

Songs and Silences to Poems by Wallace Stevens

For mezzo soprano and piano

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Songs and Silences to Poems by Wallace Stevens

I do not know which to prefer,
The beauty of inflections
Or the beauty of innuendoes,
The blackbird whistling
Or just after.

--"Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Blackbird"

Six Significant Landscapes no. 1

An old man sits
In the shadow of a pine tree
In China.
He sees larkspur,
Blue and white,
At the edge of the shadow,
Move in the wind.
His beard moves in the wind.
The pine tree moves in the wind.
Thus water flows
Over weeds.

Tattoo

The light is like a spider.
It crawls over the water.
It crawls over the edges of the snow.
It crawls under your eyelids
And spreads its webs there--
Its two webs.

The webs of your eyes
Are fastened
To the flesh and bones of you
As to rafters of grass.

There are filaments of your eyes
On the surface of the water
And in the edges of the snow.

The Place of the Solitaires

Let the place of the solitaires
Be a place of perpetual undulation.

Whether it be in mid-sea
On the dark, green water-wheel,
Or on the beaches,
There must be no cessation
Of motion, or of the noise of motion,
The renewal of noise
And manifold continuation;

And, most, of the motion of thought
And its restless iteration,

In the place of the solitaires,
Which is to be a place of perpetual undulation.

The Valley Candle

My candle burned alone in an immense valley.
Beams of the huge night converged upon it,
Until the wind blew.
The beams of the huge night
Converged upon its image,
Until the wind blew.

Fabliau of Florida

Barque of phosphor
On the palmy beach,

Move outward into heaven,
Into the alabasters
And night blues.

Foam and cloud are one.
Sultry moon-monsters
Are dissolving.

Fill your black hull
With white moonlight.

There will never be an end
To this droning of the surf.

Gubbinal

That strange flower, the sun,
Is just what you say.
Have it your way.

The world is ugly,
And the people are sad.

That tuft of jungle feathers,
That animal eye,
Is just what you say.

That savage of fire,
That seed,
Have it your way.

The world is ugly,
And the people are sad.

Primordia no. 5

The birch trees draw up whiteness from the ground.
In the swamps, bushes draw up dark red,
Or yellow.
O boatman,
What are you drawing up from the rain-pointed water?
O boatman,
What are you drawing up from the rain-pointed water?
Are you two boatmen
Different from each other?

The Disillusionment of Ten O' Clock

The houses are haunted
By white night-gowns.
None are green,
Or purple with green rings,
Or green with yellow rings,
Or yellow with blue rings.
None of them are strange,
With socks of lace
And beaded ceintures.
People are not going
To dream of baboons and periwinkles.
Only, here and there, an old sailor,
Drunk and asleep in his boots,
Catches tigers
In red weather.

Songs and Silences to Poems by Wallace Stevens was composed in connection with a conference, "Absence, Silence, and Ellipsis in Words and Music," held by the International Association of Word and Music Studies (WMA) in London in 2013. Why Stevens? The poems (chosen partly, I confess, because they are out of copyright) belong to the early phase of the poet's career. The works from this phase typically set up a stark opposition between a banal, mundane reality and a sensuous, exotic, and fanciful imagination. What makes this opposition powerful rather than merely glaring is the constant intimation that the world without imagination is not banal for social or accidental reasons, but banal in essence. The unimagined world is in and of itself a void. Stevens's regular word for its condition is "poverty." Modernity, whose only wealth for Stevens was an abundance of lost illusions, made the knowledge of this poverty inescapable, however much we may wish to hide it from ourselves. And it is this surplus absence that compels the products of imagination to attain the force of surplus presence. The music of *Songs and Silences* seeks to unveil the haunting traces of this underlying emptiness--absence, silence, and ellipsis all in one--in ways that allow the paradoxical fullness of imagined things to find a voice.

Duration: about 18 minutes.

Significant Landscape I

♩ = 88

The first system of the musical score is in 4/4 time with a key signature of one flat (B-flat). It consists of three measures. The vocal line (treble clef) contains whole rests in all three measures. The piano accompaniment (grand staff) begins with a mezzo-piano (*mp*) dynamic. The right hand features a rhythmic pattern of eighth notes, with a triplet of eighth notes in the third measure. The left hand plays a single whole note in the first measure, which is tied to the next measure.

