

**Giving Voice to Virginia Woolf: Finding the musical coalescence of
Dominick Argento's *From the Diary of Virginia Woolf***

by

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**Submitted to the Department of Music and Dance
and the Faculty of the Graduate School of the University of Kansas
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of
Doctor of Musical Arts (Voice Performance)**

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I first became interested in the topic of this lecture, “Giving Voice to Virginia Woolf: Finding the musical coalescence of Dominick Argento’s *From the Diary of Virginia Woolf*”, after hearing the opening remarks given at the beginning of a recital in 2001, which included the Woolf song cycle. The presenter, Elissa Guralnick, professor of English, CU-Boulder, stated in her talk “that composers who set text brilliantly have not only a talent for words — (that kind of gift), but also a present to confer upon words — (that kind of gift).”¹ Prof. Guralnick spoke briefly about the Argento cycle before moving on to more extended remarks regarding Robert Schumann’s cycle *Frauenlieben und –leben*, which made up the first half of the recital. This idea of a musical gift given by the composer to the literary artist captured me, particularly an artist like Virginia Woolf. Truly she was a prisoner of her own brilliant mind, and her suicide granted no fulfillment, no closure. Her death did not help make sense of her life, it only created more questions. This is particularly true in light of her entry of Easter Sunday, 1919 in which she asks herself, “What sort of diary should I like mine to be?”² In the same entry, she answers herself with a clear description:

Something...so elastic that it will embrace anything, solemn, slight or beautiful that comes into my mind. I should like it to resemble so deep old desk...in which one flings a mass of odds and ends without looking them through. I should like to come back, after a year or two, and find that the collection had sorted itself and refined itself and coalesced, as such deposits so mysteriously do, into a mould, transparent enough to reflect the light of our life...³

¹ Elissa Guralnick, “A Gift For Words” (Recital presentation, University of Colorado-Boulder, 2001),

1.

² Virginia Woolf, *A Writer’s Diary* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Company, 1954), 13.

³ Ibid.

It is the last part of this entry to which Argento was able to respond with his musical gift. Through his Pulitzer Prize winning composition, he bestowed refinement and coalescence. To a life that ended in suicide, he granted closure. With these ideas in mind, I will present the song cycle *From the Diary of Virginia Woolf*.

My research focused on the following aspects of the work: musical themes that recur throughout, specifically how and when they are used to give the listener insight into the mind of Virginia Woolf; biographical information regarding the life of Woolf, particularly as it applies to the diary entries used in this song cycle; general background information regarding Argento; and the genesis of the cycle itself.

Dominick Argento, born October 27, 1927 to Sicilian immigrants, was the eldest of three children and grew up in a rather non-musical home in York, Pennsylvania. His first encounter with musical composition occurred on Sundays at his parent's restaurant. There was an old piano on which young Dominick explored by finding tunes and picking out chords. This interest was cultivated through trips to the library where he checked out books on orchestration and harmony, as well as biographies of major composers.

When asked by his father what he'd like for his sixteenth birthday, Dominick replied "I really would like to have the old piano moved from the restaurant to the house where I could play it every day."⁴ To his surprise, Argento's parents gave him a baby grand piano and lessons with the piano teacher in town, Harry Link.

⁴ Harriet F. Sigal "The Concert Vocal Works of Dominick Argento: A Performance Analysis". (Ph.D. diss., New York University, 1983), Appendix, 2.

After high school, Argento was drafted and used as a cryptographer. When his experience with the Army was finished in 1947 he decided to make use of his G.I. Bill and attend Peabody University, studying piano with Alexander Sklarevski. Soon after the semester began Argento realized that, as talented as he was, his technique was lacking. The young student also studied composition with Nicholas Nabokov. Eventually, the emphasis shifted from piano performance to composition, and during his final year Nabokov encouraged him to apply for a Fulbright scholarship, which would allow him to study in Florence with Luigi Dallapiccola. The following spring confirmation came that Argento had been awarded the Fulbright, and thus began a history of summers spent studying and composing in this most lovely Italian city. During this year Argento considered what it was he'd really like to do, and realized he had a serious interest in opera and vocal music.

Upon his return to the states he took a college position in Hampton, Virginia and worked on a Master's degree, since his school was only 200 miles away from Peabody in Baltimore. During this time he formed the Hilltop Opera Company with Hugo Weisgall and John Olson. Argento studied composition privately with Weisgall, and at Peabody he worked with Henry Cowell. According to Argento, "He was lovely. Cowell was the exact opposite of Nabokov. Everything went. He never changed a note."⁵ During this time Argento composed his first opera, *Sicilian Limes*, which was also his Master's thesis. Providing such compositional liberation, Cowell

⁵ Sigal, Appendix, 13.

allowed this budding composer to find his own voice, which later on in his life would prove invaluable.

Following completion of his Master's degree in 1954 Argento entered the Eastman School of Music with a fellowship in opera coaching and theory. His wife, soprano Carolyn Bailey, also studied there, taking voice lessons with Julius Huhn and participating in opera workshops. He continued to study composition, now with Bernard Rogers, and he wrote several vocal works during these years, including *The Boor* and *Ode to the West Wind*, which Carolyn premiered. Two more teachers were to work with Argento before his formal education was complete. His final year at Eastman was spent with Howard Hanson, and his summers with Alan Hovhaness. Of the latter's teaching, Argento says:

(He) made me think about what I was doing – not how – that's easy. But, 'are you really trying to communicate with the audience? Are you really trying to say a certain thing? Does it have to do with a vision of what things are or what they are going to be?' That is what Hovhaness did.⁶

Like Nabokov, Hanson encouraged Dominick to apply for a scholarship to study abroad. This time, a Guggenheim scholarship provided the opportunity to return to Italy. Before leaving Argento signed a contract with the publishing company Boosey & Hawkes, and at this point he expected job offers to pour in. This did not happen. A call did come however, from the dean of Eastman in 1958 (while Argento was still in Italy), offering him a teaching position at the University of Minnesota in Minneapolis. The location did not appeal to the Argentos during the

⁶ Sigal, Appendix, 23-24.

