in the choosing of one operation of signification over another.

Wendy Steiner bases her interpretation of Stein's portraits in semiotics, echoing the signifier versus signified argument that Dubnick makes. Steiner makes an effort to connect Stein's disrupted syntax and disjointed semantic relationships to cubism. "This emphasis on nonrepresentational, internally-relational units for Stein and cubists is relevant to the interest of both in the structural rules governing their respective media,

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[49] Michael J. Hoffman, "Gertrude Stein's Portraits," *Twentieth Century Literature* 11, no. 3 (October 1965): 115-122. Marianne DeKoven, "Gertrude Stein and Modern Painting: Beyond Literary Cubism," *Contemporary Literature* 22, no. 1 (Winter 1981): 81-95. Troy Thomas, "Interart Analogy: Practice and Theory in Comparing the Arts," *Journal of Aesthetic Education* 25, no. 2, (Summer 1991): 17-36. L. T. Fitz, "Gertrude Stein and Picasso: The Language of Surfaces," *American Literature* 45, no. 2 (May 1973): 228-237.

[50] The cubist analogy as it applies to Stein's text and Thomson's musical setting will be discussed in more depth later in the chapter.

[51] Randa Dubnick, *The Structure of Obscurity: Gertrude Stein, Language, and Cubism* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1984). Dubnick primarily draws on the language of Roman Jakobson whose work in structural linguistics was a departure from the theories of Ferdinand de Saussure. *Encyclopaedia Britannica* s.v. "Jakobson, Roman," http://search.eb.com/eb/article-9043266 (accessed April 14, 2009).

[52] Dubnick, *The Structure of Obscurity*, xiv.

grammar and geometry."[53] Thomson agrees that discourse is not created by a string of words but by word-groups, which are "internally relational units."[54]

Marjorie Perloff draws a more direct comparison between cubist art and Stein's portraits by comparing Picasso's painting *Ma Jolie* (1911-12) to Stein's verbal portrait "Susie Asado." She compares Picasso's abstraction of fractured shapes that create "an illusory depth at the same time that it insists on the flatness of the surface" combined with "referential features," such as the block letters and a treble clef, to Stein's multi-layered "verbal planes," which combine the sounds of the words themselves in rhythm, rhyme, and repetition with their referential meanings.[55] Thomson's musical setting of "Susie Asado" can be considered multi-layered by sometimes evoking what the poem is denoting, for instance a bird, and what the poem is, a portrait of a dancer, by highlighting the sound of the brush of a shoe.

Marianne DeKoven combines a feminist and semiotic approach. Calling all of Stein's experimental work "anti-patriarchal," in that it resists linear, coherent, and referential modes, DeKoven uses a semiotic vocabulary to claim that Stein's attitudes towards her gender creates this anti-patriarchy at the language level.[56] DeKoven also points out the parallel between Stein's experimental work and cubist painting in that both render "multiple perspectives," and she maintains the semiotic approach to her interpretation in suggesting that Stein's work focuses on the signifier over the signified. The relationship between the signifier and the signified appears repeatedly in Stein's

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[53] Wendy Steiner, *Exact Resemblance to Exact Resemblance: The Literary Portraiture of Gertrude Stein* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1978), 147.
[54] Thomson, *Music With Words*, 2-3.
[55] Majorie Perloff, *The Poetics of Indeterminacy: Rimbaud to Cage* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1983), 71-75. See also Thomas' reading of Perloff's explanation in "Interart Analogy." Thomas, "Interart Analogy," 30-32.
[56] DeKoven, *A Different Language*, xii-xiii.

critical literature. This relationship also appears in Thomson's word-groups, though he never discusses them in those terms. Word-groups connect the signifier with the signified because they show how sounds of the signifier connect to meaning of the signified.

## 2. Poetic Analysis of "Susie Asado"

**Susie Asado**
From *Geography and Plays*
Gertrude Stein

Sweet sweet sweet sweet sweet tea.
Susie Asado.
Sweet sweet sweet sweet sweet tea.
Susie Asado.
Susie Asado which is a told tray sure.
A lean on the shoe this means slips slips hers.
When the ancient light grey is clean it is yellow, it is a silver seller.
This is a please this is a please there are the saids to jelly. These are the wets these say the sets to leave a crown to Incy.
Incy is short for incubus.
A pot. A pot is a beginning of a rare bit of trees. Trees tremble, the old vats are in bobbles, bobbles which shade and shove and render clean, render clean must.
Drink pups.
Drink pups drink pups lease a sash hold, see it shine and a bobolink has pins. It shows a nail.
What is a nail. A nail is unison.
Sweet sweet sweet sweet sweet tea.[57]

The first line contains an insistent sound and rhythm that immediately evokes the dancer, Susie Asado, who is the subject of the poem. The sound created by the word "sweet" is one of a foot brushing along the floor [su] and then tapping or stomping [t].[58] The five repetitions of the word emphasize the steps of the dance. The brush of the step [su] is echoed in the sounds of the dancer's name, "Susie Asado." Both lines are repeated like the repetition of a dance, implying Susie Asado's occupation as a flamenco dancer. The phonetic aspects of the lines create a "verbal plane" for the reader to associate meaning.[59] This "verbal plane" of sound operates in addition to the literal meaning of the words.

[57] Stein, *Geography and Plays*, 13.
[58] Marjorie Perloff suggests the sound of "stamping feet accompanied by castanets" is evoked in this line. Perloff, *The Poetics of Indeterminacy*, 74.
[59] Perloff, *Poetics of Indeterminacy*, 73.

The appearance of the words "sweet tea" implies a tea party. By conflating the subject and the portrait, Stein makes Susie Asado and the tea party one and the same.[60] Stein's reference to a tea party creates an "implicit simile: the experience of these words, suggesting a cozy tea-party, is as pleasant as an experience with Susie Asado."[61] The simile is enhanced by the pun "sweet tea" for *sweetie*.[62]

According to Betina Knapp, the line "Susie Asado which is a told tray sure" implies that the story of Susie Asado is being narrated or "told," possibly at the tea party implied in the previous line.[63] The "told tray sure" evokes a colloquial saying, as it contains parts of three other sayings: "'an old/gold/bold treasure, 'a told tale sure,' or 'a cold [tea] tray.'"[64] The pun of, "tray sure," for *treasure*, might be directed to Susie Asado or to Alice Toklas.[65] With a love interest introduced, the reader may begin to detect sexual undertones in the poem.

In the line, "A lean on the shoe this means slips slips hers," the mention of a "shoe" and the pun "slips hers" for *slippers* is another reference to Susie Asado's profession as a dancer. "Slips" and the later mention of "bobbles" might also indicate a

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[60] In *Lectures in America*, Stein describes her portraits of this period as "exactly" relating the subject of the portrait to the word used to render it. "And the thing that excited me so very much at that time and still does is that the words or words that make what I looked at by itself were always words that to me very exactly related themselves to that thing the thing at which I was looking, but as often as not had as I say nothing whatever to do with what any words would do that described that thing." Stein, *Lectures in America*, 191-192. Wendy Steiner supports Stein's attempt to create a direct connection between the subject and the portrait. "She attempted an uncompromising mimesis, a direct equivalence between her words and her subjects' thought or speech, or more frequently, between her words and her own thoughts in perceiving her subjects." Steiner, *Exact Resemblance*, 54.

[61] Steiner, *Exact Resemblance*, 103.

[62] "Tea" is also a euphemism for marijuana. Given this reading, the word "pot" in line 13 alludes to marijuana, as does "asado" which translates from the Spanish to "roast." Alice B. Toklas' name has been associated with marijuana since the publication of her cookbook in 1954. *The Alice B. Toklas Cookbook* includes a recipe for "Haschich Fudge" which calls for cannabis sativa as one of its ingredients.

[63] Bettina Liebowitz Knapp, *Gertrude Stein* (New York: Continuum, 1990), 101.

[64] Steiner, *Exact Resemblance*, 102.

[65] Janet Hobhouse describes "Susie Asado" as "some lyrical love poetry written to Alice." Janet Hobhouse, *Everybody Who Was Anybody: A Biography of Gertrude Stein* (New York: Doubleday, 1989), 121.

misstep taken in a dance. *Slippers* could also allude to the comfortable house-shoe variety, which enhances a domestic tea-party reading.[66] The different "verbal planes" at work between the phonetic sound and the meaning of the words allows for another level of meaning to occur simultaneously as both a tea-party and a flamenco performance.

The line, "When the ancient light grey is clean it is yellow, it is a silver seller," contains words that can apply to Susie Asado's performance, the tea party, or provide a more abstract reading. Colors are present in this line: grey, yellow, and silver. The colors may represent theatrical lighting effects at Susie Asado's performance.[67] Conversely, the words "ancient light" might suggest natural light. The sun, or "ancient light," can seem to produce light of grey, yellow, and silver during various times of day or conditions.

The word "clean" evokes thoughts of purification, which applies to "silver" during the process of metallurgy or polishing. The idea of polishing silver associates with a tarnished tea set referencing, once again, the tea party. The association of purification could also be applied to the "ancient light" leading to a more spiritual reading of this line; the light is "clean" or pure, or it provides purification, as in the "light of God."[68]

The word "silver" can function as both a noun and an adjective, just as "light" can serve as a noun, adjective, or verb. This ambiguity encourages a multi-level interpretation and encompasses the concept of "continuous present" that Stein seeks.[69] The reader must constantly rearrange the meaning of the words in his/her mind never reaching a concrete conclusion. While "silver" might have the associative meaning suggested above, another

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[66] Steiner, *Exact Resemblance*, 102.
[67] Bettina Knapp interprets this line as indicating theatrical lighting. Knapp, *Gertrude Stein*, 101.
[68] For example, Quakers believe in an "inner light" that refers to God's presence within a person, based on the biblical verse, John 1:9.
[69] Stein was influenced by psychologist William James. James introduced Stein to the concepts of "continuous present" and "active consciousness." Sutherland provides an excellent explanation of how James' ideas of consciousness were interpreted by Stein. Donald Sutherland, *Gertrude Stein: A biography of her work* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1951; Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1971), 1-21.

interpretation of "silver seller" is a literal pun on a *silver cellar*, or a silver salt cellar, which would accompany the "tray" of the silver tea service enhancing the tea party interpretation.

Pleasant conversation is evident in the repetition of "please" and the appearance of "saids" in the lines, "This is a please this is a please these are the saids / to jelly. These are the wets these say the sets to leave / a crown to Incy. / Incy is short for incubus." The phrases "this is a…" and "these are…" sound like the hostess pointing out different goodies to be consumed at teatime. The pleasantries of this passage support Dana Cairns Watson's reading that "interactional conversation," or conversation meant to build friendship, is present.[70] The silver salt cellar might be one of the items to be passed at the tea party and so supports her reading that the poem contains "speech in action" which allows for cooperation among guests.[71]

There is an erotic implication in the appearance of "incubus," but the introduction of this demon that rapes women while they sleep is softened by assigning it a diminutive nickname, "incy."[72] When this sexual tone is brought to the surface, other words can be read for sexual meaning: "wets," "slips," and "shove." Perloff sheds light on the sexual innuendo implied in the word "asado."[73] The Spanish word "asado" translates to "roast" which, in English, has a slang sexual meaning.

In the lines "A pot. A pot is a beginning of a rare bit of trees. / Trees tremble, the old vats are in bobbles, bobbles which / shade and shove and render clean, render clean

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[70] Dana Cairns Watson, *Gertrude Stein and the Essence of What Happens* (Nashville: Vanderbilt UP, 2005), 83.
[71] Ibid.
[72] Perloff finds that the erotic is introduced "only gently, playfully: it is, after all, a mere Incy." Perloff, *Poetics of Indeterminacy*, 74.
[73] Ibid., 75.

must," "A pot," as in a teapot, is a reminder of the tea party, as are the "bobbles" or *bubbles* of a boiling kettle. But the spiritual world that was evoked by the word "incubus" in the previous lines allows the reader to make more associations in these lines. The reader might imagine that the bubbling in the "old vats" is a witch's brew, evoking the witches' scene in *Macbeth*.[74] One can almost hear the line from Shakespeare, "Double, double toil and trouble; / Fire burn and cauldron bubble," in Stein's repetitious text.[75] Furthermore, the witches' scene takes place in the forest where "trees tremble." Now that the reader has made the association to *Macbeth*, the phrase "Render clean, render clean must" resonates with Lady Macbeth washing her hands of blood and guilt.

The reader is encouraged to drink up or "drink pups" in the lines, "Drink pups. / Drink pups drink pups lease a sash hold, see it shine / and a bobolink has pins. It shows a nail." The spiritual world of witches and demons mixes with the tea party as the meter and associated content mix. "The trochaic meter is often associated with songs, chants, and magic spells in English. Trochees make a strong, emphatic meter that is often very mnemonic. Shakespeare and Blake used trochaic meter to exploit its magical associations."[76] The association of the magic chant is diffused by the pun on the words; instead of a witch's spell the reader is left with an insistent host, "drink up, drink up, drink up!"

Several puns are associated with the "bobolink" (a North American song bird): "has pins" for *hastens*, and "bobbles" for *babbles*.[77] The "bobolink" will also make the

[74] Both Watson and Knapp make this leap of imagination. Watson, *Gertrude Stein and the Essence of What Happens* 86; Knapp, *Gertrude Stein*, 102.
[75] Shakespeare, *Macbeth*, 4.1.10-11.
[76] X. J. Kennedy and Dana Gioia, *An Introduction to Poetry*, 11th ed. (New York: Pearson Longman, 2005), 199.
[77] Steiner, *Exact Resemblance*, 103.

"trees tremble" as it comes to perch on a branch. A direct connection between the "boblink" and "Susie Asado" can be made: Susie Asado's dance movements "recall a chirping bird" implied by the opening and closing lines, "sweet, sweet, sweet…" or *tweet, tweet, tweet*.[78]

The "sash," "pins," and a "nail," mentioned in the previous lines, all "hold" something together. The "nail" could be holding the "sets" together on the stage on which Susie Asado dances.[79] The word "nail" mentioned again in the line, "What is a nail. A nail is unison," is representative of a nail that holds the poem together.[80] The "nail" brings into "unison" the disparate elements of the poem: the elements of the stage for a flamenco dance, spiritual and sexual undertones, and the more banal tea party. The poem ends in "unison" or agreement with itself by repeating the first line of the poem, "Sweet sweet sweet sweet sweet tea."[81]

Many scholars struggle with finding referential meaning in Stein's portraits, and focus instead on their language aspects or surface details.[82] Indeed, Stein's verbal play should not be underestimated. Stein describes the world she creates as one in which verbs "can change to look like themselves or something else," adverbs are "on the move" along with verbs, an article "remains a delicate and a varied something," conjunctions "live" and pronouns "have a greater possibility of being something than if they were a noun."[83] Stein's surface elements of repetition and rhyme are pleasing to the mouth, but might leave the reader dissatisfied when the poem is over. The above interpretation attempts to

[78] Perloff, *Poetics of Indeterminacy*, 76.
[79] Knapp, *Gertrude Stein*, 102.
[80] Perloff, *Poetics of Indeterminacy*, 76; Knapp, *Gertrude Stein*, 102.
[81] Perloff, *Poetics of Indeterminacy*, 76.
[82] Cyrena Pondrom offers a comparison of three analyses of Stein's work, each based in a different field: linguistics, psychology, and deconstructive criticism. Cyrena N. Pondrom, "Review: Gertrude Stein: From Outlaw to Classic." *Contemporary Literature* 27, no. 1 (Spring 1986): 98-114.
[83] Stein, *Lectures in America*, 213-214.

explore Stein's language for its sound and let the words' associative meanings enter into the interpretation.

**B. "You and the Susie": Thomson and Stein**

Thomson knew Stein's poetry collections *Tender Buttons* and *Geography and Plays* from his "Harvard days." After moving to Paris in 1925, he hoped to meet Stein, but wanted their acquaintance to come about "informally."[84] Thomson's opportunity came through a fellow American composer, George Antheil. When Antheil received an invitation to visit Stein at 27 rue de Fleurus, he invited Thomson to come along and Thomson gladly accepted.[85]

According to Thomson, he and Stein "got on like old Harvard men." While Stein saw no reason to see Antheil again, she said to Thomson, "We'll be seeing each other."[86] Stein wrote that she Thomson "became friends and saw each other a great deal," yet Thomson did not visit again until the following fall.[87]

On New Year's Day 1927, Thomson delivered a gift of a musical setting of Stein's portrait "Susie Asado." The song served as the means of introduction for Thomson into the household of Stein and Toklas. Stein, who did not read music, wrote to Thomson in response to the song: "I like its looks immensely and want to frame it and Miss Toklas who knows more than looks says the things in it please her a lot."[88] Stein excused herself in the letter for not greeting Thomson personally when he called and invited him for a future visit: "You would have been the xception [*sic*] you and the Susie,

[84] Thomson, *Virgil Thomson*, 89.
[85] Ibid.
[86] Ibid.
[87] Stein, *The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas*, 227; Thomson, *Virgil Thomson*, 90.
[88] Thomson, *Virgil Thomson*, 90.

you or the Susie, do come in soon…"[89] This gesture of introduction began a long collaboration between Thomson and Stein.

The premiere of the song was intended for a concert in Paris at the Salle d'Orgue in 1928; however, the first soprano hired refused to be associated with Stein and was replaced.[90] Her replacement, however, was a French soprano whose English diction was not to Thomson's satisfaction, so the Stein songs were withdrawn from the program.[91] "Susie Asado" was heard the following year, June 17, 1929, at the Salle Chopin on a program of young American composers.[92]

The American premiere of "Susie Asado" took place five years later in 1934 in New York at the League of Composers' "Program of First Performances."[93] The soprano Theodate Johnson with Thomson at the piano performed three songs on the program: "Le Singe et le Léopard," "Susie Asado," and "Air de Phedre."[94] A reviewer from the *New York Times* wrote of two of Thomson's songs: "'Le Singe e [*sic*] le Leopard' [*sic*] and 'Susie Asado' (the latter to a text of Gertrude Stein) displayed his talent for effective vocal writing and elfish humor. The deliberate naivité of his harmonic scheme suited both short pieces."[95]

"Susie Asado" was not published until 1935. It was included in an anthology published by Cos Cob Press under the patronage of Alma Wertheim and the leadership of

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[89] Thomson, *Virgil Thomson*, 90.
[90] Thomson, *Virgil Thomson*, 115. The songs to Stein texts were probably "Preciosilla" and "Susie Asado."
[91] The French soprano was Marthe-Marthine Cliquet-Pleyel. Thomson, *Virgil Thomson*, 115.
[92] "Concert d'Œuvres de Jeunes Compositeurs Américains," printed program, YCAL MSS 76/74/1361, Gertrude Stein and Alice B. Toklas Collection, Yale Collection of American Literature, Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library. The program consisted of works by composers who were friends of Aaron Copland: in addition to Aaron Copland, Israel Citkovitz, Carlos Chavez, Virgil Thomson, and Roy Harris.
[93] "Composers League Offers New Music," *New York Times*, February 19, 1934.
[94] Ibid.
[95] Ibid.

Aaron Copland.[96] Copland writes in the preface of the publication: "In 1934 I gathered together ten songs by composer friends of mine that I believed to be well worth publication."[97]

**1. Setting Stein**

Thomson enjoyed Stein's text for its many possibilities of meaning. Stein's multiple meanings allowed Thomson to set the text based purely on its sound, believing that a meaning would inevitably come through.

> My hope in putting Gertrude Stein to music had been to break, crack open, and solve for all time anything still waiting to be solved, which was almost everything, about English musical declamation. My theory was that if a text is set correctly for the sound of it, the meaning will take care of itself. And the Stein texts, for prosodizing in this way, were manna. With meaning already abstracted, or absent, or so multiplied that choice among them was impossible, there was no temptation toward tonal illustration, say, of birdie babbling by the brook or heavy heavy hangs my heart. You could make a setting for sound and syntax only, then add, if needed, an accompaniment equally functional. I had no sooner put to music after this recipe one short Stein text [Susie Asado] than I knew I had opened a door.[98]

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[96] An explication of the Cos Cob Press is found in Carol Oja's article "Cos Cob Press and the American Compser," *Notes*, 2nd Series, 45, no. 2 (December 1988): 227-52.
[97] *Cos Cob Song Volume* (New York: Cos Cob Press, 1935; New York: Boosey & Hawkes, 1962). The composers included in this volume have since become familiar names in American music: Roger Sessions, Theodore Chanler, Charles Ives, Israel Citkowitz, Virgil Thomson, Marc Blitzstein, Aaron Copland, Irwin Heilner, Alexander Lipsky, and Paul Bowles.
[98] Thomson, *Virgil Thomson*, 90.

Despite Thomson's disapproval of "tonal illustration," his term for conventional word-painting, in his brief analysis of "Susie Asado" he describes both the voice and piano as evoking bird sounds. The bird sounds might have been inspired by the "bobolink" mentioned in the poem.

> The text is said to portray a Spanish dancer, though certainly birds are present. In any case the composer's music-idea in both voice and piano is an evocation of bird sounds. The accompaniment consists of musical abstractions only – broken triads, rising scales (in sevenths), open fifths stacked up (C, G, D), and a single tone with an appoggiatura added to make it twitter.[99]

Thomson's biographers John Cage and Anthony Tommasini offer their own descriptions of "Susie Asado." John Cage conceives the starkness of Thomson's accompaniment as a venture into the percussive possibilities Thomson was exploring at the time.[100] Cage likens the minimal piano accompaniment to single percussion instruments and then to Stein's writing; "The minimal musical events employed in the piano part are preceded and followed by silences. Stripped of context, they resemble the sounds that issue from single percussion instruments. Though fresh in effect, they are in themselves as commonplace as the is's and the and's of Miss Stein's prose."[101]

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[99] Ibid., 85.
[100] Thomson's piece *Five Phrases from the Song of Solomon* (1924-1926) for soprano and percussion was written around the same time as "Susie Asado." Hoover and Cage, *Virgil Thomson*, 138; Thomson, *Five Phrases from the Song of Solomon* (New York: American Music Edition, 1953).
[101] "The minimal musical events employed in the piano part are preceded and followed by silences. Stripped of context, they resemble the sounds that issue from a single percussion instrument." Hoover and Cage, *Virgil Thomson*, 138.

Cage finds humor in the song: "Both the words and the music of this song with piano accompaniment are extremely funny."[102] Cage describes the humor as "dead-pan" but does not explore further meaning within the text, only that: "one finds oneself a little more innocent and a little more idiotic for having enjoyed it [the song]."[103] Cage's analysis does not provide an indication of what Thomson meant to accomplish in setting this text; merely that the music and the poem are similar in the minimalist and humorous effect they achieve. "In putting 'Susie Asado' to music he had, so to speak, held a microscope over the text, emphasizing by parallel musical means the discontinuity of the words."[104]

Tommasini describes the paradoxical effect of the piano accompaniment in "Susie Asado" as "spare yet strong, playful yet haunting, funny yet oddly moving."[105] He also points out that meaning is "activated by Thomson's setting" and ventures an interpretation of the poem.[106]

> Miss Asado is clearly a gracious hostess who serves 'Sweet sweet sweet sweet sweet tea.' She's also, as the wordplay suggests, a sweetie. And a "tray sure" (a treasure). Even more, a '*told* tray sure,' which may mean she is fabled among the circle of women who drink her sweet tea.[107]

Tommasini also identifies Stein's meaning "projected by Thomson's deft word groupings."[108] "A lean on the shoe this means slips slips hers" indicates that Miss Asado wears slippers ("slips hers").[109]

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[102] Ibid.
[103] Ibid.
[104] Ibid., 144.
[105] Tommasini, *Virgil Thomson*, 136.
[106] Ibid.
[107] Ibid.
[108] Ibid.

Thomson's setting parallels Stein's poetic setting in its repetition and quick transitions. The disjunction of Stein's poetry is reflected in Thomson's short musical devices that have no apparent connection to each other. The devices do however connect to Stein's words, punctuating their meaning and thereby creating a new reading of the poem, emphasizing the word's connections in their incongruous poetic setting.

**2. Musical Analysis of "Susie Asado" with Thomson's Word-Groups**[110]

**a. Musical Characteristics and Form**

The primary musical characteristics of this piece—sparse accompaniment, frequent metric changes, the use of diatonic intervals primarily thirds and fifths, and persistent use of repeated pitches—achieve Thomson's goal of allowing "the text's exact shape and purpose [to] dominate the union" of words and music."[111] The sparse accompaniment allows the voice in its musical setting to assert a primary role in the texture. The setting is in keeping with the poetic tone of the poem: the sudden disconnections or choppiness of the poetry is also in the musical setting.

The frequent meter changes that mark this piece support Thomson's predilection for natural speech rhythms and the innate rhythms of Stein's poetry. The piece changes meter twenty-two times, switching between 2/4, 3/4, 4/4, and 5/4 according to the stress determined by the words.

The diatonic intervals of thirds and fifths and the pitches of the C natural minor scale offer implications of tonality. However, formal tonal closure is never provided through conventional cadences. Instead, the form of the piece is determined by repetition

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[109] Ibid.
[110] My musical analysis is based on the the published score. Thomson, "Susie Asado," in *Cos Cob Song Volume* (New York: Boosey and Hawkes, 1962), 13-14. Holograph sketches of the score were also consulted. Thomson, "Susie Asado," sketches, MSS 29/15/9, Virgil Thomson Papers.
[111] Thomson, *Music With Words*, 1.

and tonal punctuation. The piece revolves around the axis of C minor and E major simultaneously implying both but never affirming either key. The formal construction, which can be interpreted as binary, divides as follows.

Introduction: (mm. 1-6) The introduction consists of two parallel phrases. The piano alternates between two musical devices, silence and the C minor arpeggio.

A: (mm. 7-21) The A section begins and ends in E-flat major. The musical devices in the piano are ascending sixteenth-note scales and the C minor arpeggio, with two uses of a measure of silence (mm. 9, 16). The voice sings in melodic, step-wise motion.