The second system continues the piece and includes the vocal melody. It starts with a measure rest marked with a '4' above the staff. The vocal line (treble clef) contains the lyrics: "An old man sits in the sha - dow of a pine tree in Chi - na." The melody includes a triplet of eighth notes. The piano accompaniment (grand staff) continues with whole rests in the first four measures, followed by a half note in the fifth measure.

The third system of the musical score begins with a measure rest marked with a '9' above the staff. The piano accompaniment (grand staff) resumes with the same rhythmic pattern of eighth notes and a triplet of eighth notes in the third measure. The vocal line (treble clef) contains whole rests throughout this system.

11

He sees

14

lark - spur, blue and white, move at the edge of the sha-dow

19

in the wind.

22

His beard moves in the wind. The

27

pine trees move in the wind.

31

Ped. *

34

So wa - ter _____ flows _____

without Pedal Ped.

38

o - ver weeds.

* Ped. *

Tattoo

$\text{♩} = 76$

41

p

The light is like a spi-der. It crawls o-ver the wa-ter. It

Measures 41-44 of the musical score. The vocal line is in 4/4 time, starting with a treble clef and a key signature of one sharp (F#). The lyrics are: "The light is like a spi-der. It crawls o-ver the wa-ter. It". The piano accompaniment is in 4/4 time, starting with a treble and bass clef. The piano part begins in measure 42 with a piano (*p*) dynamic. The melody in the piano part is simple, with some triplets in measures 41 and 43.

45

crawls o-ver the ed- ges of the snow. It

Measures 45-48 of the musical score. The vocal line continues with the lyrics: "crawls o-ver the ed- ges of the snow. It". The piano accompaniment continues, with a triplet in measure 45 and a triplet in measure 47. The piano part has a more active melody in measure 46, with a triplet in measure 47.

49

crawls un-der your eye-lids and spreads its webs there: its

Measures 49-52 of the musical score. The vocal line continues with the lyrics: "crawls un-der your eye-lids and spreads its webs there: its". The piano accompaniment continues, with a triplet in measure 49 and a triplet in measure 51. The piano part has a more active melody in measure 50, with a triplet in measure 51.

Tattoo

54 a little softer *f* 3

two webs: two webs. The webs of your eyes are fast-ened

54 a little softer *f*

58 3 *p*

to the flesh and bones of you as to raft-ers or grass.

58 *sf* *sf* *p* 8va

62 3 3

There are fi-la-ments of your eyes on the sur-face of the

62 8va *mf* *p*

66 *rit.*

wa - ter and in the edg - ges of the snow.

66

8va

3

8vb

The Place of the Solitaires

♩ = 88

70 *mp*

Let the place of the so - li - taires _____ be a place of per - pe - tu - al

70 *mp*

72 un-du - la - tion, _____

72

3

3 3 3 3

mf

76 whe-ther it be in mid-sea on the dark, green

76

mf *f*

80 *3*
wa-ter wheel, _____ Or *3* on the beach es, _____

80 *3* *3*

83 *3* *3*
there must be _____ no ces - sa - tion _____ of mo - tion _____

83 *3* *f* *p* *3* *3* *3* *3*

86 *mf* *3*
_____ or of the noise of mo - tion _____ the re-

86 *p* *mf* *3* *3* *3* *3*

89 *f* *mf*

new-al of noise, and ma-ni-fold con-tin-u - a - tion.

89 *mf* *f*

#

94 *accel.* *a tempo*

94 *f*

97 *accel.* *a tempo* *p*

But most of the mo-tion of thought,

97 *f*

20. *

101

and its rest-less re - i - ter - a - tion, in the place of the

101

p

p

104

so - li - taires, which is to be a place of per-per-tu-al un - du -

104

rit.

f

p

p

f

p

sfz

107

la - - - tion.

107

The Valley Candle

♩ = 76

109 *p*

My can-dle burned a - lone in an im - mense val - ley. Beams

109

♩ = 88

113

of the huge night con-verged u - pon it un - til the wind blew, —

long ♩ = 76

113

♩ = 69

117

un - til the wind blew.

8va — — — — —

mp

117

pp

Let sound die away.

123 $\text{♩} = 88$

Then beams of the huge night con -

mp

pp Let sound die away.