early years. “We both detested the city. Besides, the Music Department wasn’t all that hot. I don’t believe we unpacked our bags – we just kept changing what we needed.”⁷ The first year passed and Argento began looking for other jobs – none appeared. He decided to create another opera company like the one he had founded in Baltimore. At the time Minneapolis had no company, and together, with John Olson, he established the Center Opera Company, which would later become Minnesota Opera. Further projects and collaborations followed. A new regional theatre was being formed by Tyrone Guthrie, for which Argento wrote incidental scores. Eventually, he realized how fortunate he was to be in this particular situation, saying to himself:

This is foolish. Where am I going to get this kind of experience and opportunity? My own little Spoleto, my Aldeburgh, plus Tyron Guthrie...I realized I did like it in Minneapolis and so chose to stay, turning down all the job offers that, at one time, I would have given my eye teeth for...The best thing about it is that I can hear myself. I know that if I lived around here (New York) I’d be constantly aware of what is what’s-his-name doing – what is David del Tredici doing – and why isn’t Bernstein playing such-and-such. Out there, there are no other preoccupations – I go cross-country skiing, I watch the Vikings play football, and I just think about the kind of music I want to write.⁸

Argento’s teaching career at the University of Minnesota ended with his retirement in 1997. Most summers were spent composing in Italy, where he and his wife enjoyed a spacious Florentine apartment overlooking the Ponte Vecchio. Each school year was spent teaching; several important compositions were penned in Minneapolis, not the least of which is the song cycle to be performed this evening.

⁷ Ibid, Appendix, 25-26.

⁸ Ibid, Appendix, 27.

In 1971 the Schubert Club, an organization in St. Paul which, among other things, sponsors recitals, asked if Argento would be interested in composing a group of songs to be performed by Beverly Sills the following year. More than willing, he began to consider the text. The specific voice mattered in making the choice, and for Sills he “thought to compose something ‘actressy,’ perhaps a gallery of Shakespearean heroines: Ophelia, Cleopatra, and so on.”⁹ Due to an overloaded schedule Sills cancelled and was eventually replaced with Dame Janet Baker, who would be accompanied by Martin Isepp at the piano. For the English mezzo Argento knew the Shakespearean heroines would not be the correct match. Instead, upon the suggestion of Bob Moore, a colleague from the university’s English department, he began to investigate Virginia Woolf’s novel *The Waves*. Wanting to know more about Woolf, he looked into *A Writer’s Diary*, a compilation of Woolf’s personal writings edited after her death by her husband Leonard, and realized that the diary itself was a better choice than the novel. In his address to the 1976 NATS

Convention in Philadelphia Argento stated:

I believe letters in an author’s output bear a certain resemblance to songs in a composer’s output, and these resemblances are significant. Letters are quasi-private utterances as distinct from public artworks, but they still bear the hallmarks of their author’s style and mode of thinking...since they were designed for private reading, they often afford insights into the author’s mind not always glimpsed in his public works.¹⁰

The diary entries used in the cycle are not officially letters, yet one can easily see the connection between the two. This is especially true when the personal writings

⁹ Dominick Argento. *Catalogue Raisonné As Memoir: A Composer’s Life* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2004), 82.

¹⁰ Dominick Argento, “The Composer and the Singer,” *The NATS Bulletin* 33, (May 1977): 20.

belong to a literary figure with a very **public** body of works. Is the diary entry not, in fact, the most intimate look into the thoughts of an individual? In the same address, Argento further asserts that a parallel phenomenon occurs in music. “Songs represent the composer’s purest utterance, his most private being, unadorned, uncluttered, devoid of posturing, spontaneous, distilled. In short, song gives us the essence of his musical speech – pure and simple.”¹¹ Consequently, he selected eight from thousands of Woolf’s diary entries, placed them in chronological order, and crafted a song cycle exquisite and profound enough to be awarded the Pulitzer Prize in the spring of 1975.

In preparing this work for performance, I was concerned with several factors. The composition is lengthy and requires pacing, and the songs are full of vocal acrobatics that would demand absolute mastery. However, the most intimidating was to portray Virginia Woolf through these songs. Not knowing a great deal about her, I did some research, and with this study came more questions. The deeper I went, the more question there were. The reason for this may lie in the confusion in which Woolf herself existed.

Adeline Virginia Stephen entered this world in 1882 as the third child of Leslie and Julia (née Jackson) Stephen. Each of her parents had lost a spouse before marrying each other, and both brought children from their previous unions. Virginia, who was educated at home, was raised in a literary environment. Her father, an important journalist, was the editor of the *Dictionary of National Biography*, as well as one of its major contributors. By the time he resigned in 1891, “he had established

¹¹ Ibid.

himself as the leading man of letters of England...and had imprinted on the mind of his youngest daughter, Virginia, a heroic impression of literary activity.”¹² At this time Virginia began to write essays and short fiction, which were only the beginning of a lifetime of literary works and study. In 1895 her mother passed away unexpectedly, and this tragic event triggered the first of a series of mental and physical breakdowns. “Her pulse raced—it raced so fast as to be almost unbearable. She became painfully excitable and nervous and then intolerably depressed. She became terrified of people, blushed scarlet if spoken to and was unable to face a stranger in the street.”¹³ This condition only worsened after her father’s death in 1904, and included hallucinations and a compulsion to starve herself.¹⁴

In 1912, she married Leonard Woolf, who was also a writer. Their marriage was not typical, rather a sort of platonic partnership: “they had fierce arguments and violent differences of opinion,”¹⁵ but their dedication to each other is apparent. In her diary she wrote “If it were not for the divine goodness of L. how many times I should be thinking of death.”¹⁶ Early on in their marriage Virginia suffered another bout of mental and physical illness, which was followed by an attempt to take her life with sleeping pills. In his exhaustive study of his wife’s illness, recorded in his own memoirs and diaries, Leonard gives an account of this specific episode:

¹² Phyllis Rose, *Woman of Letter: A Life of Virginia Woolf* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1978), 4.

¹³ Quentin Bell, *Virginia Woolf: A Biography* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1972), 39.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁵ Hermione Lee, *Virginia Woolf* (New York: Vintage Books, 1999), 314.

¹⁶ Virginia Woolf, *The Letters of Virginia Woolf*, vol. 4, ed. Anne Olivier Bell and Andrew McNeillie (New York and London: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1984), 27.