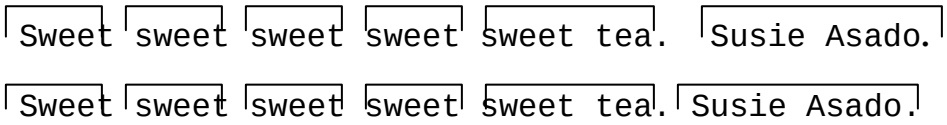
B: (mm. 22-33) The B section alludes to F major when the voice sings an A-natural (mm. 22, 30-31), but C minor tonality is heard throughout. The piano uses two musical devices, the block chord built on fifths above C3 and a single note decorated by a grace note. The voice is more chant-like than in the A section in repetitions of a single pitch.

Coda: (mm. 34-37) The coda uses devices from the introduction and the B section, a C minor arpeggio, measures of silence, and a block chord. The vocal line mimics the introduction in reverse: mm. 36-37 = mm. 1-2, m. 34 = m. 3.

**b. Musical Analysis**

The following analysis offers a point-by-point examination of Thomson's word-groups and the song he set them to in "Susie Asado." The word-groups presented are Thomson's own, published in *Music With Words*, and will be compared to his musical setting revealing his reading of the poem.

Figure 2.11: Word-groups, "Susie Asado," lines 1-4, Introduction[112]

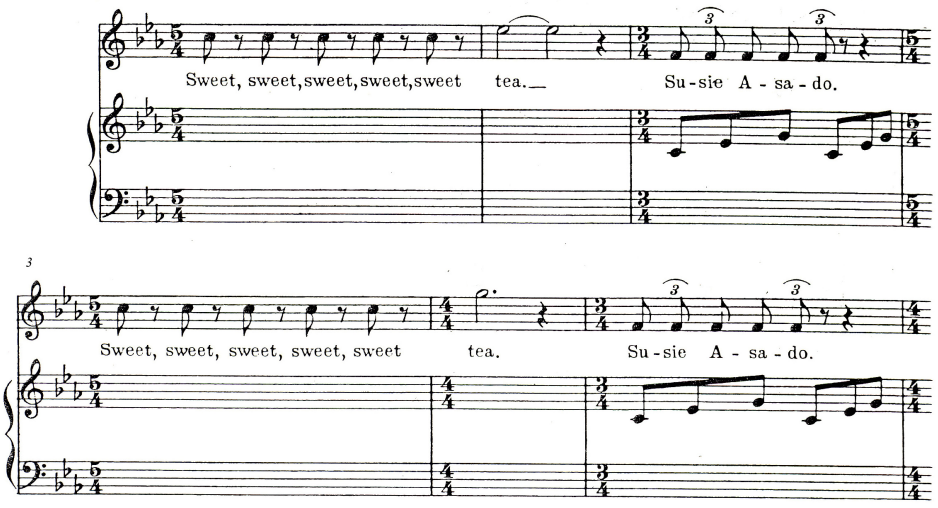



The piece begins in 5/4 with the voice singing the unaccompanied note C5 on the word "sweet." Just as the word is repeated five times in Stein's poem, the word is repeated five times on eighth-notes separated by eighth-rests. This setting emphasizes the staccato, percussive nature of the word. The voice ascends a minor third to an E-flat on the word "tea," which is held for four beats contrasting the previous word-groups it can be held because it ends with a vowel.

The first notes in the piano compose a C minor triad arpeggio, establishing C minor as the tonal center. The C minor arpeggio recurs throughout the piece. The interval of a third occurs frequently, both melodically and harmonically, throughout the song. The third can also be linked to the bird song Thomson suggests in his description.[113]

[112] Ibid., 20.
[113] The interval of a third appears frequently in Thomson's music and one of his piano portraits is devoted to it: "For Eugene Ormandy's Birthday, 18 November 1969: A Study in Stacked-Up Thirds," in *Nine Portraits for Piano* (New York: Southern Music Publishing, 1974).

Figure 2.12: Musical Example, "Susie Asado," mm. 1-6[114]




The repetition of the short word "sweet," reflects musically Thomson's separate word-groups (Figure 2.12). While set to quarter-notes in an early manuscript, separating "sweet," an eighth-note, by an eighth-rest emphasizes each word as its own group. In setting the word this way, a singer may choose to place the [t] on the eighth rest, giving equal attention to the pitched sound of the word, [ui], and the aspirate that stops it, [t]. Thomson's emphasis on the consonant supports his reading of the presence of a staccato flamenco dance rhythm. The words "sweet tea," linked by a word group, recognizes the pun on *sweetie,* but in his musical setting the words are separated by an eighth-rest, which emphasizes the consonant [t] and a percussive dance rhythm. This is one example of inconsistency between Thomson's word-groups and his musical setting of them.

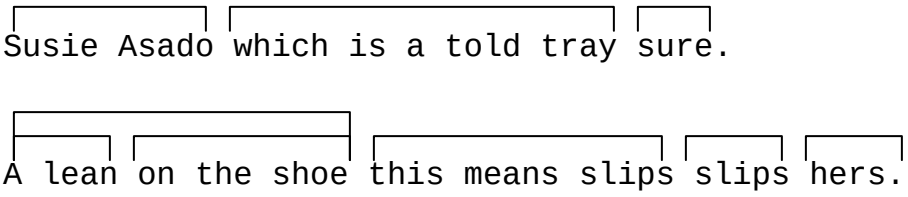
In a measure of 3/4 meter, the words "Susie Asado" are sung in triplet eighth-notes above the piano entrance of a C minor arpeggiated triad. Thomson connects the words "Susie Asado" by their shared note value and pitch, emphasizing the auditory link and certainly his intention of both words being part of one word-group. The rounded [u],

[114] Thomson, "Susie Asado," 13.

[o], and open [a] vowel sounds of "Susie Asado," provide both a respite and contrast to the staccato sound of "sweet."

The subsequent vocal line is repeated almost exactly as the first, except the line ascends a perfect fifth between "sweet" and "tea." Because of their parallel construction, these two phrases function as an introduction.

Figure 2.13: Word-groups, "Susie Asado," lines 5-6, Section A[115]

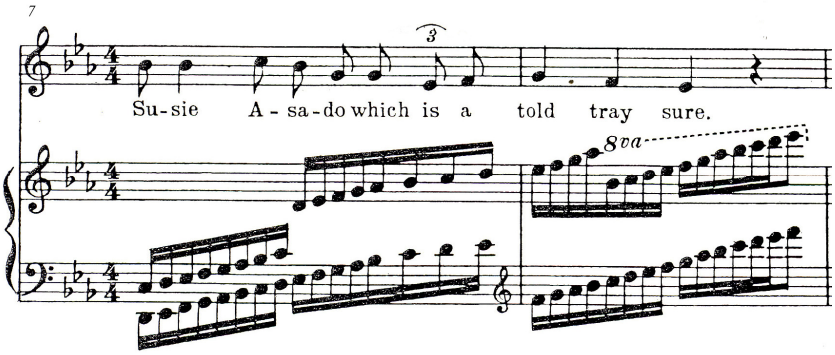



"Susie Asado which is a told tray sure," is sung to a folksy-sounding melody (mm. 7-8).[116] It is suggestive of any number of railroad or cowboy songs from the late 1800s, in this instance, because of the syncopated rhythm on the downbeat and its emphasis on the tonic triad, particularly the descent from the 3rd scale degree to the 1st scale degree, here temporarily E♭ major. The scales in the piano under this vocal line rise in parallel minor 7ths which convolutes the general tonality, but the scales are diatonic and the top line ends on E♭7, supporting the E♭4 in the voice. Thomson confuses the vertical and horizontal planes by playing with the melodic and harmonic lines. Each hand taken separately plays a C natural minor or an E♭ major scale, but with the left hand

[115] Thomson, *Music With Words*, 20.
[116] Cage suggests "'Casey Jones' puts in a brief appearance," but the tune heard here is not a quote. Hoover and Cage, *Virgil Thomson*, 138; T. Lawrence Seibert and Eddie Newton, *Casey Jones: The Brave Engineer* (Los Angeles: Southern California Music, 1909).

starting on D and the right hand on C set against the E♭-centric vocal line, the harmonies are ambiguous (Figure 2.14).

Figure 2.14: Musical Example, "Susie Asado," mm. 7-8[117]




In line 5 of the poem, "which is a told tray," and "sure" are marked as separate word-groups. Thomson's setting, however, does not render these word-groups in the vocal line. Instead, the words "told tray sure" are emphasized and are sung as if they were a single word-group: ⌈told tray sure.⌉ Each word is set to a quarter-note and the phrase indicates a kind of cadence, descending to the temporary tonal center of E-flat. The word-groups indicate Thomson reads the pun on "told tray" for *cold tray* or *old tray*. The separation of the word "sure" as its own word-group brings out the juxtaposition of "sure" and the word "slips" in the next line. This juxtaposition reveals the interpretation of the flamenco dancer "Susie Asado."

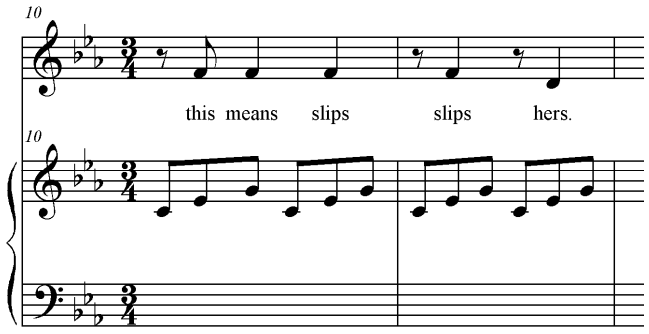
Eighth-rests frame the word-groups in the phrase "a lean on the shoe slips slips hers." The double word-group, "a lean on the shoe," encourages a literal reading of "slips" as Susie Asado's "shoe" "slips." This reading of "slips" as a verb is also in agreement with Stein's love of verbs: "it is wonderful the number of mistakes a verb can

[117] Thomson, "Susie Asado," 13.

make."[118] The descending interval between "slips" and "hers," or slipping off the pitch, illustrates this reading, as does the syncopation, or slipping off the beat (m. 11).

The C-minor arpeggio in the piano returns under the repeated vocal note F4 sung to "this means slips slips hers" (m. 10-11). This is reminiscent of the phrase "Susie Asado" also sung on F4 above a C minor arpeggio (Compare Figure 2.12 and Figure 2.15). This musical repetition reflects the repetition present in Stein's poem.

Figure 2.15: Musical Example, "Susie Asado," mm. 10-11[119]



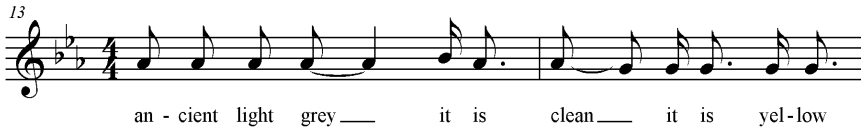

[118] Stein, *Lectures In America*, 211.
[119] Thomson, "Susie Asado," 13.

Figure 2.16: Word-groups, "Susie Asado," lines 7-10, Section A continued [120]

When the ancient light grey [it] is clean it is yellow,
it is a silver seller.
This is a please, this is a please these are the saids
to jelly.

There is a variation in the text between Stein's published poem and Thomson's scores, with the addition of the word "it" (Figure 2.16). Thomson assigns his word-groups in *Music with Words* based on the text of the poem, not the text published in his song. The addition of the word "it" in the song could be a mistake on Thomson's part or a deliberate addition to match the repetition in the rest of the line: "…*it* is clean it is yellow, it is a silver seller."[121] The repetition of text is reflected in the repetition of the rhythm, sixteenth-note/dotted-eighth-note, assigned to the words "it is" in the first two repetitions (Figure 2.17).

Figure 2.17: Music Example, "Susie Asado," vocal line, mm. 13-14




Stein uses a rhyme within the words, "yellow," "seller," and "jelly" that is pleasing both to the ear and eye. Both the aural and visual effects of "ell" are brought out

[120] Thomson, *Music With Words*, 20.
[121] The word "it" appears in early sketches of "Susie Asado" and the evidence is unclear if Stein was concerned with this addition to her poem. "Susie Asado," sketches, MSS 29/15/9, Virgil Thomson Papers. Virgil Thomson to Mr. Bradley, 16 February 1934, YCAL MSS 76/127/2775, Gertrude Stein and Alice B. Toklas Collection.

by the punctuation that follows each word causing the reader to pause or stop. Thomson's song however, does not dwell on this rhyme, but on the consonance of "silver seller."

The words "silver seller" are highlighted by melodic motion, rhythm, and a change in texture. The words are sung in a scalar pattern, which stands out from the preceding measures of single repeated notes repeated (mm. 13-14). The rhythm is in triplets, emphasizing the initial [s] sound of each word. The accompaniment changes under these words, from a scalar pattern to the arpeggiated chord.

Thomson again changes the words slightly from Stein's poem, which reads "*there* are the saids," to "*these* are the saids."[122] Although this may be a mistake in the text he was using, it is possible that he changed the word to match the repetition in the next line, "these are the wets these say the sets…" This change is supported in the application of word-groups as shown in Figure 2.16 where Thomson includes the change in text.[123]

Majorie Perloff cites the line, "This is a please this is a please there are the saids to jelly," as a point of accelerating rhythm of the poem.[124] She provides a scansion of the line emphasizing the repetition of the pattern of stressed syllables: stressed, unstressed, unstressed, stressed, a combination of the trochee and iamb.[125] Thomson emphasizes the combination in his word-groups and brings out these stresses in the rhythm he assigns the passage. The stressed words ("this" and "please") are sung on the beat and the unstressed are sung off the beat within a triplet rhythm (Figure 2.18).

[122] Italics mine.
[123] Thomson, *Music With Words*, 20.
[124] Perloff, *Poetics of Indeterminacy*, 75
[125] Ibid.

Figure 2.18: Musical Example, “Susie Asado,” vocal line, mm. 16[126]

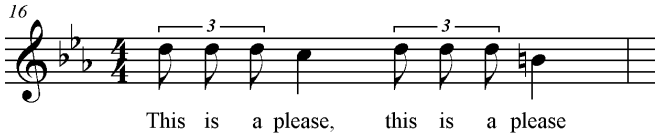



Figure 2.19: Word-groups, “Susie Asado,” lines 10-11, Section A continued [127]

These are the wets these say the sets to leave a crown to Incy.

Thomson sets off the internal rhyme of “wets” and “sets” by following each word with a rest. Like the use of the rest after the word “sweet” in the first lines of the poem, the ending consonants “ts” are exposed for their rhythmic sound. The combination of the trochee and the iamb is indicated by Thomson’s word-groups, which create a verbal link between the phrases “these are the wets” and “these say the sets.”

The rhythm Thomson uses to set the words “to leave a crown to Incy” reflects his word-groups; a rest separates each group. Melodically, the words “crown to Incy” descend on scale degrees 3-2-1 in the key of E-flat. While the A section oscillates between C minor and its relative major, E-flat, the section ends here somewhat in both keys. The voice descends to an E-flat but the piano ascends in its C natural minor scales, refusing definite closure in E-flat major.

The oscillation between the two keys has much to do with the sparse piano accompaniment whose brief gestures never indicate a particular key center and never

[126] Thomson, “Susie Asado,” 14.
[127] Thomson, *Music With Words*, 20.

offer a proper cadence, leaving it up to the voice to imply one. The devices used in this section (Section A) are the C minor arpeggio, the scalar sixteenth notes, and silence where the voice is left to sing alone. A pattern can be formulated using these three devices.

Figure 2.20: Table, Musical Devices of the Piano Accompaniment in "Susie Asado," Section A, mm. 1-21

Musical Devices:
*a* = Silence (full measure/s of rest), 6 mm.
*b* = C minor arpeggio, 6 mm.
*c* = Scales in C natural minor/E-flat major, 8 mm.

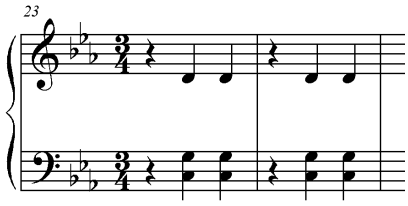
| mm. | 1-2 | 3 | 4-5 | 6 | 7-8 | 9 | 10-12 | 13-14 | 15 | 16 | 17 | 18-21 |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Device | *a* | *b* | *a* | *b* | *c* | *a* | *b* | *c* | *b* | *a* | *b* | *c* |
| Form, tonality | Introduction, C minor | | | | A section, C minor/E-flat major | | | | | | | |

The pattern can be devised in three groups of four, which group by device. However, grouped tonally the closures occur within device *c*, the scalar device, where the voice ends in a descending third implying a cadence: in m. 8 the voice descends to E-flat, and in m. 21 to E-flat. This closure points to the half-way point in the poem. In a poem of 20 lines this musical closure occurs in line 11.

The B section begins in m. 22 with a new ostinato piano motive. A block chord is played, an open fifth, C-G in the bass, under D4 in the treble clef, or "stacked-up" fifths as Thomson calls them (See Figure 2.20). In this particular measure (m. 22) the voice adds an additional fifth, singing on A4. This chord is played twice in quarter-notes, preceded and followed by a quarter-rest. John Cage might have considered this device the

bass drum or timpani when he wrote that the piano part resembles percussion instruments.[128] This consistent pulse offers rhythmic stability for the singer.

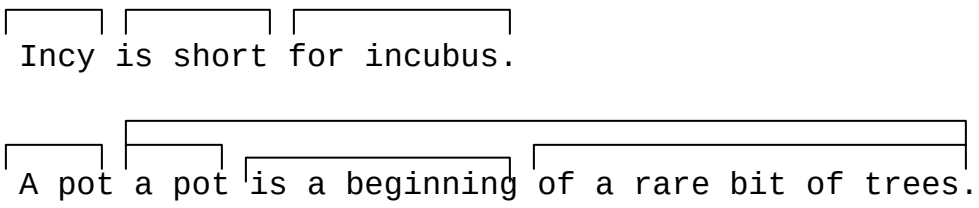
Figure 2.21: Musical Example, "Susie Asado," piano ostinato, m. 23-24[129]




The piano plays the consistent pattern of quarter-rest/quarter-note/quarter-note in a combination of meters. The changing meters adhere to the metrical stress of the poetry, allowing stressed syllables to fall on the downbeat of a measure. However, because the piano does not play on the downbeat of these measures the piano sounds out of phase with the voice. This metrically confusing section reflects the text as it "trembles" and "bobbles." The rhythmic placement of the ostinato pattern shifts in mm. 28-29 as it reaches the climax of the song. This consistent ostinato figure allows Thomson to interact with the text while maintaining the integrity of its rhythm.[130]

[128] Hoover and Cage, *Virgil Thomson*, 138.
[129] Thomson, "Susie Asado," 14.
[130] Thomson uses similar displacement of the bar line in the Prologue of *Four Saints in Three Acts*. See Kelly Mac Ward, *An Analysis of the Relationship Between Text and Musical Shape and an Investigation of the Relationship Between Text and Surface Rhythmic Detail in 'Four Saints in Three Acts' by Virgil Thomson*, University of Texas at Austin, PhD Dissertation, 1978 (Ann Arbor, MI: University Microfilms International, 2007), 107-108.

Figure 2.22: Word-groups, "Susie Asado," 12-13, Section B[131]



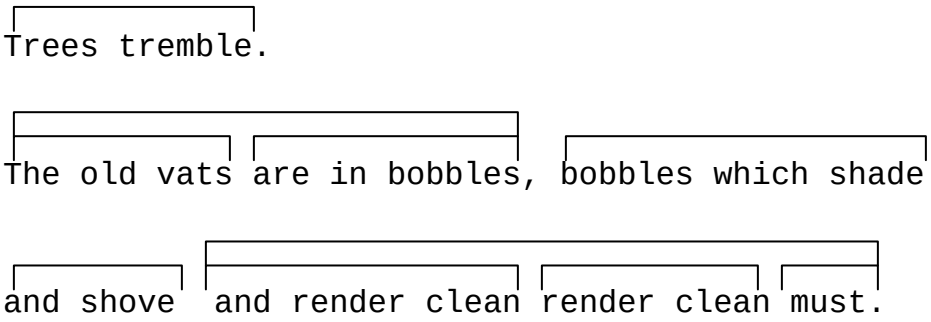

In this section, whole strings of words are sung on one note in speech rhythms, with stressed syllables given a greater rhythmic value and unstressed syllables assigned grace notes or short rhythmic values on weak beats. "Incy is short for incubus" is sung on a single note: A4. The note placement indicates the stress of the words in the first two groups. The strong syllables arrive on the beats one and two: "In-" is on the downbeat of the measure and "short" is on the second beat. The rhythm approximates the word-groups Thomson assigned. The unstressed syllables of the first two groups are on the unstressed beats of the triplet. A rest separates the second and third groups.

The line, "a pot a pot is a beginning of a rare bit of trees," is written much like a chant with increasing repetitions of a single note. In the phrase "a pot a pot," "a" is written as a grace note to be sung just before the beat. The syllables "is a be-" are also grace notes to be fitted between beats two and three. Both Watson and Knapp suggest this line of the poem alludes to the witches' scene from *Macbeth*.[132] Thomson musically renders this reading with the voice chanting the line on a single note, like the witches chanting over "old vats" of brew. Drums, suggested by the rhythmic ostinato in the piano, add to the chant interpretation.

[131] Thomson, *Music With Words*, 20.
[132] Watson, *Gertrude Stein and the Essence of What Happens* 86; Knapp, *Gertrude Stein*, 102.

Thomson wrote in *Music With Words* that he intended to evoke bird sounds in both the voice and piano.[133] The repetitions of a single pitch could be interpreted as Thomson's musical imitation of bird sounds. In the first section, bird sounds were imitated in the opening measures of the voice reproducing the "tweet" of a bird and also in the quickly moving scalar passages in the piano. In the B section the bird sounds are heard as the voice rapidly repeats notes. The short appoggiatura in the piano (mm. 30-33) also evokes a bird. The bird interpretation matches the text of lines 13-14, which include the "trees" where the birds dwell.

Figure 2.23: Word-groups, "Susie Asado," lines 14-15[134]




Accent marks increase the intensity of the climax as the voice sings the words, "render clean must" on G5 (m. 29). This combination of the pitch with its implication of the dominant harmony, the accented emphasis, and the repetition in this measure creates closure even though it does not offer a formal cadence. In his book, Anthony Tommasini remarks on this climax:

[133] "The text is said to portray a Spanish dancer, though certainly birds are present. In any case the composer's music-idea in both voice and piano is an evocation of bird sounds." Thomson, *Music With Words*, 85.
[134] Ibid., 20.

> The vocal line builds in intensity and direction to a resounding high G, and the singer sings, almost ominously, “Trees tremble, the old vats are in bobbles, bobbles which shade and shove and render clean, render clear [*sic*] must.” These words, Thomson felt, “explode off the page at you.” And when his setting of them is sung with conviction, this moment has gripping resonance.[135]

Figure 2.24: Word-groups, “Susie Asado,” lines 16-20[136]

Drink pups.

Drink pups drink pups lease a sash hold see it shine

and a bobolink has pins.

It shows a nail.

What is a nail.

A nail is unison.

Sweet sweet sweet sweet sweet tea.

A new ostinato occurs in m. 30. The figure is a B♭3 quarter-note embellished by a grace note on the C4 above, separated by two quarter-rests. This sparse figure emphasizes the chant of the voice that sings above on the single note F, “Drink pups drink pups drink pups leash a sash.” The grace note figure evokes a bird sound that Thomson suggests, but it can also represent the drip of tea or slurping as one *drinks up* suggested by the poem.

There is a slight pause in the chant in the words “bobolink has pins. / It shows a nail” because of the rests inserted between the words “bobolink” (sixteenth-rest) “has

[135] Tommasini, *Virgil Thomson*, 136-37.
[136] Thomson, *Music With Words*, 20.

pins," and "has pins" (dotted-eighth-rest) "it shows a nail." The rests are accurate in indicating Thomson's word-groups and may even point to the bird, the "bobolink," that Thomson has evoked throughout. They also allow time for the ending consonant sounds [k] in "bobolink" and [nz] in "pins." This rhythmically uneven line leads to the return of a more melodic vocal line. The phrase sung to "it shows a nail" is similar to brief melodic phrases in the beginning section.[137]

The reappearance of the C minor arpeggio under the repeated notes F4 in the voice is a reminder of "Susie Asado" in the opening measures. The voice sings unaccompanied on the word "unison" on the note B♭4 followed by a rest and a block chord of stacked up fifths built on G2 in the piano. The chord reflects the irony in the poem sung by the voice. The voice is not in unison with the piano, only with itself, and the chord points to this solitude. These are also the last notes heard in the accompaniment, emphasizing the loneness of the voice. The final two measures of the song are exactly the same as the first two. "Sweet tea" is sung on the ascending notes C5 to E♭5 giving a palindrome impression; the song ends in the same way it began.

[137] See measures 7-8 and 14-15.

Figure 2.25: Table: Form and Musical Devices in Piano Accompaniment, “Susie Asado”

Musical devices in piano:
*a* = Silence (full measure/s of rest)
*b* = C minor arpeggio
*c* = Scales
*d* = Open chords
*e* = Single note (embellished)

| Tonal center | Cm | Cm | Cm | Cm | EbM/Cm | Cm | Cm | Cm | Cm | EbM | Cm | EbM | FM-Cm | Cm | Cm | GM | Cm |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| mm. | 1-2 | 3 | 4-5 | 6 | 7-8 | 9 | 10-12 | 13-14 | 15 | 16 | 17 | 18-21 | 22-29 | 30-33 | 34 | 35 | 36-37 |
| Device in piano | *a* | *b* | *a* | *b* | *c* | *a* | *b* | *c* | *b* | *a* | *b* | *c* | *d* | *e* | *b* | *d* | *a* |
| Form | Introduction | | | | A | | | | | | | | B | | Conclusion | | |

### C. Comparing Thomson and Stein: The Cubist Analogy

Upon receiving the song “Susie Asado” Stein wrote to Thomson, “I like its looks immensely and want to frame it.” Stein’s response to the piece underlines her reaction to the work as a visual entity. Thomson’s musical devices have visual interest beyond their musical intentions: the empty space of the silent measures, the thick diagonal lines of the bars of the sixteenth notes, the vertical stems of the block chords.