128 $\text{♩} = 76$ long

verged u - pon its i - mage un - til the wind

131 $\text{♩} = 66$ (a little slower than before) long

blew, un - til the wind blew.

mf

Fabliau of Florida

♩. = 66

135

Barque of phos - phor on the

p

135

136

137

138

139

palm - y beach, ——— move ——— out-ward — in-to hea-ven, —

139

140

141

142

143

144

in-to-the a - la - bas - ters and night blue ———

rit. *a tempo*

mf *p* RH

144

145

146

147

148

8vb

149

8^{va} LH

Foam _____ and

149

RH

154

cloud _____ are one. _____ Sul - try moon mon - sters are dis-

154

159

solv - - - ing. _____

159

RH

p

(♩=♩)

164

Fill your black hull with

8va

LH

170

white moon - light. There will ne-ver be an

170

p

8va

175

end There will ne-ver be an

175

8va

180

end _____

180

8^{va} -----

to this dron - ing of _____ the surf. _____

The musical score is written for a vocal part and piano accompaniment. The vocal line is in 8/8 time and begins at measure 180 with a half note 'end' followed by a melodic phrase. The piano accompaniment consists of a right hand with eighth notes and a left hand with a single note. The score ends with a double bar line.

Gubbinal

♩ = 76

186

Musical score for measures 186-191. The score is in 4/4 time. The vocal line (treble clef) contains whole rests. The piano accompaniment (grand staff) features chords and moving lines. Measure 186 starts with a mezzo-piano (*mp*) dynamic. Measure 191 features a forte (*f*) dynamic. The piano part includes a melodic line in the right hand and a bass line in the left hand.

192

Quasi 3/4

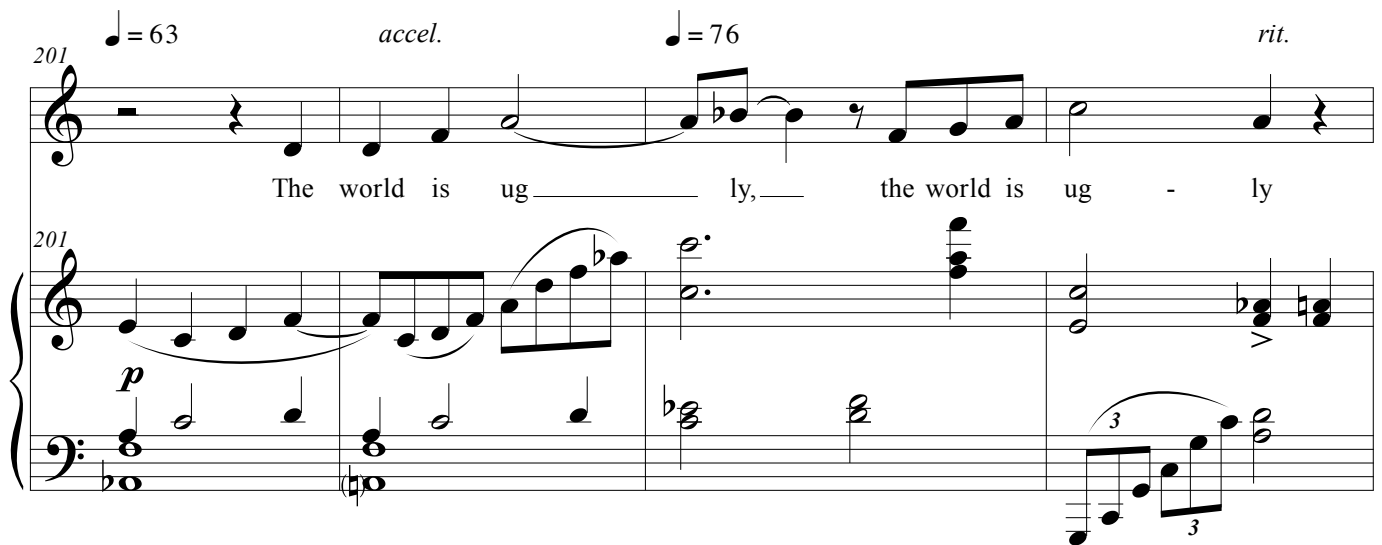
Musical score for measures 192-196. The score is in 4/4 time, with a tempo change to Quasi 3/4 indicated by a dashed line. The vocal line (treble clef) contains the lyrics: "That strange flower, — the sun,". The piano accompaniment (grand staff) features chords and moving lines. Measure 192 starts with a piano (*p*) dynamic. The piano part includes a melodic line in the right hand and a bass line in the left hand.

197

Musical score for measures 197-201. The score is in 4/4 time. The vocal line (treble clef) contains the lyrics: "is just what you say. Have it your way.". The piano accompaniment (grand staff) features chords and moving lines. Measure 197 starts with a mezzo-piano (*mp*) dynamic. The piano part includes a melodic line in the right hand and a bass line in the left hand. A dashed line with "8vb" indicates an octave drop for the bass line in measure 201.