In her third attack, which began in 1914 [in fact 1913], this stage lasted for several months and ended by her falling into a coma for two days. During the depressive stage all her thoughts and emotions were in exact opposite of what they had been in the manic stage. She was in the depths of melancholia and despair; she scarcely spoke; refused to eat; refused to believe that she was ill; and insisted that her condition was due to her own guilt; at the height of this stage she tried to commit suicide.¹⁷

Following this breakdown was a period of remarkable productivity including her first two novels *The Voyage Out* (1915) and *Night and Day* (1919). It is at approximately this same point that she began keeping a diary, and this diary would become her own autobiography. Hermione Lee explains that the diary's uses would "vary: it is a 'barometer' of her feelings, a storehouse for memories, a record of events and encounters, a practice-ground for writing, a commentary on work in progress, and a sedative for agitation, anger, or apprehension."¹⁸ Other novels followed, including *Mrs. Dalloway* (1925), *To the Lighthouse* (1927), and *The Waves* (1931); meanwhile, she continued to struggle with her own well being.

In 1940, the Woolfs relocated to Rodmell, East Sussex, because of the increasing danger of German invasion in London. Auditory reminders of the war were a constant presence as the sounds of bombings and gunfire drifted into the countryside. As the spring of 1941 approached, Leonard's concern for his wife grew, and he pleaded with her to rest. He sensed another episode emerging. His fears were not unfounded; on Friday, the 28th of March, Virginia left the house, having placed a letter for Leonard and one for her sister Vanessa on the mantel. The letter to Leonard read:

¹⁷ Lee, op. cit., 174.

¹⁸ Ibid, 5.

Dearest,
I want to tell you that you have
given me complete happiness. No one
could have done more than you have done.
Please believe that.
But I know that I shall never get over
this: & I am wasting your life. It is this madness.
Nothing anyone says can persuade me.
You can work, & you will be much
better without me. You see I can't
write this even, which shows I am right.
All I want to say is that until this
disease came on we were perfectly
happy. It was all due to you.
No one could have been so good as
you have been. From the very
first day till now.
Everyone knows that.
V.¹⁹

She then walked to a nearby river, picked up a large stone, and placed it in her coat pocket before wading into the river and drowning. It is interesting to note that at approximately the same time, a young man across the ocean in York, PA began his study of music. Whether one sees this as a coincidence or providence, the connection between Argento and Woolf would be cemented 35 years later with the premiere of his song cycle, *From the Diary of Virginia Woolf*.

The entries chosen by Argento for this cycle span more than twenty years in Virginia's adult life. They range in emotion and content, and because of their intimate nature these writings allow a deeper understanding of Woolf, which only a diary could afford. Listeners are able to "see" Virginia on good and bad days and these contrasts are made all the more vivid by Argento's musical setting. It is

¹⁹ Ibid, 747.

apparent that “Virginia Woolf’s texts are clearly the inspiration for both the vocal lines and the accompaniments.”²⁰ The cycle is eclectic. It makes use of 20th century techniques, such as 12-tone rows and the piano’s sympathetic vibrations in response to the singer’s voice, but it also employs Gregorian chant, café tunes of the 1920s, and sentimental melodies of the late 19th century.²¹ Additionally, sections of the work are nearly operatic, which is only fitting, considering Argento’s compositional preferences. Clearly, this piece is meant for the recital hall and not the operatic stage, but its dramatic quality is undeniable and can easily be understood as a biographical portrait of Woolf. “Argento does not require the full apparatus of the stage to probe the human condition...Dramas in miniature, the song cycles, like the operas, are masterpieces of characterization.”²²

Composing in an age of limitless possibilities, Argento stands out as a conservative. While his contemporaries were abandoning tonality and form, he was not afraid to use tertian harmony. In a 1975 interview with Mike Steele of *Musical America*, Argento maintains, “I’ve never had any desire to throw everything out the window and start over. I’ve been branded a conservative by a few people because I salvage what I like of the past. But to me it’s the height of folly to ignore the past

²⁰ Melinda R. Smahey. “The Relationship of the Piano Accompaniments to the Texts and Vocal Lines in Dominick Argento’s *From the Diary of Virginia Woolf*” (D.M.A. diss., University of Missouri, Kansas City, 1997), 2.

²¹ Mike Steele, “Dominick Argento: Musician of the Month,” *HiFi and Musical America* 25 (September 1975): MA-8.

²² Mary Ann Feldman, “Dominick Argento: Minnesota Romantic,” *Minnesota Public Radio Music*, <<http://music.minnesota.publicradio.org/features/0210/argento/songcycles.shtml>>, (consulted 8/18/05).

two thousand years.”²³ Indeed, Argento’s cycle is a successful union of styles, which are combined with the text to give greater clarity to the heroine of the cycle.

From the Diary of Virginia Woolf

“The Diary”

While themes are used throughout the cycle, perhaps they are most influential in the ‘bookend’ songs. In the first, entitled “The Diary”, significant themes are presented which facilitate the listener’s introduction to the world of Virginia Woolf. The opening piano melody begins hesitatingly, through the use of a dotted rhythmic figure, and wanders through several themes that will reappear later both in this song and throughout the cycle. The first, the “contemplation” theme, is present in mm. 1-2. This is immediately followed by the “elastic” theme,²⁴ named for its association with the text “something so elastic.” Each of these themes reinforces a literal concept. The “contemplation” theme evokes the image of a thought being turned over and over in someone’s mind through the use of sequencing techniques. In m. 1 this occurs in a short, four-note melodic figure, which leaps up a third before descending, and again in m. 2, where the unique intervallic shape of the first half of the measure is duplicated in the second half.

²³ Steele, op. cit., 8.

²⁴ Smashey, 30.

Fig. 1 mm. 1-2:

Mosso e pensieroso (♩ = 84 ca.)

Voice

Piano

mp

legato e scorrevole

The “elastic” theme is a clever musical representation of a thought being stretched and then stretched a bit more as its boundaries are explored. Argento accomplishes this musically by spanning the melody over a major seventh and then expanding it further by a major third.

Fig. 2 mm. 3 & 4

poch. tratt. - - - -

poch. tratt. - - - -

The “contemplation” theme then returns at a different pitch level, and the entire effect is one of a woman considering the task she is about to undertake. At this point, Woolf speaks: “What sort of diary should I like mine to be?” Her uncertainty is evinced rhythmically in the stratification of the piano and voice.