Stein’s literary radicalism has often been compared with cubism as was described in the critical approaches by Stein scholars earlier in the chapter.[138] Majorie Perloff makes a strong argument for the similarities between Stein’s poem “Susie Asado” and Picasso’s *Ma Jolie*.[139] Picasso’s painting, also called *Woman with Guitar*, is a work of “analytic cubism” in which the viewer perceives the figure in the painting by recognizing fragments of fingers, an elbow, and perhaps, a smile. The fragmentation of a figure that

[138] Elements of cubism include: simplicity of form, abstracted three-dimensional forms to their two-dimensional facets, repetition of shapes, and collage.
[139] Perloff, *The Poetics of Indeterminacy*, 70-77; Pablo Picasso, *Ma Jolie (Woman with Guitar)*, oil on canvas, 1000×654 mm, 1911–2 (Museum of Modern Art, New York).

occurs in the painting also occurs in Stein's poem. The figure of a dancer is alluded to in Stein's poem by a "shoe" that "slips," the "light" of the theater, and her body that "tremble[s]" and "bobbles." This fragmenting in the work of both Picasso and Stein allows the viewer or reader to "see" different views of the figure simultaneously.

Picasso's fragmenting was accomplished by rendering different facets of the same object through space. These facets allowed Picasso to represent the figure on different planes simultaneously on the same canvas, that is, multiple two-dimensional planes were represented on a single two-dimensional surface. Stein too, created multiple planes through rhythmic, syntactic, and semantic possibilities of her words. The staccato, repetitive rhythm of the word "sweet" is the best clue the reader is given to identify the figure, a dancer. Stein's startling syntax, substituting verbs and adjectives for nouns, forces the reader to make multiple readings of a sentence. The words that one associates with dance and the sounds that Stein wrote take on new meaning when mixed with Stein's puns. Stein used multiple means, or verbal planes, to render the dancer present in the poem.

Just as Stein's "Susie Asado" can be compared with cubism, a similar comparison can be made for Thomson's song. Thomson, like Stein, utilizes fragmentation in his song: the accompaniment is broken into bits and each device is used in only one or two measures at a time. The devices that are interspersed throughout the piece create a visual fragmentation (that Stein found appealing) and an aural fragmentation. The devices are simple: an arpeggiated triad, a scale, a chord, and an appoggiatura and because the devices are interspersed throughout the piece, or fragmented, the ear doesn't gain a stable key center through their use. The fragmentation allows the listener to hear the piece in

different keys simultaneously, much like Stein and Picasso offered different "views" of a figure at the same time.

A planar analogy can also be made between the work of Picasso and Stein and Thomson's song. In Thomson's song, the planes offered are horizontal (melodic) and vertical (harmonic). The first half of the song is primarily horizontal: the accompaniment focuses on notes played one after the other that merely imply a harmony, such as the C minor arpeggio. And, even though the scales are played simultaneously, one does not hear the harmony created between the voices, merely that they are both E-flat major (or C natural minor) scales. When the block chords enter in m. 22 the plane changes to vertical. Even the text is delivered in a vertical manner, emphasizing syllables through rhythm, since very little melody is present as the voice chants. The voice generally functions on its own plane seldom lining up with the accompaniment rhythmically or harmonically, but it does work with the accompaniment to imply a tonal center (as in m. 8).

Thomson avoids formal cadences with any diatonic underpinnings such as use of the leading tone or leaps in the bass. The closures are heard through implied cadences and changes in texture and pattern. For instance, in mm. 22 the texture changes to stacked fifths grounding the piece rhythmically and offering contrast to the scalar motion of the previous section. This resistance to closure strongly links the song to the cubist style.

> Cubists emphasized syntax at the expense of meaning by allowing abstract planes and textures to exist as structural rather than representational forms. In Stein's poem, the desire is not to describe a narrative and come to an

> end but to put off the signified and the moment of closure for as long as possible, to stay within process, the infinite play of meanings.[140]

Instead of using functional harmonies to determine the form, Thomson relies on the text. The text, as indicated by Thomson's word-groups, offers the basis for rhythm in the vocal line and the accompaniment devices offer contrast or support to the vocal line and the meaning it carries in the text. The structure of the song is built on these rhythms and devices. Through Thomson's method of text-setting, Stein's words do indeed, "break" and "crack open," but instead of allowing meaning to "take care of itself," Thomson enhances the multiple meanings of the text with his music.[141]

[140] Thomas, "Interart Analogy," 32.
[141] Thomson, *Virgil Thomson*, 90.

## Chapter 3: KENNETH KOCH AND VIRGIL THOMSON

Before delving into *Mostly About Love* in the following chapter, this chapter explores the work of poet Kenneth Koch, the author of the four poems Thomson set to music. Three of the poems, "To You," "Down at the Docks," and "Spring," appear in Koch's collection *Thank You and Other Poems*, but the fourth poem, "Chanson," remains published only in Thomson's song, "A Prayer to Saint Catherine."[1] In this chapter I discuss Koch's poetry and the importance he places on the surface of the language. The style of Koch's poems from the 1950s leading to the collection *Thank You and Other Poems* will be explored. I will then examine the collaboration between Thomson and Koch through their correspondence and a comparison of their respective styles will be made reflecting their influences and their particular place in history.

[1] Kenneth Koch, *Thank You and Other Poems* (New York: Grove, 1962); Koch, "Chanson," typescript, MSS 29A/196/56, Virgil Thomson Papers, Irving S. Gilmore Music Library, Yale University.

## I. Kenneth Koch

### A. Koch and the New York School: A Background for his Poetry

The cultural climate of New York City in the 1950s allowed the worlds of painting and poetry to intersect. The mingling between Abstract Expressionists artists Willem de Kooning, Franz Kline, Jackson Pollock, and writers Frank O'Hara, John Ashbery, James Schuyler, and Kenneth Koch connected the artists and poets in aesthetic and eventually in name: the New York School. [2]

The most important members of the New York School of poetry were Kenneth Koch, Frank O'Hara, John Ashbery, and James Schuyler.[3] John Bernard Myers, director of the Tibor de Nagy Gallery, which published Koch's first collection of poems, sought to promote and legitimize this group of poets. Myers coined the name the New York School to connect them to the New York School painters, which his gallery already represented.[4] The New York School of painting refers to Abstract Expressionism and to those painters whose works were exhibited at Myers' gallery, specifically de Kooning, Kline, and Pollock. Connecting the poets and painters in name also served to boost the sales of his publications of these poets' work.

Donald Allen, a pivotal editor, publisher, friend, and champion of the New York School poets, used the name "New York Poets" in his collection *The New American*

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[2] Abstract Expressionism describes the ethos of the group of artists in New York during the 1940s and early 50s. Although their styles varied, they generally used abstraction to convey extreme emotion or unconscious expression. Styles include the action painting of Jackson Pollock, the abstracted figures Willem de Kooning, the large-scale, gestural works of Franz Kline, and the color fields of Barnett Newman. David Anfam, "Abstract Expressionism," in *Grove Art Online*, *Oxford Art Online* http://www.oxfordartonline.com (accessed December 15, 2008).

[3] David Lehman, *The Last Avant-Garde: The Making of the New York School of Poets* (New York: Anchor Books, 1999), 1. In his anthology, Donald Allen also includes Barbara Guest and Edward Field as New York School poets. Donald Allen, ed., *The New American Poetry, 1945-1960* (New York: Grove Press, 1960), xiii.

[4] Lehman, *The Last Avant-Garde*, 20.

*Poetry, 1945-1960*, published in 1960.[5] The collection included the poems of Koch, O'Hara, Ashbery, Schuyler, and other "wild beasts" of American poetry who shared "one common characteristic: a total rejection of all those qualities typical of academic verse."[6] The inclusion of these poets in Allen's collection solidified their image as a group and helped to establish their careers as poets.

**B. Characteristics of Koch's Poetry**

The anti-establishment stance of the New York School poets resulted in work that encompassed all of life: its fullness, its spontaneity, but also its ordinariness. These poets were out to prove that poetry need not be stuffy, romantic, or snobbish, but could be about personal experience, and that any subject was suitable for a poem. Kenneth Koch named three characteristics they shared in their poetry: the influence of French poetry, the use of humor, and an interest in the surface of the language.

Koch was introduced to French poetry in preparation for his trip to France in 1950 on a Fulbright Fellowship. "Discovering French poetry was like discovering a new kind of art," Koch disclosed in *The Art of Poetry*. Numerous interviews reveal the influence of both classical and modern French poetry on Koch's own work.[7] From the classics, Koch admired the balance between form and content. The alexandrine form[8] fascinated Koch; for him, lines from Racine were as "wonderful" to him as avant-garde ones.[9] Koch also

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[5] Allen, *The New American Poetry*, xii.
[6] Lehman, *The Last Avant-Garde*, 334; Allen, *The New American Poetry*, xi. Five different groups of poets were represented in Allen's anthology: 1) Black Mountain Poets, 2) The San Francisco Renaissance, 3) The Beat Generation, 4) New York Poets, and 5) Younger Poets.
[7] Koch, "An Interview with Jordan Davis," in *The Art of Poetry* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan, 1996), 189. Also see interviews by Ernest Hilbert, David Kennedy, and David Shapiro.
[8] An alexandrine is a poem with a 12-syllable line common in French poetry.
[9] "Discovering French poetry was like discovering a new kind of art. When I was much younger I thought about the excitement of finding a new art altogether. French poetry was a little bit like this. There were fiction, nonfiction, drama, poetry, and French poetry. An odd thing was that its classic phrases were as wonderful to me as its avant-garde ones. From Racine: "Pour qui sont ces serpents qui sifflent sur vos

admired the style of the modern poets, which inspired spontaneity, momentum, and lyricism in his own poetry.

The humor in the poetry of modern French poets Max Jacob and Arthur Rimbaud found its way into Koch's work. Living up to the nickname "Dr. Fun" given to him by his colleague John Ashbery, Koch's poetry often contains exuberance and humor.[10] His metaphors and parodies poke fun at their targets, but, in so doing, expose the close connection between seriousness and triviality.[11] "I don't intend for my poetry to be mainly funny or satirical, but it seems to me that high spirits and sort of a comic view are part of being serious."[12] Humor is a tool in Koch's poetic belt to encompass all of life, juxtaposing moments of gravity with moments of absurdity. "There was a certain amount of humor in all our work. Maybe you can almost characterize the poetry of the New York School as having as one of its main subjects the fullness and richness of life and the richness of possibility." [13]

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tête?" (For whom are those snakes intended that are whistling on top of your heads?) I was fascinated by the alexandrine. For one thing, you get to go on for longer than with a pentameter. Then there was the restraint and the elegance in highly charged situations (those snakes) unlike anything I'd known in life or in poetry in English." Koch, "An Interview with Jordan Davis," in *The Art of Poetry*, 189.

[10] Melanie Rehak, "Dr. Fun," *The Nation* 23 (December 2006): 26-32.

[11] Parody is found in "Four Modern Poets," an homage/parody to Robert Frost, Ezra Pound, Gerard Manley Hopkins, and D. H. Lawrence. Koch, *The Art of Poetry*, 97-101.

[12] Koch, "Poet Kenneth Koch," interview by Elizabeth Farnsworth, *Online Newshour*, PBS, November 28, 1996, transcript, www.pbs.org/newshour/bb/entertainment/november96/koch_11-28.html.

[13] Koch, Koch, interview by David Kennedy, August 5, 1993, transcript, http://writing.upenn.edu/~afilreis/88/koch.html.

Humor in Koch's work is also found in the wordplay at the surface level of his poems, where sounds become as important as the words' meaning. In these lines from "Days and Nights" Koch twists the meaning of the lines by mutating the sounds of the words.

> Sweet are the uses of adversity
> Became Sweetheart cabooses of diversity
> And Sweet art cow papooses at the university
> And sea bar Calpurnia flower havens' re-noosed knees[14]

Koch's focus on the surface details of language is of particular interest in this study because it is the surface of a poem—the sound of the words—that Thomson highlights in his word-groups.

### C. The Surface in Koch's Poetry

The qualities that result from Koch's attention to the surface—awkward juxtapositions, absurd suggestion, and disregard for syntax—reflect the aesthetic of the Abstract Expressionist artists working in New York in the 1940s and 50s, many of whom Koch knew. The aesthetic favored abstraction over representation. The painters sought to eliminate symbolism and focus on basic elements, including space, color and the materials themselves. Painters used large canvasses to encompass what easel paintings could not: Barnett Newman to embody the intensity of color and Jackson Pollock to capture the magnitude of energy. Barnett Newman, Clifford Still, and Mark Rothko experimented with fields of space or color in which background and foreground meld together, leaving the viewer alone to experience the totality of the work. In the mid-1940s, De Kooning limited his color palette to primarily black and white to undermine tonal relations and heighten spatial ones.

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[14] Koch, "Days and Nights," *Days and Nights* in *The Collected Poems of Kenneth Koch* (New York: Knopf, 2005), 404.

Jackson Pollock, in his persistence of process and immediacy created "action paintings," abandoning the paintbrush in favor of dripping paint directly from the can on the canvas.[15] Pollock sought to bring his motion and energy closer to the viewer in a more immediate way by focusing on the process of painting and the quality of the paint itself.[16]

Just as Pollock and the New York School painters achieved immediacy through his abstraction or focus on essential elements of painting, O'Hara, Koch, Schuyler, and Ashbery found immediacy in the surface of the poem. Koch said in an interview, "We seemed particularly interested in the surface of the language and the excitement that was going on there rather than thinking and finding the precise word for it, rather to let the words find the subject or partly define the subject for us."[17] Focus on the surface allowed these poets to give primacy to words themselves rather than what they signified, just as abstraction overcame the need for representation in painting.

Koch's materials—or his essential elements—are words, or even more directly, sounds. The elevation of the signifier (essential elements of a word such as sounds or symbols) above the signified (what a word means) allows for focus on the surface of a poem. By focusing on the signifier, meaning becomes less important, and word-sounds or word patterns gain prominence. In this way, sounds give cohesion to a poem more than a concept or consistent idea. Instead, the meaning of the poem is conveyed by sounds or disparate words that, together, reveal the meaning of the poem, much in the way color

[15] David Anfam, *Abstract Expressionism* (London: Thames & Hudson, 1990), 109-110.
[16] "Energy and motion made visible—memories arrested in space." Jackson Pollock, note on a photograph, quoted in Anfam, *Abstract Expressionism*, 121.
[17] Koch, interview by David Kennedy.

field paintings in oblige the viewer to negotiate the background and foreground at once.[18] Like the Abstract Expressionist artists, Koch's aesthetic agenda focused on the immediacy of writing and what the reader might experience upon reading it.

In his book, John Bernard Myers defines the way that Koch used the surface of the poem. "For Koch, the surface of a work of art *is* the work of art. The color and timbre of individual words, as well as of clusters of words, *is* what poetry is."[19] Koch's play on the color and timbre of words and groups of words make his poetry pleasant to recite; it is as if Koch had concocted "a sequence of word-tastes in the mouth."[20]

**a. Abstraction**

**Rapping Along** (First Stanza)
From *Sun Out: Selected Poems 1952-1954*
Kenneth Koch

Greatness on a day
Meant for steadiness and study halls,
Oh can suicide be so near
And the telephone's valence
Our teacher of reaching hills?
And can the policeman's villa
Ever pelt the other fellow
With the wallet of his stars?[21]

A recitation of the stanza from Koch's poem "Rapping Along" reveals that each line connects to the next through some method of consonance. The stoppage of air of the plosive "t" in "greatness" and "meant" (lines 1-2) is combined with "s" as the second line continues in the words "steadiness" and "study." The "s" then connects to "suicide" in the third line and the [s] sound is heard throughout the poem, at the end of the word

[18] The Abstract Expressionist color field painters were Barnett Newman, Mark Rothko and Clyfford Still. Characteristics of color field painting are the use of colors similar in tone and intensity, simplified composition, and large format. David Anfam, "Colour field painting," in *Grove Art Online*, *Oxford Art Online* http://www.oxfordartonline.com/subscriber/article/grove/art/T018823 (accessed March 22, 2009).
[19] John Bernard Myers, "The Poets of the New York School," in *The Poets of the New York School* (Philadelphia: Graduate School of Fine Arts, University of Pennsylvania, 1969), 23.
[20] Joshua Weiner, "Review: The Collected Poems of Kenneth Koch," *Chicago Review* (Autumn 2006), reproduced by *Poetry Daily*, http://www.poems.com/special_features/prose/essay_weiner.php.
[21] Koch, "Rapping Along," *Sun Out: Selected Poems, 1952-1954* (New York: Knopf, 2004), 9.

"valence" in line 4, the middle of the word "policeman's," and the "st" combination is heard in the last word "stars."

The double "l" connects the beginning of the stanza with the end both visually and aurally. "Halls" in the second line is matched by "hills" in the fifth line by its placement at the end of the line and its change of just one letter. The "ll" matched by the inner consonance in "villa" and "fellow" at the end of the sixth and seventh lines, and in the middle of line seven, "wallet." The consonance [l] evolves through the verse in repetition (the sound is also heard internally in the words "telephone," "valence" "policeman's," "pelt") as it drifts farther from a prominent position of the word then of the line. The play on the surface of the poem allows the reader to enjoy the words as they come in each present moment, extracting meaning through the experience.

Koch's style was decidedly abstract in his collection of poems, *Sun Out: Selected Poems 1952-1954*, from which "Rapping Along" is taken.[22] "In my poetry then I was trying to get a very hard, concrete, and shining quality in language. What I wrote was often unsyntactical and, in a way, 'irrational.' There seemed to me something in any word in the language…which would be weakened if I put it in any expected context."[23] His inspiration was the New York art and poetry world of the early nineteen fifties and his recent trip to France where he had been immersed in French language and poetry.[24]

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[22] Koch, *Sun Out: Selected Poems, 1952-1954* (New York: Knopf, 2004). "What I wrote was often unsyntactical and, in a way, 'irrational.' There seemed to me something in any word in the language – take the word, 'floor,' 'book,' 'table,' 'cheek,' or 'hand,' – which would be weakened if I put it in any expected context." Koch, "A Conversation with Kenneth Koch," interview by David Shapiro, *Field: Contemporary Poetry and Poetics*, no. 7 (Fall 1972), reprinted in *Jacket 15*, December 2001, http://jacketmagazine.com/15/koch-shapiro.html.
[23] Koch, "A Conversation with Kenneth Koch," by David Shapiro.
[24] Koch, *Sun Out*, ix.

Koch's misinterpretation of the French language entered his poetry allowing him to keep his subject "up in the air as long as possible" by utilizing multiple meanings of words.[25]

The very title of the poem from which the above stanza is taken, "Rapping Along," allows Koch to chat or rap through the poem, seemingly a description of his "day." The description could be of a boring day, like those of school days, "Meant for steadiness and study halls, / Oh can suicide be so near." The reader too, raps along with Koch, is made a partner in his rap simply by reading along or aloud. The medium of words and the message of the poem are inextricable. The poem is not only *about* "rapping along" it *is* "rapping along" and it is the attention to surface that allows Koch to explore the discrepancy between the work and the subject.

**c. Lyricism**

Koch fell in love around 1953 and as a result his style became more lyrical. "I found that the emotion I was feeling was so strong that I couldn't help but make sense, in a different way. Poems in *Thank You* like 'Spring,' 'To You,' and 'In Love with You' were written out of this feeling."[26] The poems in the 1961 collection, *Thank You and Other Poems*, are more lyrical than earlier poems that were written in a more abstract, irrational style. Koch's language continues to encompass a broad world, but contains more personal expression, such as in the first lines of "In Love with You."

> O what a physical effect it has on me
> To dive forever into the light blue sea
> Of your acquaintance![27]

Three of the four poems in Virgil Thomson's *Mostly About Love* come from *Thank You and Other Poems*: "To You," "Down at the Docks," and "Spring." "To You"

[25] Ibid., x.
[26] Koch, "A Conversation with Kenneth Koch," by David Shapiro.
[27] Koch, "In Love With You," *Thank You,* 21.

and "Spring" were probably written around 1954 the year that Koch married Mary Janice Elwood.[28] Koch's poetry of this period has the lightness and lilt of love lyrics. "Down at the Docks" was first published in *Poetry* in 1957, although no date accompanies the typewritten manuscript.[29] The lyric quality of the poem suggests that it was written in the mid-fifties. "Chanson," the fourth poem in the set, was never published but was written within the same period as the poems in *Thank You*. No date is given in the typescript of "Chanson," but because of its subject and narrative quality, it could have been written around 1957 while Koch was living in Florence.[30] The four poems set in *Mostly About Love* will be analyzed in detail in the following chapter, revealing both Koch's surface play and lyricism.

[28] Koch, "To You," typescript, MSS Koch I/4/1-2 and I/7A/2, Kenneth Koch Papers, The Berg Collection of English and American Literature, The New York Public Library, Astor, Lenox and Tilden Foundations; Koch, "Spring," typescript, MSS Koch I/7A/2, Kenneth Koch Papers. Koch mentions these poems together in the Shapiro interview, which encourages me to believe they were written during the same period.
[29] Koch, "Down at the Docks," *Poetry* 90 (July 1957): 199; Koch, "Down at the Docks," typescript, MSS Koch I/7A/2, Kenneth Koch Papers.
[30] Koch was in Florence in 1957 while his wife, Janice, was on a Fulbright Fellowship. "Chanson" was written during his interest in narrative poetry, during which time he wrote *Ko; or, A Season on Earth* (1957), and while he was living close to Sienna possibly inspiring its subject. Lehman, *The Last Avant-Garde*, 228; Koch, "Chanson," MSS 29A/196/56, Virgil Thomson Papers.

## II. Virgil Thomson and Kenneth Koch

### A. A Short Collaboration

Thomson had composed two operas with Gertrude Stein, *Four Saints in Three Acts* (1929) and *The Mother of Us All* (1946). After Stein's death in 1946, Thomson knew he would be hard-pressed to find another librettist as well suited to him and his music. He longed to write another opera and had looked at numerous librettos over the years.[31] For his next librettist, Thomson sought a poet with a theater background; someone who could create lyrical verse that would "sing from the stage."[32] Thomson found such a poet in Kenneth Koch.

Thomson and Koch met in the mid-1950s in New York, although neither remembered exactly when. Thomson recognized the features in Koch's poetry that made it similar to Stein's: his abstraction and the immediacy in his "rapping along." He also recognized that Koch's poetic lyricism made his poems appropriate for vocal settings.[33] Thomson flattered Koch by claiming his poetry was "just like Gertrude's but it makes sense" and decided Koch was the man with whom to work on an opera.[34] In 1959 Koch agreed to write the libretto for a new Thomson opera.

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[31] Anthony Tommasini, *Virgil Thomson: Composer on the Aisle* (New York: Norton, 1997), 453.
[32] Ibid.
[33] "Sometimes I plan more solo songs form your shorter poems. One day soon I shall write several of them." Thomson to Koch, 18 July 1959, MSS Koch XI/208/1, Kenneth Koch Papers. "Thanks for the lovely poems probably for singing…" Thomson to Koch, 1 August 1959, MSS Koch XI/208/1, Kenneth Koch Papers.
[34] "Virgil gave me one of the major compliments I've ever gotten on my work. One night when I was at his house, he said to one of his friends he was introducing me to, 'He writes just like Gertrude but it makes sense.' [laughs] That would be quite an accomplishment if I could really do that." Koch, interview by Anthony Tommasini, October 1, 1991. Unpublished interview provided by Anthony Tommasini.

In the spring of 1959 Thomson set two of Koch's poems: "Spring" and the tongue-in-cheek titled poem "Collected Poems." [35] The song settings were homage to Koch and a means to urge Koch to write the libretto. By the summer Thomson was anxious to begin the opera: "What gives? Where is my libretto?" asks Thomson in a letter from Paris dated July 3, 1959.[36] On August 1, Thomson was still waiting for the libretto, and writes, "… and please send along the libretto. Finished." Confident in the collaboration and to stroke Koch's ego to encourage him to finish the libretto, Thomson added, "What, by the way, is the subject of our opera No. 2?"[37]

It was during this volley of letters and Koch's work on *Angelica* that Thomson composed the remaining songs that make up the set *Mostly About Love*. In a letter from Thomson, July 18, 1959, Thomson alludes to composing more songs, "Sometimes I plan more solo songs from your shorter poems. One day soon I shall write several of them."[38] Koch's response included some of his poems, "I am also enclosing, in this letter, a few of my short poems which I think you may not have seen, or any rate may not have with you (I thought one or two of them might be right for your music, or rather I hope!)"[39] Thomson responds, though still focused on the opera, "Thanks for the lovely poems for probably singing and please send along the libretto. Finished."[40] As Koch recalled in an interview with Anthony Tommasini, he probably gave Thomson a selection of ten to fifteen poems that were mostly unpublished. Koch encouraged Thomson to set

[35] Thomson, *Collected Poems* (San Antonio: Southern Music Publishing, 1978). *Collected Poems* is for baritone and soprano duet and was later arranged for duet with orchestra.
[36] Virgil Thomson to Kenneth Koch, 3 July 1959, MSS Koch XI/208/1, Kenneth Koch Papers.
[37] Thomson to Koch, 1 August 1959, MSS Koch XI/208/1, Kenneth Koch Papers.
[38] Thomson to Koch, 18 July 1959, MSS Koch XI/208/1, Kenneth Koch Papers.
[39] Koch to Thomson, 26 July 1959, MSS 29/57/33, Virgil Thomson Papers. In the letter Koch does not name the poems he sent.
[40] Thomson to Koch, 1 August 1959, MSS Koch XI/208/1, Kenneth Koch Papers.