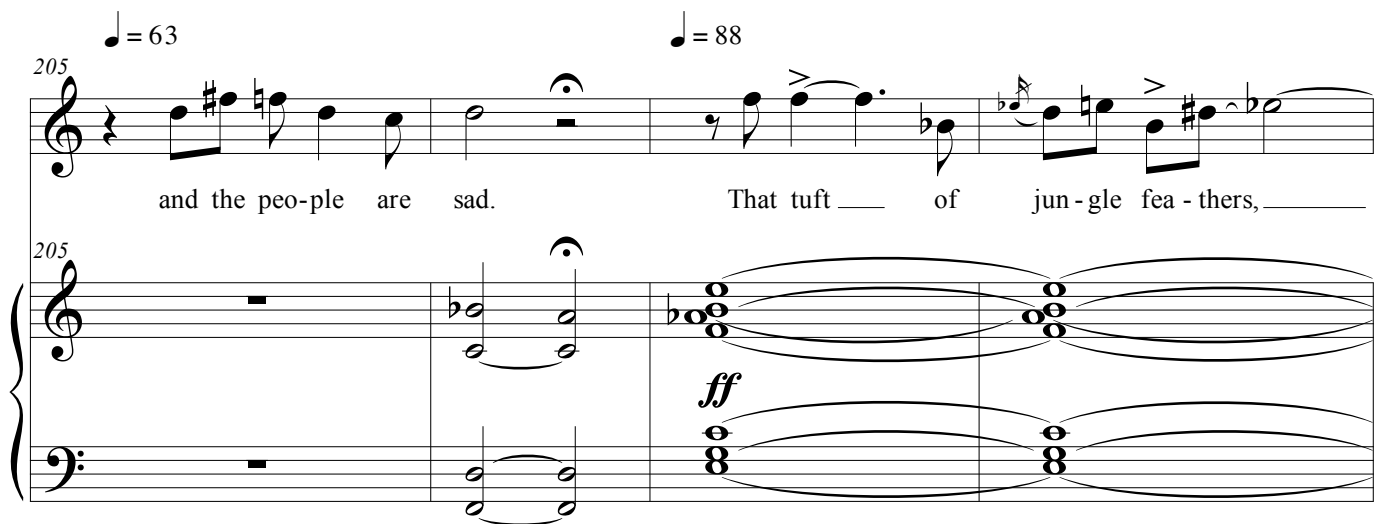
201 $\text{♩} = 63$ *accel.* $\text{♩} = 76$ *rit.*