Fig. 3 mm.7-10

After this initial vocal phrase another important theme appears, the “contentment” theme.²⁵ It is characterized by its intervallic profile of an ascending major sixth, an ascending major second, then a descending major sixth. The marking *cantabile* (in a singing style) in the piano part, paired with the pedaled arpeggiations in the left hand, further support this idea of contentment.

Fig. 4 mm. 13-16

One last prominent theme is identifiable through its unusual melodic profile. Much like the “contemplation” theme, it avoids any tonal center, and also is associated with the idea of searching for something. This music accompanies the text “I should like it to resemble some deep old desk.” As this theme recurs throughout the cycle it is

²⁵ Smashey, 31.

associated with Woolf's self-assigned task of collecting "odds and ends" from her daily experiences and recording them in her diary.

Fig. 5 mm. 22-26

Other compositional techniques are used which help illustrate the qualities Woolf seeks in order to fulfill her expectations for her diary. She requests that the diary be "something so elastic that it will embrace anything, solemn, slight or beautiful that comes into my mind." Argento grants this request through his entry selections. Of the thousands of excerpts he chose eight that would suit Woolf's demand: something solemn (Hardy's funeral); something slight (Rome); and something beautiful (her parents, Leslie and Julia Stephen). Additionally, the eight entries he selected were chosen "to cover the whole period during which she kept a diary, 1919-1941." He goes on to state,

I wanted a very early one and the final one. The six in between I tried to select to represent approximately equal chronological landmarks, but also keeping in mind a variety of concerns and preoccupations of hers. My deliberate model was *Frauenliebe und Leben* [Eight songs covering a long period in a woman's life].²⁶

²⁶ Letter from Dominick Argento to Patricia Oreskovic, Minneapolis, Minnesota, February 3, 1976.

Argento utilizes traditional harmony throughout the cycle, but perhaps no instance is as poignant as the tonal security which is coupled with the text “to come back after a year or two.” In m. 31 the solid grounding in E major on the downbeat musically illustrates the security that would be provided if Woolf’s wish of finding that her “collection had sorted itself and refined itself and coalesced” were granted.

Fig. 6 mm. 30-32

The musical score for Figure 6 consists of two systems. The first system shows a vocal line on a single staff with the lyrics "like to come" and a piano accompaniment on two staves. The vocal line is marked *p cantabile*. The second system shows the vocal line continuing with the lyrics "back, af - ter a year or two, and" and the piano accompaniment. The tempo marking is *Quasi largo (♩ = 66 ca.)* and the dynamic marking is *p sonoroso*.

The song concludes with an appearance of the “contentment” theme. Although there is an open-ended quality to this cadential gesture, it maintains a level of hope that is rare in this cycle.

Fig. 7 mm. 45-46

The musical score for Figure 7 consists of two systems. The first system shows a vocal line on a single staff with the marking *niente*. The second system shows the vocal line continuing with a long note and the piano accompaniment on two staves. The piano accompaniment is marked *ppp*.

“Anxiety”

This sense of hope is short-lived as the second song, “Anxiety,” opens with relentless agitation. By this point in her life Woolf had seen the beginning and the end of the first World War, and was also a part of a new generation of women who had been granted the right to vote. This dichotomy of positive and negative is present in her writing. “At the end of 1919 and at the start of 1920 she recorded, almost in the same breath, spasms of anxiety and rushes of confidence. On one day she could do no more than make ‘marks’ on the page. Then the deep ‘well of confidence’ would bubble back up.”²⁷ The months immediately preceding the diary entry of October 25, 1920, the text for the second song, were spent summering at Rodmell. The tranquility provided by the summer home, however, was not enough to buoy her spirits. “The stress and concentration of this post-war period let her in for moments of extreme depression. The old feeling of life as a tragic ‘strip of pavement over an abyss’ could bring her down.”²⁸ On the first of October Woolf returned to London for the winter and was plagued with headaches that prevented her from reading or writing anything for five days.²⁹ “Anxiety” highlights her struggle with depression, and creates a vivid picture of her tenuous grasp on stability. Musically this is depicted through rhythmic devices. The meter constantly shifts between duple and triple, and is made all the more precarious by syncopation and hemiola. The use of hemiola for repetitions of the text “Why?” is especially effective. Even after the

²⁷ Lee, *op. cit.*, 429.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 432.

²⁹ Edward Bishop, *A Virginia Woolf Chronology* (Boston: G. K. Gall & Co., 1989), 59.

vocal line has ended, the question “Why?” is echoed in the piano, creating a feeling of desperation.

Fig. 8 mm. 46-47



The driving energy of the accompaniment is fueled by the nearly continuous presence of eighth notes, which suggests a runaway train on which Woolf is merely a passenger. She is helpless as she watches the scenery of her life roll past, usually out of control and frantic.

A distinctive rhythmic figure appears several times in this brief song, a dotted eighth followed by three sixteenth notes, which creates the effect of something falling away or unraveling. Its most prominent occurrence is in m. 35-36, where it precedes the text “But why do I feel this: Now that I say it I don’t feel it.”

The text is divided into two parts: those which convey hysteria and terror, and those which are calm and even mundane. The aforementioned text falls into the latter category, and is forcefully grounded by nine measures of repeated B - flats in the left hand of the piano.

Fig. 9 mm. 49-58

The image displays two systems of musical notation. The first system (mm. 49-54) features a vocal line in treble clef with lyrics "The fire burns;" and a piano accompaniment in grand staff. The piano part includes markings for *mf*, *sp*, *sempre stacc.*, and *(sp)*. The second system (mm. 55-58) features a vocal line with lyrics "we are going to hear the Beggar's Op'ra." and a piano accompaniment. The piano part includes markings for *poco a poco cresc.* and *f*.

The effect is one of trying to emit a facade of calm while every internal instinct is struggling frantically to maintain control. Inevitably, these efforts fall apart as the next section explodes in dramatic fashion. Incidentally, this climax is also one of two sections in which the vocal line is not doubled in the piano, the other being the final utterances of the question "Why?"

The vocal line is mostly syllabically and changes direction often. This is especially true for the text that falls into the "terror" category. These two melodic features, combined with the sudden shifts in mood and meter, allow listeners to

glimpse the painful existence that Virginia Woolf bore for the majority of her adult life.