"Chanson" ("A Prayer to Saint Catherine,") "I had a good deal to do with the selection because St. Catherine hadn't been published."[41]

On August 11, 1959 Koch sent Thomson his libretto for *Angelica,* an opera about the most beautiful woman in the world.[42] Upon receipt Thomson wrote, "The Angelica is beautiful ever so beautiful and sings all the way. I love it all but I do imagine it will need cutting. We can face that next winter. Now it is too handsome to castrate."[43] However, just a month after Thomson wrote to Koch about how much he loved the libretto, Thomson decided against setting it. In a letter to his friend, Maurice Grosser, written September 7, 1959 he writes, "After lots of reading the Kenneth Koch libretto, I find it on the whole silly and terribly monotonous and I don't think I want to use it. I'll break it to him in N. Y."[44] When Koch called to ask how the opera was coming, Thomson replied, "You don't really want me to set that, do you, baby? It's a soft egg."[45]

The news was heartbreaking for Koch and it caused a rift between the two men. Thomson never set another of Koch's poems, although the two eventually did make amends. Koch remembered his disappointment, "What a guy, [i]t really is so much like love affairs you have to say, well, it was worth it in some way. You know, thanks for the memories. But he wouldn't marry me."[46]

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[41] Koch, interview by Anthony Tommasini.
[42] Koch to Thomson, 11 August 1959, MSS 29/57/33, Virgil Thomson Papers.
[43] Thomson to Koch, 16 August 1959, MSS Koch XI/208/1, Kenneth Koch Papers.
[44] Virgil Thomson to Maurice Grosser, 7 September 1959, in *Selected Letters of Virgil Thomson,* ed. Tim Page and Vanessa Weeks Page (New York: Summit Books, 1988), 302.
[45] "As I remember, the next thing that happened…weeks went by. I called him up. He was back in New York. I said, Virgil, how's the opera coming. He said, 'You don't really want me to set that, do you, baby? It's a soft egg.'" Koch, interview by Anthony Tommasini.
[46] Ibid.

**B. Thomson, Koch, and the Avant-Garde**

Both Virgil Thomson and Kenneth Koch were influenced by the avant-garde of each man's generation. Avant-garde artists, musicians, and writers surrounded Thomson as a young man in Paris in the 1920s. This avant-garde defined the modernist aesthetic that guided Thomson's work. Like Thomson, Koch developed his work surrounded by a group of writers and artists considered avant-garde, but this was thirty years later and in New York City.

Both avant-gardes have similarities, which are reflected in both men's work. Thomson and Koch were both influenced by living in France and Koch's work especially reflects the influence the French language and French poetry. Thomson had been inspired by Dada, especially by its advocate Satie. Dada was a movement that embraced the "anti-art" and resisted traditional aesthetics. Koch had been influenced by Surrealism, a movement that developed out of Dada and also resisted tradition.[47] These movements form a piece of the complex make-up of their respective work. By keeping in close contact with artist contemporaries of many genres, both Thomson and Koch produced work connected to his generation's avant-garde.

However, there are generational differences between the avant-gardes. For Thomson, the avant-garde of his generation included the giants of modernism. This avant-garde grew out of the social context of the First World War, a Lost Generation dealing with the disillusionment of humanity. Koch's avant-garde, or the "last avant-

[47] "I was influenced by surrealist poetry and paintings as were thousands of other people and it seems to me to have become a part of the way I write but it's not…As I understand the surrealist program, it was programmatically in favour of the unconscious as opposed to the conscious; programmatically in favor of chance, even programmatically in favour of a certain kind of violence and all that dream stuff. All that is interesting to me and it's become an automatic part of what I do but I would never say I was a surrealist." Koch, interview by David Kennedy.

garde," grew out of the anxiety of the post-war years of the ever-looming Cold War. Koch's last avant-garde was planting the seeds of post-modernism as his generation dealt with an ever-quickening urban landscape.[48]

But, for a moment in time, these two generations of avant-gardism met in the songs *Mostly About Love*. Thomson could hear something of Stein in the poetry of Koch: the words acted on their own, playing on the surface, their meanings abstracted. But there was lyricism in Koch's poems, more "music," that allowed them to sing.[49] The reason Koch was included in Donald Allen's anthology could be the very same reason Thomson was so attracted to his poetry: "Everybody [in the anthology] had some reference to the transformation of the diction and the rhythms into vernacular rhythms and/or spoken cadences and idiomatic diction."[50] It is the "plain but beautiful language" found in Koch's poems that explains Thomson's interest in them, and coincidentally, "plain but beautiful language" also describes Thomson's musical language of his settings of them.[51]

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[48] Lehman asserts that while it may not be "the last avant-garde movement we will ever have," as the interval between rejection and acceptance grows shorter our generation may not see an avant-garde. "If we are all postmodernists, we are none of us avant-garde, for postmodernism is the institutionalization of the avant-garde." Lehman, *The Last Avant-Garde*, 10-11.

[49] "…I think a lot of poetry just comes from what you might call the language of poetry. Paul Valery [*sic*] said that poetry's sort of a language within the language. And what makes it different from the ordinary language is that music is just as important as grammar and meaning. EF: You mean the music of the poem? KK: Yeah. The music that you have in the words, in the lines, which is really sound, and rhythm." Koch, interview with Elizabeth Farnsworth.

[50] Allen Ginsberg and Kenneth Koch, "From a Conversation," *Poetry Project Newsletter* (October/November 1995): 5, quoted in Lehman, *The Last Avant-Garde*, 335.

[51] Aram Saroyan, "Ten Things Never to Say to a Younger Woman: The Art of Love," review of *The Art of Love*, by Kenneth Koch, *New York Times Book Review*, September 28, 1975.

## Chapter 4: POETIC AND MUSICAL ANALYSIS OF *MOSTLY ABOUT LOVE*

### I. Origin and Performance Premiere of *Mostly About Love*

Kenneth Koch remembered that Virgil Thomson set his poems to music to demonstrate his intention of setting the opera libretto on which Koch was working.[1] Thomson set two of Koch's poems in April 1959, "Collected Poems" and "Spring." "Spring," which Thomson titled "Let's Take a Walk," became the third song in a set of four to Koch's poetry. The other three songs, "Love Song," "Down at the Docks," and "A Prayer to Saint Catherine," were composed in October 1959 which complete a set of songs commissioned by Alice Esty to sing at her annual recital.

Alice Esty (1904-2000), singer-model-actress, had a limited career on Broadway before she turned into a patroness of the arts when she married William C. Esty founder of the William Esty Advertising Agency.[2] Esty was famously known for commissioning songs from contemporary composers and singing them on her own concerts. From 1955 to 1969 she presented a concert almost annually, for which she commissioned many works from French and American composers. Among the list of notable French composers she commissioned were: Darius Milhaud, Francis Poulenc, Henri Sauget, and Germaine Taillefaire. The significant American composers she commissioned, among the

[1] Kenneth Koch, interview by Anthony Tommasini, October 1, 1991. Unpublished interview provided by Anthony Tommasini.

[2] The William Esty Advertising Agency was bought by Ted Bates Worldwide in 1982, which was bought by Saatchi & Saatchi Company in 1986. Saatchi merged Esty with Campbell Mithun creating Campbell-Mithun-Esty. Campbell Mithun has dropped the Esty name, but maintains large accounts such as Burger King, General Mills, and Wells Fargo. Philip H. Dougherty, "Advertising; Esty to report to Saatchi," *New York Times*, November 21, 1986; "Our Clients," http://www.campbellmithun.com.

many whom she supported, were Paul Bowles, Ned Rorem, Mark Blitzstein, and Virgil Thomson.[3]

Unfortunately, Esty had more talent in choosing promising composers than she had in vocal ability. Even her long-time pianist, David Stimer, admitted to Thomson that Esty was "not a fast study."[4] Her first review in the New York Times, written in 1955, estimates her talent plainly.

> Miss Esty proved to be a personable young lady with a voice that must have been quite pretty before its exposure to the deadly grind of the vocal studios. At present it is a bit strident in its upper range and husky in its lower. The artist is unable to sustain a pianissimo, another telling sign of faulty vocalism.[5]

Despite her weak voice, she was eventually recognized for her patronage of new music.

> One of the most familiar musical events of the spring season comes when Alice Esty takes over Carnegie Recital Hall to display her good deeds for the past year. These deeds consist of the commissioning of songs by contemporary composers…[6]

Commissioned by Alice Esty for the sum of $600, the songs were appropriately first titled, *Songs for Alice Esty*. Esty was happy with the songs as evidenced in her thank

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[3] Many of the original manuscripts that Alice Esty commissioned are available in the Alice Esty Papers at Bates College, http://abacus.bates.edu/muskie-archives/FindingAids/AEstyFA.shtml.
[4] David Stimer to Virgil Thomson, 17 August 1963, MSS 29A/99/87, Virgil Thomson Papers, Irving S. Gilmore Music Library, Yale University.
[5] J. B., "Music: Song Program, Alice Esty, Soprano, Offers Contemporary Selections in Carnegie Recital Hall," *New York Times*, September 16, 1955.
[6] Alan Rich, "Alice Esty Returns in New Song Cycles," *New York Times*, April 12, 1963.

you note: "Thank you again for your beautiful songs."[7] When the songs were later published, the set was renamed *Mostly About Love*, but the dedication to Esty remained.

Esty premiered Thomson's songs to Koch's poetry on a concert at Carnegie Hall, April 3, 1960. A review of the concert commends Thomson's songs, but offers no comments on Esty's singing. One might speculate that the reviewer decided to avoid a negative evaluation by remaining silent on the issue.

> Of the new works, Mr. Thomson's made a very favorable impression. They exhibited the composer's gift of musical invention and his discriminating ear for prosody, as well as his tongue-in-cheek use of conventional song accompaniment patterns that would seem so commonplace but for the sprightly manner in which they are employed.[8]

This critical reception recognizes Thomson's gift of text-setting. Anthony Tommasini, Virgil Thomson authority and New York Times music critic, comments on how well Thomson fitted music to Koch's poems: "Yet, not since his collaborations with Stein had Thomson's music so embraced a poet's words…"[9] Tommasini offers true praise since Thomson achieved recognition as a composer by setting Gertrude Stein's painfully obscure texts in two complete operas.

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[7] Alice Esty to Virgil Thomson, November 1959, MSS 29A/99/91, Virgil Thomson Papers.
[8] The program also included new works by Marcel Delannoy and Ned Rorem, along with previously performed works by Claire Brook and Darius Milhaud. J. B., "Alice Esty is Heard in a Program of Songs," *New York Times*, April 4, 1960.
[9] Anthony Tommasini, *Virgil Thomson: Composer on the Aisle* (New York: Norton, 1997), 457.

## II. Poetic and Musical Analysis

In this section I will analyze both Koch's poems and Thomson's music. First, each of the four poems will be analyzed, "To You," "Down at the Docks," "Spring," and "Chanson." Each poetic analysis will be followed by a musical analysis of the song Thomson set to that poem.[10] The analyses are presented in the same order that the songs appear in the set *Mostly About Love*: "Love Song" (set to the poem "To You,") "Down at the Docks" (set to the poem "Down at the Docks,") "Let's Take a Walk" (set to the poem "Spring,") and "A Prayer to Saint Catherine" (set to the poem "Chanson.") The analysis of the poetry will reveal Koch's attention to the surface level of the poems and the musical analysis will reveal the importance of these surface details in Thomson's settings. I offer my own word-groups in the musical analysis as a representation of Thomson's reading of the poem based on his musical setting.

[10] For this study I consulted the following primary sources: Thomson, *Mostly About Love*, holograph sketches and scores, MSS 29/14/22, The Virgil Thomson Papers. Thomson, "Love Song," "Down at the Docks," "Let's Take a Walk," "A Prayer to Saint Catherine," in *Mostly About Love* (New York: Schirmer, 1964); Koch, "To You," "Down at the Docks," "Spring," "Chanson," typescripts, MSS 29A/196/56, Virgil Thomson Papers; Koch, "To You," typescript, MSS Koch I/4/1-2 and I/7A/2, Kenneth Koch Papers, The Berg Collection of English and American Literature, The New York Public Library, Astor, Lenox and Tilden Foundations; Koch, "Spring," typescript, MSS Koch I/7A/2, Kenneth Koch Papers; Koch, "Down at the Docks," typescript, MSS Koch I/7A/2, Kenneth Koch Papers; Koch, *Thank You and Other Poems* (New York: Grove, 1962).

## A. "Love Song"

### 1. How do I Love Thee?: Poetic Analysis of "To You"

**To You**
From *Thank You and Other Poems*
Kenneth Koch

I love you as a sheriff searches for a walnut
That will solve a murder case unsolved for years
Because the murderer left it in the snow beside a window
Through which he saw her head, connecting with
Her shoulders by a neck, and laid a red
Roof in her heart.  For this we live a thousand years;
For this we love, and we live because we love, we are not
Inside a bottle, thank goodness!  I love you as a
Kid searches for a goat; I am crazier than shirttails
In the wind, when you're near a wind that blows from
The big blue sea, so shiny so deep and so unlike us;
I think I am bicycling across an Africa of green and white fields
Always to be near you, even in my heart
When I'm awake, which swims, and also I believe that you
Are trustworthy as the sidewalk which leads me to
The place where I again think of you, a new
Harmony of thoughts! I love you as the sunlight leads the prow
Of a ship which sails
From Hartford to Miami, and I love you
Best at dawn, when even before I am awake the sun
Receives me in the questions you always pose.[11]

The poem is a passionate lyric dedicated to the poet's lover.[12] While the poem does not have the strict structure of a sonnet its subject and the use of traditional poetic procedures of repetition and simile encourage it to be read like one. The poet's repeated declaration of love is much like Elizabeth Barrett Browning's in Sonnet 43.

[11] Kenneth Koch, "To You," *Thank You and Other Poems* (New York: Grove, 1962), 16.
[12] The "poet" refers to the speaker within the poem.

**Sonnet 43**
From *Sonnets from the Portuguese*
Elizabeth Barrett Browning

How do I love thee? Let me count the ways.
I love thee to the depth and breadth and height
My soul can reach, when feeling out of sight
For the ends of Being and ideal Grace.
I love thee to the level of everyday's
Most quiet need, by sun and candlelight.
I love thee freely, as men strive for Right;
I love thee purely, as they turn from Praise.
I love thee with the passion put to use
In my old griefs, and with my childhood's faith.
I love thee with a love I seemed to lose
With my lost saints -- I love thee with the breath,
Smiles, tears, of all my life! -- and, if God choose,
I shall but love thee better after death.[13]

Koch's poem offers answers to the question Browning poses in her first line, "How do I love thee?" "I love you as a sheriff searches for a walnut," answers the poet in the first line of the poem. The line "I love you as a / Kid searches for a goat" reveals the poet's desperation. "I love you as the sunlight leads the prow / Of a ship" followed by "I love you / Best at dawn," are the final answers. The poet's passion grows with each confessed "I love you."

The poet's evidence of love is described as the determination of a "sheriff" to solve a case, in an extended metaphor. The longing is intensified by the smallness of the walnut; the sheriff will have to search for it with enormous tenacity to find such a small item and will want it all the more because it is so small. The walnut also offers an image of the case that will be "cracked" upon the walnut's discovery. The rhymes and half-rhymes draw the sentence together: "snow" and "window;" "head" and "red;" the [ɛ]

[13] Elizabeth Barrett Browning, "Sonnet 43," *Sonnets from the Portuguese*, in *Sonnets from the Portuguese and Other Love Poems* (New York: Doubleday, 1990), 53.

sound in “head,” “neck,” and “red;” the alliteration of “red roof” and “head” and “heart.”[14]

Sensuousness is evoked with the body parts mentioned in lines 4-6: “head,” “shoulders,” “neck,” and the word “laid” enhances their sexual meaning. Words associated with a house, “window” and “roof,” imply domesticity. These sensual and domestic words combine to form a crime of passion in the reader’s mind. The word “red” suggests the blood of this murder scene.

The “heart” that ends the sentence connects the physical and emotional. The heart is a body part like the “head,” “shoulders,” and “neck,” but it also represents the passion embodied in both the crime and the speaker’s love that the crime represents. The “heart” belongs to “her” and represents the love that the poet desires as he states at the beginning of the poem, “I love you.”

This description of body parts objectifies what the murderer saw through the window and contains vague similarities to Rimbaud’s “Vénus Anadyomène” as his Venus emerges from the bathtub.[15] In Rimbaud’s poem the woman’s head emerges, followed by her “fat gray neck” and “broad shoulder-blades.”[16] Because Koch was deeply inspired by Rimbaud, these lines are likely related. Rimbaud’s Venus is described to such detail that she becomes disgusting. In Koch’s poem the description serves to objectify a woman who meets a horrible end. Koch has managed to nod to Rimbaud’s irony by including a description of a murder that doesn’t belong in a love lyric.

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[14] Symbols in brackets represent phonemes according to the International Phonetic Alphabet.
[15] John Vernon offers an analysis of Rimbaud’s “Vénus Anadyomène.” It was his discussion of humor in Rimbaud in proximity to the discussion of Koch’s work that inspired the comparison. John Vernon, “Fresh Air: Humor in Contemporary American Poetry,” *Comic Relief: Humor in Contemporary American Literature* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1978), 308-310.
[16] Rimbaud, “Vénus Anadyomène,” trans. Wallace Fowlie, in *Rimbaud: Complete Works, Selected Letters* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press), 40-41, quoted in Vernon, “Fresh Air,” *Comic Relief*, 309.

The first sentence of the poem (lines 1-6) sets up an antecedent statement, and the next lines provide its consequent: “For this we live a thousand years; / For this we love, and we live because we love, we are not / Inside a bottle, thank goodness.” The consequential statement explains the passion of the previous lines. Love is the only emotion that could create such passion, a murderous passion or the passion for justice.

Koch creates a parallel construction in these lines: For this we live – For this we love. His repeated use of “live” and “love” emphasizes their similarity in sound and meaning. The line ending of “years” is the same as the ending of the second line, connecting the lines and the statements. The repetition of the pronoun “we” gives a musical sense to these lines, given the lilt of the sound when next to the initial “l” consonant. The poet is thankful he is not “inside a bottle” meaning that he is thankful to live freely and that his love is not restricted by space or time, “for this we live a thousand years.” Formally these lines contrast with the previous section in its frequent stops in puncutuation.

Lines 8-9 contain a simile that parallels the first line. In the line: “I love you as a / Kid searches for a goat,” love is compared to the desperation of a lost child. When the image of a young goat searching for its mother is humanized by the use of the word “kid,” the image of a child searching for his mother is evoked, and with it, the feeling of helplessness and loss. These feelings come from the extremely tight bond between mother and child. This bond is as tight as the one the poet feels with his lover. It is the strength of this bond and the fear of losing it that Koch impresses on his reader.

The line “I am crazier than shirttails in the wind” implies that the poet is “crazy” in love with his beloved. Koch’s humor comes through in the proximity of “goat” and

“shirttails in the wind” in the image of a goat eating clothes off the clothesline. The wind that blows the shirttails comes from the sea (“a wind that blows from / The big blue sea”), and will connect this passage to lines 17-18 where the reader can imagine wind in the sails of a ship (“I love you as the sunlight leads the prow / Of a ship that sails”).

Line 11 describes the “big blue sea” as “so shiny so deep and so unlike us.” Perhaps it is the profundity of the ocean that is “so unlike” the unpredictability of the passionate love between the poet and his lover. The phrase is humorous, placing the word “deep” next to “so unlike us.”

The poet is willing to go to great lengths to be “near” his beloved, traverse a great expanse, bicycle across Africa, or swim the “big blue sea.” The word “heart” appears again, a reminder of the passion contained in the first passage. The poet seems to comment on his own words after he asserts, “and also I believe that you / Are trustworthy as the sidewalk which leads me to / The place where I again think of you.” Commenting on this effusion, he is pleased with “a new / Harmony of thoughts” that he has just had. “Harmony” also points to the accord between the poet and his beloved. This passage contains delightful end-rhymes of “you,” “to,” and “new.”

A final simile is presented in line 17. The sunlight leads a ship from the northern to southern, warmer climes, just as love illuminates the poet’s life, taking him to a warmer place where the “sun receives” him. The sun is also featured in the dawn, when the poet loves his beloved even before he is awake. “I love you / Best at dawn, when even before I am awake the sun / Receives me in the questions you always pose.” The unconscious state of loving is one that Browning also hopes to achieve, “… and, if God choose, / I shall but love thee better after death.”

### 2. Musical Analysis of "Love Song"

Thomson changed the title for his song from the poem's title "To You" to "Love Song," and he also affected change to Koch's work by omitting some of Koch's words. Tommasini describes the situation: "Like any poet, Koch was perturbed about having his work tampered with. But Thomson was an imposing elder statesman of the arts; Koch was the chosen younger colleague with a scant reputation outside of poetry circles; so he could not protest."[17] Koch, having been reminded of Thomson's censorship in an interview in 1991, imitated what Thomson might have said had Koch tried to argue, "It's more beautiful this way, Sweetie. Don't say the same thing three times."[18] In the end, Thomson got his way by setting the cut poem and Koch felt fortunate that a famous composer had set his poetry.[19]

Tommasini emphasizes his assertion that Koch's poetry brought out the best in Thomson when he writes: Koch's "effusive and wonderfully wacky language of 'Love Song'" was set "with music of ardency and earnestness."[20] The straightforward music captures the honesty of Koch's poem, which at its essence is a confession of love.

#### a. Form

Thomson matches the bold declamation in Koch's first line of poetry with bold chord progressions. The opening rolled chords are a fanfare announcing the first words of the poem, "I love you." The subsequent progressions consist of three chords, a main

[17] Tommasini, *Virgil Thomson*, 457.
[18] Koch, interview by Anthony Tommasini.
[19] "He was so much older and more famous I let him do whatever he wanted. Can you imagine arguing with Virgil about that? [Imitates Virgil] 'It's more beautiful this way, Sweetie. Don't say the same thing three times.' I don't think I'd let anybody do it now. At least I'd have to think about it. It was like somebody saying, You can come to the royal reception if you come after ten. You just go. [laughs] My poem's life was obviously on the page of a book, it wasn't in a song. And I had the idea that composers did this." Koch, interview by Anthony Tommasini.
[20] Tommasini, *Virgil Thomson*, 457.

chord followed by a related chord and back to the main chord, in bold quarter-note rhythm. The first substantive cadence of the piece, $V^7$-I, occurs in mm. 20-21, and is prolonged through m. 23 to close this section and begin A', marked by a repetition of the opening words, "I love you," and a brief return of the opening three-chord progressions.

The chordal section is contrasted by a B section of arpeggiated triplets which also marks a change in the poetry from traditional simile and an inclusion of outside forces, "I love as a sheriff searches for a walnut," "I love you as a kid searches for a goat," to more personal or confessional expressions of love, "always to be near you," "I believe that you are trustworthy." Thomson's accompaniment becomes more expansive to accommodate the increasing introspection of the poetry. The circular feeling of the triplets also aptly depict the text that begins this section, "I think I am bicycling."

The return of block chords at m. 50 in a IV-V progression both ends the B section and begins the final C section. The subdominant chord is rolled in a manner similar to the first chords of the song, although the right hand plays triplets on beats 3 and 4, providing a rhythmic connection between the B section and this new section. The new section begins with a repetition of the text, "I love you," and is similar to the A section in its melodic contour. The accompaniment also returns to a similar chordal style.

The song is solidly in C major although there are few conventional cadences.[21] The song ends with an expanded $V^7$-I cadence, but then moves to a final A major chord. The A major chord prepares the listener for the next song of the set, "Down at the Docks," which begins in D major, but it does not lessen the surprise ending.

[21] C major is indicated by the voice, which primarily sings pitches of the diatonic C major scale. The exceptions are the E♭s sung in mm. 46-47.

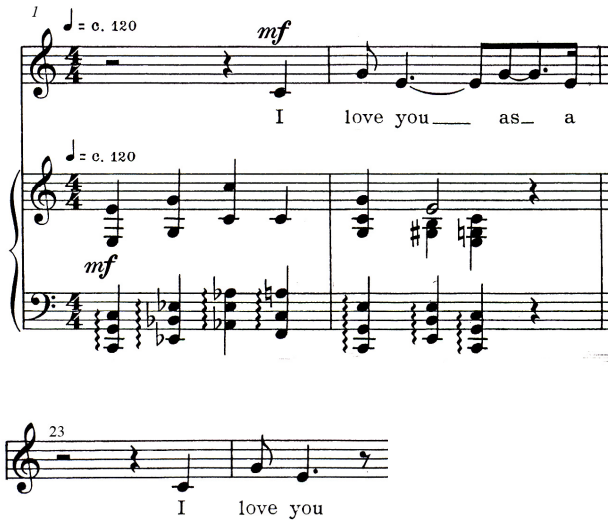
Figure 4.1: Table, Form in “Love Song”

| Section: | A | A' | B | C |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Measures: | 1-23 | 23-34 | 34-50 | 50-68 |

**b. Musical Analysis**

After the fanfare of rolled chords that opens the piece, the voice sings scale degrees 1, 5, 3. The outline of the tonic triad, which is also present in the opening of the second and third songs of the set, serves to anchor the key of C major and introduces the intervallic nature of the vocal line. Also featured in this opening motive is the syncopated rhythm: quarter-note/eighth-note/dotted-quarter-note, spanning the bar line so the eighth-note is on the downbeat of the measure. The motive appears again in bars 23-24, signaling the beginning of the A' section.

Figure 4.2: Musical Example, “Love Song,” mm. 1-2 and Melodic Motive mm. 23-24




The accompaniment interjects and fills in with block chords, with an open fifth in the lower voices, and closes in a half cadence in m. 8. At m. 10, rising parallel thirds are

heard between the outer voices, as in the opening chords, but this time it is between the voice and the bass of the piano. These parallel thirds are placed on prominent beats so they can be heard strongly through m. 15, emphasizing the ascending vocal line, which builds the suspense of the "murder case."

