

Kenneth Silverman, *Begin Again: A Biography of John Cage* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 2012), pp. 272–74.

Cage paid fascinating tribute to Thoreauvian anarchism in a musical work published in 1970, *Song Books*. West German radio stations nominated it for consideration by the Prix Italia International jury. The 319-page, two-volume score consists of eighty-nine short vocal solos composed by fifty different methods. Cage used chance operations throughout—to decide the number of songs, the particular composition technique (transparency, star chart)—leaving behind hundreds of pages of outlines. The song texts range all over: bits from current newspapers (“POLICE SET UP ROADBLOCKS”); tributes to Satie and Duchamp; quotations from Fuller, Brown, McLuhan; passages in Japanese, French, German, Polish, Spanish; textless melodic lines to vocalize or hum.

But Cage’s literary-musipolitical sprawl keeps returning to Thoreau. The score includes such material as a portrait of Thoreau (Solo 5) and a map of “Concord (Solo 3), to be wandered over in order to suggest a melodic line; a description of Thoreau’s nature walks (Solo 4); and remarks from Thoreau’s journal about the telegraph harp (Solo 17), as well as syllable mixes from the journal (Solo 85). The score also calls for showing twenty-two Thoreau-related slides and presenting something by Thoreau as a gift to some member of the audience.

Cage’s most emphatic invocation of Thoreau, however, is the lengthy Solo 35. Its eleven pages of text essentially repeat again and again, in slightly different verbal and rhythmic arrangement, the opening declaration of “Civil Disobedience”: “The best form of government is no government at all.” Cage called for Thoreau’s words to be rhapsodized. His instructions read:

Sing in an optomistic [sic] spirit... Before singing this solo, raise either the black flag of Anarchy or the flag of the Whole Earth ... do not lower it at any time during the performance.

Cage’s instruction also calls for the singing of this no-government solo as an irregular refrain during a presentation of *Song Books*. He sent a copy of his score to Walter Harding, president of the Thoreau Society. Harding said he hoped to have some of the songs performed at the society’s annual meeting in Concord: “I can just see the place blowing apart.”

Cage’s *Song Books* most effectively raises the Thoreauvian flag of anarchy by acting it out. In a sort of indeterminacy gone wild, singers are free to choose to perform any number of any solos they wish for any length of time in any order—accompanied, if they wish, by other indeterminate music, such as the *Concert for Piano and Orchestra*. They also freely choose their own costumes, and sometimes their own words and pauses—one performer not more important than another, each doing his or her own thing. Having created this uncompetitive model of “practical global anarchy,” Cage laughingly said that it was nearly impossible to

consider *Song Books* a work of art: "Who would dare? It resembles a brothel, doesn't it?"

Not every treatment of his ungoverned brothel pleased Cage, however. Some solos are Fluxus-like event scores, such as Solo 8: "In a situation provided with maximum amplification (no feedback), perform a disciplined action." Cage witnessed a rendering of this solo in 1975 by the gay African-American composer/singer Julius Eastman (1940–90). For his disciplined action Eastman gave a mock lecture that he called "a new system of love." He illustrated his remarks by slowly and completely undressing his young boyfriend onstage, then attempting to also undress his own sister, who resisted. Cage was furious.

For all his deep affectionate interest in Thoreau, too, Cage enjoyed human relationships and understood that he could not live as Thoreau did, alone in a cabin at Walden Pond. Such moments of inner conflict, of trying to square his experience with his expectations and beliefs, sometimes left him confused. "And I think that many people would agree with me," he said, "that what can be noticed now is extraordinarily confusing." Pulled in different directions, too, by Mao, Fuller, and McLuhan, he sometimes doubted that the example of his music could help to change society.

News of various public events also depressed Cage. In September 1974, the motorcycle stuntman Evel Knievel tried to jump his rocket-powered bike across Idaho's Snake River Canyon. He crashed, but came away with six million dollars. A crowd of about twelve thousand came to watch him. They beat up reporters, had public sex, trampled restraining fences, and stole four thousand cans of beer.

Reports of the moneymad chaos moved Cage to describe the public's spiritual life as "undisciplined": "I'm afraid that many people still need watching over." He hoped society would improve, he told an interviewer, "but now I sometimes feel pessimistic that that might not happen, that we might just all go to the dogs." Friends noticed such lapses from his habitual optimism. "When I told Jasper Johns that I was feeling slightly pessimistic," Cage reported, "he roared with joy, and said 'At last!'"