“Fancy”

In the early weeks of 1927 Virginia finished her novel *To the Lighthouse*, and recorded her impressions of it in her diary on January 14. “What I feel is that it is a hard muscular book, which at this age proves that I have something in me. It has not run out and gone flabby.”³⁰ Her sentiments were echoed by Leonard, who considered it her best book and a “masterpiece.”³¹ Perhaps this affirmation inspired her entry of February 21 in which she poses the question, “Why not invent a new kind of play?”³² This is the subject of Argento’s third song, “Fancy.” Virginia’s play is a series of several two-word phrases which contain a noun and a verb. It is possible that her economic style is influenced by the writings of her contemporary, e. e. cummings. She would certainly have been aware of his work. The end of this entry, which Argento does not include in his musical setting, designates the shape she would like: “Away from facts, free; yet concentrated; prose yet poetry; a novel and a play.”³³ As always, Argento complies with her request by supplying the set, lighting, costumes, etc. to her script through his music.

Her creative optimism is heralded in fanfare fashion with ceremonial, ascending dotted figures in the piano.

³⁰ Virginia Woolf, *A Writer’s Diary* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Company, 1954), 102.

³¹ Ibid.

³² Ibid, 103.

³³ Ibid.

Fig. 10 mm. 1-2

Allegretto capriccioso (♩ = 132) *poco rall*

f > Why not in - vent *poco rall*

f-like a fanfare *sfz* *mp*

Specific accompanimental figures coordinate with the different personnel of the drama. The woman receives an elegant and feminine arpeggiated triplet pattern. In comparison, the man is given one that is simplistic, employing clumsy open fifths, and marked with tenuto. It enters prematurely, and cuts short the female character's monologue. Even the organ is represented, with expansive block chords.

Fig. 11 mm 8-10

The musical score consists of three measures. The first measure is marked *Adagio* (♩ = 88) with dynamics *mp* and *-dolce*. The second measure is marked *Andante* (♩ = 104) with dynamics *mf* and *-deciso*. The third measure is marked *Adagietto* (♩ = 96) with dynamic *f*. The vocal line has lyrics: "Wom-an thinks. He does. Or-gan plays." The piano accompaniment includes triplets in the first measure, *sub. mf* in the second, and *f sonorous* in the third. There are also markings for *arco* and *pizz.* in the piano part.

Incidentally, the dotted figure, which is most pronounced in the measure referring to the organ, foreshadows its use in the next song, “Hardy’s Funeral”.

A fourth character, the night, is given its own special accompaniment, and its vocal line is marked *dolcissimo* (very sweet). This is followed by a closed-mouth hum, further indicating its specialness. Argento reserves the use of textless vocal lines, such as humming for Woolf’s moments of sincere happiness.

What began as an exercise in writing and developed into a moment of contentment ends in melancholy. Again stratifying the voice and the piano, Argento constructs a literal “miss” between these two components, and further colors the situation by marking the vocal part *triste* (sad).

“Hardy’s Funeral”

In similar fashion, Argento builds the scene of the next song, “Hardy’s Funeral,” through several devices, most prominently featured in the piano. The opening melody in the piano, marked *come un’ intonazione* (like an intonation), resembles Gregorian chant, as both hands of the piano move in parallel octaves.

atmosphere. Added to these is a repetitive rhythmic figure which occurs in both the vocal line and the piano. The pattern of a short note followed by a dotted, longer one is the inverse of the rhythm typical in a French overture, yet it still implies a procession full of pomposity and appropriate self-importance. It is evident from the text that Woolf does not subscribe to the solemnity of this moment. She freely admits her thoughts wander to things such as a letter she has just received and a recent lecture she attended. When she does describe the actual events of the funeral, it is always with a satirical tongue. These descriptions are commonly paired with the dotted rhythms. Having grown up in the late Victorian period,

the conception of women relied heavily on the idea that moral and spiritual matters were the province of women and that however debased and brutal men might become...women were free – indeed required – to...remain the embodiments of moral perfection. A woman was expected to live out an imitation of Christ, sacrificing her own desires to the needs of her husband and children.³⁴

For a woman such as Virginia, this was not only a comical expectation, it was also impossible, because “becoming an artist involved the rejection of this powerful model of femininity.”³⁵ Cued by certain words which describe the scene, Argento supplies the musical context, which dresses this song in a cloak of farce, not unlike an opera buffa. Markings in the vocal line, such as *misterioso* (in a mysterious manner), paired with the text “like a stage coffin” add to the overly dramatic sentiment of the scenario. When describing the bishop, Virginia points out his “polished shiny nose” and “suspects the rapt spectacled young priest of being a humbug” – an imposter.

³⁴ Rose, op. cit., 157.

³⁵ Ibid, 158.

Rather than admonishing Woolf for her blasphemous stance, Argento becomes her compatriot, and gives her a musical megaphone with which to tell the world of her radical rebellion. The climax of Woolf and Argento's collaboration is the repetition of the opening piano figure - the *intonazione* - in the vocal line, which is coupled with the text "in sure and certain hope of immortality." Perhaps this phrase was part of the ceremony or the liturgy. Whatever its origin, it becomes the climax of Virginia's satire, which is then carried on by the piano part, which is marked *eroico* (heroic).

Realizing her self-indulgence, she admits that her behavior is "perhaps melodramatic." At this point she turns again to introspection as she contemplates her own death. Once again, as in "Fancy," a moment of amusement is displaced with melancholy as she senses "the futility of it all."

"Rome"

In May of 1935, Leonard and Virginia toured Europe on holiday with stops in Holland, Germany, Italy and France. With anti-Semitic tendencies growing stronger in Germany, it seems in retrospect a reckless and dangerous diversion. Hermione Lee suspects "the journey to Germany was made so that Leonard could inform himself at first hand about the situation."³⁶ Fortunately, their time in Germany transpired uneventfully and on May 13, Virginia found herself recording her impressions of Rome, which constitute the text of the fifth song. More than any of the other entries, this one represents the "odds and ends" that Virginia predicted would become the bricks to the mortar of her diary. Obliging, the "desk" theme makes several

³⁶ Lee, op. cit., 668.

appearances, two of which are distinct. In describing Rome Woolf uses fragmented phrases in pastiche to create the scene: “ladies in bright coats with white hats”; “old man who haunts the Greco”; “some very poor black wispy women.” In m. 21, at Woolf’s command of “music”, the “desk” theme is heard in the piano, disguised as a mandolin, to remind the listeners that these are the odds and ends which have been flung into the desk – that is, her diary.