Figure 4.3: Word-groups, "Love Song," lines 1-2[22]

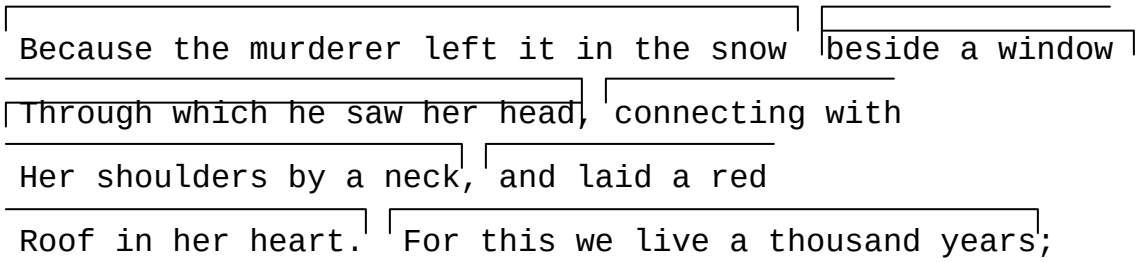
⌈I love you⌉ ⌈as a sheriff searches for a walnut⌉
⌈That will solve a murder case⌉ ⌈unsolved for years⌉

Thomson's vocal line adheres to Koch's first two lines of poetry, setting them as two vocal phrases, using a rest to indicate separation and a breath. Underlying play of the alternating chords emphasizes important words. "Love," "sheriff," "walnut," "solve," and "years," are all important words with stressed first syllables and all are accented with this three chord device (mm. 2, 3, 4, 5, 7). The words are also set on downbeats, increasing the importance of their syllable stress.

The word-groups I have created reflect the division of the vocal line. "I love you" defines the tonic triad. "As," sung on the 5th scale degree, is already beginning to move toward the dominant closure of the phrase in measure 4. The next word-group is a result of the words, "solve," "murder," and "case" sung on the same pitch, implying they are grouped together. The last word-group is based on its explanation of the first half of the line, "unsolved for years."

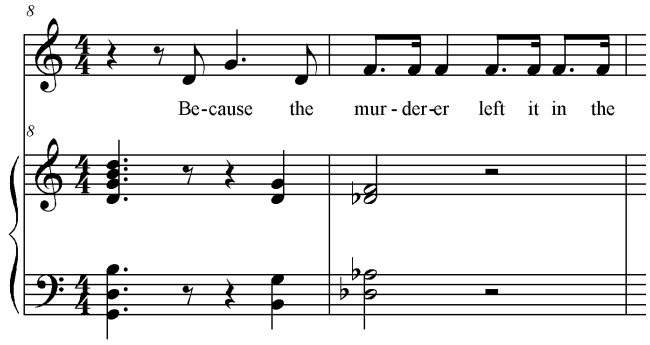
[22] The word-groups in this chapter are my interpretation of Thomson's reading of the poem based on his musical setting.

Figure 4.4: Word-groups, “Love Song,” 3-6




The surprise D-flat major chord in m. 9, the distance of a tritone from the preceding G major chord, gives spookiness to the intoned words, “murderer left it in the snow” (Figure 4.5). The dotted-eighth-note/sixteenth-note rhythm adds to the suspense of the scene. This chant is followed by familiar skips like the opening lines as the voice ascends. The contour of the vocal line in mm. 10-15 has similarities to the vocal line of mm. 2-6, offering a parallel construction. In both cases, the vocal line moves up the staff in a series of skip to its highest note E then the line descends slightly. The first time, in m. 7, the voice settles on D over a dominant harmony. The second time, m. 15, the voice settles on C over a first inversion tonic harmony.

Figure 4.5: Musical Example, “Love Song,” mm. 8-9




Koch’s verse looks much like prose, with long lines and no poetic divisions created by conventional rhymes or stanzas. The long lines in the poetry are represented by longer vocal phrases in the song, contrasted by the song “Susie Asado” where short vocal phrases represent the abruptness of the poetry. For “Susie Asado,” Thomson presents short word-groups to reflect a short line length in the poem and staccato nature of the words themselves. For this poem, I have created longer word-groups to reflect the longer lines of poetry.

Thomson, in rendering word-groups, might have divided the lines even further than I have, into what he called double word-groups, and this may be evidenced in his rhythmic or metrical setting.[23] I set the words “because the murderer left it in the snow” as one word-group because it is set as one vocal phrase, with the rhythmic motion leading to “snow.” The words “beside a window through which he saw her head” are set as one vocal phrase, but I divided the phrase into a double word-group to observe both the end of the poetic line and the falling third of the vocal line. The vocal line and the word-

[23] See Chapter 1 for an explanation of Thomson’s double word-groups.

groups end on the word “heart.” This is the first full-stop punctuation that Koch has used in the poem and thus Thomson ends the line on the tonic.

Figure 4.6: Word-groups, “Love Song,” lines 6-8

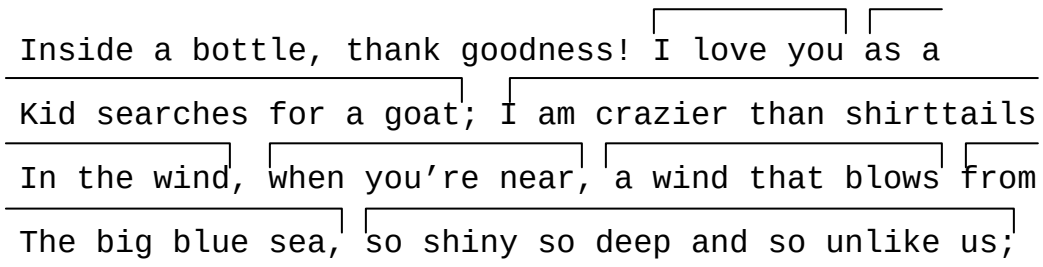
Roof in her heart. For this we live a thousand years;
For this we love, and we live because we love, we are not
Inside a bottle, thank goodness! I love you as a

The next eight measures (mm. 16-23) connect the two A sections. In m. 16, the voice sings the recurring suspenseful rhythmic motive, dotted-eighth-note/sixteenth-note, which underlines the rhythm of the alternating stressed and unstressed syllables in the text: “for this we live a.” The voice sings the dotted-eighth-note/sixteenth-note rhythm in m. 20 outlining the dominant triad on the text, “live because we love.” The voice then chants on the pitch E as the harmony returns to tonic C major in m. 23 to begin the A' section. The accompaniment of this connecting section is slow moving chordal harmonies, stretched by rolled chords played on the downbeats of mm. 17-20.

Thomson indicates the punctuation of the text in his vocal phrases, and thus the word-groups I have created in this section are also determined by punctuation. The chant, “we are not inside a bottle, thank goodness!” is similar to the chant of m. 9, “because the murderer left it in the snow,” and in Figure 4.6 the phrase is likewise grouped as one word-group. It would seem that Thomson was creating a bit of his own

verse; both phrases have the same syllable count, but the phrases form only fragments of the lines that contain them.[24]

Figure 4.7: Word-groups, "Love Song," lines 8-11

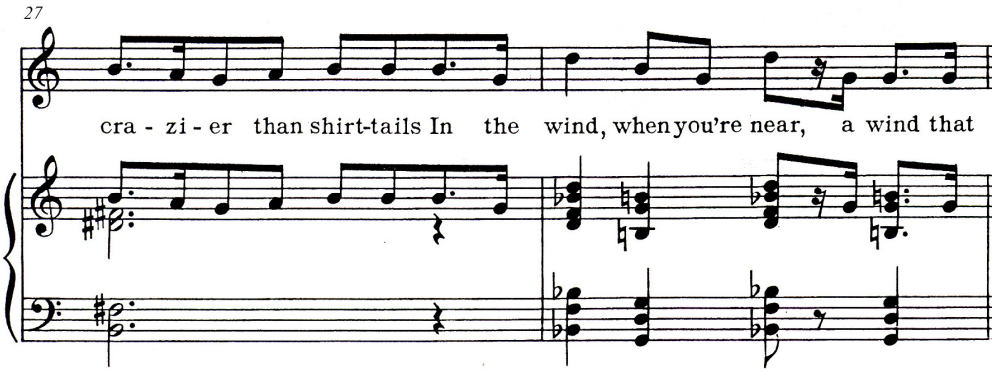



The return of A is significantly abridged. Both A sections have the same opening motive, melodically and rhythmically, sung to the same text, "I love you." The A' melody includes the same intervallic skipping vocal line of the first section. For a moment, Thomson seems to imitate a popular ditty in the quick rhythms of mm. 27-28 ("crazier than shirttails in the wind,") which sounds like some vaudeville or swing tune (Figure 4.8).[25] The vocal line then broadens into a dotted-half-note rhythm sung on the word "blows." The word evokes the sky, and is followed by imagery of water in the words, "big blue sea." This imagery prepares the listener for the rolling triplets of the B section.

[24] The third line of the poem reads: "Because the murderer left it in the snow beside a window" and lines 7-8 read: "For this we love, and we live because we love, we are not / Inside a bottle, thank goodness! I love you as a." This is an instance where Thomson's vocal lines break Koch's poetic lines. Kenneth Koch, "To You," *Thank You*, 16.

[25] The tune vaguely sounds like the Looney Tunes theme which is "The Merry-Go-Round Broke Down" written in 1937 by Clifford Friend and Dave Franklin. *Wikipedia*, s.v. "Cliff Friend," http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Cliff_Friend (accessed March 3, 2009).

Figure 4.8: Musical Example, “Love Song,” mm. 27-28




The last line of the A' section creates some confusion in its word rhythm. Thomson sets the word “unlike” on the first beat of the measure disrupting the regular syllabic stress in which the stress of the phrase falls on every other syllable: “and so un-like us.”[26] Instead, Thomson sets the line: “and so un-like us.” The disruption of the syllabic stress achieves a slowing of the expected word rhythm and so creates the closure of the phrase.

I have grouped the word-groups in Figure 4.7 according to their punctuation and Thomson’s vocal phrases. I have grouped “a wind that blows” and “from the big blue sea” separately because the long note length on the word “blows” indicates a slowing of the phrase. The word-group “so shiny so deep and so unlike us” is long enough to be split into two word-groups, but it is sung as one phrase indicating one word-group and the repetition of the word “so” also indicates it is a single word-group.

The lyricism of the B section is enhanced by an apparent change of meter: while the time signature does not officially change, the use of triplet quarter-notes achieves the feeling of 6/8 (As in Figure 4.10). Thus far, the piece has been in 4/4 meter, with either

[26] The underline indicates syllabic stress.

quarter notes or half notes falling on the strong beats of the measure in the piano, and the voice singing speech-like rhythms above it. The triplet section allows for variation from the angular speech rhythms and encourages more lyrical singing. The texture of this section provides a respite from the declamatory nature of the voice and the interjections from the piano in the previous sections.

Figure 4.9: Word-groups, "Love Song," lines 12-16

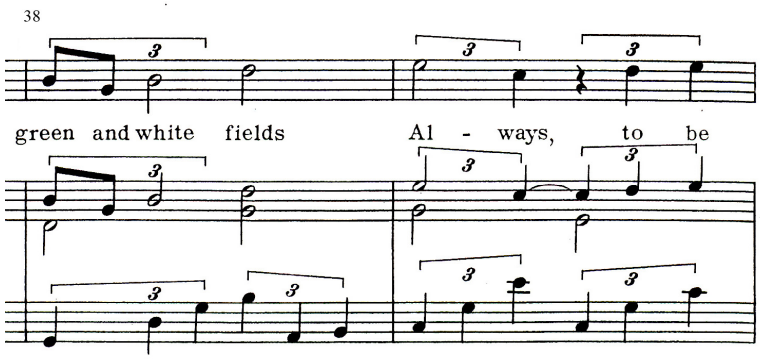
I think I am bicycling across an Africa of green and white fields
Always, to be near you, even in my heart
When I'm awake, ...and also I believe that you
Are trustworthy as the sidewalk which leads me to
The place where I again think of you,

The arpeggiated triplets in the accompaniment evoke the blowing "wind" and "blue sea," but also the bicycle wheel spinning around. The expansive feeling of this section is also heard as the voice sings of the "green and white fields" of Africa. The triplets also have a barcarolle lilt, perhaps foreshadowing the sailing ship that is described in the later lines of the song.

My word-groups in Figure 4.9 are based on Thomson's vocal phrasing and the use of half-notes to indicate word or syllable stress. For instance, "Always," receives its own word-group because it begins a new line, the stress of the first syllable is indicated in the

half-note/quarter-note rhythm under a triplet marking, and the half-note on the word "fields" seems to indicate the end of a word-group.

Figure 4.10: Musical Example, "Love Song," mm. 38-39



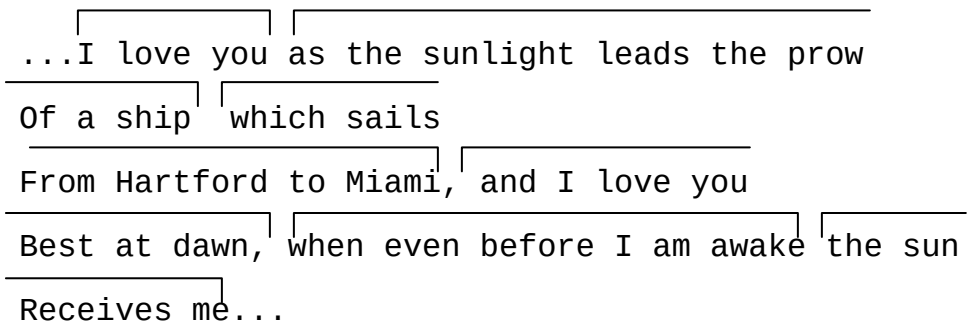

Thomson omits the words, "which swims" in the line of the poem that reads:

When I'm awake, which swims, and also I believe that you

The words "which swims" connects the earthier lines of the poem, which contain "fields" and a "sidewalk," to the "big blue sea" of the previous lines. The connection of the elements of air ("which blows"), water ("which swims" and "big blue sea"), and earth ("fields" and "sidewalk") come together in another line that Thomson omitted, "a new / Harmony of thoughts." The phrase is broken between lines 16 and 17 which read, "The place where I again think of you, a new / Harmony of thoughts! I love you as the sunlight leads the prow." Omitting the word "harmony" omits the implied harmony and connection between the three elements in the line: water, air, earth. Probably more important to Thomson was the smoothing out of the syllabic length of the lines; Koch's original lines were, 11, 14, 12, 11, 15 syllables in length and Thomson's new creation are 11, 12, 12, 9, 11.

The phrase, “as the sidewalk,” is preceded by a rest which I have indicated by beginning a new word-group. Two half-notes (the first one receives two equal beats and the second is part of a triplet) are sung on the word “sidewalk” indicating the possible end of the grouping. The angularity and solidness of the duple rhythm within the triplet section adds gravity to the “sidewalk” which describes the loved one and her trustworthiness. This measure is followed by a descending line, which is musically descriptive of the path the sidewalk creates, “which leads me to the place where I again think of you.”

Figure 4.11: Word-groups, “Love Song,” lines 17-21




The last section begins with the voice singing a repetition of the words, “I love you;” however, unlike the previous repetitions it is sung in a quarter-note rhythm. The strength and earnestness of this repetition is felt in the quarter-note setting opposed to the flippant syncopated rhythm of the first two sections. The next two word-groups are sung over the piano’s mostly half-note block chords, signaling a broadening to the climax of the piece.

The vocal line in m. 56 is marked *forte*, as the voice sings "and I love you / best at dawn." Broad rolled chords play as the voice holds F5 on the word "dawn" which I have indicated is the end of a word group. I have created the word-group "when e'vn before I am awake" to group an arching phrase, building to the climax, when the voice sings "before" on a high G5, before descending more than an octave below, when the voice sings "awake" on the high F5 and descends to the bottom space F4. The rolled chords in the piano play under the high G providing momentum as the voice sings the note for 5 beats.

A rising vocal line ends the piece. Representing the rising sun of "dawn" mentioned in the poem, the voice sings an ascending step-wise line from G4 to E5, which is paralleled in unison in the upper voice of the piano. This scalar melodic line is in contrast to the rest of the piece that moves in a skipping motion. The last three chords in the piano return to earth in descending thirds, E major–C major–A major. The appearance of thirds is at once familiar because of their prominence throughout the piece.

Thomson's recommendations about clearly projecting the text and his mindfulness of the singer set out in Chapter 1 are not applied to the last line of the song. The line ascends towards the top of the staff on the last words of the song, "Receive me." The bright [i] sound over three syllables can be difficult to finesse without giving too much emphasis to the last note. The last note is sung on the word "me," on a quarter-note, on the last beat of the measure.

Allusions to sky, earth, and water that are made in the poem are also made musically. Sky is represented in the ascending line of the voice evoking the sunrise. Earth is represented in the low chords at the end of the piece or the solidness of the duple

rhythm against the triple meter in the B section. Water is represented in a triplet rhythm, which evokes waves or the rocking of a ship.

Thomson omits the end of the last line of the poem. The line reads "receives me in the questions which you always pose," but Thomson only sets the words, "receives me." It is possible he left out the rest of the line for dramatic purpose. Perhaps he preferred the image of sunrise, the voice rising above the horizon, instead of using Koch's earthbound and anticlimactic text. Thomson remedies the drama by ending the vocal line on a high note, but brings the accompaniment back to earth in descending low sounding chords as if the last words of the poem are sung by the piano. Thomson ends the piece on an A major chord, the dominant in the key of D, the key of the following piece, "Down at the Docks." By not ending the piece in tonic, perhaps Thomson is posing the questions of Koch's last line of poetry.

## B. “Down at the Docks”

### 1. The Senses and The Sexes: Poetic Analysis of “Down at the Docks”

**Down at the Docks**
From *Thank You and Other Poems*
Kenneth Koch

Down at the docks
Where everything is sweet and inclines
At night
To the sound of canoes
I planted a maple tree
And every night
Beneath it I studied the cosmos
Down at the docks.

Sweet ladies, listen to me.
The dock is made of wood
The maple tree’s not made of wood
It is wood
Wood comes from it
As music comes from me
And from this mandolin I’ve made
Out of the maple tree.

Jealous gentlemen, study how
Wood comes from the maple
Then devise your love
So that it seems
To come from where
All it is yet something more
White spring flowers and leafy bough
Jealous gentlemen.

Arrogant little waves
Knocking at the dock
It’s for you I’ve made this chanson
For you and that big dark blue.[27]

The poem “Down at the Docks,” calls on the senses and features distinct contrasts: feminine and masculine, water and earth, sinuous and angular. These contrasts are contained in a traditional-looking form of three octet stanzas followed by a quatrain stanza. There is no specific end-rhyme pattern to speak to the traditional form, but the first and last lines of the three octet stanzas contain rhyme or repetition that frames the

[27] Kenneth Koch, *The Collected Poems of Kenneth Koch* (New York: Knopf, 2005), 132.

stanza within. The first stanza introduces the docks, the second speaks directly to the "ladies," the third to the "gentlemen," and the last returns to the dock, but contains elements of femininity and masculinity that recall the second and third stanzas.

In the first stanza, the repetition "Down at the docks," in lines 1 and 8, offers an opening and a closing to the stanza. The setting at night is emphasized by the end-rhyme on the word "night" that occurs on line 3 and 6, and also by the half-rhyme in line 2 on the word "inclines." Reference to the "cosmos" enhances the nighttime setting.

The frequent ending consonance enhances the "sound of canoes." The ending aspirate [t] is heard prominently in "sweet" and "night" and also in the short helping words of "at" and "it." The "t" is also heard in other places in the stanza: "planted," "tree," "to," "studied." Another aspirate, [k] is heard in alliteration, "canoes" and "cosmos" and internally, "docks" and "inclines." These aspirate consonants evoke the sound of the canoe tapping upon the dock. The words "canoes" and "cosmos," also have a visual similarity in addition to their consonance.

While not directly mentioned in the poem, water is alluded to by the "docks" and the "canoes." The water theme contrasts with the earth theme created in line 5, when the maple tree is planted. In addition to creating the contrasting water and earth themes, this stanza appeals to the senses. The reader's sense of sound is appealed to with the words, "sound of canoes," emphasized by the imitative aspirates mentioned above. The sense of taste is aroused by the words, "sweet" and "maple," and the sense of sight is invoked when the poet "studied the cosmos."

The sensuality called for in the poem awakens the reader's perception to its sexual tones and the distinction between "sweet ladies" and "jealous gentlemen" calls the

reader's attention to the relationship between women and men. Sex seeps into Koch's poetry in his pursuit of pleasure in writing it, and though veiled by humor the result is sometimes sexist.[28] Koch's "Art of Love" is written in a humorous tone, but it reads as an insult to women who are objectified in it.

> If you combine tying her hands to the bed and her feet
> You can jump on her! She will be all flattened and splayed out.
> What a fine way to spend an autumn afternoon, or an April one!
> So delicious, you jumping up and down, she lying there, helpless,
> enjoying your every gasp![29]

Reading overtly sexual poetry by the same poet highlights the innuendo in "Down at the Docks."

The second stanza is addressed directly to "sweet ladies," again, indirectly appealing to our senses. The sensuousness is encouraged with the alliterative [m] sound featured in the first three lines in the words "me," "made," "maple," and "made," and the last three lines in the words "music," "me," "mandolin," "made," and "maple." The sensory experience of pressing the lips together to form the [m] sound is similar to the sensory pucker of a kiss. The pleasure of the feeling of a kiss and the pleasure of the sound of the hum is encouraged not only by the repetition of the "m" but also in the "music" the poet makes. The end-rhyme of lines 1 and 8 on the [i] sound, "me" and "tree," encapsulates the stanza.

A contrast between the feminine and the masculine is subtly evoked in this stanza. While it is addressed to the "ladies," hard objects are mentioned, "dock," "wood," "tree," that have masculine associations. The reference to "wood" is double entendre for a male erection. The beginning vowel sounds that begin the last three lines, "As," "And," "Out,"

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[28] Koch, *Making Your Own Days: The Pleasures of Reading and Writing Poetry* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1998), 19-21.
[29] Koch, "The Art of Love," *The Art of Love* in *The Collected Poems of Kenneth Koch*, 278.

are produced by a glottal stroke of the vocal cords, rough, guttural sounds, which are both masculine and sexual.

The third stanza is addressed to men, but evokes the feminine with “flowers,” and “leafy bough.” The senses are stirred in the first line. The words “Jealous gentlemen” offer a delicious assonance and consonance in the initial [ʤ] sound, the open [ɛ] sound, and the [l] and the [n] that allow the mouth to chew the words experientially. Though there is no end rhyme to enclose the stanza, “jealous gentlemen” begins both the beginning and ending line offering repetition to bookend the stanza.

In opposition to the water theme alluded to by the docks in the first two stanzas, earthiness is featured prominently: “maple tree,” “flowers,” “leafy bough.” The maple is mentioned in three stanzas and the use of “sweet” implies not just the tree, but also the taste of maple, enhancing our sensory perception of the poem.

The poet instructs the “Jealous gentlemen” in the ways of wooing women or even deceiving them, “Then devise your love / So that it seems / To come from where / All is it yet something more.” The words “devise” and “so that it seems” imply that the “jealous gentlemen” are not completely honest.

The word “come” appears harmlessly in the second stanza, but when it appears as “wood comes…” in the third stanza one can infer its double entendre as the male orgasm. This gives new meaning to the second stanza in which “Wood comes from it [maple tree] / As music comes from me.” The reader can now wonder exactly what “music” the poet is referring to. However, the beauty of sex is not wasted on the “jealous gentlemen.” In the third stanza it is not all deceit. It is also “white spring flowers and leafy bough,” which is possibly another way of describing an orgasm.

The final stanza divides into both the masculine and feminine. The first two lines of the stanza imply the masculine; they are shorter, more abrupt, angular, and the words evoke tense feelings, "arrogant," "knocking," "dock." The concentration of consonants in the first two lines is onomatopoeic of the knocking waves: "Arrogant little waves / Knocking at the dock." The knowledge of the double entendre in the previous stanzas gives new meaning to these lines. The reader is left to wonder: What makes the waves? What activity creates knocking? The word, "knocking," is slang for engaging in sexual intercourse, as in, "knocking boots."[30] These two lines imply the act of sexual intercourse.

The last two lines of the final stanza are longer, smoother, and features the round [u] sound "you," and "blue," implying the feminine. These lines restore romance to the male-female relationship, "It's for you I've made this chanson / For you and that big dark blue." The first line is the traditional offering from a boy in love. He has written her a song, in this case this poem. The [u] sound featured in the last two lines ("you" and "blue") is imitative of a "chanson," similar to a song sung without knowing the words. The second line twists that innocent offering into a mischievous one; he has not written the song only for the girl, but also for "that big dark blue." Interpreting "that big dark blue" in a physical sense, it might represent the hidden parts of a woman's body, or in an abstract sense, it might represent the sexual life still unknown to this man.

The final stanza contrasts the second and third stanzas. After the earthiness implied by the trees and flowers of stanzas 2 and 3, this stanza is in opposition, ending with water or the sky. "That big dark blue" describes an ocean or the expanse of the

[30] Definition for "knocking boots" found in *Urban Dictionary*, http://www.urbandictionary.com/define.php?term=knocking+boots (accessed July 16, 2007).

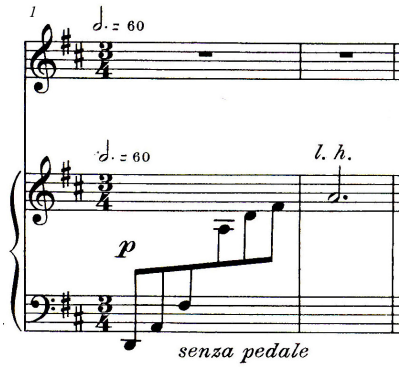
“cosmos.” The poem itself is set at night, and this interpretation evokes acts that occur under the cover of darkness.