The world is ug — ly, — the world is ug - ly



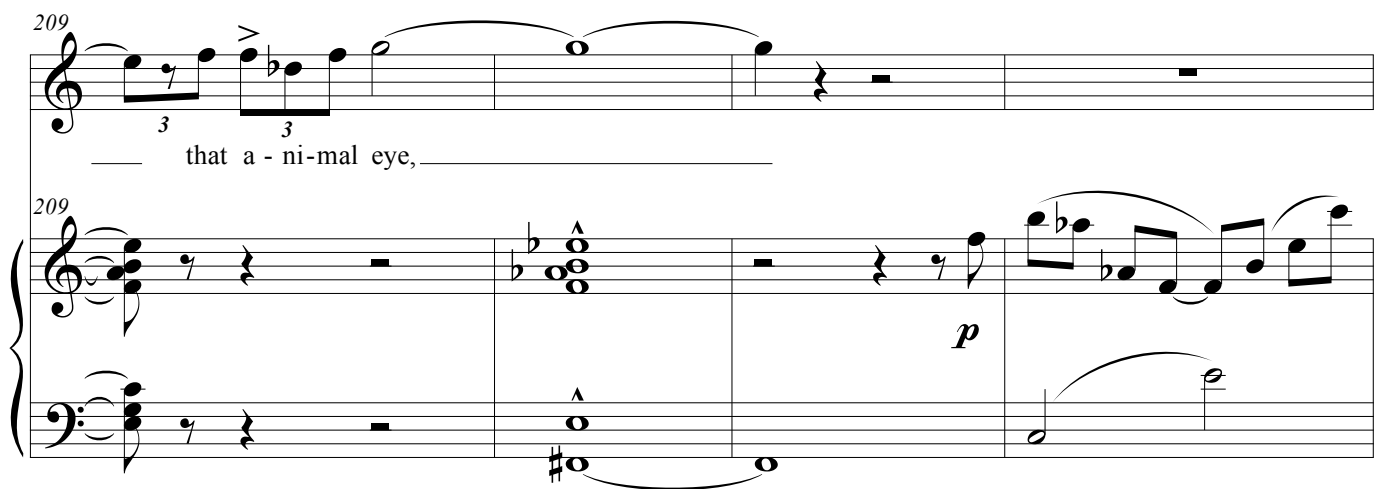
205 $\text{♩} = 63$ $\text{♩} = 88$

and the peo-ple are sad. That tuft — of jun - gle fea - thers, —



209 $\text{♩} = 63$ $\text{♩} = 88$

— that a - ni-mal eye, —



♩ = 76

213

is just what you say. is just what you say. ____

8va - - - - -

216 ♩ = 88 **ff** *sempre*

That sa-vage, ____ that sa-vage of fire, ____

8va - - - - -

ff

220 *p*

____ that seed. ____ Have it your way.

mp

225 3

Have it your way.

225 *p*

$\text{♩} = 63$ *accel.*

229 The world, the world is ug

229 *pp* *p*

$\text{♩} = 76$ *rit.* $\text{♩} = 48$

233 ly, the world is ug - ly and the peo-ple are sad.

233

From "Primordia"

237 ♩ = 116

fp

The

Without Pedal

241

birch trees draw up white - ness from the ground.

245

fp

249

In the swamps bush-es draw up dark red or

249

8va

3

253

yel - low, or? The

253

8va

fp

257

birch trees draw up white - ness from the ground.

257

8va

fp

261

261 (8^{va}) *fp* *fp* *fp* *f p f* 8^{va} loco

265

265 *p f fp f* O boat - man,

269

269 *fp* O boat man, What are you

273

draw-ing up — from the rain point - ed wa - ter?

273 *f* 8^{va}

277

277 *fp* 8^{va}

281

O boat - man, O

281 8^{va}

285

boat man, What are you draw-ing up from the

285 *fp* *f*

289

rain point - ed wa - ter?

289 *p*

293

O,

293 *fp* *fp*

*Hold key down to produce overtones until release sign



298 *rit.* *a tempo*

O, O boat - men, are you two

fp *fp*

* Pronounce with an indefinite vowel
to sound like either "-man" or "-men."

303

boat-men dif - ferent from each o - ther?

f *sf* *sf* *sf* *sf* *sf*

* Hold key down to produce overtones until release sign

307

sf *sf* *p* *fp*

✱

311

The birch trees draw up white - ness from the

315

ground. From the ground.

319

From the

The Disillusionment of Ten O'Clock

♩ = 84

322

322

p

Red.

*

Red.

326

326

Red.

*

331

331

The hous - es are

Red.

*

3/4

The musical score is written for piano in 4/4 time. It consists of three systems of staves. The first system (measures 322-325) features a vocal line with whole rests and a piano accompaniment starting at measure 322 with a piano (p) dynamic. The piano part includes a triplet of eighth notes and a descending eighth-note scale. The second system (measures 326-329) continues the piano accompaniment with more complex melodic lines and triplets. The third system (measures 330-333) shows the vocal line entering with the lyrics 'The hous - es are' at measure 331. The piano accompaniment continues with a triplet and a change to 3/4 time at the end of the system. Various performance markings like 'Red.' and '*' are placed below the piano staves.

336

haunt-ed by white night - gowns.

336

3

Ped.

*

342

None are green,

342

3

Ped.

*

Ped.

*

Ped.

*

346

or pur-ple with green rings,

346

8va

3

mf

p

mf

Ped.

*

350

or green with yel - low rings, or

350

p *mf* *p*

Red. *

354

yel-low with blue rings.

354

3

Red. *

♩ = 96

359

None of them are strange. with socks of lace and

359

sf *mf*

Red. *

364

bead-ed cein-tures. _____

long

3 ah! 3

364

p

rit.

$\text{♩} = 84$

Spoken:

People are not going to dream
(pause)
Of baboons and periwinkles.

367

pp

373

On - ly here and there, an old sai - lor, _____

373

p

mp cresc.

3

Red. *

377

drunk, and a - sleep in his boots

mf *f* *ff* *ppp*

$\text{♩} = 63$

382

catch es

p *pp* *p*

Red. *

387

ti - gers in red wea - ther.

p *pp* *p*