Fig. 12 mm. 21-25

The musical score for measures 21-25 consists of two systems. The first system shows the piano accompaniment with a mandolin-like texture, marked 'P quasi un mandolino'. The vocal line begins with the lyrics 'Music...'. The second system shows the piano accompaniment continuing with the same texture, and the vocal line with the lyrics 'Look out and see peo-ple...'. The score includes dynamic markings such as 'p' and 'mp', and tempo markings like 'a tempo' and 'sempre simile'. There are also numerical markings '6' and '3' indicating specific rhythmic or melodic patterns.

It is heard again at the dynamic, *fortissimo* climax in mm. 39-43, which is paired with a reduction in tempo as well as a marking of *pesante* (heavy). All of these elements draw attention to the theme and give it importance. The song closes with a reference to a letter sent from the British Prime Minister’s office, proffering a recommendation for the Companion of Honour, which she declines.³⁷ Her refusal might be surprising; after all the Order consists of the Sovereign, and 65 ordinary members, and is conferred upon men and women for recognized service of national importance.³⁸

³⁷ Bishop, op. cit., 175.

³⁸ www.royal.gov.uk/output/Page494.asp (consulted 10/17/05)

Nonetheless, Woolf refuses; in fact, she refused three times. Perhaps the reasons are found in her essay published in *The Forum* in March of 1929:

The history of England is the history of the male line, not the female. Of our fathers we know always some fact, some distinction...But what of our mothers, our grandmothers, our great-grandmothers, what remains?...We know nothing of them except their names and the dates of their marriages and the number of children they bore.³⁹

She elaborates further to explain the dearth of writings by British women.

Law and custom were of course largely responsible for these strange intermissions of silence and speech. When a woman was liable, as she was in the 15th century, to be beaten and flung about the room if she did not marry the man of her parents' choice, the spiritual atmosphere was not favourable to the production of works of art. When she was married without her own consent to a man who thereupon became her lord and master...it is likely she had little time for writing, and less encouragement.⁴⁰

Feeling as she did, it would be impossible for her to accept such an award from a country that she felt had smothered the efforts of its female writers.

“War”

The last three songs can be understood as a group that combines to form a *scena*, which depicts the final chapter of Virginia's life. Song number six, “War,” is a musical depiction of the Battle of Britain, which was being fought in the skies over her Rodmell cottage.⁴¹ With the threat of German soldiers marching into England, Leonard and Virginia made plans for a double suicide. A 350 page “arrest list” or “black list” had been compiled by the Gestapo in preparation for the planned invasion of July 1940. “On this list, along side many of their friends and acquaintances, were

³⁹ Virginia Woolf, *Women and Writing* (London: The Women's Press, 1979), 44.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 45.

⁴¹ Rose, *op. cit.*, 226.

‘Leonard Woolf, *Schriftsteller* (male writer)’,...and ‘Virginia Woolf, *Schriftstellerin* (female writer)’.⁴² The Woolfs had secured lethal amounts of morphine from Adrian Stephen, Virginia’s brother, who had been working as an army psychiatrist.⁴³

Argento’s treatment of this diary entry consists of 20th century compositional techniques, including an unbarred, free form, as well as a depressed sustaining pedal that picks up undertones and sympathetic vibrations.⁴⁴ These choices produce a musical effect that compliments and intensifies Woolf’s thoughts, fears, and frustrations. On June 22, she writes:

This, I thought yesterday, may be my last walk...the war – our waiting while the knives sharpen for the operation – has taken the outer wall of security. No echo comes back. I have no surroundings...Those familiar circumvolutions – those standards – which have for so many years given back an echo and so thickened my identity are all wide and wild as the desert now. I mean, there is no “autumn,” no winter. We pour to the edge of a precipice...and then? I can’t conceive that there will be a 27th June 1941.⁴⁵

The conditions associated with the war can be connected with Virginia’s increasing struggle with life. It is not farfetched to believe that she was at war for most of her life as she dealt with her physical and mental maladies.

The piano is devoid of any melodic role in this song and exists solely as a sound effect. Two figures are used repeatedly and each represents a specific idea. First, there are numerous occurrences of rapid-fire repetitions of a singular note, evocative of gunfire or some type of battle-related sound effect.

⁴² Lee, op. cit., 718.

⁴³ Ibid.

⁴⁴ Dominick Argento, *From the Diary of Virginia Woolf*, (New York, Boosey and Hawkes, Inc., 1975.)

⁴⁵ Woolf, *A Writer’s Diary*, 324-25.

Fig.13 pg. 25

VI. WAR (June, 1940)

Rubato e grave, quasi improvvisato
mp con stanchezza
(♩ = 84)

This, I thought yes - ter - day, _____

sempre colla parte *(alternando le mani)*

mf (♩ = 108) *rall.* - - - - -

*Ped.** - - - - -

_____ may be my last walk... _____

mp (♩ = 84)

8va *p* 3 3 3

(♩ = 108) *rall.* - - - - -

p This, I thought yes - ter - day, _____ may

pp (♩ = 84)

mp 3 3 3 *p*

rall. sim.

* Keep sustaining pedal depressed as indicated throughout to pick up undertones and sympathetic vibrations.

The other is the exclusive use of the pitches g# and c#, whose dominant/tonic relationship is associated with the finality of war.

Fig. 14 pg. 27

27

molto cresc. ed accel.