**2. Musical Analysis of "Down at the Docks"**

**a. Features of Form and Accompaniment**

Despite Koch's subtly suggestive language in lines such as, "every thing is sweet / and inclines at night," Thomson treats the language of the poem literally.[31] The simplicity of the harmony, the 3/4 time signature, and the upward movement of the arpeggiated eighth-notes evoke small waves lapping at the dock of an imaginary lake which is described in the first stanza of the poem. The voice and piano are marked *piano* at their respective entrances, illustrating the quiet of the nighttime setting ("everything is sweet and inclines / at night").

Figure 4.12: Musical Example, "Down at the Docks," mm. 1-2




Thomson uses Koch's formal stanza divisions as his own and differentiates between them by changing key and texture. The texture of the first stanza is dominated by a measure of arpeggiated eighth-notes followed by a measure of a dotted-half-note, allowing the harmony to change every other measure. The alternation of movement and

[31] Thomson's treatment is much like that of *Capital Capitals* where he commonly "treats the suggestive language like everything else, intoning it in chant-derived melodic lines and integrating it into the bulk of Stein's patter." Carol Oja, *Making Music Modern* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), 261.

stasis gives the impression of lapping or rolling of water instead of the trickling or flowing that might be implied by moving eighth-notes alone.

The second stanza changes key (G major) and dynamic (*mezzo forte*). The texture in the accompaniment begins with a held chord in the bass of the piano with rhythmic accompaniment in the upper voices, changing harmonies every measure. The voice sings a skipping melody over this accompaniment. The texture of the accompaniment changes in m. 34 with ascending eighth-note arpeggios, similar to the opening section, but continuing every measure giving continuous movement. These arpeggios represent the "music" and the "mandolin" described in the poem. The arpeggios begin an ascending and descending pattern in m. 44, interrupted by the dominant harmony in mm. 46-48, but resumes in m. 49 until the tonic harmony is reached in m. 58. There the accompaniment returns to the ascending eighth-note pattern.

The connection between second and third stanzas occurs in the piano in mm. 60-63. Here the pattern of the first section, the ascending arpeggio pattern alternating with the dotted-half-notes occurs in a deceptive cadence and then a full cadence. The cadence point also serves as a pivot chord modulating to C major (mm. 62-63).

In the third stanza, the voice is marked *mezzo piano* and the piano is marked *piano*. The texture again changes as the piano offers staccato quarter notes in a kind of ascending arpeggio. The texture evokes the plucked strings of the guitar and, along with the syncopated rhythms sung by the voice, this section begins in an almost Spanish feeling. The accompaniment wanders from this style under the lines "All is it yet something more / white spring flowers and leafy bough," which creates the climax of the song.

A C minor harmony sounds in the climactic measure (m. 82) and from there, a development of harmonies occurs. A decrescendo is marked in the piano from mm. 91-93 releasing the climax. Measures 93-94 serve as the formal cadence, and a *poco ritenuto* is marked in the measure of the dominant seventh chord leading to tonic. The recurrence of the phrase "jealous gentlemen" ends the section with a return of the staccato accompaniment in the piano. Thomson promptly changes key to begin the fourth and final stanza.

In the fourth stanza, the arpeggiated texture returns in the piano representing the sound of the waves lapping against the dock, or "knocking" as described in the poem. However; the arpeggiation turns into ascending eighth-note scales in both hands by m. 101. The eighth-notes form parallel thirds, both ascending and descending through m. 106. The dynamics are marked *mezzo piano* in the voice and *piano* in the piano, so the running eighth-notes should be inconspicuous, like a passing wake through the water.

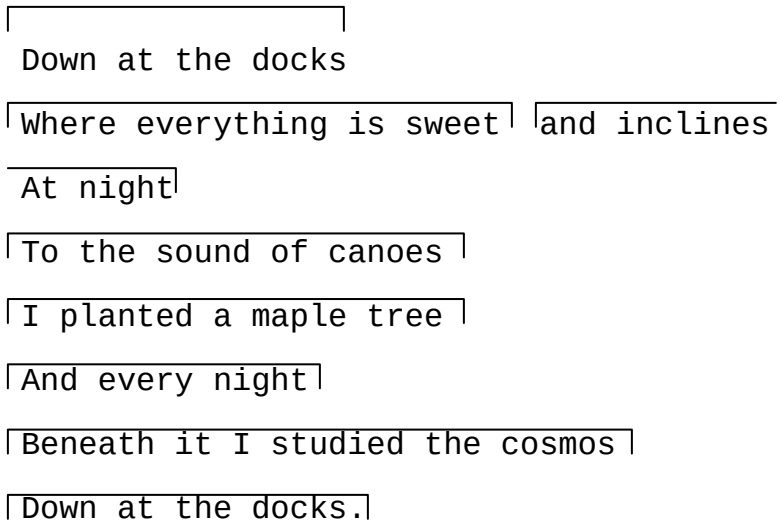
This eighth-note texture changes to halves and quarters under a short melismatic passage in the voice (mm. 107-111). Two measures of the staccato quarter-note/half-note rhythm (mm. 115-116) are a brief reappearance of the accompaniment from stanza 3 and the next to penultimate measure contains scalar eighth-notes like those earlier in the fourth stanza. The song closes in D major.

Figure 4.13: Table, Form in “Down At the Docks”

| Stanza | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Key Area | D major | G major | C major | D major |
| Measures | 1-26 | 27-63 | 64-97 | 98-124 |
| Texture | Ascending arpeggiated eighth-notes alternating with dotted-half-notes | Dotted-half-notes under rhythmic upper voices/ arpeggiated eighth-notes | Staccato quarter-notes | Scalar eighth-notes/ chordal quarter-note and half-note movement |

**b. Musical Analysis**

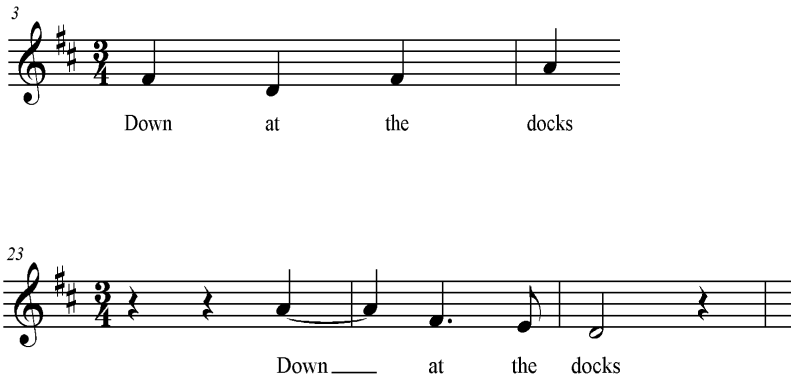
Figure 4.14: Word-groups, “Down at the Docks,” lines 1-8




This poem features shorter lines than does the first poem of the set, “To You.” The shorter lines form more concise images and are less narrative than “To You.” The first stanza is framed by the repetition of the line, “Down at the docks,” and Thomson frames the stanza with the tonic chord in the voice. “Down at the docks” is sung on F♯-

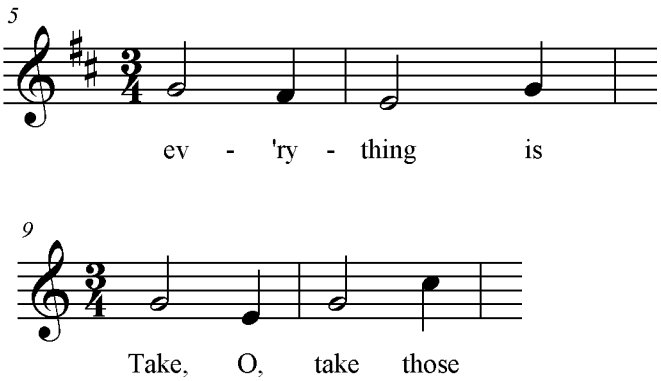
D-F♯-A the first time, and then uses a descending line, A-F♯-E-D, the second time (Figure 4.15).

Figure 4.15: Musical Example, “Down at the Docks,” mm. 3-4 and mm. 23-25




The vocal line utilizes the motion of the 3/4 time signature by placing stressed syllables on the downbeat of a measure. Most of the words are set one syllable per quarter-note, but Thomson utilizes the half-note/quarter-note rhythm to enhance the crusic stress of beat one and the anacrusic nature of beat three. This emphasizes the stress of a syllable that falls on the half-note downbeat and decreases the stress of a syllable placed on the upbeat of a measure. For instance in mm. 5-6: “ev-‘ry-thing is,” the accented syllables “Ev-” and “thing” are sung on half-notes on the downbeat of their respective measures. The same rhythm is used in “Take, o take those lips away,” also in the 3/4 time signature.

Figure 4.16: Musical Example, Rhythmic Comparison,
"Down at the Docks," mm. 5-6 and "Take, O, Take Those Lips Away," mm. 9-10




Another rhythm used to take advantage of the particular weight of the downbeat in this time signature is the dotted-quarter-note/eighth-note/quarter-note. In m. 7, "sweet" receives the most stress, and in m. 9, "night" receives the stress. Both words are prominent in the poem. "Sweet" is oddly descriptive, perhaps of the smell of the night or of the maple from the tree, and a bit onomatopoetic in the way the [s] and the [u] sounds together imply something tasty on the lips. This rhythm helps to bring out the assonance in "night" and "inclines."

The senses are provoked in this stanza. "Sweet," already mentioned above, arouses the sense of smell and taste. "Sound," connecting with another sense, is emphasized on the downbeat of m. 10. "Studied," is used to evoke the sense of sight at m. 19. All of these words are pointed to by Koch, with the use of the [s] sound, and given emphasis by Thomson, by placing them on a downbeat.

The melodic technique is more linear than the song that precedes it. After the arpeggiation of the first line, "Down at the docks," the line takes on a more stepwise pattern meandering its way from D3, in the opening phrase to the highest note, F♯5 at the

top of the staff in m. 20 forming the climax of the stanza. The F♯ reached on the word "cosmos" illustrates the word by being sung on the highest note of the phrase, as if in the sky. The word is also sung over a three-measure melisma representing the expanse of the universe.

Thomson's vocal phrases adhere closely to Koch's poetic line, so that is how I have depicted the word-groups in lines 1-8 (Figure 4.14). The lines, "where everything is sweet and inclines / At night / to the sound of canoes" divide unevenly poetically and the vocal phrase is too long to be one entire group. For the word-groups in Figure 4.14, I have divided Thomson's vocal phrase according to word stress, not according to the poetic line divisions. The voice ends the stanza on D3 and the piano ends the section with a change in texture on staccato quarter-notes.

Figure 4.17: Word-groups, "Down at the Docks," lines 9-16

Sweet ladies, listen to me.
The dock is made of wood
The maple tree's not made of wood
It is wood
Wood comes from it
As music comes from me
And from this mandolin I've made
Out of the maple tree

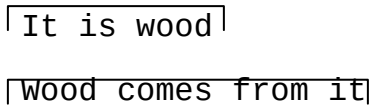
The word "sweet," begins the second stanza, this time in a figurative description of ladies rather than the sensual description in the first stanza. The stanza begins as a sort

of lesson to these ladies and then play begins on the word "wood." Koch's play on the word "wood" is emphasized by Thomson's vocal phrases and is reflected in my word-groups in Figure 4.17, where "wood" is either the end or beginning of the word-group. However, the poet in the poem moves the reader away from the concrete world of "wood" into the abstract world of his "music." These concepts are connected with the use of the [m] in "maple" (which is "wood"), "made," "music," "mandolin," then the repetition of the "maple" completes the stanza.

Thomson translates Koch's focus on "music" by adding rhythmic emphasis as the voice approaches the word "mandolin." The phrase "From this mandolin" is set in dotted-quarter-notes that evoke the rhythmic playing of the mandolin. The dotted-quarter-notes are mimicked in the top line of the piano in mm. 49-50 providing a hemiola in 3/4 time. The long line sung over "I've made" de-emphasizes the rhythm of the mandolin and emphasizes the lyricism of the voice or the serenader who is playing the mandolin. The poem implies that the poet plays and sings and Thomson's vocal line supports this reading.

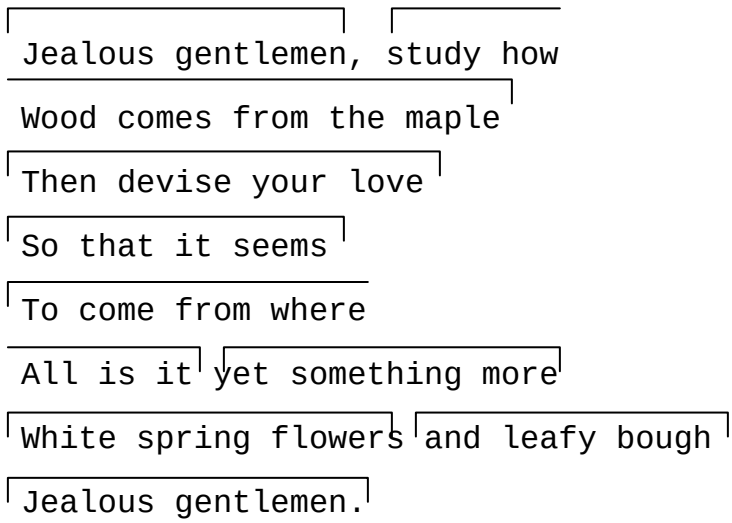
My word-groups in this stanza are based on punctuation or poetic line that are reflected in Thomson's vocal line. Thomson has set the poetic lines as vocal phrases, indicated with a rest, except in the phrase "It is wood / Wood comes from it."

Figure 4.18: Word-groups, “Down at the Docks,” lines 12-13




These groups are easily separated by poetic lines and Thomson sets them to different rhythms; the words “is wood” are sung on dotted-half-notes and “wood comes from it” on quarter-notes. A singer will likely add a pause or even a breath between these groups.

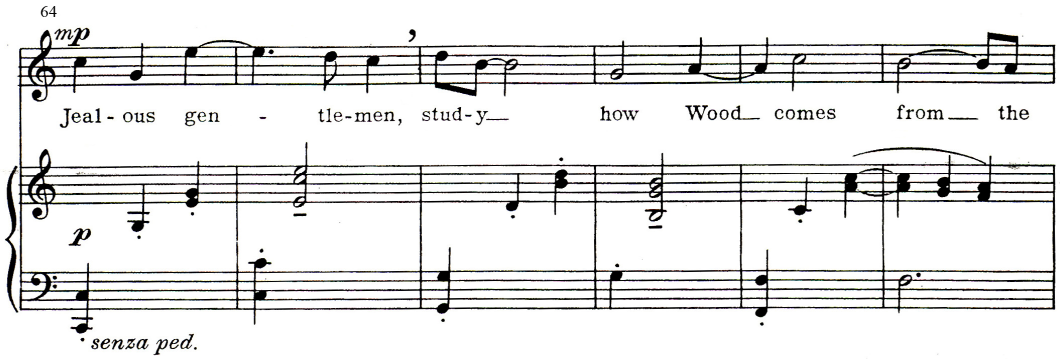
Figure 4.19: Word-groups, “Down at the Docks,” lines 17-24




Rhythmic motives used in the first and second stanza are utilized in the third stanza. The dotted-quarter-note /eighth-note/quarter-note motive (m. 7, 9) of the first section is used, but becomes rhythmically displaced in m. 65 when the dotted-quarter-note is tied to a quarter-note in the previous measure. The stress on the first syllable of “gen-tle-men,” is emphasized because of its length, not its place in the measure. The use

of a stressed syllable on the third beat foreshadows the hemiola that is sung in mm. 67-68.

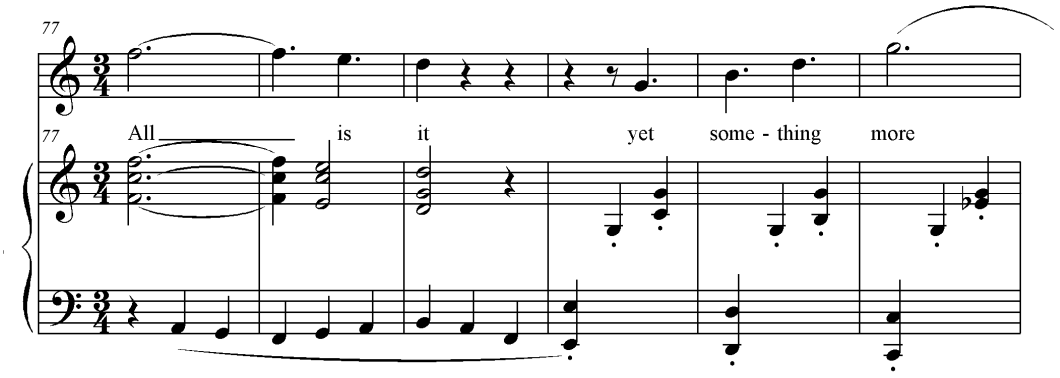
Figure 4.20: Musical Example, "Down at the Docks," mm. 64-69




The half-note/quarter-note rhythm of the first section (mm. 5-6) brought out the words on the downbeat, but by tying the quarter-note of this motive to the quarter-note on the downbeat of the next measure a hemiola over two measures is created. In mm. 67-68 the voice sings a duple rhythm over the triple rhythm in the piano. This allows the word on the third beat to be stressed, in this case the word "wood."

The use of the dotted-quarter-notes of the previous section reappears in measures 78-81. The two against three is heard more prominently because of the quarter-notes in the piano. The repetition of rhythmic motives is similar to Koch's repetition of sounds, words, and phrases.

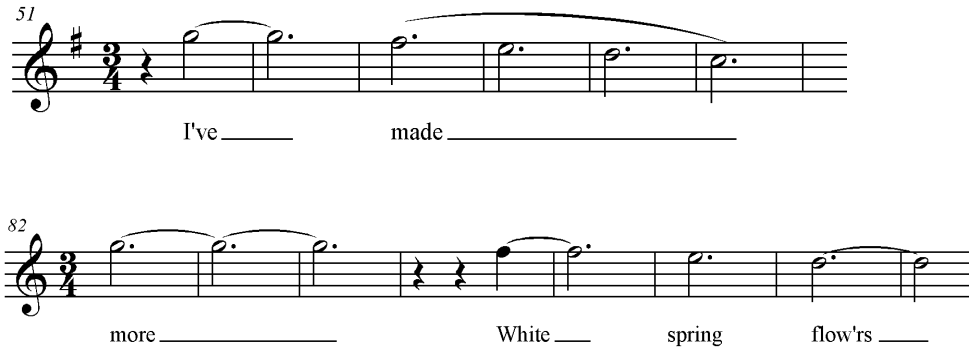
Figure 4.21: Musical Example, “Down at the Docks,” mm. 78-81




In the third stanza of the poem, the poet now addresses the “gentlemen.” This stanza is framed by the words “jealous gentlemen,” just as the first stanza was framed by the phrase “down at the docks.” “Jealous gentlemen” is sung the same way melodically and rhythmically in both the beginning and end of the stanza. Thomson indicates a breath mark after “jealous gentlemen,” in keeping with Koch’s punctuation, indicating a new phrase and word-group. Thomson uses Koch’s poetic line for the next two vocal phrases and my word-groups in Figure 4.19 reflect those phrases. “To come from where all is it” is grouped together because of the arching phrase Thomson creates with the words (m. 75-79). I have marked the line “White spring flowers and leafy bough” as two word-groups. The line can be sung as one phrase and still heard as two groups. “Flowers” and “bough” are both sung on the same note and both times are approached from above, giving the groups similar closure.

The word “more” forms the climax of the stanza. It is sung on the highest note of the entire piece, G5, which was also the climax note of the previous section. The G is held and marked with a crescendo to *forte* over three measures. Here, the dénouement is similar to the descent taken by the previous phrase.

Figure 4.22: Musical Examples, “Down at the Docks,” mm. 51-56 and mm. 82-88




In the previous section, the phrase eventually descends to the tonic G (m. 60), and in this section the tonic C is finally reached in measure 95 at the end of the phrase, “jealous gentlemen.”

Figure 4.23: Word-groups, “Down at the Docks,” lines 25-28

Arrogant little waves
Knocking at the dock
It’s for you I’ve made this chanson
For you and that big dark blue

The scalar eighth-notes found in mm.100-106 are a common feature in Thomson’s vocal accompaniments. These parallel scales appear in “Let’s take a Walk,” and “A Prayer to St. Catherine,” and they also appear in “Susie Asado.” The melodic texture is scalar for the first three measures of this section, even paralleling the bass line in m. 100. The dotted-quarter-note rhythm occurs in m. 103. The rhythm is reminiscent of the “mandolin” in the second stanza.

The poet uses repetition of the words "I've made." In the second stanza the poet has made a "mandolin…out of a maple tree" and in the last stanza he has made" a "chanson" (song), in this case, a poem. Thomson treats each instance differently, but highlights the connection that these are both the poet's creations. In the second stanza, the mandolin is brought out by the dotted-quarter-note rhythm. There, the "I've made" that follows is sung in a descending line that starts on the highest note of the song, G5, and is carried down over four measures. In the final stanza, the measure that begins "I've made" contains dotted-quarter-notes. The word "chanson" is sung in an embellished descending line. This lyric descending line is much like the earlier one sung to "made" in mm. 53-56. Under the word "chanson," the accompaniment rhythm changes to quarter-notes and the bass line mimics the half-note/quarter-note rhythm found in the first stanza.

The quarter-note rhythm keeps the harmony changing twice per measure from m. 107 to m. 115. Here, an altered A major harmony is heard while the voice sings a dotted-quarter-note rhythm that is reminiscent of the "mandolin" rhythm. The phrase continues upward to a G5 (if the singer observes the optional upper note) on the word "dark." The contour of "and that big" is similar to the contour of the earlier phrase "you I've made" (mm. 103-104).

Beneath the words "and that big," a staccato quarter-note followed by a half-note marked with a tenuto is played in the piano. This is the same figure that played a minor role in the "jealous gentlemen" section (third stanza). The descending quarter-note chords of mm. 117-119 form descending parallel thirds with the bass note, although not in a consistent voicing. These descending thirds lead to the last word of the song "blue."

I have assigned the word “blue” its own word-group because it is separated from the previous phrase by a measure of rest. “Blue” is sung on the second beat of the measure in an enjoyable final syncopation. To finish the song Thomson offers more descending thirds, this time just a fragment of staccato eighth-notes appear in bar 122. The thirds descend upon a D major chord, which is played again in the last two measures with slightly different voicings in each measure based on descending thirds. The descent in the inner voices between the chords sound as if the chord is fading away, much like a “canoe” floating away in the distance or a falling star fading away in the “cosmos.”

## C. “Let’s Take a Walk”

### 1. Surprises and False Steps: Poetic Analysis of “Spring”

**Spring**
From *Thank You and Other Poems*
Kenneth Koch

Let’s take a walk
In the city
Till our shoes get wet
(It’s been raining
All night) and when
We see the traffic
Lights and the moon
Let’s take a smile,
Off the ashcan, let’s walk
Into town (I mean
A lemon peel)

Let’s make music
(I hear the cats
Purply beautiful
Like hallways in summer
Made of snowing rubber
Valence piccalilli and diamonds)
Oh see the arch ruby
Of this late March sky
Are you less intelligent
Than the pirate of lemons
Let’s take a walk

I know you tonight
As I have never known
A book of white stones
Or a bookcase of orange groans
Or symbolism
I think I’m in love
With those imaginary racetracks
Of red traced grey in
The sky and the gimcracks
Of all you know and love
Who once loathed firecrackers
And license plates and
Diamonds but now you love them all
And just for my sake

Let’s take a walk
Into the river
(I can even do that
Tonight) where
If I kiss you please
Remember with your shoes off
You’re so beautiful like
A lifted umbrella orange
And white we may never
Discover the blue over-
Coat maybe never never O blind
With this (love) let’s walk
Into the first
Rivers of morning as you are seen

To be bathed in a light white light
Come on[32]

In this poem the poet urges his beloved to take a walk with him, and in doing so, implies that he is actually asking for something more. In the second stanza, he asks her to make music, confirming the reader's suspicion in the first stanza that he is in pursuit of sex. The poem captures his attempts to attain his beloved.

The first stanza sets the scene of a rainy night, and the second stanza evokes the senses of sound and sight of music and the night sky. In the second stanza, the poet becomes frustrated by his slow progress, and so he hurls insults at his beloved, "Are you less intelligent / Than the pirate of lemons," before returning to his original petition, "Let's take a walk."

The third stanza is devoted to his convincing her, beginning with, "I know you tonight" as if he might know what is best for her. He tries to impress her with his "book" knowledge and intellectual understanding of "symbolism." He teases her, "I think I'm in love / With those imaginary racetracks / Of red traced grey in / The sky…" and he does his best to convince her to take a walk with him. He lists things she thought were useless "gimcracks:" firecrackers, license plates, and diamonds, and about which she changed her mind: "but now you love them all," to convince her that although she thinks little of the poet now, she is certain to love him.

The poet begs, "just for my sake" and boasts, "let's take a walk / Into the river / (I can even do that / Tonight." He resorts to flattery, "you're so beautiful" as an excuse for kissing her. He even gives her a glimpse of what she is missing: "We may never discover

[32] Koch, "Spring," *Thank You*, 18-19.

the blue over- / Coat." But he becomes overwhelmed with his love, exclaiming, "O blind / With this (love)." The poem ends with one final entreaty: "Come on."

The title, "Spring," inspires thoughts of nature, but it is answered ironically with an urban scene; "city," "traffic," "ashcan," and "town" are all mentioned in the first stanza. The scene is precisely the urban pastoral critics have found in the work of the New York School.[33] The idyllic setting is evoked by "traffic lights" and an "ashcan," instead of a properly rural scene inspired by the title, "Spring." This urban pastoral is a response to romantic poetry; the New York School Poets celebrated the city as poets like Wordsworth and Coleridge had revered nature. This urban pastoral also served to legitimize their own work, insisting their urban experiences were just as profound as the revelations earlier poets had found in nature.