(♩ = 84) *p* the out - er wall *f* of - se - cu - ri - ty (♩ = 108)

p *mf* *rall.*

niente *dolciss.* *p* No e - cho comes back. No e - (senza accel.)

mp *rall.*

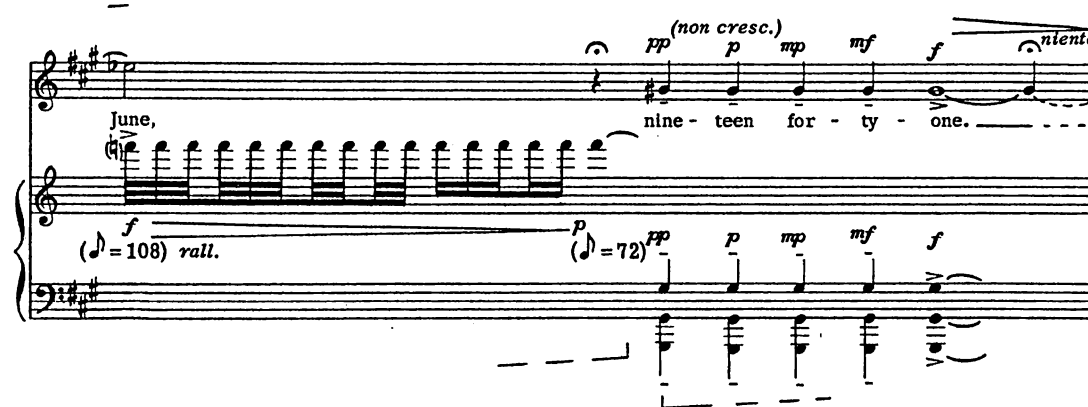
mp *rall.*

p - cho comes back. *mp* *rall.*

Occasionally the *g#* is used by itself, creating the effect of a drone or a clock. In her autobiographical *Reminiscences*, Virginia speaks of the perpetual “ticking of a vast clock” and warns “that some day it would cease for all of us.”⁴⁶

Because of its association with the dominant the *g#* signifies that this is not the end, but that it is inevitably approaching.

Fig 15 pg. 30 (1941)



The vocal line is a series of pseudo-vocalizations that reflect no direction or shape. Rather, they depict with agonizing accuracy the condition of a woman plagued with a lifetime of illness - a condition only further complicated by the war. Worth noting is Argento’s setting of Woolf’s question, “...and then?” In contrast to the perfect fourth, which signifies “the war,” Argento chooses a diminished fifth for her inquiry. Again, the composer validates her fears of what is to come by leaving her question unanswered until the final moments of the cycle.

⁴⁶ Virginia Woolf, *Moments of Being* (New York: Harcourt, Inc. 1985), 35.

“Parents”

Without pause the cycle moves into the seventh song, “Parents.” Two iterations of the pitch $g\#$ in the final moments of the previous song serve as connective tissue; it becomes the mediant of the tonal center of the next song, which is largely in E major. The repetitions of this note transport Virginia back to her childhood.

Virginia’s childhood was changed forever by a single event – her mother’s death. Her mother was the epitome of beauty and grace, both spiritually and physically. She was respected and loved by all that knew her, and adored by her children. “Most of Virginia’s early memories are of St. Ives, warm and sensual memories, full of light and color, and the place is intimately connected in her imagination with her mother, who was the altarpiece, the center of the cathedral space of her childhood.”⁴⁷ Julia’s infallible image was only strengthened after her death, as it stood in stark contrast to the miserable disposition adopted by her husband after her passing. He began to emerge “as a full-fledged villain...Julia (had been) too concerned with his pleasure and his health and had...died of fatigue at 49.”⁴⁸ Stella, the eldest of Julia’s daughters from her first marriage, assumed her mother’s responsibilities until her own premature death two years later, at the age of 28. Leslie’s foul attitude and selfish behavior were then directed at Vanessa, Virginia’s older sister, who came to resent them. Fortunately Virginia inherited her father’s love

⁴⁷ Rose, *op. cit.*, 9. The Stephen family spent their summer holidays in St. Ives, Cornwall from 1882-1894.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 18.

of literature and with this common ground, the two were able to make a connection. Phyllis Rose in her book *Woman of Letters: A Life of Virginia Woolf*, explains that Woolf's "education was largely in the hands of her father. From her mid-teens, he allowed her the freedom of his excellent library and discussed with her whatever she read, training her in the fearless, accurate, and pithy expression of her responses to books."⁴⁹ She was grateful for this gift, since at the turn of the 20th century few women were given an education. However, Rose explains that this gift was one-dimensional:

Leslie, whose dedication to intellect she aspired to copy, seemed to thrust her back into the feminine seclusion of a tea-party world, pointing the path to achievement, then shutting the door in her face. While her brothers were free to make lives for themselves, her life seemed significant only insofar as she could minister to the needs of men, chiefly those of her father.⁵⁰

Argento chose to present Woolf's adolescent vision of her parents by selecting a diary entry in which Virginia writes, "How beautiful they were."⁵¹ In *Reminiscences*, which was addressed to Vanessa's first child, Julian, Woolf explains that:

the relationship between your grandfather and mother was, as the saying is, perfect, nor would I for a moment dispute that...each of these much tried and by no means easy-going people found in the other the highest and most perfect harmony which their natures could respond to. Beautiful often, even to our eyes, were their gestures, their glances of pure and unutterable delight in each other.⁵²

It is this sentiment that Argento expresses musically in the penultimate song of the cycle.

⁴⁹ Ibid., 35.

⁵⁰ Ibid., 37.

⁵¹ Woolf, *A Writer's Diary*, 346.

⁵² Woolf, *Moments of Being*, 37.

By the time Virginia penned this entry on December 22, 1940, bombs had destroyed the Woolf's home at Mecklenburgh Square in London and meat, sugar and petrol were scarce.⁵³ In light of her immediate environment, such a recollection must have given Virginia some sense of security, even if it was tenuous. The tonality of this song wavers in its fragile grasp of E major, a musical metaphor of the contrast between security and complication. Measures 1-5 provide a relatively stable environment and establish the stepwise movements of the bass line associated specifically with the memory of her parents.

Fig. 16 mm. 1-5

Largo ed affettuoso (♩ = 69 ca.)
pp
 How beau-ti - ful - they were, those old

quasi pizzicato

Più mosso (♩ = 44)
p
 peo - ple - I mean fa - ther and moth - er - how

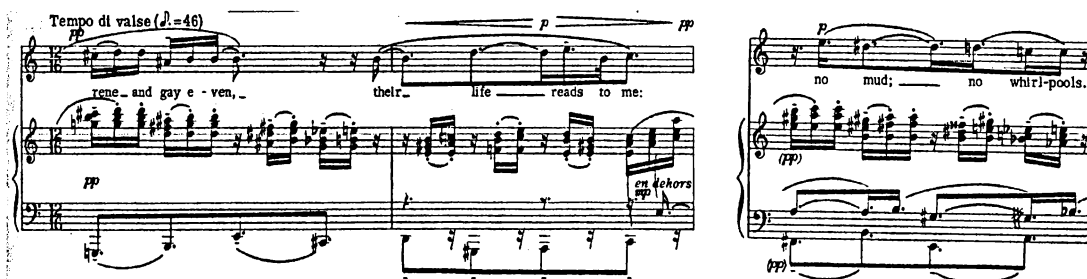
poch. cresc.

poch. dim. e rall.
p
 sim - ple, how clear, how un - troub - led.