Motion is alluded to in the first line ("Let's take a walk") and then by the poem itself, and is indicative of a city that never stops moving. There is no punctuation indicated to allow the reader to pause or to breathe. The only interruptions in the line are parenthetical statements and the only interruptions in the poem are the three stanza breaks. Time passes quickly throughout the poem which spans an entire night, from sunset, "arch ruby / Of this late March sky," to dawn, "let's walk / Into the first / Rivers of morning."

The poem hangs together through a series of impressions and sounds. A refrain of "Let's take a walk" at the beginning and end of a stanza acts as a musical ritornello, connecting the four stanzas. The refrain "Let's take a walk" opens stanza 1 and ends

[33] Timothy Gray, "Process and Plurality in New York's Urban Pastoral," Review of *The Scene of My Selves: New Work on New York School Poets*, ed. Terrence Diggory and Stephen Paul Miller and *In the Process of Poetry: The New York School and the Avant-Garde*, by William Watkin. *Contemporary Literature* 44, no. 2 (Summer 2003): 362-378.

stanzas 2 and 3. Its shorter version, “Let’s walk” appears in the first and fourth stanzas. The use of this refrain as a poetic device prepares the ear for other uses of repetition. Two instances of a false repetition of the opening refrain occur in the first and second stanzas, the first, “Let’s take a smile” and the second, “Let’s make music” which opens the second stanza, imply false starts or wrong turns taken on this walk.

Koch connects the words within the stanzas with rhyme, alliteration, and assonance, though not necessarily syntactical sense. The first stanza makes sense syntactically for the first seven lines: “Let’s take a walk / In the city / Till our shoes get wet / (It’s been raining / All night) and when / We see the traffic / Lights and the moon.” The next line begins the false repetition, “Let’s take a smile” and continues “Off the ashcan.” Koch has used the false repetition, the impression of something familiar, to lead to more unknown surprises. The repetition of the refrain “Let’s walk” and the connection between “town” and “city” of the second line helps the reader balance between sense and nonsense.

The use of the [u] sound in the “w” of “walk” “wet” “we” and “when” and the vowel sound of “moon” makes an aural connection throughout the stanza. The rhyme between “night” and “lights,” in lines 5 and 7, and the rhymes of consecutive words, “get wet” and “we see,” also show the connection aural play creates in the stanza.

The first line of the second stanza, “Let’s make music,” begins deceptively like “Let’s take a walk:” it begins with the same first word, “let’s,” there is a rhyme between “make” and “take,” and both lines contain the same number of syllables. Following this false start, the stanza launches into a surprise, tangential parenthetical thought. “(I hear

the cats / Purply beautiful / Like hallways in summer / Made of snowing rubber / Valence piccalilli and diamonds)."

The associations implicit in "music" and "hear" allow the reader to make a connection into this departure. "Purply beautiful" implies the sound of blues or jazz, especially if one connects the word "cats" to players in a band. The allusion to sound allows the reader to more enjoy the parallel sounds and rhymes of "-ways in summer" and "snowing rubber."

The poet offers a vague simile within parenthesis to separate it from the rest of the poem. "(I hear the cats / Purply beautiful / *Like* hallways in summer / Made of snowing rubber / Valence piccalilli and diamonds.)"[34] He compares the sound of the cats to hallways, and in his description he is caught up in an ecstasy of words, letting the words spin out like a jazz improvisation.[35] In the next line the sense of sight is introduced, "Oh see the arch ruby," in response to sound that was explored in lines 12-17. The associative connection of jewels serves to unify the stanza in the consecutive line endings of "diamonds" and "ruby."

The introduction of "late March" contradicts the "summer" mentioned just lines before (line 15), but also prepares the reader for further contradictions. The word "sky" makes a connection to the "moon" of the first stanza and to the "diamonds" in line 17 that the reader can associate with stars. The repetition of "lemons" in "Pirate of lemons" connects the oddly ending line of the first stanza, "lemon peel." The refrain "Let's take a walk" ends the second stanza, and frames the first and second stanzas together.

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[34] Italics mine.

[35] Paul Hoover claims this exuberance is a reversion to the earlier style of *When the Sun Tries to Go On*. Paul Hoover, "Fables of Representation: Poetry of the New York School," *American Poetry Review* 31, no. 4 (July/August 2002): 20.

The first four lines of the third stanza are brilliant with a cacophony of rhymes: “I know you tonight / As I have never known / A book of white stones / Or a bookcase of orange groans.” The [n] alliteration is featured in the first two lines, while the rhyme between “tonight” and “white” connect line 1 and 3. Each line contains the assonant sounds in “know,” “known,” “stones,” and “groans.” The exact rhyme between “stones” and “groans” is pleasurable, as is the repetition of “book.” The parallel construction of “white stones” and “orange groans” almost overcomes the reader’s expectation of the line ending with “orange groves,” another instance of Koch contradicting the reader’s expectation.

The middle of the third stanza (lines 28-35) contains the rhyme [æk] in “racetracks,” “gimcracks,” and “firecrackers.” The use of this rhyme in every other line ending provides symmetry for these lines. The repetition of the word “love” also provides cohesiveness in these lines. The visual and aural similarities between “racetracks” and “red traced” provide pleasure to the reader’s eye and ear. The pleasure of the sound [l] is featured throughout the lines, especially situating “love” and “loathe” in subsequent lines, where humor is found in their similar sounds and quite opposite meanings. The word “know,” especially preceded by a pronoun, “you know,” is a connection to the first line of the stanza, “I know you,” creating even more cohesion within the stanza as a whole. “And just for my sake” offers a cadential moment signaling the return of the refrain, “Let’s take a walk,” presenting a rhyme between the words “sake” and “take.” The poem, as printed in both Koch’s *Collected Poems* and *Thank You and Other Poems*, shows a page break after the line “Let’s take a walk,” implying the end of a stanza.

The new stanza then begins, “Into the river.” The “river” is explained at the end of the stanza to be a river of light rather than one of water, but the poet keeps the metaphor going with the idea of bathing in it, “as you are seen / To be bathed in light white light.” The “river” is another confluence of the urban and the rural; a river is associated with nature, but it is also a feature of urbanity in that a river is a means of trade. The words “lifted umbrella” and the “overcoat” return the reader’s thoughts to the first stanza (“it’s been raining / All night”) where the reader first faced the theme of the urban pastoral.

Aural connections made with the internal rhymes, “light white light” also point to “tonight” and “white” of previous lines. The beautiful vowel assonance of “if” and “kiss” as well as the similarities between, “we may never” and “maybe never” lend to the overall assonance of the stanza. “Let’s walk” is the final ritornello of the poem, but it does not end the poem to suggest formality. Instead, it is tucked away at the end of a line and the poem ends with the two-syllable line, “Come on,” like a button holding the poem together and the final entreaty of the poet.

### 2. Musical Analysis of "Let's Take a Walk"

Thomson's setting of Koch's poem "Spring," which he renamed, "Let's Take a Walk," sacrifices much of Koch's poetry; Thomson set only 24 lines of the 52-line poem. Shortening the poem likens it to the other poems of the song set; the length of the other poems is around twenty lines: "To You," 21 lines; "Down at the Docks," 28 lines; "Chanson," 20 lines. However, "Let's Take a Walk," was written months before the other three settings refuting the possibility that Thomson was matching the length of the poems in the set. Thomson offered no official reason to Koch for cutting the poetry, but the following analysis suggests ways Thomson found his own poetic voice to conceal the omissions of Koch's poetry.[36]

#### a. Form

Thomson eliminates the second and third stanza of Koch's text, essentially creating a two-stanza work out of a four-stanza poem. Thomson does imitate Koch's repetitive word-motives, creating his own short melodic motives that are featured throughout the piece.

Thomson opens the piece with a four-note motive that reappears in various ways. The four-note motive is followed by an eighth-note motive that will also reappear later in the piece. This section stays firmly in the tonic, F major. The second section opens in F major but then wanders into G major in m. 37-43. One remarkable point occurs in m. 60, where a rest in the vocal line and an A major chord in the piano introduces one of the poem's word repetitions, "let's walk." This vocal line builds to the climax of the piece at m. 65 on the word "morning" on G5. After a repetition of the opening eighth-note motive the piece ends in an F major chord.

[36] Koch, Interview by Anthony Tommasini.

The piece roughly divides into two parts, mm. 1-24 and 25-82, which makes for an uneven division. A case could be made for a division into three sections, mm. 1-34, 34-59, and 60-82, because of the word-repetition and the pause in the vocal line at m. 60; however, tonally the division between the second and third sections is unconvincing, borrowing as it does from both F major and D major throughout both sections, but never straying far from F major.

The piano is much more independent of the voice than in the previous two songs in the set. The piano creates interest both linearly and chordally and the rhythm varies more greatly. Whereas in the previous songs texture could delineate sections of the song, here texture is eclectic throughout providing a cohesive texture though the entire song. This allows the harmonic movement and melodic line to create a piece that is continually moving.

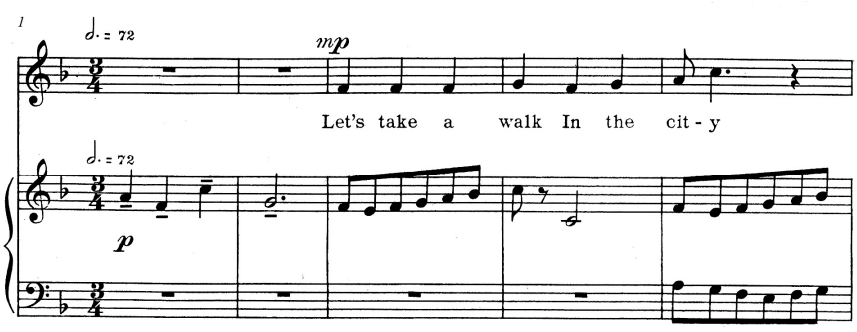
**b. Musical Analysis**

Figure 4.24: Word-groups, “Let’s Take a Walk,” lines 1-10

Let’s take a walk
In the city
Till our shoes get wet ...
and when
We see the traffic
Lights and the moon
Let’s take a smile
Off the ashcan, let’s walk
Into town

In the four-note introduction the piano plays A-F-C-G. This introduces the pitches of the motive F-G-A-C that recurs throughout the piece. The first vocal phrase, sung on "Let's take a walk in the city," ascends a fifth, from F4 to C5, emphasizing the tonic/dominant alternation occurring in the underlying harmony. I have grouped as one word-group, to emphasize the four-note motive. Under this vocal phrase the piano plays a decorated version of the vocal line in eighth notes. The piano's sprightly eighth-notes bring out the motion of the ascending line in the voice.

Figure 4.25: Musical Example, "Let's Take a Walk," mm. 1-5



In the phrase, “Till our shoes get wet,” the word “shoes” receives emphasis because of its length, a dotted-half-note. The word “shoes” is also emphasized for its assonance with “moon” and with the [u] in the “w” sound of the words “when” and “we” found in the next three lines. The omission of the intervening parenthetical line “It’s been raining/All night,” increases the audibility of the [u] sound.

> Let’s take a walk
> In the city
> Till our shoes get wet
> (It’s been raining
> All night) and when
> We see the traffic
> Lights and the moon
> Let’s take a smile
> Off the ashcan, let’s walk
> Into town (I mean
> A lemon peel).[37]

The stop-plosive consonant [t] encourages the short treatment of the words, “get” and “wet.”[38] Here, both words are sung as a half-note followed by a quarter rest. The rest emphasizes the short vowel duration, the rhyme of the words, and the ending aspirate consonant that harmonizes with the [t] at the beginning of the line in the word “till.” I set these words are set as separate word-groups within the larger word-group because of the musical emphasis given them in their equal duration and the quarter rest that follows each word (Figure 4.23).

This vocal line, “Till our shoes get wet,” is sung over a slightly altered descending 6/3-chord sequence in the piano. The descending parallel thirds and sixths imply falling rain, although their hymn-like sound might suggest they originate in Thomson’s church music background. Thomson omits the line, “(It’s been raining/All night),” but the emphasis on the third beat in mm. 8-9 sounds like jumping into puddles left by the rain.

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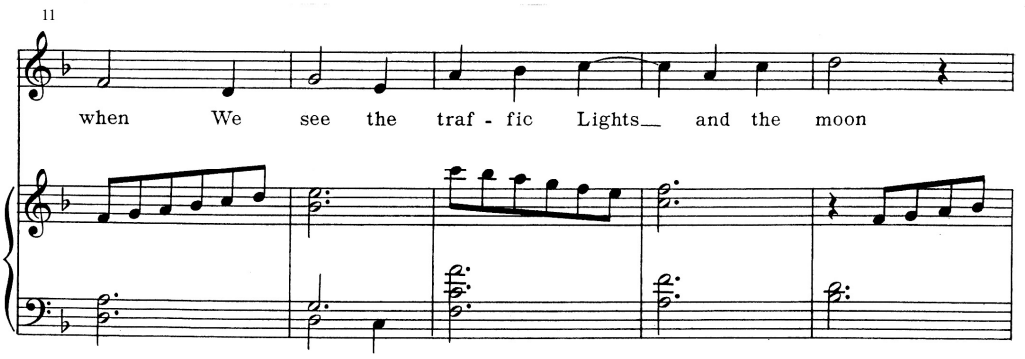
[37] Koch, “Spring,” *Thank You*, 19.

[38] In his book, Thomson insists that a “completely short word,” a word that is composed of a short vowel surrounded by short consonants, cannot be extended and still be understood when sung. Virgil Thomson, *Music with Words* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1989), 10.

I created the word-group, “And when we see the traffic lights and the moon,” based on Thomson’s vocal phrase, with the words “and the moon” indicating a double word-group as an additional clause. The sequence of the rhythm quarter-note/half-note brings out the ascending melodic line. Again, the pitches F-G-A-C are heard prominently in the vocal line while the piano plays them in eighth notes in the accompaniment, once in an ascending line and once in retrograde (mm. 11, 13).[39]

Figure 4.26: Musical Example, “Let’s Take a Walk” mm. 11-13

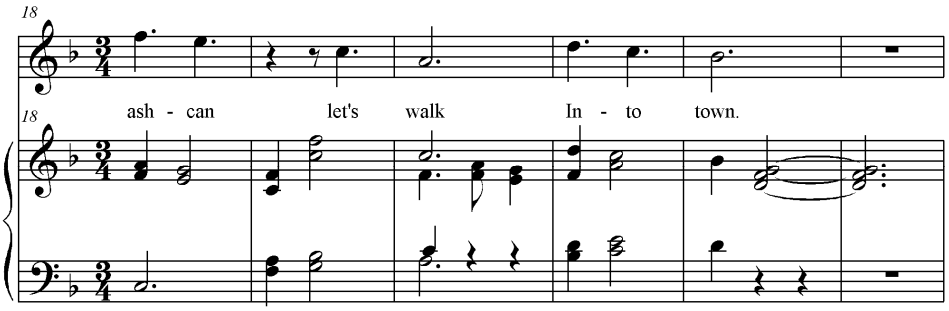



Thomson’s omission of the line “It’s been raining / All night,” eliminates the rhyme of “night” and “lights;” instead Thomson emphasizes the alliteration of “lights” and “let’s.” The word “let’s” reappears twice in the ending lines of the stanza. By eliminating the last line of Koch’s original stanza, “(I mean/A lemon peel),” Thomson sets up the ending [n] in the stressed words, “when,” “moon,” and “town,” to balance this entire section. Even the [n] in the unstressed syllable of “ashcan” provides closure with its ending sound.

[39] The addition of the pitch D to this motive (such as in m. 15) adds an element of pentatonicism to the piece.

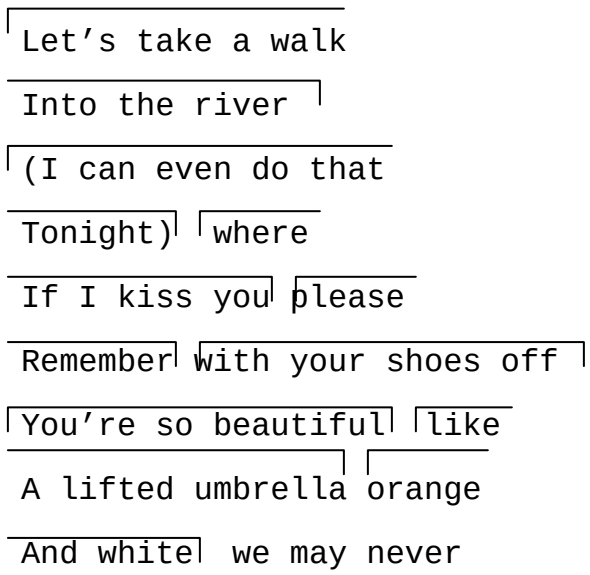
A rhythmic motive, quarter-note/half-note, occurs in the piano in the last two lines of this stanza (mm. 18-19, 21-22). The rhythmic motive appears later in a descending fifth, but here it is in play with the vocal line. The vocal line creates a duple rhythm with dotted-quarter-notes (mm. 18, 19, 21). With this broadening, the voice gracefully walks into town as the poem suggests, while the piano jumps into or around puddles with its wayward quarter-note/half-note rhythm. The word-group, "let's walk / Into town" follows Koch's enjambment.

Figure 4.27: Musical Example, "Let's Take a Walk," mm. 18-22




Koch's poem is divided into four stanzas; however Thomson eliminates almost two of the stanzas. The second and third stanzas end with the same line, "Let's take a walk," Thomson interchanges them and the result is the omission of the entire middle section of the poem.

Figure 4.28: Word-groups, “Let’s Take a Walk,” lines 37-45



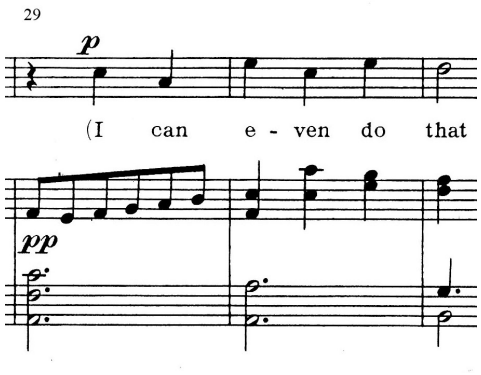

In an anecdote told by Richard Hundley, Thomson added a note, C3, in m. 24 that is published as a measure of rest.[40] Apparently, Thomson preferred a C played here and added it to Mr. Hundley’s score. The C adds a certainty of movement from the dominant to the tonic that begins the second stanza. Mr. Hundley emphasizes that this shows the creative process of Thomson in that he was willing to change things even after a song was published.

The repetition of “Let’s take a walk,” is sung similarly to the first iteration, ascending the second, but with an added lower neighbor tone. But, as the first time outlined the fifth from F4 to C5, here the line ascends from F4 to D5, keeping the harmony moving, whereas the opening line maintained the tonic harmony. The word-group adheres to Koch’s enjambment rather than the line division. Parallel sixths are played in the bass, ascending by step each measure through the phrase, “Let’s take a walk into the river.”

[40] Richard Hundley, interview by the author, August 4, 2006.

Measures 29-30 use the melodic motives from the opening piano line. The vocal phrase is a transposition of the opening melodic motive in the piano (down a third, up a fifth) this time in A minor. The eighth-note motive from m. 3 is played in the upper voice of the piano at m. 29 under the second vocal phrase. Koch set these words, "I can even do that tonight," in parentheses and Thomson creates the parentheses musically by marking these measures *piano* contrasting the *mezzo forte* in the surrounding phrases. The differentiation is recognized in my word-group in Figure 4.27 that ignores the line division.

Figure 4.29: Musical Example, "Let's Take a Walk" mm. 29-30

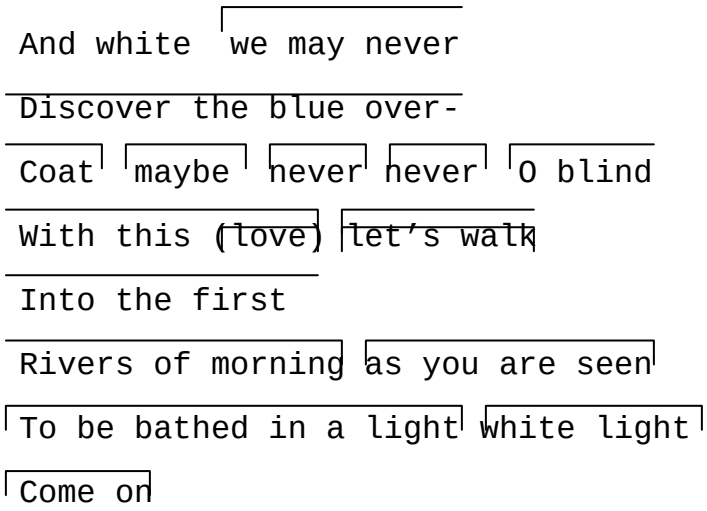



The voice sings the words "kiss you," on a quarter-note/half-note rhythm in m. 35. "Kiss," is the shorter word of the two, but it receives the metrical stress in the poetry, so it is sung on the downbeat. This figure is imitated in the upper voice of the piano in the subsequent measure. My word-groups follow the syntactical meaning of the phrase, "where / If I kiss you," while Thomson's rhythm brings out the words, "kiss you."

The rising bass notes in mm. 34-37, A-B-C♯-D, lead to a contrasting section that develops the key of G major. This development is short, but does exploit a short motive

of a rising third. The phrase “with your shoes,” is sung in quarter-notes, G-A-B♮, and is immediately imitated in the upper voice of the piano (mm. 38-39). The motive is then sung again and doubled in the piano in m. 42 with the words, “like a lifted.” My word-groups that contain this melodic motive are based on Thomson’s vocal phrases.

Figure 4.30: Word-groups, “Let’s Take a Walk,” lines 45-52




The next word-group, recognized as a vocal phrase, “we may never discover the blue over-coat,” is sung in a jumble of intervals that eventually emphasizes the F major triad. All the while the bass line is ascending by step in mostly dotted-half-notes. The bass notes continue their upward motion under the next vocal phrase, which is a series of descending thirds, rising in imitation of each other in excited exclamations, “maybe,” “never,” “never.” Their excited separation creates separate word-groups. The scalar eighth-notes are present under these vocal phrases serving as a connection to earlier

sections of the song. In the voice, the thirds crescendo into the exclamation, “O” on F5 in m. 55. This exclamation is like Koch’s false starts in the poetry; it is a false climax.

The text takes an unexpected turn and the vocal phrase continues, dropping the interval of a seventh on the word “blind.” In the phrase, “O blind / With this (love),” Thomson sets “love” apart in its own measure, which implies the parenthesis that Koch gives it. I have created a single word-group for the word “love” within the larger word-group to reflect this break. A quicker harmonic motion is heard in this phrase as the bass moves in quarter-note rhythms instead of the dotted-half-notes that permeate the piece.

Thomson brings out the repetition of the words, “let’s walk,” which implies a new section of the song. However, a new section is not supported in the harmonies in the piano, which do not cadence but continue on. Recognizing the repetition of “let’s walk,” the phrase is set as a separate word-group. Syntactically, the words belong to the rest of the phrase, “let’s walk / Into the first / Rivers of morning,” and so “let’s walk” becomes a double word-group incorporated into the larger vocal phrase.

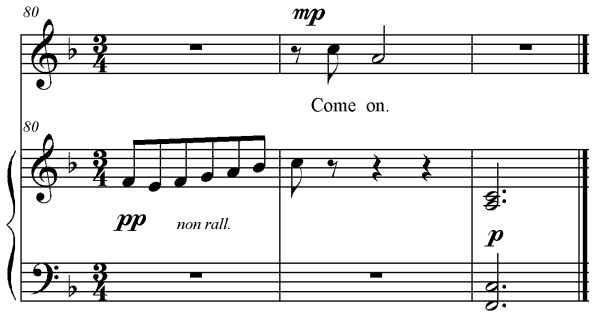
“Into the first,” is sung on a scale from G4 to C5 followed by the words, “rivers of morning.” The voice outlines a C major triad arriving on G5 for the climax of the piece. The climax G becomes the second scale degree leading to F5, the tonic note of the piece. The word “morning,” is sung with a crescendo to *fortissimo* increasing the climax of the piece. Under the held notes of “morning,” the upper voice of the piano plays with the ascending eighth-note motive from the opening of the piece, also playing it in sixteenth-notes.

The next phrase begins on the second beat of the measure, “as you are seen.” Thomson has employed this rhythmic syncopation throughout the piece to set phrases

apart. In m. 29, he used the syncopation and the dynamic marking of *piano* to emphasize the parentheses that Koch uses around the line, "(I can even do that / Tonight)." In the vocal phrase in m. 33, the syncopation emphasizes the surprise of the leap of a sixth and helps the singer attain it. In mm. 52-55 the syncopation brings out the insistence and exclamation of the words, "maybe never never O." A final use of syncopation in the phrase, "white light," (mm. 75-76) sets it apart from the previous phrase and I have set it as a separate word-group in Figure 4.29. The *diminuendo* that begins in m. 76 continues through this phrase even as the voice leaps the octave, F4-F5, on the word "light." It is interesting to note that the first song of the set, "Love Song," contains the downward vocal leap from F5 to F4 in the penultimate phrase.

The voice is meant to fade away on the word "light" as indicated by the *diminuendo*, the *pianissimo* marked in measure 88, and the measure of rest (m. 89) that follows it. The opening eighth-note motive returns following the measure of rest and the voice has the final text of invitation, "Come on" as a closing and the song ends with a tonic chord in the piano.

Figure 4.31: Musical Example, “Let’s Take a Walk,” mm. 80-82




Thomson uses the repetition of small motives to create cohesiveness throughout the piece. These motives are especially useful since Thomson offers no real harmonic progression (the piece never strays far from F major) and instead creates melodic interest with these motives. The repetition of small motives is much like Koch’s own use of repetition in the poem. Where the lines seem not to make sense semantically, Koch supports them with small repetitions in sound or phrases.

## D. "A Prayer to Saint Catherine"

### 1. Poem as Prayer / Prayer as Poem: Poetic Analysis of "Chanson"

**Chanson**
Unpublished
Kenneth Koch

If I am to be preserved from heartache and shyness
By Saint Catherine of Siena,
I am praying to her that she will hear my prayer
And treat me in every way with kindness.

I went to Siena to Saint Catherine's own church--
It is impossible to deny this--
To pray to her to cure me of my heartache and shyness,
Which she can do, because she is a great saint.

Other saints would regard my prayer as foolish--
Saint Nicholas, for example.
He would chuckle, "God helps those who help themselves.
Rouse yourself! Get out there and do something about it!"

Or Saint Joanna. She would say, "It is not shyness
That bothers you. It is sin. Pray to Catherine of Siena."
But that is what I have done.
And that is why I have come here to cure my heartache.

Saint Catherine of Siena,
If this song pleases you, then be good enough to answer
the prayer it contains.
Make the person who sings this song less shy than that
person is,
And give that person some joy in that person's heart.[41]

The most traditional of Koch's poems that Thomson set to music, Koch uses conventional syntax and form to offer a traditional prayer. The poem is written in five stanzas of four lines each. Punctuation is used to enhance the voice of the text and for clarity of meaning.

Saint Catherine was a Tertiary of the Dominican order in the 14th century.[42] She was a mystic and a civic leader in addition to caring for the sick and needy. She was

[41] Koch, "Chanson," typescript, MSS 29A/196/56, Virgil Thomson Papers.
[42] As a Tertiary of the Dominican Order, Saint Catherine was not a nun, but a layperson who took vows of piety, wore the habit, and shared the work and privileges of the Order of St. Dominic. The Order of St. Dominic was founded to preach the Christian gospel. Pierre Mandonnet, "Order of Preachers," *The Catholic Encyclopedia* (New York: Robert Appleton Company, 1911), http://www.newadvent.org/cathen/12354c.htm.

chastised for her charm and lively personality, which could be why the speaker in the poem felt she was the appropriate Saint to relieve him or her of his shyness and heartache.[43] The first stanza presents this problem.

The second stanza describes the speaker's actions, "I went to Siena to Saint Catherine's own church," and explains why he believes that Saint Catherine will cure him: "because she is a great saint."[44] The church referred to, "Saint Catherine's own church," is San Domenico in Siena, from which Saint Catherine is said to have ministered. I speculate that Koch created this poem upon a visit to Siena, inspired by the chapel within San Domenico devoted to Saint Catherine. In fact, Koch was living in nearby Florence in 1957, and it is likely the poem dates from this year.

The third and fourth stanzas turn to the ungracious saints who would think such a prayer was trite or "foolish." Saint Nicholas and Saint Joanna are characterized by their own voices in the poem. Saint Nicholas died in the fourth century, and is commonly associated with Christmas's Santa Claus. The poem encourages this association, the phrase "he would chuckle," makes the reader think of "jolly old Saint Nick" or the "little round belly, / That shook when he laughed, like a bowlful of jelly!" from Clement Moore's *A Visit from St. Nicholas*.[45] Saint Nicholas' fastidiousness is portrayed when he speaks: "God helps those who help themselves. / Rouse yourself! Get out there and do something about it!"

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[43] Kenelm Foster, "Introduction," *I, Catherine: Selected Writings of St. Catherine of Siena*, trans. and ed. Kenelm Foster and Mary Jo Ronayne (London: Collins, 1980), 18. Available online at http://www.drawnbylove.com/.

[44] The speaker within the poem could also be a woman. Male pronouns are used for ease of reading not to indicate gender.

[45] *A Visit From St. Nicholas*, attributed to Clement Moore, was first published anonymously in the Troy, New York *Sentinel*, December 23, 1823. Clement Moore, *A Visit from St. Nicholas* (Boston: The Atlantic Monthly Press, 1921), 7-8.

The fourth stanza describes Saint Joanna, whom the speaker also rejects as an appropriate saint to direct his prayer. Saint Joanna is said to have helped in Jesus' ministry and was one of the women who discovered his body missing from the tomb. Her piety is portrayed in her remarks: "It is not shyness / That bothers you. It is sin. Pray to Catherine of Siena." This statement returns the speaker to the saint of his petition, just as the last stanza echoes the petition of the first.

The final stanza is very much like the Novena Prayer to Saint Catherine:

> O marvelous wonder of the Church, seraphic virgin, Saint Catherine, because of thine extraordinary virtue and the immense good which thou didst accomplish for the Church and society, thou art acclaimed and blessed by all people. O blessed Catherine, turn thy benign countenance towards me, who confident of thy powerful patronage call upon thee with all the ardor of affection and I beg thee to obtain by thy prayers the favors I so ardently desire (mention your request).
>
> Thou wast a victim of charity, who in order to benefit thy neighbor obtained from God the most stupendous miracles and became the joy and the hope of all; thou canst not help but hear the prayers of those who fly to thy heart - that heart which thou didst receive from the Divine Redeemer in a celestial ecstasy.
>
> O seraphic virgin, show once again proof of thy power and of thy flaming charity, so that thy name shall ever be blessed and exalted; grant that we, having experienced thy most efficacious intercession here on earth, may come one day to thank thee in Heaven and enjoy eternal happiness with thee. Amen.[46]

In the final stanza the poet offers the poem as an offering, and voices his request again, "if this song pleases you, then be good enough to answer the prayer it contains." This request parallels the petition in the Novena prayer: "I beg thee to obtain by thy prayers the favors I so ardently desire." Calling his poem a "song" is also self-referent to the title of the poem, "Chanson."

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[46] Francis P. Keough, "Novena Prayer Cards," from the Dominican Shrine of St. Jude (New York, September 29, 1954), reprinted in "Catherine of Siena," *Wikipedia*, http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Catherine_of_Siena (accessed April 20, 2009).

The poem also parallels the Novena Prayer in the line "give that person some joy in that person's heart." In the Novena Prayer, Catherine "became the joy…of all;" in the poem the petitioner requests that joy for himself, which is why he prays to Saint Catherine. The word "heart" is also used in both the poem and the prayer. In the poem, it is the joy represented by Catherine that the petitioner wants in his heart. In the prayer, it is the petitioners and their prayers that "fly" to Catherine's heart.

The relationship the poem creates between the petitioner and the saint creates a relationship between the poem and a prayer. Koch's traditional syntax and form contribute to the poem being interpreted as a formal prayer. The fact that Koch was not Catholic and the sincerity of the poem as a prayer adds veiled irony to speaker's the pleas.

### 2. Musical Analysis of "A Prayer to Saint Catherine"

#### a. Background and Formal Structure

Thomson set Koch's poem "Chanson" in its entirety, but renamed it, "A Prayer to Saint Catherine." This is possibly one of the most popular of Thomson's songs. It has been recorded by numerous artists and is a recital favorite of Frederica von Stade.[47] It is also featured on the PBS website as part of its *Great Performance Series* on American Concert Song as one of Thomson's "true jewels."[48]

The poem, titled "Chanson," is unpublished but Koch's typescript is found in Virgil Thomson's papers at the Yale Library.[49] From the Tommasini interview with Kenneth Koch it appears that Koch encouraged Thomson to set the poem because it was unpublished. The narrative style is different from the other poems of the set. The speaker is described as someone shy, sad, and religious. The religious tone is slightly unusual for a Koch text, although he occasionally mentions saints in his poetry.[50]

Thomson picks up on the religious tones of the text and sets it accordingly. The piano plays one chord in introduction as if giving a pitch to the cantor. Then the voice begins a simple scalar melody, as in chant, over sustained harmonies that change every measure. This section closes in cadential 6/4–5/3 chords.

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[47] See Frederica von Stade's recent recital programs: "Frederica von Stade–Recital" (Long Beach Performing Arts Center, Long Beach, CA, May 9, 2008), http://www.longbeachopera.org/index.php/2008-Season/frederica-von-stade/; Mark Swed, review of concert performance by Frederica von Stade (mezzo-soprano) and Jake Heggie (piano), Broad Stage, Santa Monica, CA, October 11, 2008, "Von Stade Sounds Out the Broad Stage," *Los Angeles Times*, October 13, 2008.

[48] *Thomas Hampson: I Hear America Singing*, PBS website, content by Thomas Hampson and Carla Maria Verdino-Süllwold, http://www.pbs.org/wnet/ihas/composer/thomson.html.

[49] Koch, "Chanson," typescript, MSS 29A/196/56, Virgil Thomson Papers.

[50] An early poem includes the lines, "If I am ever to be deserving of wisdom / May Saint Jules send it to me without delay," and a line similar to the one in "Saint Catherine," "…to those whose songs please him." Koch, in "Early Poems," I/3/1, Kenneth Koch Papers.

The piece divides into an A-B-A' form, though no proper cadence on tonic is heard until the end of the piece, and even then it is not an authentic cadence. The first stanza of the poem creates the A section of the song. It is sung in the scalar chant-like style described above. The B section contains the next three stanzas of the poems. While there are some places that might indicate a division within the section, the strongest closure is the cadential 6/4–5/3 in measure 34, before the last stanza of the poem begins. The A' section imitates A in its brief introduction, this time a note in addition to a chord, before the voice begins the scalar chant-like melody. The accompaniment is more active the second time around.

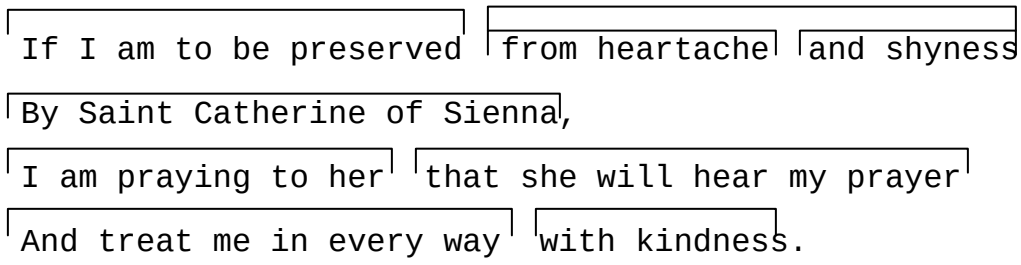
Figure 4.32: Table, Form in "A Prayer to Saint Catherine"

| Formal Section | A | B | A' |
|---|---|---|---|
| Measures | 1-11 | 12-34 | 53-47 |
| Tonal Movement | I-V | I-V | V-I |

**b. Musical Analysis**

I have constructed the following word-groups as larger groupings, allowing for double or triple groupings within them. Within the word-groups meaning is expressed and the poem begins to be parsed much like a sentence diagram; I have based my word-groups on the word stress and pronunciation, which is also reflected in Thomson's setting.

Figure 4.33: Word-groups, "A Prayer to Saint Catherine," lines 1-4




The simple scalar melody that opens the piece not only allows Thomson to imitate early church music but it allows him to assign actual speech rhythms to words. The speech rhythms that are the easiest to spot are on the words, "shyness" and "kindness" (mm. 3, 10), which both have stress on the first syllable and almost rhyme. These words are assigned the rhythm: dotted-quarter-note/eighth-note, which de-emphasizes the unstressed second syllable. However, they both play a part in the melodic trajectory of the line, "shyness" is sung on an ascending step and "kindness" on a descending step.

Thomson makes use of the dactylic meter (stressed-unstressed-unstressed) in "heart-ache and" and "pray-ing to," assigning each foot a triplet rhythm. This slight rhythmic variation gives emotional emphasis to "heartache" and "praying." Thomson also assigns rhythmic variation to the word "Siena," which occurs here, and in the B

section, as an eighth-note/dotted-eighth-note/sixteenth-note, which correctly assigns the amount of stress each syllable receives. A whimsical interpretation is that this rhythm gives the word an Italian lilt. This rhythm gives slightly more time and emphasis to the middle syllable forcing the singer to sing it the way an Italian might say it.

Figure 4.34: Musical Example, “A Prayer to Saint Catherine,” mm. 4-5

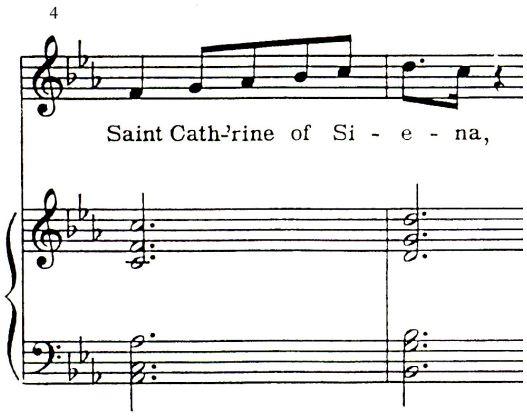


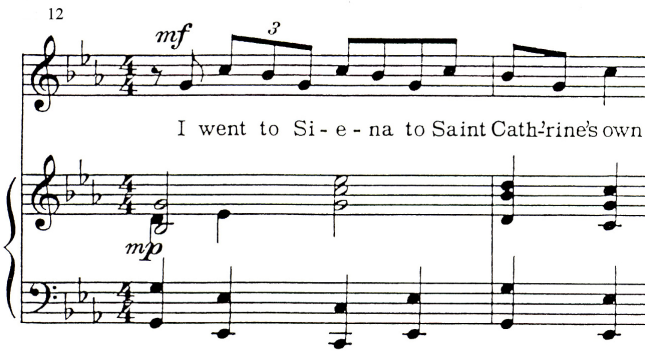

Figure 4.35: Word-groups, “A Prayer to Saint Catherine,” lines 5-8

I went to Siena to Saint Catherine’s own church
(It is impossible to deny this)
To pray to her to cure me of my heartache and shyness,
Which she can do, because she is a great saint.

The voice continues its chant-like stepwise melody in the B section. Here, the word “Siena” is not in the dotted rhythm of its previous appearance, but it contains a different rhythmic detail. The first syllable is sung on the last eighth-note of an eighth-note triplet, with the remainder of the word sung on two straight eighth-notes. This

rhythmic detail emphasizes the stress on the second syllable of the word, which is enhanced by the sung note C5, the highest note of the pattern.

Figure 4.36: Musical Example, "A Prayer to Saint Catherine," m. 12-13



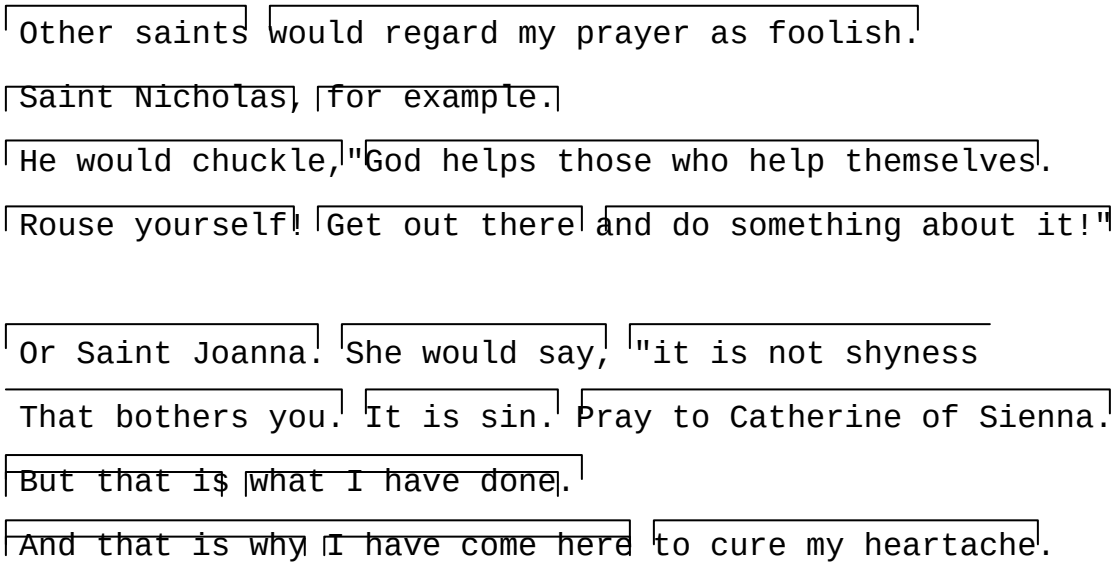

The chordal movement in mm. 12-15 implies a hymn. The bass line under this phrase arpeggiates thirds above and below tonic in octaves, as an organist might add a lower octave using the pedals. These notes are harmonized with mediant and submediant chords that lead to a plagal cadence (IV-I) in measure 14. Here, the parenthesis in the text, "(It is impossible to deny this)," is heard in the vocal line in the decrease in dynamic, from *mezzo forte* to *mezzo piano*, and the rhythm that becomes quicker, as if meant as an aside. Koch's poem does not use the parenthesis found in the song's text, but does include a dash before and after the phrase "it is impossible to deny this," which gives the same aside impression. The voice returns to *mezzo forte* after the aside, although the piano only come up to *mezzo piano* to allow the voice primacy over its chords.

Again, Thomson brings out the words "heartache" and "shyness" by adding counterpoint in m. 16. This variation in texture highlights this portion of text and recalls

the polyphony of the early church. The word-groups reflect the change in texture, while maintaining the integrity of the meaning of the phrase.

The B section is mostly in 4/4 meter, interspersed with measures of 3/4, the meter of the A section. This is possibly a nod to the religiosity of the A section. The A section is a supplication to Saint Catherine in 3/4. The B section is more secular, the singer or poet asks for something for himself and even voices his frustration with other saints, and the meter is 4/4. The focus returns to Saint Catherine in the return of A and the meter returns to 3/4, changing to 4/4 when the focus changes to the poet's worldly wishes.

Figure 4.37: Word-groups, "A Prayer to Saint Catherine," lines 9-16




Both voice and piano build a crescendo in parallel thirds to *forte* in honor of Saint Catherine before decreasing the dynamic to introduce Saint Nicholas. Thomson's sketch of Saint Nicholas is bombastic: his voice resonates in parallel octaves in both hands of

the piano. The voice and the piano crescendo in his words: “Rouse yourself! Get out there and do something about it!”

Saint Joanna portrayed as more civil than Saint Nicholas, but she is equally unhelpful and condescending in her response. Saint Joanna’s response is prefaced by an abrupt decrease in dynamic to *mezzo piano* in the voice and *piano* in the accompaniment (m. 26). The oscillating half-steps in the piano and voice, much like plain-chant, cleverly depict Saint Joanna’s self-important attitude.[51] My word-groups follow the punctuation of Saint Joanna’s words.

The frequent punctuation in these stanzas gives indications of word-groups. For Saint Nicholas’ words, I have created word-groups to reflect his exclamatory punctuation For Saint Joanna’s economical sentences I have created short word-groups. These word-groups follow Thomson’s phrasing in the song where short rests indicate punctuation.

Following the mini-portraits of Saints Nicholas and Joanna, the harmony begins the movement towards the cadential 6/4–5/3 that closes the B section. As the speaker once again achieves his or her own voice, the dynamic increases to *forte* and the vocal line is sung in descending scalar motion, like parts of the opening section (mm. 6-7), and the meter returns to 3/4. The descending line increases the deflated and hopeless feeling of the speaker. The last word of the stanza, “heartache,” is sung to an eighth-note/dotted-quarter-note rhythm. This setting emphasizes the “ache” instead of precisely setting the word for its syllabic stress. The stress on the first syllable still comes through because it is set on the first beat of the measure.

[51] The descending half-step motive is commonly associated with woe or sorrow, so here it could be depicting sin. See Deryck Cooke, *The Language of Music* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1959).

Figure 4.38: Musical Example, “A Prayer to Saint Catherine,” mm. 33-34

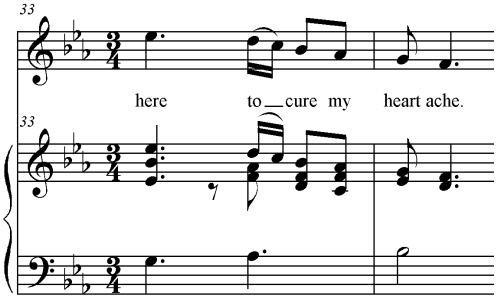



Figure 4.39: Word-groups, “A Prayer to Saint Catherine,” lines 17-20

⌜Saint Catherine of Siena,⌝
⌜If this song pleases you,⌝ ⌜then be good enough⌝
⌜to answer the prayer it contains.⌝
⌜Make the person that sings this song less shy⌝
⌜than that person is,⌝
⌜And give that person some joy⌝ ⌜in that person’s heart⌝.

The return of A is heard in the minute introduction of a note and a chord, causing the ear to almost hear a V-I introduction. The voice enters in an ascending line like the beginning. The accompaniment is not as sparse as in the opening A section, but it moves in similar chordal, church-like harmonies.

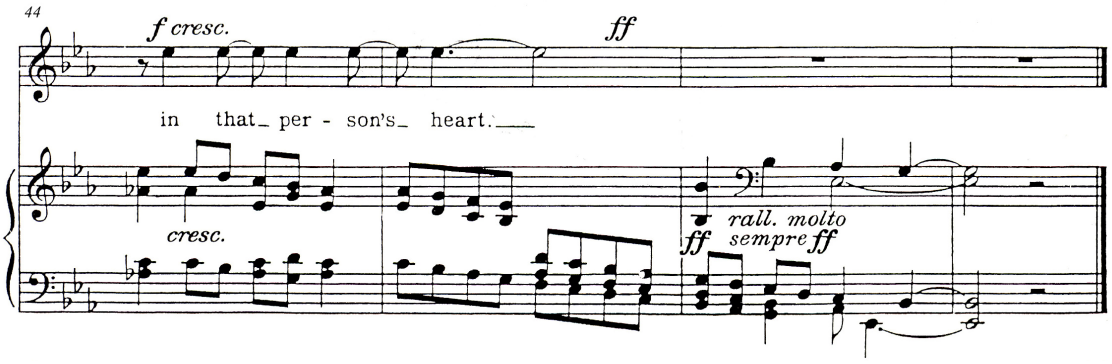
The word-groups of this stanza I have partially parsed together from the short rests in the vocal line where the phrasing indicates a pause. The long word-group, “Make the person that sings this song less shy,” can be divided into smaller groups though Thomson set it as one vocal phrase with varying speech rhythms. It does appear that the

word “shy” represents the end of this group because it is sung on a higher and longer note than the rest of the words of the group (m. 41).

Throughout this section the singer gets stronger and more resolute. The opening lines of supplication are sung at *mezzo piano* and are in 3/4 meter like the opening prayerful section. As the singer starts to sing about himself/herself, even though it is in the third-person, the dynamic increases to *mezzo forte* and the meter changes to 4/4. As the singer approaches the word “joy,” the ultimate gift from Saint Catherine, the line builds in a crescendo to *forte* and “joy” is sung on the highest and longest note of the song (F5). Under the word “joy” the piano plays, still in a chordal texture, but with decoration and in syncopation, which illustrates joy.

The voice picks up on the syncopation for the notes of the last words and the piano begins a descent in parallel 6/3 chords to its final tonic chord. The voice sings the last E-flats in quarter-notes, off by a half-beat, almost like a bell, and increases to *fortissimo* on the last note as an expression of joy and boldness, representing the speaker’s hope and belief in his prayer.

Figure 4.40: Musical Example, “A Prayer to Saint Catherine,” mm. 44-47



## III. Conclusion

The poetic and musical analysis in this chapter sets out to show how both Kenneth Koch and Virgil Thomson assigned importance to the surface level of the language of the poems. In Koch's poetry, the subtle rhymes, assonances, consonances, and evolving sounds allude to more than the poem says directly. Thomson's settings highlight many of these surface features, allowing Koch's poetry to speak for itself. My word-groups in the musical analysis point out how Thomson's settings correspond to and enhance the surface features of the words. Still, at times, Thomson chooses to set the words to music that responds to their metaphorical or direct meaning.

The four songs Thomson chose for *Mostly About Love* represent four different styles of the poet. The first, "To You," is sonnet-like, almost in parody of Elizabeth Barret Browning. The lines are long and lyric. Thomson reflects this lyricism in the rolling triplets that make up the middle section of the song. In "Down at the Docks," Koch offers a cacophony of sounds within octet stanzas. The shorter lines and repetition of consonant sounds Thomson treats with short vocal phrases. However, Thomson takes the title literally and gives the accompaniment flowing eighth-notes imitative of water. "Spring" contains the most obscure poetry of the four. Taking this into consideration, Thomson cuts almost half of the poem and gives it an almost through-composed setting, appropriately taking the words as they come letting them take the setting where they may. Thomson makes the piece coherent by using repetitive motivic devices much like Koch uses repetition in his sounds and words. "Chanson" is the most somber of the poems, but it creates the most popular song of the group. The song is the most narrative of the set, and it speaks honestly to the listener enhanced by Thomson's earnest setting. A song that

reveals such bare vulnerability is bound to become a favorite among singers and audiences.

The purpose of this study is to demonstrate the relationship between words and music through an examination of Thomson's method of text setting using word-groups. The songs in *Mostly About Love* are particularly appropriate for this study because both the poet and the composer are committed to the surface of the language. Thomson's word-groups represent the spoken utterance of a text and it is the importance of the utterance or sound that Koch infuses in his poetry. This commitment to the surface results in songs that preserve the subtleties of the poetry with music fitted precisely to it in a "marriage of words and music."[52]

Anthony Tommasini describes each song in *Mostly About Love* as addressing a different aspect of love: ""Love Song" is a declaration of love, "Down at the Docks" is a discourse on love, "Let's Take a Walk" is an invitation to love, and "A Prayer to St. Catherine" is a supplication for love."[53] Beyond the declarations and the discourses, these songs represent the lovingly handled crafts of poetry and composition that create songs to be lovingly sung and loved by listeners.

[52] Thomson, *Music With Words,* 2.
[53] Tommasini, *Virgil Thomson*, 457.

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