⁵³ Bishop, op. cit., 215, 217.

Virginia’s description of her parents as “untroubled” is a reference to her own troubled mind, and this is reflected in the harmonic instability of both the voice and piano. As her thoughts turn to her father’s memoirs and old letters the piano line becomes more romantic, with lush texture and sweeping arpeggiations. Eventually Woolf’s memories carry her further into the past as the meter changes in m. 23 from duple to triple and the song becomes a waltz. Again, Virginia’s instability is contrasted with the simplicity of her parents’ existence in mm. 25-26. Her description of their lives as devoid of “mud” and “whirlpools” is really a reflection of her own life, which is plagued by these things. Argento addresses this idea musically by setting the words “mud” and “whirlpools” in duple time, against the triplet waltz pattern of the piano.

Fig. 17 mm.23-25



In this entry mention is made of “the little hum and song of the nursery.” The nursery of Virginia’s earliest years was a place of childhood games and security. “She remembered particularly when (her mother) came into the nursery to say goodnight, her hand shading a candle.”⁵⁴ Like the untexted hum of the second song, which gives reverence to the night, Argento’s use of the single syllable “O,” set with

⁵⁴ Rose, op. cit., 10.

a lyrical, upward-sweeping melody, highlights the special memory of the nursery. This beautiful recollection is violently interrupted by the rapid-fire, single-note repetition of the previous song. Immediately, the once full-bodied texture of the piano becomes sparse and barren, and reality comes racing back. All beauty is gone and Virginia is left to struggle with the consequences of her remembrances. For her own sake she decides to abort her “child’s vision” so as to avoid the introspection which only aggravates her mental well-being. In the end, her desire to remember momentarily gets the better of her as the opening melody of the song is heard. She begins to embrace the idea, but stops again. Like the previous transition, no break is made between the seventh and the eighth and final song.

“Last Entry”

The text for the last song of this cycle was written less than three weeks before Woolf’s death. Its words are not those of a woman gone mad, but of a woman who realizes that the end is near and “insists upon spending (her) time to the best advantage.”⁵⁵ Hermione Lee, who has received critical acclaim for her fresh and richly layered portrait of Woolf’s life, rejects the label of insanity often given to Virginia and vehemently asserts

Virginia Woolf was a sane woman who had an illness. She was often a patient, but she was not a victim. She was not weak, or hysterical, or self-deluding, or guilty, or oppressed. On the contrary, she was a person of exceptional courage, intelligence, and stoicism, who made the best use she could, and came to the deepest understanding possible to her, of her own condition. She endured, periodically, great agony of mind and severe physical pain, with remarkably little self-pity.⁵⁶

⁵⁵ Woolf, *A Writer’s Diary*, 351.

⁵⁶ Lee, *op. cit.*, 171

It is this sense of strength that is most prevalent in the final song, “Last Entry;” this is supported by Argento’s marking of *risoluto ed appassionato* (resolute and passionately). As usual she refuses herself introspection, knowing that it will only lead to greater anguish, and commands herself to “observe.” Through observation she is able to maintain an objective distance and therefore allow this information to become “serviceable” – hopefully.

Occupation also becomes her ally, and Argento repeats this command both verbally and musically. At this point the composer reveals his final and most meaningful gift to our heroine – a complete recollection of all the musical ideas presented in the cycle. The first to appear is a short section of “Anxiety”, which is cleverly blended into the repetition of “occupation is essential” in mm. 25-26. Argento takes some liberty by repeating certain portions of Woolf’s entries. In the case of this final song, repetitions of the word “observe” become a command so that Woolf might see the refined coalescence that has been achieved through this musical journey. Again, we hear the familiar open fifths of “Hardy’s Funeral” and the unmistakable tango of “Rome.” Poignantly, the haunting melody of “Parents” returns, followed by the gender-themed melodies of Woolf’s “new kind of play” in “Fancy”. Finally, the relentless chime of “War” signals the end is near, but Argento’s gift is not yet complete. As Woolf distracts herself with that evening’s dinner preparation, subtle musical clues guide Virginia to the realization that her wish has come to fruition. In mm. 48-51, the “contentment” theme is heard, replicating exactly its original appearance in “The Diary.”

Fig. 16 mm. 48-51

The dotted, descending figure also heard in the first song is present, and acts as a gentle musical reminder of her primary goal in writing the diary.

Fig. 17 mm. 28-35 (song 1) & mm. 53-58 (song 8)

28-35:

53-58:

had-dock by writ-ing them down... by writ-ing them down... by writ- ing them... by writ- ing... (... to come rall.)

As in the first song, the “contentment” theme occurs in the final measures of the cycle, but this time with closure. By omitting the last portion of this theme, the descending major sixth, Argento conveys the sense that something has indeed been accomplished.

Fig 18 mm. 45-46 (song 1) & mm. 73-74 (song 8)

45-46:

niente

73-74:

niente

It becomes clear that her writings **have** produced a mould that will reflect the light of **her** life.

Dominick Argento considers the voice to be “the original instrument, the one for which and with which music was invented.”⁵⁷ He is attracted by its vulnerability and fascinated by the “‘persona’ that each individual voice creates, (the) combination of a unique instrument with a unique personality, technique and artistry.”⁵⁸ By analyzing and studying his song cycle *From the Diary of Virginia Woolf*, one is also able to look at the “persona” of Virginia Woolf. Argento’s presentation of this woman is graciously honest and allows listeners to see her in a variety of lights, on good days as well as bad ones. Besides conferring upon her the gift of musical coalescence, he also gives her the gift of humanity by removing from her the description with which she is so often associated: insane. By providing a musical biography for the audience, he makes Virginia accessible, and someone to whom they can relate.

Together, Argento and Woolf confer upon their audience a gift. By allowing us to become a part of the journey of this cycle, they give to us some of the coalescence that will reflect the light of our own lives.

⁵⁷ Dominick Argento, “The Composer and the Singer,” *The NATS Bulletin* 33, (May 1977): 19.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*

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